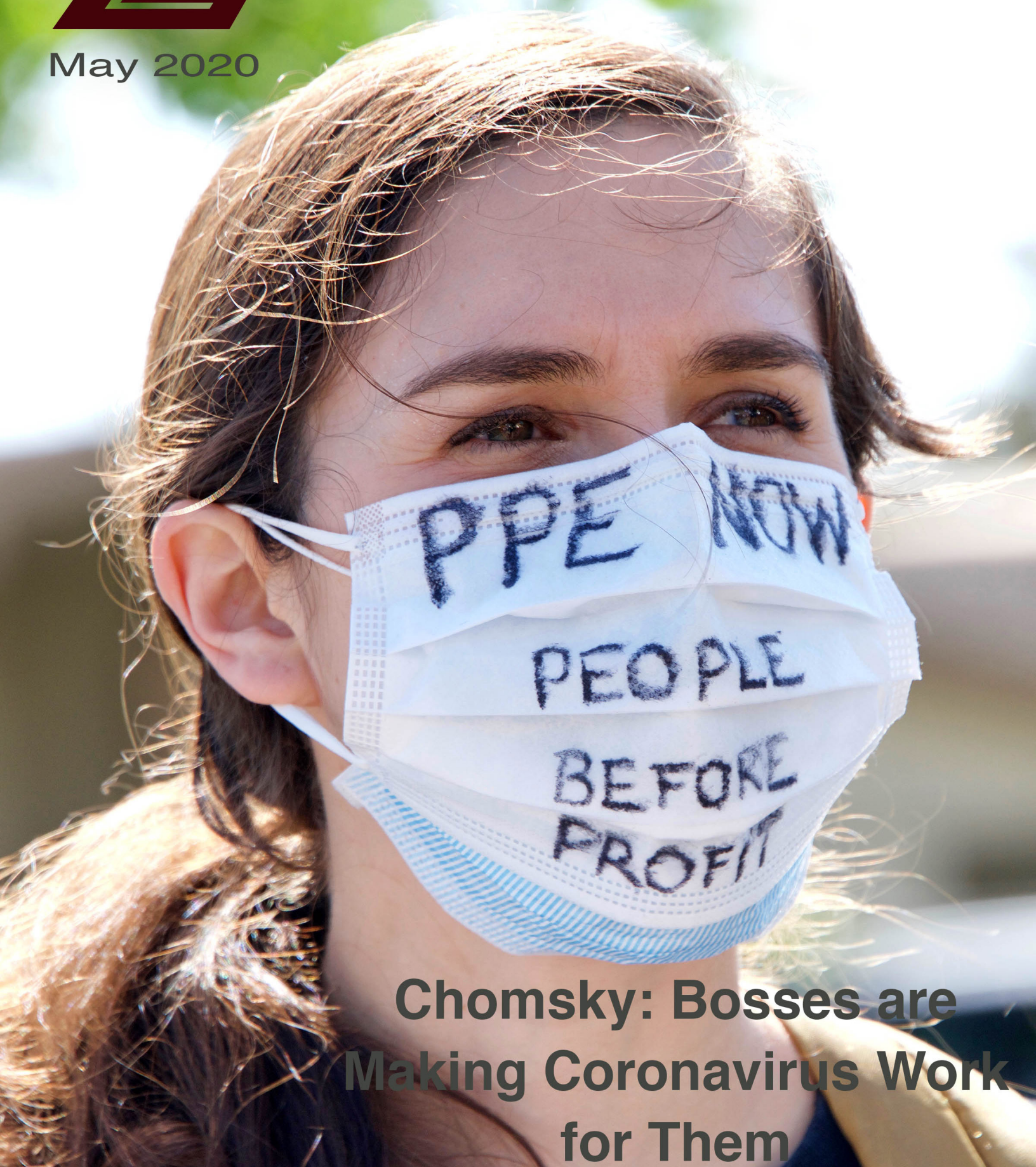




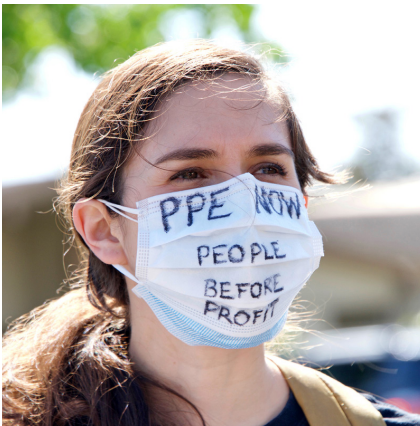
Brecher: Make the Damn Masks

May 2020



**Chomsky: Bosses are
Making Coronavirus Work
for Them**

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Bernie's Decision: Retreat Should Not Be Confused with Surrender

By Norman Solomon

Politics is ultimately about life and death, as the current pandemic horrors make clear. Policies that can seem abstract not only routinely harm quality of life; they also kill.

Both Bernie Sanders campaigns for president have brought a principled serious-

ness to the national discourse that no other candidate has come near matching. Now, we seem to be entering new terrain. Or are we?

You might not like “war” metaphors, but a vicious reality is that various types of warfare are constantly happening against billions of people on this planet. Humanity is under siege from

structured injustice due to anti-democratic power.

We don't have a choice of whether or not we're in a class war. It's going on perpetually—waged with enormous financial, political and media firepower. The firepower of class warfare against Bernie Sanders has been ferocious and unrelenting. The Bernie campaign is dissipating, but

We will often lose. We will not give up. We must not give up



Photo by StoopDown/Shutterstock.com

We don't have a choice of whether or not we're in a class war. It's going on perpetually—waged with enormous financial, political and media firepower

class war is sure to remain unrelenting.

Our choices revolve around whether and how to fight back against the centralized wealth and huge corporate interests waging that endless war. Now, as the era after the Bernie 2020 campaign gets underway, I'd like to tell you a little about one of the countless inspiring activists I've met—and why his outlook is so connected to the moment we're in now.

Fifty years ago, Fred Branfman saw the human consequences of war in Laos—an airborne genocide that took place courtesy of U.S. taxpayers and the Orwellian-named Defense Department. Fred was a humanitarian-aid volunteer in Laos when he discovered that his country was taking the lives of peasants there by the thousands.

Fred assembled *Voices from the Plain of Jars*. Published in 1972, with the subtitle *Life*

Under an Air War, the book included essays by Laotian people living under long-term U.S. bombardment as well as drawings by children who depicted the horrors all around them. As one bookseller put it, "This is the story of the first society to be totally destroyed by aircraft."

In 2006, when I talked with Fred, he said: "At the age of 27, a moral abyss suddenly opened before me. I was shocked to the core of



Photo By Sheila Fitzgerald/Shutterstock.com

“When I looked more deeply at my own life, I noticed that my life was not now and never had been built around ‘hope.’ Laos was an example. I went there, I learned to love the peasants, the bombing shocked my psyche and soul to the core, and I responded—not because I was hopeful or hopeless, but because I was alive.”

my being as I found myself interviewing Laotian peasants, among the most decent, human and kind people on Earth, who described living underground for years on end, while they saw countless fellow villagers and family members burned alive by napalm, suffocated by 500-pound bombs, and shredded by antipersonnel bombs dropped by my country, the United States.”

Fred moved to Washington, where he worked with antiwar groups to lobby Congress and protest the inflicting of mass carnage on Indochina. He saw the urgent need to work inside and outside the political system to change policies and save lives.

More than three decades after his experiences in Laos, Fred wrote about “the effect on the biosphere of the interaction between global warming, biodiversity loss, water aquifer depletion, chemical contamination, and a wide

variety of other new threats to the biospheric systems upon which human life depends.” He was far from optimistic. And that’s where, in April 2020, Fred has much to convey to us with a spirit that remains powerful several years after his death.

Many people who pay attention to national and global realities are in despair, and the loss of the Bernie campaign now adds to the weight of pessimism. Fred would have understood. Looking toward the future, he said, “I find it hard to have much ‘hope’ that the species will better itself in coming decades.”

But, Fred went on, “I have also reached a point in my self-inquiries where I came to dislike the whole notion of ‘hope.’ If I need to have ‘hope’ to motivate me, what will I do when I see no rational reason for hope? If I can be ‘hopeful,’ then I can also be ‘hopeless,’ and I do not like feeling hopeless.”

He added: “When I looked more deeply at my own life, I noticed that my life was not now and never had been built around ‘hope.’ Laos was an example. I went there, I learned to love the peasants, the bombing shocked my psyche and soul to the core, and I responded—not because I was hopeful or hopeless, but because I was alive.”

And human.

That should be reason enough for solidarity and determination. We will often lose. We will not give up. We must not give up. **Z**

Norman Solomon is co-founder and national coordinator of RootsAction.org. He was a Bernie Sanders delegate from California to the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Solomon is the author of a dozen books including *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death*.

Vigil for Peace in Yemen: A New Norm

By Kathy Kelly

For the past three years, several dozen New Yorkers have gathered each Saturday at Union Square, at 11:00 AM, to vigil for peace in Yemen.

Now, however, due to the coronavirus, the vigil for

peace is radically altered. Recently, in recognition of the city's coming shelter in place program, participants were asked to hold individual vigils at their respective homes on the subsequent Saturday mornings. Normally, during the public vigils, one or more participants would provide updates on the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, the ongoing war, and U.S. complicity. As COVID-19 threatens to engulf war-torn Yemen, it is even more critical to raise awareness of how the war debilitates the country.

If the vigil for peace were to gather in Union Square, activists most certainly would draw attention to how Turkish officials indicted 20 Saudi nationals for the murder

of the dissident writer, Jamal Khashoggi. Turkey's investigation of the murder and dismemberment of Khashoggi indicts 18 people for committing the murder and names two officials for incitement to murder. One of them, General Ahmad Al-Asiri, a close associate of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, was deputy chief of intelligence when Khashoggi was murdered.

Numerous news reports over the past five years establish a pattern of Al-Asiri responding to inquiries about Saudi-led coalition military attacks against Yemen civilians with misleading statements, outright denials and attempted cover-ups.



Activists practice "physical distancing" at a Saturday morning vigil for Peace in Yemen, Union Square, NYC.

Photo by Bill Offenloch



Water crisis caused by the war in the city of Taiz South Yemen.
Photo by anasalhaji/Shutterstock.com

For example, On August 30, 2015, according to Human Rights Watch, a Saudi coalition-led airstrike attacked the Al-Sham Water Bottling Factory in the outskirts of Abs, in northern Yemen. The strike destroyed the factory and killed 14 workers, including 3 boys, and wounded 11 more.

Later on August 30, after the airstrike, General Al-Asiri told Reuters that the plant was not a bottling factory, but rather a place where Houthi made explosive devices. However, all of the individuals Human Rights Watch interviewed concurred:

“...that plant was being

used to bottle water and was not used for any military purposes... A group of international journalists traveled to the site of the blast two days after it was hit and reported that they could not find evidence of any military targets in the area. They said that they carefully examined the site, and took photos and videos of piles of scorched plastic bottles melted together from the heat of the explosion. They could not find any evidence that the factory was being used for military purposes.”

Meanwhile, Yemenis were desperately trying to contend

with rising cases of cholera caused by shortages of clean water.

In October 2015, when eyewitnesses declared a hospital in northern Yemen run by Doctors Without Borders was destroyed by Saudi-led coalition warplanes, General Al-Asiri told Reuters that coalition jets had been in action over Saada governorate but had not hit the hospital.

On August 15, 2016, a Saudi-led bombing campaign again targeted a hospital in northern Yemen supported by Doctors Without Borders. Nineteen people were killed.

The Abs hospital was

Particularly now, with intense focus on U.S. health care, it's timely to recognize that in the past five years U.S.-supported Gulf Coalition airstrikes bombed Yemen's health care facilities 83 times

bombed two days after Saudi airstrikes attacked a school in northern Yemen, killing ten students and wounding dozens more.

Yet Saudi officials continued to insist they struck military targets only. Commenting on the August 13 school attack, General Al-Asiri said the dead children were evidence the Houthis were recruiting children as guards and fighters.

"We would have hoped," General Al-Asiri said, that Doctors Without Borders "would take measures to stop the recruitment of children to fight in wars instead of crying over them in the media."

In one of the deadliest attacks of the war, on October 8, 2016, the Saudi-led military coalition's fighter jets repeatedly bombed a hall filled with mourners during a funeral for an official in the capital city of Sana. At least 140 people were killed and 550 more were wounded.

General Al-Asiri, still a

spokesperson for the Saudi-led coalition, suggested there were other causes for the blast and later reported the coalition had not carried out any strikes near the hall. But outraged UN officials, backed up by videos on social media, insisted that airstrikes had massacred the mourners.

The United States has steadily sided with Saudi Arabia, including supplying it with weapons, training its armed forces, and covering for it in the UN Security Council. But "Defense One," a U.S. news agency intending to provide news and analysis for national security leaders and stakeholders, recently issued a stinging rebuke to the Kingdom's Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman. They denounced the "humanitarian abomination ushered by Riyadh's war in Yemen," and called his leadership "as destabilizing to the Middle East as its Iranian rival." Defense One urged Washington to discontinue enabling "Ri-

yadh's most reckless behavior."

Turkey's indictment of 20 Saudi nationals for murder and their insistence that Al-Asiri bears responsibility may help move the court of public opinion to resist all support for the Kingdom's ongoing war in Yemen.

Particularly now, with intense focus on U.S. health care, it's timely to recognize that in the past five years U.S.-supported Gulf Coalition airstrikes bombed Yemen's health care facilities 83 times. As parents here care for children during school closures, they should be reminded that since December 13, 2018, eight Yemeni children have been killed or injured every single day. Most of the children killed were playing outdoors with their friends or were on their way to or from school. According to the Yemen Data Project, more than 18,400 civilians have been killed or injured by Saudi Arabia and its Gulf



Taiz / Yemen - Children participate in a protest against the war

Photo by akramalrasny

allies since the initial bombing campaign in 2015.

U.S. national security leaders and stakeholders in war, as they shelter in place, have an extraordinary opportunity to set a new norm and link with the vigil for Peace in Yemen, virtually.

Z

Kathy Kelly (kathy@vcnv.org) co-coordinates Voices for Creative Nonviolence (www.vcnv.org).

Love In A Dangerous Time

By Mike Ferner

A profusion of anonymous axioms and memes floods social media these days but one remains my very favorite: “It’s like we’ve all been sent to our room to think about what we did.” My friends, if there ever was a nation that needed a “time out” for that purpose, it’s ours.

With nearly every minute of round-the-clock news cycles dedicated to updates on the COVID-19 pandemic, one needn’t restate examples of the plague’s panic, suffering, fear or insecurity. It’s all right there, worsening with each iteration.

Fortunately, we’re also witnessing an abundance of human compassion that assuages some of the pain and

fear. Every day people find creative ways to express their concern and confirm our common humanity.

In a stellar essay, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks reflects, “Already there’s a shift of values coming to the world. We’re forced to be intentional about keeping up our human connections...There’s a new introspection coming into the world, as well. [People seem] eager to have deeper conversations and ask more fundamental questions...If your lungs filled with fluid a week from Tuesday would you be content with the life you’ve lived? *What would you do if a loved one died?*”

I’ve heard some of the same conversations and perceived

And it gives me hope that maybe...just maybe, this newfound compassion and introspection will continue and expand beyond our borders

some of the same transformations Brooks writes about. And it gives me hope that maybe...just maybe, this newfound compassion and introspection will continue and expand beyond our borders. Perhaps the hearts of Americans will feel just a portion of the suffering and grief our government has caused around the world—suffering for which we have each paid dearly in blood and treasure.

Certainly no one would minimize the traumas that have already and will yet hit the U.S. Millions will be affected along a continuum ranging from sickness, death, unemployment and grief to where, spared by fate from the above, it will mostly be an inconvenience mixed with anxiety over the supply of toilet paper.

Will those on the lucky end of the spectrum have the further good fortune to take this once in a century opportunity to go to our room and think

about what we did?

For those who do, here is some raw material for the imagination.

When the U.S. invasion of Iraq was in only its third year, a Johns Hopkins University study concluded that 655,000 people had already been killed in that war.

Prior to that, the United Nations estimated that pre-war sanctions enforced on Iraq at the behest of the U.S. had killed over 500,000 children under the age of 5.

Based on the Johns Hopkins estimate of Iraqis killed, a conservative estimate of the wounded from that same period was 2.6 million people. Additionally, the UN estimated between 1.5 million and 2 million Iraqis were “internally displaced” by the fighting and roughly the same number had fled their country, among them disproportionate numbers of doctors.

Take a moment to let that sink in...

Now, conjure your most empathetic vision and imagine what those numbers would look like if we applied them comparably to our own population. As hard as it is to believe, here's what our dear nation would look like:

- In the former cities of Atlanta, Denver, Boston, Seattle, Milwaukee, Fort Worth, Baltimore, San Francisco, Dallas and Philadelphia every single person is dead.
- In Vermont, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Nebraska, Nevada, Kansas, Mississippi, Iowa, Oregon, South Carolina and Colorado every single person is wounded.
- The entire populations of Ohio and New Jersey are homeless, surviving with friends, relatives or under



Photo by John Gomez/Shutterstock.com

...if we can expand our consciousness and compassion, we can begin to comprehend our government's behavior in the world and come out of this pandemic demanding to be better members of the human family

bridges as they can.

- The entire populations of Michigan, Indiana and Kentucky have fled to Canada or Mexico.
- One in four U.S. doctors has left the country. Last year, 3,000 doctors were kidnapped and 800 killed.
- Only the well-off can afford bottled water. What comes out of the tap is guaranteed to at least make you sick and very frequently kill your children.
- On a good day we have 3 or 4 hours of electricity to preserve food or cool the heat...all summer... in Arizona, Florida and the other 48 states.
- Three times as many of our fellow citizens are

out of work as during the Great Depression.

- In every major city, hospitals are seriously degraded by years of sanctions or outright destroyed by bombing.
- Roads are at best a time-consuming hazard.
- Trying to care for the sick and wounded in these conditions consumes an ever-larger portion of our personal time and national resources, debilitating the economy even further.
- Anxiety, depression and suicide rates increase dramatically.
- It begins to sink in that nobody "out there" is coming to save us. We are in hell. Alone.

If you've not yet deleted this article in disgust or horror, open your heart further to understand that the above comparisons are based on one nation's reality, but our taxes have provided the Pentagon and CIA the wherewithal to make life equally damnable for our fellow humans in Iran, Libya, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Viet Nam, Cambodia, Thailand, Republic of the Congo and who knows how many places. Much of the world calls it war crimes. We passively accept it as foreign policy.

David Brooks observed, "We learn more about ourselves in these hard periods. The differences between red and blue don't seem as acute on the gurneys of the ER, but the inequality in the world seems more obscene when the difference between rich and poor is life or death."

True indeed and worth taking to heart. Then, if we can

expand our consciousness and compassion, we can begin to comprehend our government's behavior in the world and come out of this pandemic demanding to be better members of the human family.

Mike Ferner is a former Navy Corpsman, national president of Veterans For Peace and member of Toledo's City Council. Email him at mike.ferner@sbc-global.net

GOP's Achievement is Now on Display

By Wim Laven

Significant blame for the failed response and delayed action in responding to the global COVID-19 pandemic is being directed at Donald Trump: he fired the pandemic response team so crucial to readiness and progress; threw away the pandemic response book Obama's administration left him; cut the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention funding less than two weeks after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 an emergency; called it a "hoax," and "bad flu" when an early response would have been most crucial; etc...

Even where he has taken

action, like instituting travel bans, it is not accompanied by vital and necessary measures. In this wholesale failure, he does not take any responsibility, and he makes states fend for themselves while celebrating that his coronavirus briefings are a ratings hit.

Maybe he is right, it is not his fault. I think we should look deeper into the conditions and loyalty that have allowed Trump's incompetence to metastasize into such a public health menace—thanks to his much-delayed response the U.S. has now surpassed China in coronavirus deaths. Republicans are responsible for condoning his corruption, persistent abuses of power, and ongoing grift. With COVID-19 we see a reality show President—one



Photo Phil Pasquini/Shutterstock.com

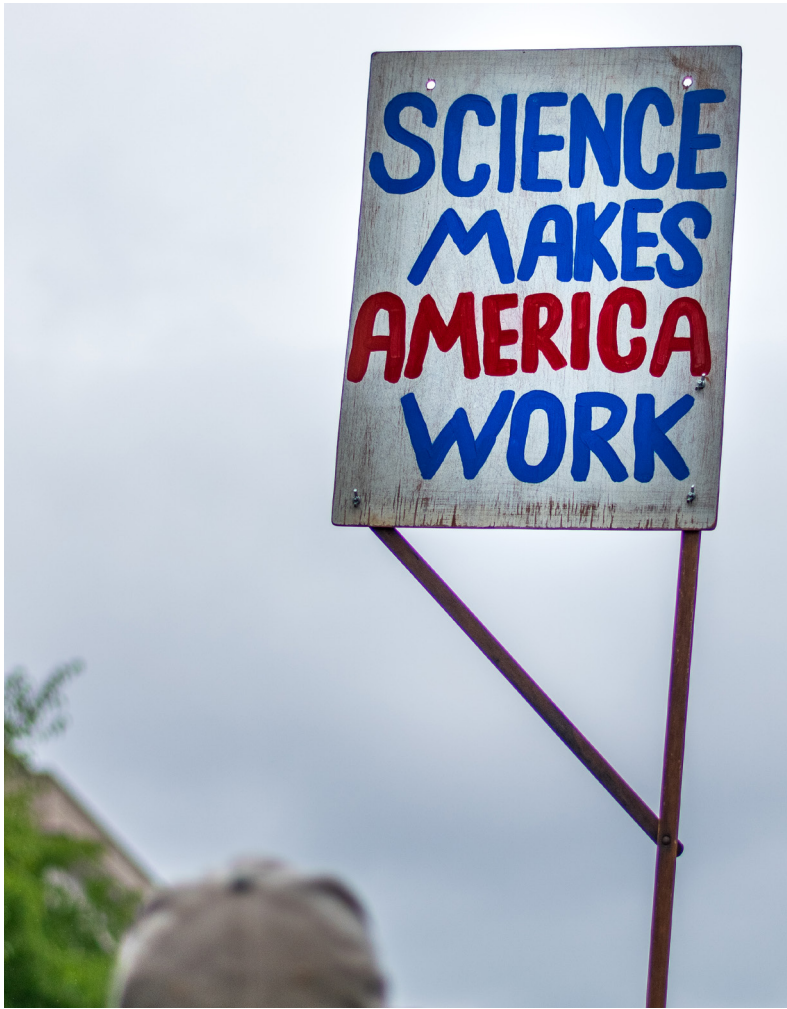


Photo by Destiny Seaton/Shutterstock.com

part “Apprentice” and one part “Survivor”—instead of a dedicated public servant.

Remember the scenes of the Florida beaches packed during Spring Break? Brady Sluder epitomized the display, “If I get corona, I get corona ... I’m not going to let it stop me from partying,” but he has now apologized, “I wasn’t aware of the severity of my actions...” What could lead

to such broad negligence?

The prolific rise of conspiracy, hoax, and propaganda on the right is now presented in full relief. Pick your poison: Fox, OAN, QAnon, or Rush Limbaugh.

Some are clearly worse than others. For example, while Fox may mollify viewers about white nationalism, QAnon itself presents a domestic terrorist threat according to

the FBI; all push dangerous conspiracy theories about the “deep state,” and other roundly discredited hoaxes, like “pizzagate” and false-flag stories like the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting being a ruse to take gun rights away.

It is not surprising that they have all pedaled deception over our current crisis. Trump and Fox took almost two months to pivot from “hoax” to “blindsided the world,” while the more extreme groups champion the coronavirus as a “weaponized viral strain designed to sell more useless, deadly vaccines, while at the same time killing off a few thousand, or perhaps a few million, people.”

The GOP has led a decades-long crusade against science. In policy debate after policy debate science and expertise are undermined. Science and evidence are presented as obstacles to business goals and stockholder profit. Powerful and well funded donors, lobbyists, and political action committees challenge everything from environmental protections and global climate change to human rights and worker protections. Now Trump allows corporations to break pollution laws, using coronavirus as an excuse and has just rolled back emissions standards. Yes, it looks like his “cure” could indeed

The GOP has led a decades-long crusade against science

be as bad as the disease.

All these years of dishonesty about science have had a devastating impact. Ad hominem attacks have replaced critical thinking; MAGA hat-wearing group-thinkers endorse a “savior” who declaims, “what do you have to lose?” when the truth is: everything—life as we know

it—is at stake. The opinion of experts in the field, based on volumes of evidence and sound analysis, is no match for an ignorant public that was not inoculated against the thousands of lies—“you’re just a Trump hater,” they say when you cite actual empirical, observable, measurable evidence.

The conditions that made the public vulnerable started decades ago. Cuts to funding for education year after year, undermining curriculum, calling creationism as valid as evolution, and the results are clear: people who believe bad information make bad choices. States supporting Trump take the epidemic less



Photo by Marlon Trottman/Shutterstock.com

The conditions that made the public vulnerable started decades ago. Cuts to funding for education year after year, undermining curriculum, calling creationism as valid as evolution, and the results are clear: people who believe bad information make bad choices

seriously but get more aid from him as appreciation. For instance, in California counties with more conservative political tendencies people have not reduced their daily travel as much or taken “stay at home orders” as seriously as those with more liberal tendencies.

There used to be rational political debates. They took place where people were in agreement on the facts, but the arguments were about priorities and values. Now Trump’s grievances have replaced governance.

The attacks against the media are also clear. Responsible journalists sounding alarms are being blamed for causing panic. The track record of rightwing media is abysmal, from climate chaos denial to birtherism to deep state paranoia and now to imbecilic and deadly coronavirus ig-

norance. This is the media of the Republicans and the party with its mouthpieces need to be both dismissed and held to account.

Z

Wim Laven, Ph.D., syndicated by PeaceVoice, teaches courses in political science and conflict resolution.

ICE Eases Threat but “Essential” Immigrant Farmworkers Struggle to Feed Themselves During

Coronavirus

By Danica Jorden

The 3-million-strong farmworker force that provides the United States with its food has been deemed “essential” by the United States government during the coronavirus. Undocumented farmworkers, who make up almost half of this predominantly Latino force, have been granted a sort of reprieve from arrest by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agency that arrests, detains and deport undocumented immigrants in the United States

In a marked pivot from its previous stance, ICE issued a statement on March 18 de-

claring that, during the coronavirus crisis, it will focus on “criminal” aliens and “delay” enforcement activities aimed at others. The brief, four-paragraph statement ended with a phrase civil rights organizations have long clamored for: “Individuals should not avoid seeking medical care because they fear civil immigration enforcement.”

DHS followed up a day later with a memorandum listing agricultural work as part of the “essential critical infrastructure,” telling farmworkers “you have a special responsibility to maintain your

work schedule.”

Previously ICE claimed to only arrest and detain, in the words of Donald Trump during his presidential campaign, the “bad hombres,” immigrants who posed an imminent threat to public safety. But ICE’s own literature conflates violent crimes with misdemeanor border crossing. Numerous community groups have documented case upon case of teens being arrested at school bus stops, parents being torn out of their cars in front of their children, and applicants arrested at ICE check-ins who had no serious

records other than border crossing infractions.

But COVID-19 has caused the U.S. government to rethink its position with regard to the massive workforce that grows and harvests the nation’s food. From the orange groves of California to the corn fields of Iowa and the sweet potato growers of North Carolina, 80 percent of the 3 million farmworkers in the United States are Latino, and 90 percent of those working on H-2A (temporary agricultural worker) visas are from Mexico. Only a little more than half (53 percent) of



Photo by Johnny Silvercloud/Shutterstock.com

these essential workers have legal authorization.

Lariza Garzon and the Episcopal Farmworker Ministry (EFWM) saw their food delivery for farmworkers in Dunn, North Carolina, swamped on March 27 by immigrant families in search of basic foodstuffs. According to Garzon, more than 200 families came to the EFWM's offices, and at least 50 families were forced to leave empty handed.

EFWM is asking for donations of items like hand sanitizer, soap and Tylenol, and staples such as beans, tortillas, cooking oil and canned tuna. (They also accept monetary donations at <https://episcopalfarmworkerministry.org/donate/> or <https://interland3.donorperfect.net/weblink/weblink.aspx?name=E348613&id=1>)

According to Student Action for Farmworkers (SAF) in Durham, North Carolina, farmworkers only earn an average of \$11,000 a year for their risky, backbreaking work and long hours. SAF says "a farmworker must harvest 2 tons of sweet potatoes to earn just \$4.50." Federal law permits children as young as 12 to work the fields, and the blueberry harvest that sweeps from Michigan and Maine to Florida has employed children even younger.

The Trump administration's February 24 "public charge

Immigrant farm workers have long been essential to the U.S. But they have never been recognized, respected or properly rewarded for their labor

rule," denies the immigration applications of persons who have or could potentially avail themselves of public benefits such as welfare, Medicaid health insurance and food stamps. It is being used against H-2A visa holders, even though their exceptionally low wages would drive them to seek assistance in order to survive. Undocumented agricultural workers are stopped from legalizing their situations by the public charge rule even as the government now demands they work for the good of the country.

Immigrant farm workers have long been essential to the U.S. But they have never been recognized, respected or properly rewarded for their labor. While a reprieve

from the threat of ICE arrest and deportation, if it really happens, is welcome, the true crime is how the U.S. treats these essential workers. **Z**

Trump Budget Winners and Loser

By H. Patricia Hynes

Budgets are moral documents (or immoral, depending on priorities). So also is tax policy.

Consider Trump's proposed \$1.3 trillion discretionary budget for 2021. In snapshot, the Pentagon gets 55 percent and every other need of 331 million people—from health, education, agriculture, transportation, environmental protection to housing—is left with 45 percent. As one retired colonel observed, "the military gravy train is running at full speed."

Military weaponsmakers are the biggest winners raking in nearly half of every Pentagon dollar—an estimated \$350 billion—annually. Moreover in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, the

Pentagon is increasing periodic progress payments made to military manufacturers to keep them on schedule, a move described as a “taxpayer rip-off” by one retired Pentagon official.

Military corporations, though, trump military personnel. Tens of thousands of soldiers and their families rely on food stamps. For at least two weeks after our country was advised to implement social distancing, Army and Marine soldiers, against their own fears, were compelled to continue training in close mass formation. Paralyzed by indecision, mid-level leaders were waiting for higher command decisions. U.S. Army Aviation aircrews were ordered to airlift coronavirus patients to local hospital without masks, disinfectant and medical guidelines. With no plan to quarantine the crew, they talked of taking off doors in flight.

Two other winners are Immigration and Customs Control (ICE) and its sister agency Customs and Border Patrol (CBP).

Under Trump’s proposed budget, ICE—the agency whose agents seize parents from their jobs and homes for deportation—will double by 2024. The proposed CBP budget would go from \$14.8 billion to \$15.6 billion, to bolster snatching babies and

Trump’s proposed budget is one that prizes corporate life over human life; militarized security and walls over tackling the challenge of a humanistic immigration policy; and the wealthy over the rest of us

children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexican border and caging them in crowded, unsanitary conditions. Budget priorities also include \$2.3 billion investments in militarized border security technology, infrastructure and equipment, new border fencing, and hiring an additional 750 Border Patrol agents.

Another winner: Wealth

The 2017 tax cut—hyped as a bonus for all—has left our government with a multi-billion dollar debt that could have funded the missing coronavirus test kits, medical safety equipment, vaccine research, and urgently needed basic health care.

Thanks to this tax cut—the rich get richer: 72 percent of the tax cuts were directed to the wealthiest 20 percent of households. Ninety-one of the flourishing Fortune 500 companies paid no income taxes in 2018, and most of the rest paid half the rate they ought to have paid by tax regulation.

Trump’s proposed budget is one that prizes corporate life over human life; militarized security and walls over tackling the challenge of a humanistic immigration policy; and the wealthy over the rest of us. Another gift to corporate America is granting Gilead Sciences the exclusive right to research the drug remdesivir that shows potential for treating the coronavirus. If successful the company is guaranteed a 7-year patent, can set prices controls on it, will benefit from grants and tax credits, and could block manufacturers from developing generic versions at lower costs and more affordable for patients.

Losers in Trump’s budget

State Department. If Trump has his way, the State Department may be cut by 23 percent, thus undermining potentially more effective and intelligent response to

conflict, such as diplomacy and humanitarian aid. Why not build our diplomacy capacity, given we have failed wretchedly in war since World War II in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, the second Iraq War, and Syria, leaving millions dead, injured physically and spiritually, homeless and hungry? Even a majority of U.S. veterans doubt that the trillion dollar wars they fought in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria were worth fighting

The Environmental Protection Agency. The proposed cut of 27 percent is nothing less than insane, given increased coastline flooding and erosion, more extreme wildfires, worsened hurricanes and prolonged droughts from the climate crisis, all of which is estimated to cripple economic growth in this decade. Further, researchers recently calculated that 80,000 additional lives would be lost every decade if this administration completes its rollback of clean air protections. All to coddle some well-connected fossil fuel, auto and truck corporations.

Health and Human Services. The proposed cut of 9 percent to Health and Human Services, including a 16 percent cut to the Centers for Disease Control, is homicidal. Local and state health departments across the country

have lost nearly one quarter of their workforce—front-line health workers critical to stemming the spread of the virus—since 2008, when their positions were eliminated during the Great Recession.

Epidemiologist Larry Brilliant, who helped eradicate smallpox, underscored our underfunded and underprepared public health system: “by the time South Korea had done 200,000 COVID-19 tests, we had probably done less than 1,000.”

Among 20 peer countries, the United States has the largest opioid users per capita, the highest drug-death rate, the highest use of antidepressants per capita, and the highest suicide and homicide rates. In additional comparisons of health with these comparable countries, we have the highest infant mortality rate and the shortest life expectancy.

Why do we fail in protecting our own people’s health and well-being while we squander more than a trillion dollars each year—with the assent of both Republicans and Democrats—on maintaining a failed and futile military empire across the world?

Now what could be done to chart a better future for the 99 percent?

- Repeal the 2017 Tax cuts
- Invest in diplomacy, lower the defense budget, retrain workers for the Green New Deal as described in *Warheads to Windmills*, and quarantine fossil fuels where they are—in the ground.
- Restore the capacity of our health and environmental agencies to at least pre-2008 recession, and enact universal health coverage.
- Heed the call of the UN Secretary General Guterres: “Put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives—the pandemic.”

COVID-19 and the Wasting Disease of Normalcy

By Brian Terrell

“But what of the price of peace?” asked Jesuit priest and war resister Daniel Ber-

rigan, writing from federal prison in 1969, doing time for his part in the destruction of draft records. “I think of the good, decent, peace-loving people I have known by the thousands, and I wonder. How many of them are so afflicted with the wasting disease of normalcy that, even as they declare for the peace, their hands reach out with an instinctive spasm in the direction of their loved ones,

in the direction of their comforts, their home, their security, their income, their future, their plans—that twenty-year plan of family growth and unity, that fifty-year plan of decent life and honorable natural demise.”

From his prison cell in a year of mass movements to end the war in Vietnam and mobilizations for nuclear disarmament, Daniel Berrigan diagnosed normalcy as a disease and labeled it an obstacle to peace:

“Of course, let us have the peace,’ we cry, ‘but at the same time let us have normalcy, let us lose nothing, let our lives stand intact, let us know neither prison nor ill repute nor disruption of ties.’ And because we must encompass this and protect that, and because at all costs—at all costs—our hopes must march on schedule, and because it is unheard of that in the name of peace a sword should fall, disjoining that fine and cunning web that our lives have woven... because of this we cry peace, peace, and there is no peace.”



Daniel Berrigan, inoculated against normalcy

Fifty-one years later, due to the COVID-19 pandemic,

the very notion of normalcy is being questioned as never before. While Donald Trump is “chomping on the bit” to return the economy to normal very soon based on a metric in his own head, more reflective voices are saying that a return to normal, now or even in the future, is an intolerable threat to be resisted. “There is a lot of talk about returning to ‘normal’ after the COVID-19 outbreak,” says climate activist Greta Thunberg, “but normal was a crisis.”

In recent days even economists with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and columnists in the *New York Times* have spoken about the urgent ne-

cessity of reordering economic and political priorities to something more humane—only the thickest and cruelest minds today speak of a return to normal as a positive outcome.

Early in the pandemic, the Australian journalist John Pilger reminded the world of the baseline normal that COVID-19 exacerbates: “A pandemic has been declared, but not for the 24,600 who die every day from unnecessary starvation, and not for 3,000 children who die every day from preventable malaria, and not for the 10,000 people who die every day because they are denied publicly-funded healthcare, and

not for the hundreds of Venezuelans and Iranians who die every day because America’s blockade denies them life-saving medicines, and not for the hundreds of mostly children bombed or starved to death every day in Yemen, in a war supplied and kept going, profitably, by America and Britain. Before you panic, consider them.”

I was starting high school when Daniel Berrigan asked his question and at the time, while there obviously were wars and injustices in the world, it seemed as though if we did not take them too seriously or protest too strenuously, the American Dream with its limitless potential



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As Greta Thunberg and the Friday school strikers for climate convict my generation, few young people, even from previously privileged places, come of age today with such confidence in their futures

was spread before us. Play the game, and our hopes would “march on schedule” was an implied promise that in 1969 looked like a sure thing, for us young white North Americans, anyway. A few years later, I abandoned normal life, dropped out after a year of college and joined the Catholic Worker movement where I came under the influence of Daniel Berrigan and Dorothy

Day, but these were privileged choices that I made. I did not reject normalcy because I did not think that it could deliver on its promise, but because I wanted something else. As Greta Thunberg and the Friday school strikers for climate convict my generation, few young people, even from previously privileged places, come of age today with such confidence in their futures.

The pandemic has brought home what the threats of global destruction by climate change and nuclear war should have long ago—that the promises of normalcy will never deliver in the end, that they are lies that lead those who trust in them to their ruin. Daniel Berrigan saw this a half century ago, normalcy is an affliction, a wasting disease more dangerous to its

The pandemic has brought home what the threats of global destruction by climate change and nuclear war should have long ago—that the promises of normalcy will never deliver in the end, that they are lies that lead those who trust in them to their ruin



Photo by Video131/Shutterstock.com

The wasting disease of normalcy, though, is the far greater existential threat and our survival requires that we meet it with at least the same courage, generosity and ingenuity

victims and to the planet than any viral plague.

Author and human rights activist Arundhati Roy is one of many who recognizes the peril and the promise of the moment: “Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to ‘normality’, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.”

“Every crisis contains both

danger and opportunity,” said Pope Francis about the present situation. “Today I believe we have to slow down our rate of production and consumption and to learn to understand and contemplate the natural world. This is the opportunity for conversion. Yes, I see early signs of an economy that is less liquid, more human. But let us not lose our memory once all this is past, let us not file it away and go back to where we were.”

“There are ways forward we never imagined—at huge cost, with great suffering—but there are possibilities and I’m immensely hopeful,” said Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, on Easter. “After so much suffering, so much heroism from key workers and the NHS (National Health Service) in this country and their equivalents all across the globe, once this epidemic is conquered we cannot be content to go

back to what was before as if all was normal. There needs to be a resurrection of our common life, a new normal, something that links to the old but is different and more beautiful.”

In these perilous times, it is necessary to use the best social practices and to wisely apply science and technology to survive the present COVID-19 pandemic. The wasting disease of normalcy, though, is the far greater existential threat and our survival requires that we meet it with at least the same courage, generosity and ingenuity. **Z**

Brian Terrell is a co-coordinator of Voices for Creative Nonviolence and is quarantined on a Catholic Worker farm in Maloy, Iowa



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Why The Mainstream Media Suggests Lifting Sanctions Against Iran While Not Saying Anything About Venezuela

By Steve Ellner

No other country in the world is being subjected to the type of regime change strategy that the Trump administration is applying to Venezuela. Only in the case of Venezuela has Washington done so much to promote international support in favor of a parallel government. Meanwhile, the mainstream media fails to take up in any way the arguments that expose the fallaciousness and inhumanity of the sanctions imposed against Venezuela. At a press conference on April 2, a reporter told Trump he has a moral responsibility to help Iran as it is hit by the coronavirus. No mention was made

about Venezuela. Why Iran and not Venezuela? Three reasons stand out:

1. The conflict with Iran is a partisan issue. The 2015 nuclear arms agreement with Iran was engineered by the Obama administration, the same that imposed sanctions against Venezuela by calling it an “extraordinary and unusual threat” to U.S. national security. It is thus not surprising that the Democratic Party leadership is critical, though mildly so, of U.S. policy toward Iran, while throwing support toward Trump’s regime change efforts in Venezuela.

2. The Iranian government has a military capacity in the

Venezuela is being ganged up on while the Democratic Party, the mainstream media, some alternative media, most U.S. liberals and much of the world are just standing by

Middle East that threatens U.S. presence in the region. Iran's militia allies such as Hezbollah serve as a dissuasive force. This is a reality that the Pentagon and Washington policymakers are very aware of. In contrast, Venezuela represents no military threat at all to the United States. The Trump administration's claim that Venezuela is allied with dissident FARC Colombian guerrillas intent on creating disruptions is a bogus charge. Venezuela has no equivalent to Hezbollah operating in the region.

3. Venezuelan democracy allows for the existence of a legal opposition whose right-wing factions represented by Juan Guaidó, among others, are Washington surrogates. There is no equivalent movement operating within Iran. This situation strengthens the U.S. position in Venezuela, while weakening it in Iran. Ironically, democracy, which is supposedly what Washington is attempting to promote, disadvantages the Maduro government, while the lack of

it strengthens the position of Iran.

The mainstream media, rather than address these three key issues, accepts, or refrains from questioning, the Trump administration's current justification for singling out Venezuela to achieve regime change: that Venezuela is a narco-state. The media holds back from pointing to the obvious fallacies of Trump's claims: (a) that according to official statistics 84 percent of the drug trafficking from South America uses Pacific routes while only 7 percent pass through Venezuela and other eastern Caribbean areas; (b) why is the Southern Command lining up navy ships along the Venezuelan coast on grounds that drug traffickers will use the coronavirus to inundate U.S. markets, instead of surveilling the Pacific coast?; and (c) Why doesn't the Trump administration take its drug charges against Maduro to an international tribunal?

At this point Venezuela is receiving belligerent treat-

ment from the U.S. largely without precedent in peacetime situations. In just one week, the Trump administration announced a 15 million dollar award for help in capturing Maduro, among other members of his government. Then it unveiled a plan of transition to achieve democracy beginning with Maduro's resignation. Then it announced that it was sending Navy ships to the Venezuelan coast ostensibly to beef up counter-narcotics operations.

In short, Venezuela is being ganged up on while the Democratic Party, the mainstream media, some alternative media, most U.S. liberals and much of the world are just standing by. **Z**

Steve Ellner is a retired professor from Venezuela's Universidad de Oriente and currently an Associate Managing Editor of *Latin American Perspectives*. He is the editor of the recently released *Latin America's Pink Tide: Breakthroughs and Shortcomings*.

The bigger picture is hiding behind a virus

By Jonathan Cook

Things often look the way they do because someone claiming authority tells

us they look that way. If that sounds too cynical, pause for a moment and reflect on what seemed most important to you just a year ago, or even a few weeks ago.

Then, you may have been thinking that Russian interference in western politics was a vitally important issue, and something that we needed to invest much of our emotional and political energy in countering. Or maybe a few weeks ago you felt that everything would be fine if we could just get Donald Trump out of the White House. Or maybe you imagined that Brexit was the panacea to Britain's prob-

We want to live and prosper, and they need to maintain order, to demonstrate their competence, to prevent dissatisfaction bubbling up into anger or open revolt



Photo by Rena Schild/Shutterstock.com

lems—or, conversely, that it would bring about the UK's downfall.

Still feel that way?

After all, much as we might want to (and doubtless some will try), we can't really blame Vladimir Putin, or Russian troll farms spending a few thousand dollars on Facebook advertising, for the coronavirus pandemic. Much as we might want to, we can't really blame Trump for the catastrophic condition of the privatized American health care system, totally ill-equipped and unprepared for a nationwide health emergency. And as tempting as it is for some of us, we can't really blame Europe's soft borders and immigrants for the

rising death toll in the UK. It was the global economy and cheap travel that brought the virus into Britain, and it was the Brexit-loving prime minister Boris Johnson who dithered as the epidemic took hold.

The bigger picture

Is it possible that only a few weeks ago our priorities were just a little divorced from a bigger reality? That what appeared to be the big picture was not actually big enough? That maybe we should have been thinking about even more important, pressing matters—systemic

ones like the threat of a pandemic of the very kind we are currently enduring.

Because while we were all thinking about Russiagate or Trump or Brexit, there were lots of experts—even the Pentagon, it seems—warning of just such a terrible calamity and urging that preparations be made to avoid it. We are in the current mess precisely because those warnings were ignored or given no attention—not because the science was doubted, but because there was no will to do something to avert the threat.

If we reflect, it is possible to get a sense of two things. First, that our attention rarely belongs to us; it is the plaything of others. And second,



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that the “real world,” as it is presented to us, rarely reflects anything we might usefully be able to label as objective reality. It is a set of political, economic and social priorities that have been manufactured for us.

Agents outside our control with their own vested interests—politicians, the media, business—construct reality, much as a filmmaker designs a movie. They guide our gaze in certain directions and not others.

A Critical Perspective

At a moment like this of real crisis, one that overshadows all else, we have a chance—though only a chance—to recognize this truth and develop our own critical perspective. A perspective that truly belongs to us, and not to others.

Think back to the old you, the pre-coronavirus you. Were your priorities the same as your current ones?

This is not to say that the things you prioritize now—in this crisis—are necessarily any more “yours” than the old set of priorities.

If you’re watching the TV or reading newspapers—and who isn’t—you’re probably feeling scared, either for yourself or for your loved ones.

All you can think about is the coronavirus. Nothing else really seems that important by comparison. And all you can hope for is the moment when the lockdowns are over and life returns to normal.

But that’s not objectively the “real world” either. Terrible as the coronavirus is, and as right as anyone is to be afraid of the threat it poses, those “agents of authority” are again directing and controlling our gaze, though at least this time those in authority include doctors and scientists. And they are guiding our attention in ways that serve their interests—for good or bad.

Endless tallies of infections and deaths, rocketing graphs, stories of young people, along with the elderly, battling for survival serve a purpose: to make sure we stick to the lockdown, that we maintain social distancing, that we don’t get complacent and spread the disease.

Here our interests—survival, preventing hospitals from being overwhelmed—coincide with those of the establishment, the “agents of authority.” We want to live and prosper, and they need to maintain order, to demonstrate their competence, to prevent dissatisfaction bubbling up into anger or open revolt.

Crowded out by detail

But again the object of our attention is not as much ours as we may believe. While we focus on graphs, while we twitch the curtains to see if neighbors are going for a second run or whether families are out in the garden celebrating a birthday distant from an elderly parent, we are much less likely to be thinking about how well the crisis is being handled. The detail, the mundane is again crowding out the important, the big picture.

Our current fear is an enemy to our developing and maintaining a critical perspective. The more we are frightened by graphs, by deaths, the more we are likely to submit to whatever we are told will keep us safe.

Under cover of the public’s fear, and of justified concerns about the state of the economy and future employment, countries like the U.S. are transferring huge sums of public money to the biggest corporations. Politicians controlled by big business and media owned by big business are pushing through this corporate robbery without scrutiny—and for reasons that should be self-explanatory. They know our attention is too overwhelmed by the virus

for us to assess intentionally mystifying arguments about the supposed economic benefits, about yet more illusory trickle-down.

There are many other dramatic changes being introduced, almost too many and too rapidly for us to follow them properly. Bans on movement. Intensified surveillance. Censorship. The transfer of draconian powers to the police, and preparations for the deployment of soldiers on streets. Detention without trial. Martial law. Measures that might have terrified us when Trump was our main worry, or Brexit, or Russia, may now seem a price worth paying for a “return to normality”.

Paradoxically, a craving for the old-normal may mean we are prepared to submit to a new-normal that could permanently deny us any chance of returning to the old-normal.

The point is not just that things are far more provisional than most of us are ready to contemplate; it's that our window on what we think of as “the real world,” as “normal,” is almost entirely manufactured for us.

Distracted by the virus

Strange as this may sound right now, in the midst of our fear and suffering, the pandemic is not really the big picture either. Our attention is consumed by the virus, but it is, in a truly awful sense, a distraction too.

In a few more years, maybe sooner than we imagine, we will look back on the virus—with the benefit of distance and hindsight—and feel the same way about it we do now about Putin, or Trump, or Brexit.

It will feel part of our old selves, our old priorities, a small part of a much bigger picture, a clue to where we were heading, a portent we did not pay attention to when it mattered most.

The virus is one small warning—one among many—that we have been living out of sync with the natural world we share with other life. Our need to control and dominate, our need to acquire, our need for security, our need to conquer death—they have crowded out all else. We have followed those who promised quick, easy solutions, those who refused to compromise, those who conveyed authority, those who spread fear, those who hated.

If only we could redirect our gaze, if we could seize back control of our attention for a moment, we might understand that we are being

plagued not just by a virus but by our fear, our hate, our hunger, our selfishness. The evidence is there in the fires, the floods and the disease, in the insects that have disappeared, in the polluted seas, in the stripping of the planet's ancient lungs, its forests, in the melting ice-caps.

The big picture is hiding in plain sight, no longer obscured by issues like Russia and Brexit but now only by the most microscopic germ, marking the thin boundary between life and death. **Z**

This essay first appeared on Jonathan Cook's blog: <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>

Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include *Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East* (Pluto Press) and *Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair* (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.



Can Democracy Survive the Coronavirus?

By Sonali Kolhatkar

The COVID-19 global pandemic has prompted a major question about leadership in a time of crisis: how to balance the importance of public health with the respecting of individual

liberty? The virus respects no borders. It cares little for how nations are run, whether through democratic governance or authoritarianism. But democratic governments have already used the virus to crack down on freedoms, while those regimes that were authoritarian to begin with have used the pandemic to grab even more power. Meanwhile in countries like the United States, the notion of freedom is being used to undermine public health. But freedom and public health are not mutually exclusive.

Hungary's right-wing gov-

ernment offers perhaps the most striking example of how a crisis of public health has been used to further authoritarianism. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has cited the virus spread to cancel all elections and remain in power indefinitely. He has invoked broad powers to limit air travel and individual movements. But there is no end date to the restrictions, nor any parliamentary review of his actions. For as long as Orbán's emergency orders are in place, he has claimed the right to rule by decree. Likening the virus to the sort of "foreign influ-



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ence” he has railed against, Orban said, “We are fighting a two-front war. One front is called migration, and the other one belongs to the coronavirus. There is a logical connection between the two, as both spread with movement.”

In Serbia, President Aleksandar Vucic has pushed for similarly extreme measures and relied on heavily armed police patrols to enforce his edicts. He too has undermined parliamentary oversight of his actions and assumed the right to rule by decree.

A spokesperson for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe explained the framework for what the pandemic requires from governments: “A state of emergency—wherever it is declared and for whatever

reason—must be proportionate to its aim, and only remain in place for as long as absolutely necessary.” But history is replete with examples of governments seizing power during moments of crisis and refusing to voluntarily relinquish them.

In India, the world’s largest democracy and second most populous country, the authoritarian Hindu fundamentalist government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has imposed the strictest lockdown in the world. Announced with almost no notice, Modi upended life for more than a billion people with a mandatory 21-day lockdown to slow the spread of the coronavirus. With hundreds of millions of people surviving on a hand-to-mouth existence, many

homeless or displaced, such a draconian order did more harm than good. Tens of thousands gathered into crowded buses, trains, and streets desperate to return to their villages as their source of incomes were cut off. Nearly two dozen people have died en route from Indian cities, including an 11-year-old who simply starved to death.

China, a nation whose authoritarian streak was already under international scrutiny, expanded its surveillance power under cover of the virus. Public transportation will now deploy facial recognition and temperature scanning technology to keep tabs on citizens with no oversight on how the data will be used, and no end date on data gathering.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban has cited the virus spread to cancel all elections and remain in power indefinitely. He has invoked broad powers to limit air travel and individual movements

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Photo by Christopher Penler/Shutterstock.com

Israel has taken it a step further, openly surveilling all residents using their cell phone data to track those who have tested positive for COVID-19 and determining who has come into contact with them. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu waived parliamentary oversight on using such “anti-terrorism” measures to tackle the pandemic.

In the United States, the emergence of COVID-19 initially provoked almost no actions from the government. President Donald Trump was briefed about the devastating potential of the disease to take

half a million lives in January, but he was more deeply concerned about the health of the economy than that of American lives and repeatedly claimed, “No one saw this coming.” Trump watched the stock market gains under his presidency unravel and prematurely urged a return to normalcy, hoping to see “packed churches” by Easter and worrying that the “cure” for the virus would be “worse than the problem itself.” An administration that has based its power on undermining science and courting right-wing religious fundamentalists, gun-owners, and self-avowed

libertarians has used the notion of “individual freedoms” to justify its dangerous inaction.

Numerous U.S. officials are carving out exemptions for religious gatherings in spite of the clear need for strict quarantining to stop the spread of the disease. Jerry Falwell Jr.’s Liberty University refused to respect quarantine recommendations and reopened after Spring Break, endangering students. The pastor of a megachurch in Florida also flouted public health warnings and assembled his congregation.

Perhaps the best symbol of

“libertarian” idiocy is Ammon Bundy, the leader of the failed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon who is leading a “liberty rebellion” in Idaho—a state that has more cases of the virus per capita than California. Bundy has even wished the illness upon himself, saying, “I want the virus now.” But he ought to consider the case of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson who also spent weeks refusing to take action against the virus and claimed he was seeking “herd immunity” for a large percentage of the population. Johnson has now contracted the virus and sought intensive care at a hospital. Like others, he has realized an aversion to scientific facts doesn’t make you immune to the virus.

A crisis such as the one we are facing demands decisive action tempered with an abundance of caution about infringements of people’s rights. Nations such as New Zealand are showing it can be done. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has acted decisively but emphasized government transparency in decision-making over a virus-lockdown. She has issued clear messages about the government’s strategy and goals for eliminating the virus’ spread and made herself available to the instruments of accountability in a democ-

racy—namely the press. Her approach stands in contrast to the United States where President Trump has upped the ferocity of his attacks on reporters.

South Korea also took quick action to tackle the virus after it first exploded into view. President Moon Jae-in ordered widespread testing, imposed emergency measures on the epicenter of the outbreak, and isolated and treated patients swiftly. Communicating clearly and often with the public, the government effectively turned around a public health crisis without resorting to heavy-handed or autocratic measures. Unlike the United States and UK, President Moon relied on sound scientific advice and wasted no time in ordering tests and protective equipment.

New Zealand and South Korea offer models for how governments can navigate

unprecedented crises such as this. The coronavirus is not just a threat to our personal and collective health; it is a threat to our democratic institutions as well. We need to protect lives and democracies. **Z**

This article was produced by Economy for All, a project of the Independent Media Institute.

Sonali Kolhatkar is the founder, host and executive producer of “Rising Up With Sonali,” a television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations.

Market “Solutions” to the Covid-19 Crisis

By Jack Rasmus



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The reality is that the free market and the so-called free enterprise system is largely responsible for much of today's health crisis

Listening to Trump's daily press conference, one gets injected with a healthy dose of how market-based solutions are already saving us from the virus.

On a daily basis, Trump tells us what a fantastic job he's doing, then trots out corporate CEOs before the camera, one after another, each telling us what they're doing: U.S. auto executives tell us of their plans to convert their idled factories and produce millions of ventilators (while states in desperate need are actually buying them from abroad, mostly China); Big Pharma companies talk about developing a new vaccine or interim medical treatments like hydrochloroquine (which Cuba has already produced and is giving free to Italy); silicon valley tech companies announce contributions of hundreds of thousands of N95 masks (from their offshore inventories (purchased from Asia and

elsewhere, no doubt).

But the reality is that the free market—and the so-called free enterprise system—is largely responsible for much of today's health crisis. It is the “market” that has given us the massive shortages in hospital beds, ventilators, critical personal protection equipment (PPE), and the long lag in developing interim medical treatments—let alone a vaccine.

Here's just a few notable cases of how the market has failed and continues to do so:

Hospital Beds

As others have pointed out before the Neoliberal market system implanted itself in the U.S. decades ago with Ronald Reagan (deepening and expanding ever since), there were 1.5 million hospital beds in the country and an extensive non-profit

public hospital system. Before 1980, there were 100 million fewer U.S. citizens for those 1.5 million beds. Today, there are 100 million more Americans, but only 925,000 hospital beds. The reduction, of course, was all done in the name of “market efficiency” by the for-profit hospital chains who bought up and then shut down much of the non-profit public hospital system. Now, as the current health crisis deepens, we're left setting up cots in auditoriums and college dorms and calling them hospitals.

The crisis in hospital beds for virus patients can be traced largely to the program of Bill Clinton in 1994 called “managed health care.” That program permitted and incentivized the acquisition of the public hospital system by the for-profit chains who sought to reduce competition so they could raise prices.

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Rena Schild/
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It is the “market” that has given us the massive shortages in hospital beds, ventilators, critical personal protection equipment (PPE), and the long lag in developing interim medical treatments—let alone a vaccine

Under Clinton’s program, the for-profit chains were even exempted from U.S. anti-trust laws that might have prevented the loss of a half million hospital beds. Hospitals are one of the few industries that are totally exempt from anti-trust.

Equipment (PPE)

Why is the U.S. so short on ventilators, masks, safety clothing, even disinfectants? It’s because the market solution was to offshore the production of these critical items to Asia, Latin America, and especially China, years ago. It was cheaper to move production offshore (experts

call this today relocating the supply chains) and then import these products back to the U.S. economy. Expanding free trade (again under Clinton) then made the cost of importing back to the U.S. even cheaper and thus more profitable. Offshoring and free trade are but two sides of the same coin. Add a third leg to the economic stool: tax laws

Personal

Protective



You won't hear about that "non-market" solution from market-unfriendly Cuba from Trump

were changed to provide tax breaks to corporations that actually offshored the production of PPE.

Fast forward to today and we have China producing 115 million N95 and surgical masks a day. China's surplus is so great it is giving ventilators and masks to Italy for free. But is the U.S. saying anything about this in Trump's press conferences? Has Trump ever admitted the availability of these critical PPE materials, ready for import to the U.S. right now. No. Instead, health care providers, doctors, nurses, technicians, are told to re-use their masks and other equipment since there aren't enough of them to go around. And we're told by corporate representatives in Trump's press conferences the materials are coming. Just be patient.

And then there's the Hydrochloroquine interim treatment for those sick with

COVID-19. Trump mentioned that, but did he say where it was already being used? Some reports are now appearing that the treatment was successfully developed in Cuba, whose doctors have been sent to Italy to administer it to the most ill patients. But no mention, however, that that treatment is taking place right now in Italy. You won't hear about that "non-market" solution from market-unfriendly Cuba from Trump.

Unemployment Benefits

The U.S. has one of the most miserly unemployment benefit payment systems among all the advanced economies. It provides barely a third of what's needed to live on—and in many states not even that. In California, one of the more generous in relative terms, the top bene-

fit is \$450 per week. That's about \$1,800 a month. But the median rent in urban areas of California is \$3,000 or more. In New York and other big cities, it's even more. And the insufficient benefits are paid for only six months.

But if you're one of the tens of millions of temp, contract, gig workers you're not considered an employee for the company you're working for. You, therefore, are not eligible for even the insufficient unemployment benefits paid in the U.S.

That has temporarily changed as the U.S. Congress CARES Act just passed. It now provides unemployment benefits for gig and other contract workers, albeit for just four months. But the point is this: it's not the "market" that is helping the millions of gig and other contract workers with at least some benefits. It's the government.

The market has allowed

companies to avoid paying any unemployment benefits tax that would otherwise cover contract and gig workers. The taxpayer and government now will pick up the tab. The market failed and the government-taxpayer must clean up its mess and provide the benefits companies like Uber, Lyft, AirBnB and others have avoided and pocketed for themselves.

Health Insurance

In the free market nirvana that is the U.S. today, millions of companies are permitted to forego providing their employees health insurance coverage, 37 million have no insurance at all, 87 million are underinsured, and there are millions with insurance that have deductibles of thousands of dollars per person, per year.

Now the CARES Act once again, i.e. the government and taxpayer, is stepping in

and ensuring these millions—employed and unemployed—have some kind of health insurance coverage. The government is called upon to clean up the mess the market has left.

Paid Medical-Sick Leave

The richest country in the world, the U.S., where the Fortune 500 largest companies have managed to distribute more than \$1 trillion



Photo by Rena Schild/Shutterstock.com

a year for the past nine years to their shareholders in stock buybacks and dividend payouts, only provides on average 6 paid sick leave days a year to employees. And that's typically only where a union contract exists. Most get unpaid sick leave or none at all. Get sick, go find another job. That's the market solution. In Europe and elsewhere, combined paid leave is typically 30 days or more a year. But not in Trump's market solution America.

Once again, the consequence is that the government-taxpayer in the CARES Act will have to pick up the tab for paid medical leave for the millions who must stay home due to their Employer's order, or government "stay in place" guidelines, or school districts shutdowns.

Market Solutions for Worker Retraining

It used to be that companies trained their own workers to become more skilled and productive. There was once a very widespread on-the-job training culture in the U.S. That disappeared with the deepening of neoliberalism and globalization (aka free trade, offshoring, and foreign direct investment by U.S. multinational corps). Under

Bill Clinton, corporations were allowed to bring hundreds of thousands of skilled workers from their foreign operations back to the U.S. to take some of the best U.S. jobs. It still continues. Free market efficiency meant it was cheaper (and more profitable) just to transfer workers on H1-B and L-1/2 visas to the U.S. No need to train American citizens. It was cheaper to import skilled labor. That was the "market solution" to job training.

The CARES ACT: \$500 Billion "Socialism for Corporations"

The CARES Act allocates \$500 billion just to large corporations. (Another \$367 billion to smaller businesses). But do the large corporations really need the \$500 billion? And who will oversee the distribution of that largesse?

Take the Airlines. Do they need it for the next 60 days? Do they deserve it?

The airlines are getting \$58 billion under the CARES Act. Half of that in outright grants. No strings attached. Another half in loans. Reportedly, they're now quickly taking the grants but not the loans. Why? They're probably waiting for Congress to agree to

convert the loans to outright grants later in the year.

But no one is asking how much cash on hand the airline companies have as they're handed these tens of billions of dollars. And no one is mentioning that the same airline companies in recent years gave their shareholders and CEOs no less than \$45 billion in stock buybacks and dividend payouts. So now they're getting \$58 billion to backfill the hole of \$45 billion they gave away to themselves and their big investors (who together owned most of the \$45 billion stock bought back).

In recent years big corporations (Fortune 500) earned record profits and paid out more than \$1 trillion a year in buybacks and dividends. Under Trump, they've paid out a total of more than \$3 trillion in buybacks and dividends. In addition to that, in the months immediately leading up to the March 2020 virus crisis, the same big corporations were drawing down hundreds of billions of dollars from their credit lines with banks. At the same time, in recent months they have been issuing new bonds and raising billions more in cash. No less than \$73 billion was raised from issuing new bonds in February, a record. Flush with mountains of cash from Trump 2018 tax cuts, from their bank credit lines, and

from record corporate bond issuance, they now are being given \$500 billion more by Congress in the CARES ACT. Do they really need it? Let's open their books and see before they get even one dollar.

Not least, there's the question of who will oversee who gets the \$500 billion. The Democrats in Congress say the special board that was created must oversee. Trump, in turn, has said, no way. I'm personally going to oversee this. Want to guess who'll

win that one?

The point is Big Corporations are loaded with cash. And they didn't earn most of it from the market. They got it from Trump tax cuts, from bank credit lines, and from low interest corporate bond issuance made possible by convenient near-zero interest loans from the Federal Reserve. Nevertheless, now the non-market sugar daddy, the U.S. government, is giving them \$500 billion more whether they need it or not.

Super-Socialism for Bankers & Investors

The \$500 billion going to big business pales in comparison, however, to the multi-trillions that the central bank, the Federal Reserve, is now pouring into the bankers, shadow bankers (i.e. hedge funds, equity firms, investment banks, mutual funds, etc.), and even now into non-bank corporations for the first time as well.

In 2008 the Federal Reserve



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provided more than \$4 trillion to bail out the banks. Now it is providing more than \$6 trillion (thus far)—and this time the banks haven't even failed yet.

The Fed has opened a free money spigot to investors, bankers, and to big business of all types, and has simply declared “come on in and take it.” And if the \$6 trillion to date isn't enough, we'll provide more.

For the first time ever the Fed is now providing free money not only to bankers, but to credit card companies, mortgage companies, corporate bondholders, and even to investors in derivatives like Exchange Traded Funds, or ETFs. Next it will start buying stocks to prop up those markets. Its cousin central bank, the Bank of Japan, has been doing that for years now.

Subsidizing Capital Incomes by Government Not the Market

Both tax policy and central bank monetary policy are supposed to function as general economy stabilization tools, according to mainstream economists. But today that's a fiction perpetrated by the corporate media. In recent decades, tax and central bank policy “tools” have become

The Capitalist State and its government takes care of its own. The rest of us will be taken care of by “the market,” according to Trump

virtual conduits for the subsidization of capital incomes.

They have become the vehicles of Corporate Socialism. The Capitalist State and its government takes care of its own. The rest of us will be taken care of by “the market,” according to Trump. Z

Dr. Rasmus is author of the just-published book, *The Scourge of Neoliberalism: US Economic Policy from Reagan to Trump*, Clarity Press, January 2020. He blogs at jackrasmus.com and hosts the weekly radio show, “Alternative Visions” on the Progressive Radio Network. Join Dr. Rasmus for daily commentary on developments in the US economy and politics on Twitter at @drjackrasmus.

Feature



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Bosses Are Making Coronavirus Worse, for Their Benefit

Chris Brooks interviews Noam Chomsky

Labor Notes staff writer Chris Brooks interviewed professor Chomsky on April 10 to learn more about how we got into this moment—and what it will take to get us out of it.

Professor Chomsky, thank you so much for joining me. I know you're swamped with interview requests all the time, so on behalf of Labor Notes, just thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us.

Chomsky: Glad to.

So I wanted to just start out with getting your thoughts generally on the unprecedented moment we're in. We're obviously in the midst of both a global pandemic and a global recession and right now millions of people in the United States have found themselves both unemployed and uninsured while our health care system is overloaded and lacking anything close to the number of hospital beds and

ventilators and personal protective equipment that we need. And I know we could spend the whole half-hour on this question alone, but in brief strokes, I'm wondering if you could just outline for us how to understand the current moment we're in and the political choices that led us here.

Well, first of all, we should recognize that unless we get to the roots of this pandemic, it's going to recur, probably in worse form,



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simply because of the manipulations of the capitalist system which are trying to create circumstances in which it will be worse, for their benefit. We can see that in the stimulus bill and many other things.

Now, second, because of the global warming which is going on and puts all of this into the shadow, we will recover from this at severe cost. We're not going to recover from the ongoing melting of the polar ice sheets. And if you want to understand how contemporary capital is looking at this, take a look at Trump's budget. It's true that this is a pathological extreme of the normal capitalist systems and maybe it's not fair to use it as an example, but that's what we're living with.

So on February 10, while the epidemic was raging, going to get worse, Trump came out with his budget proposals. What were they? First point, continue the defunding of health-related elements of the government. Throughout his term he'd been cutting back on funding of anything that doesn't benefit private power and wealth, corporate power. So all the health-related parts of the government had been increasingly defunded. He killed programs, all sorts of things.

February 10, let's continue with it. So further defunding of the Centers for Disease

Control and other health-related parts of the government. But there were also compensating increases in the budget, for the fossil fuel industry, more subsidies to the fossil fuel industry. So let's not only kill as many people as possible now, but let's try to destroy all of society. That's basically what the words mean. Of course, more funding for the military and for his famous wall.

But these two things stand out very brightly as an indication of the criminality that is first of all endemic but is highlighted in the sociopathic White House. Brings it out radically. But of course Trump can't be blamed for all of this. It goes back, and we better think about it.

After the SARS epidemic in 2003, also a coronavirus, it was well understood by scientists that other recurrences of one or another coronavirus was going to come, probably more serious. Well, understanding is not enough. Someone has to pick up the ball and run with it. Now there are two possibilities. One is the drug companies, but they follow normal, capitalist logic. You do what makes profit tomorrow. You don't worry about the fact that in a couple of years everything's going to collapse. That's not your problem. So the drug companies essentially did nothing. There were things that could be done. There

Government is the solution when the private sector's in trouble, that's understood. But if it's just when the public needs something, government's not the answer

was plenty of information circulating. Scientists knew what to do. There could have been preparations. Somebody's got to pay for it. Not the drug companies. Well, in a rational world, even a capitalist world prior to Ronald Reagan, the government could have stepped in and done it.

That's pretty much the way polio was eradicated, through a government-initiated and -funded program. When Jonas Salk discovered the vaccine, he insisted that there be no patents. He said, "It's got to be public, just like the sun." That's still capitalism, but it's regimented capitalism. That was ended at a stroke by Ronald Reagan. Government's the problem, it's not the solution. Let's legalize tax havens. Let's legalize stock buybacks costing tens of trillions of dollars to the public in pure robbery.

Government is the solution when the private sector's in trouble, that's understood. But if it's just when the public needs something, government's not the answer. So going back to 2003, government couldn't step in. Actually, it did to a slight extent step in, and it's very revealing to see what happened. Obama, after the Ebola crisis, recognized that there are problems. We have to do something.

Obama did several things. One of them was to try to contract for ventilators. Ventilators are the big bottleneck in the system right now. That's what's forcing nurses to decide who to kill tomorrow. There aren't enough of them, but the Obama administration did contract for the development of high-quality, low-cost ventilators. The company was quickly bought up by a bigger one which sidelined the project—it was competing with their own expensive ventilators—and then turned to the government and said they want to get out of the contract, it's not profitable enough.

That's savage capitalism. Not just capitalism, but neoliberal capitalism. It gets worse. In January and February of this year, when

U.S. intelligence services were pounding at the door of the White House saying, "Hey, there's a real crisis. Do something." Couldn't do it. But the Trump administration was doing something, namely it was exporting ventilators to China and other countries to improve the trade balance. That went on into March.

Now the same manufacturers and shipping companies that were sending them out are bringing them back, double profit. This is what we're living with. It can easily go on. So if you look back over the whole thing, at the base is a colossal market failure. The markets simply don't work. It can work for selling shoes sometimes, but if anything significant happens, it's none of their business. You have to operate as Milton Friedman and others pointed out: just by greed. You do things for your own welfare, wealth, nothing else. It's a built-in disaster. We've had so many examples, I don't have to review it. So at the beginning is a market failure. Then comes the extra hammer blow of savage capitalism, neoliberalism, which we've been suffering from over the world for 40 years, goes beyond ventilators.

Hospitals in the United States have to be run on a business model. So no spare capacity. It doesn't work even in normal times. And plenty of people, including me, can testify on that in the best hospitals. But it kind of works. However, if anything goes wrong, you're sunk. Tough luck. Maybe that's okay for automobile manufacturing. It doesn't work for health care. Our health care system altogether is an international scandal. But the business model, of course, just makes it a built-in disaster. So there's that.

And some of the other things that went on are just too surreal to discuss. USAID had a program, very successful program, detecting viruses that are in animal populations, wild populations that are getting to closer contact with humans because of habitat destruction

and global warming. So they were identifying thousands of potential disease viruses, working in China as well. Trump disbanded it. He'd been defunding it, but then he disbanded it with exquisite timing in October.

I could go on and on. This is the picture you get. A bunch of sadistic sociopaths in the White House intensifying deep market failures that go much farther back. And now intensifying it further. The rich are not waiting to see how to build the next world. They're working on it right now, making sure it comes

out the right way. Further subsidies to fossil fuels, destroy EPA regulations that might save people but harm profits, this is all going on right in front of our eyes and the question is, will there be counterforces? If not...

Before we move on to the discussion maybe of popular movements and how to fight back in this, in the discussion of market failures, they seem to be combining as well with the legacy of institutional racism in the United States and we see this playing out in the disproportionate

This is the picture you get. A bunch of sadistic sociopaths in the White House intensifying deep market failures that go much farther back



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impact that the coronavirus is having in Black communities. In your view, how should we understand this?

We can understand that by going back four centuries to when the first slaves were brought. I don't want to have to run through the whole history, but the most vicious system of slavery in human history is the basis, large part of the basis, for U.S. prosperity.

Cotton was the oil of the 18th and 19th century. You had to have cheap cotton. You don't get that by following the rules they teach you in the economics department. You get it by vicious, brutal slavery. That's laid the basis for manufacturing, textile manufacturing, finance, commerce, retail, obviously, that went on through much of the 19th century. Well, finally, slavery was formally ended for about 10 years during the Reconstruction period. Then

there was an agreement with the South that they could go on exactly the way they were before. So you get one of the best books on the topic called *Slavery by Another Name*, measures taken to essentially criminalize the Black population. So the Black guy standing on a street corner, they fine him for vagrancy. He can't pay the fine. Okay, you go to a chain gang.

End result was this great manufacturing revolution of the late 19th century, early 20th century, largely built on, it wasn't called slavery, but ownership of the Black population by the State. It's much better than slavery. If you have slaves, you have to keep them alive. Well, if you put them in prison, the government has to keep them alive. You just get them when you need them and there's no question of a lack of discipline or protest or anything like that. This went on almost until the Sec-



ond World War. At that point there were jobs. People had to work.

But then comes new forms of imposed slavery. So well into the late 1960s, federal housing laws required segregation. There was a lot of public-supported housing going on in the 1950s. Levittowns and so on, but for whites, no Blacks. Liberal senators voted for this, hated it, but they voted for it because there was no other way to get any public housing passed.

The United States had anti-miscegenation laws—so severe that the Nazis refused to accept them—into the 1960s. Then it takes other forms. The Supreme Court just essentially did what the government did back at the end of Reconstruction, told the Southern states, you can do whatever you like. They eliminated the Voting Rights Act. We've just seen this a couple of days ago in Wisconsin. Incredible. If you want to see democracy simply crushed, take a look what happened two days ago in Wisconsin.

The governor sensibly wanted, a Democratic governor, wanted to delay the primary and extend absentee voting. I mean, nothing could make more perfect sense. There is a Republican-dominated legislature that had a small minority of votes, but gerrymandering gave

them the largest number of seats in the Republican legislature. They called a session. I don't think the Republicans even bothered to show up. The Majority Leader simply called the session and closed it. Didn't consider the governor's proposal, supported by the Supreme Court.

This is designed to ensure that poor minority voters, people who can't get the polls easily, mostly Democrats, won't vote. The rich, the traditional base of the ones who did all this, they vote. It's an open way, not even concealed, to try to ensure that no matter what the public wants, the most reactionary policies will be maintained permanently.

[Senate Majority Leader] Mitch McConnell is the evil genius behind this. He's been doing it beautifully. Make sure that the judiciary is stuffed with young, mostly unqualified, ultra-reactionary justices. That ensures that whatever the country wants in the future, they'll be able to kill it. Just like the Roberts Court, the majority is able to do it now. Republicans know that they're a minority party. There's no way to get votes on their actual programs. That's why they have to appeal to so-called cultural issues—gun rights, abortion and so on—not their actual policies, which are fill the pockets of the rich. That's the ac-

End result was this great manufacturing revolution of the late 19th century, early 20th century, largely built on, it wasn't called slavery, but ownership of the Black population by the State. It's much better than slavery. If you have slaves, you have to keep them alive. Well, if you put them in prison, the government has to keep them alive

tual policy. Trump is a genius at this. Have to admire him. With one hand he says, “I’m your savior, I’m working for the poor working guy.” On the other hand he’s stabbing him in the back. It’s pretty impressive. He’s most certainly the most successful con man in American history, ever.

I presume it’ll explode sometime, but so far it’s maintaining itself. They’re trying very hard to dismantle whatever elements of democracy there are. There are models elsewhere, [Prime Minister Viktor] Orbán in Hungary is doing the same thing, one of their big friends. In fact, it’s kind of interesting, it’s pretty hard to identify a coherent geopolitical strategy from the chaos in the White House. But there is one that comes out with considerable clarity: form an international of the most reactionary states in the world, then let that be the basis for U.S. power.

So [President Abdel Fattah el-]Sisi in Egypt,

the worst tyrant in Egypt’s history, the family dictators in Saudi Arabia, in particular MBS [Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud], the biggest killer. Israel, which is going way to the right, is now at the center of it. Former tacit relations between Israel and the Arab states are now becoming open. [Prime Minister Narendra] Modi in India, what he’s doing is simply unspeakable. He gave four hours’ notice for the total lockdown. Most of the population in India is informal workers. They don’t have anywhere to go. They can’t stay home. There’s no home. So they’re trekking on the highways, maybe a thousand miles to some village somewhere, dying on the way. Impossible to imagine what this is going to do. But since they’re mostly poor and many of them are Muslim, who cares? So he’s a major part of this reactionary international. Nice guys like Orbán in Hungary or the like. They love them.



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[Former Deputy Prime Minister Matteo] Salvini in Italy, one of the worst gangsters around. In the Western hemisphere the main representative is [President Jair] Bolsonaro in Brazil, who's vying with Trump to see who could be the worst criminal in the world. Trump easily can beat him because of U.S. power, but the policies are not much different and that's harming not just Brazil but the whole world. Current predictions in scientific journals are that in about 15 years the Amazon will shift from being a net carbon sink to a net carbon CO2 emitter. That's a disaster. All the result of extended gifts by Bolsonaro to the mining industries, the agribusinesses, all of his friends. So there are guys trying to create the next world. They're working hard. They always do. Their relentless, constant class war never stops and if they're allowed to win, we're toast.

And along those lines, you've said it's really valuable to read the business press because they're often very frank about what they think of the world and what they're doing, what their plans and schemes are. From our viewpoint, we're seeing a lot of rank-and-file activity in the United States right now. Strikes are taking place in many locations. Workers are organizing in response to the coronavirus and being encouraged to work in unsafe conditions. Are the employers talking about that

and are they worried about it?

Oh, boy, are they. In fact, as you know, every January, the guys who modestly call themselves the masters of the universe gather in Davos, Switzerland, to go skiing, talk about how wonderful they are and so on and so forth. This January meeting was very interesting. They see that the peasants are coming with the pitchforks and they're worried about it. So there's a shift. You look at the theme of the meeting, it's, "Yeah, we did bad things in the past. We now understand it. We're now opening a new era in capitalism, a new era in which we aren't just concerned with the stockholders, but with the workers and the population and we're such good guys, so humanist that you can entrust your faith to us. We'll make sure everything's fine."

And it was pretty interesting to see what happened. There were two main speakers. This should be played in every classroom in the country. Two main speakers. Trump, of course, gave the keynote speech. Greta Thunberg gave the other speech. The contrast was fantastic. The first speech is this raving buffoon, screaming about how greedy he is and we can't even count up the number of the lies. The second speech is a 17-year-old girl quietly giving a factual, accurate description of what's happening in the world and looking these guys in the face and saying, "You're

So there are guys trying to create the next world. They're working hard. They always do. Their relentless, constant class war never stops and if they're allowed to win, we're toast

destroying our lives.” And of course everyone politely claps. Nice little girl. Go back to school.

The reaction to Trump was particularly interesting. They don’t like him. His vulgarity and crudity is interfering with the image they’re trying to project as dedicated humanists. But they love him. They gave him a round of upstanding applause and couldn’t stop cheering. Because they understand something. This guy, no matter how vulgar he is, knows very well whose pockets to fill and how to fill them. So he can be a buffoon. We’ll tolerate his antics

as long as he continues with the policies that count. That’s the Davos men.

They didn’t bother pointing out that we’ve heard this tune before. Back in the 1950s it was called the soulful corporation. Corporations have become soulful. Now they’re just overflowing with kindness for working people and everyone else. It’s a new era. Well, we’ve had some time to see how soulful they were, and this will continue.

So either we can be taken in by the con and let it go, or you can fight back and create a different world. It’s a very good opportunity for it

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So either we can be taken in by the con and let it go, or you can fight back and create a different world. It's a very good opportunity for it now

now. The strikes that you mentioned, protests all over the world. There's community self-help groups forming. Neighborhoods, poor neighborhoods or people helping each other trying to do something for the elderly who are cooped up. Some of them are astounding.

So go to Brazil, where the president is just a monstrosity. For him, the whole pandemic is just a cold. The Brazilians are immune to viruses. We're special people and so on and so forth. The government's doing nothing. Some of the governors are, but not the federal government. The worst of this is going to be in the, as everywhere, in the slums, the impoverished areas, the indigenous areas. The worst slums like the favelas in Rio, the idea of washing your hands every couple of hours is a little difficult when you don't have water, or separating yourself when you're crammed into one room. But there is a group that came and tried to impose some reasonable standards as well as possible under these horrible conditions. Who? The crime gangs that have been terrorizing the favelas. They're so powerful, the police are afraid to go in. They organized to try to deal with the health crisis.

It tells you something, just like the nurses on the front line. There are human resources there and they can come to the fore in some of the most unexpected places. Not from the corporate sector, not from the wealthy, not from the soulful corporations. Certainly not from governments, particularly pathological ones

like this. Others are doing better. But from popular action, that's the hope.

Sanders, when he gave his withdrawal speech, emphasized this. He said the campaign may be ending, the movement isn't. It's up to especially his young supporters to put some meat into that, that it can be done. No matter what happens. Trump's reelected, it's an utter tragedy. Biden's elected, it won't be wonderful. But either way you've got to do what's possible, and it's not out of reach.

Do you think most people are going to emerge from their homes after the quarantine is over with their political opinions changed or intact?

We'll see. It's certainly a time for reflection about the kind of things we were just talking about. Why are we in this situation? What we were just talking about is not profound. It's on the surface. It's not quantum physics. Think about it a little. It's obvious. So maybe people will do it or maybe they'll stay mesmerized by the con man in office. I get letters from people, poor working people, who say, "You goddamn liberals are bringing all the immigrants to steal our jobs and Trump is saving us." Okay. Maybe it's possible to break through to them. It's not easy.

These guys are tuned to Fox News all day. That's the echo chamber. If you're looking at it from outer space and you're not suffer-



ing from it, you think, what's going on? This maniac in the White House comes out and says whatever he says. The opposite the next day. It's repeated with fervor in the Fox echo chamber. He says the opposite the next day, same thing. Meanwhile, he's looking at Fox News every morning to figure out what to say. It's his source of news and information. And then you get the intelligent guys like Mike Pompeo who says, "God sent Trump to earth to save Israel from Iran." That's the sensible guy. It's some ironic joke being played. Let's say there is a God, maybe. If so, He decided that He made a bad mistake on the sixth day and he's now going to end it with humor. Just watch these people destroy themselves. That's what it looks like.

Is there the chance that the United States could build up a culture of solidarity and a labor politics coming out of this like the UK did after World War II, that could lead to something like the NHS, recognizing all of these market failures, recognizing the inefficiencies and the complications that are created when you're competing rather than coordinating resources? Is it possible for the United States to move in this direction?

Sure. We've done it before. I lived through the Depression. That's why I have this long white beard. But in the 1920s the labor movement was totally crushed. Take a look at David Montgomery, a labor historian, one of his great books is *The Fall of the House of Labor*. He's talking about the 1920s. It was crushed by the liberal Wilson administration, the Red Scare and all the rest. In the 1930s it began to revive. The CIO organizing sit-down strikes, great threat to management, sit-down strike, workers are sitting there. Next thing that's going to come to their heads is, "We don't need the bosses. We can run this place ourselves." And then you're done. It's a very

fragile system. Well, that led to reactions. There happened to be a sympathetic administration, which is critical. A very good labor historian, Erik Loomis, has studied case after case of this and he points out that moments of positive change have almost always been led by an active labor movement and the only times they succeeded were when there was a relatively sympathetic administration, at least a tolerant one.

Well, you don't happen to have that now, but actually if Biden came in, not great, but he could be pushed. If the labor movement revives, the Sanders movement, which is very significant, he's achieved great successes, if that can take off, it could be, we once again could get out of the capitalist crises as was done in the 1930s.

The New Deal didn't end the Depression, the war did with massive state-directed production, but nevertheless it was much better than today. I'm old enough to remember it and my family, extended family, were mostly first-generation working people, mostly unemployed living under poverty that is much worse than the working class today. But it was hopeful. There weren't depths of despair. There wasn't a feeling the world's coming to an end. The mood was, "Somehow we'll get out of this together, working together." Some of them were in the Communist Party, some were in the labor unions. I had a couple of aunts who were unemployed seamstresses, but they were in ILGWU [International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union], which gave them a life, a cultural life, meetings, a week in the country, theater activities that were being carried out.

You can do something. We're together. We'll get out of it. That could be revived.

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Feature



Photo by Sheila Fitzgerald/Shutterstock.com

“Make the Damn Masks!”

By Jeremy Brecher

It was hardly surprising when a group of trade unions sent a letter to President Donald Trump asking him to provide ventilators and other personal protective equipment (PPE) for healthcare workers and all other workers put at risk by exposure to coronavirus. The desperate need for PPE goes far beyond healthcare workers. Janitors are deep cleaning buildings, teachers’ aides are delivering meals

More than 25 nurses at @UChicagoMed @IngallsHealth took action to protest the lack of N95 respirators, and the fact that nurses are being forced to work in the ER without proper training. “We will ALWAYS fight for the safety of our patients and our communities”

to children at home, warehouse and manufacturing workers are making and distributing essential goods, home care providers are caring for the most vulnerable, public service workers are maintaining essential services, bus operators are taking essential workers to their jobs, telecom workers are entering homes to repair vital internet services, childcare workers are caring for our children and cashiers are scanning groceries—all at greater risk of contracting the coronavirus without enough PPE to lessen exposure.

But what were the names of nearly 100 environmental, environmental justice, climate, and other organizations doing on a letter about ventilators for union members? The answer may represent new page in the tortuous history of cooperation and conflict between the environmental movement and organized labor.

The immediate backstory starts with the appeal by Greta Thunberg and other youth climate activists for adults to join the millions participating in the student climate strikers. Environmental groups, climate-concerned trade unionists, and youth climate strikers all began reaching out to each other. The Labor Network for Sustainability (LNS), an organization dedicated to building bridges between organized labor and the environmental move-

ment to join together in a common struggle for environmental, economic, and social sustainability, began organizing conferences and online calls to bring trade unionists into the September 20, 2020, global climate strike. Union participation in the September 20 actions was in fact unprecedented.

At the start of 2020, this effort was expanding to include many more unions and more extensive action for the anticipated 50th anniversary of the first Earth Day. Then came the coronavirus pandemic. Environmentalists and trade unionists looked to the student climate strike organizers to decide what to do. In the face of lockdowns, social distancing, and the constant threat of infection, they concluded that holding public actions was out of the question. They called instead for virtual, on-line actions. While unions faced multiplying needs to protect their members from the onslaught of coronavirus, some of them nonetheless made plans to participate in the days of action online.

But how should environmental, climate, and climate justice movements be relating to the coronavirus pandemic? LNS didn't have an answer, but knew that workers on the frontlines of fighting the pandemic faced enormous threats, and decided that one thing it could do

was use the bridges that had been built in the climate strikes to let unions tell environmentalists what their members were facing, what their unions were doing about it, and what kind of help they could use.

On March 26, the LNS convened a video-conference in which leaders of the environmental, climate, and climate justice movements heard directly from leaders of seven unions about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their members and what they are doing about it. The convening included leaders from the American Federation of Teachers, Association of Flight Attendants, 1199 Service Employees International Union, United Health Care Workers East, UNITE

HERE, Amalgamated Transit Union, United Food and Commercial Workers Union Local 21, Washington State, and National Nurses United. While the workers these unions represent are not the only ones affected by the pandemic, their concerns and demands are characteristic of many others.

“Amplify our demands for PPE!”

While the trade unionists had a variety of requests, the urgent priority was for help getting PPE and getting new PPE produced. Marti Smith, Midwest Director, National Nurses United, told the environmental



Photo by Sheila Fitzgerald/Shutterstock.com

leaders what you can do is:

“amplify our demands for personal protective equipment, specifically for respirators, in traditional media, on social media, and on social media with members of Congress and the administration. We have multiple social media campaigns running, and we have useful press coverage coming out every day. If you can stand with us however you can, like Ms. Fonda did, that would be wonderful. Without these protections, we will be burying our members. I’m not kidding here. The average age of a nurse is 47 years old, and it will not be long before we are attending funerals.”

Most urgently, this involves finding and

making available PPE that already exists. Maria Castaneda, the Secretary-Treasurer of 1199 Service Employees International Union, United Healthcare Workers East, said the personal protective equipment for frontline workers is still very much needed:

“What I would like us to do together is for us together to collectively ask for the release of the strategic stockpile of PPEs and medical equipment. It’s all in the warehouse, but it needs to be released to the states, to the governors, to the health industry, any industry.”

Protective equipment is also stored in many private locations, and unions asked for help in finding it and putting it to use. Faye Guenther, President of the United Food and Commer-



Photo by Sheila Fitzgerald/Shutterstock.com

cial Workers Union Local 21 in Washington state, which was stricken early by the virus, described their “massive personal protective equipment drive.” Organizations around the country are “helping get personal protective equipment here to the State of Washington.” The union is trying to “partner with the postal service, with Stamp Out Hunger,” to get basic personal protective equipment out of peoples’ garages, out of peoples’ homes, and into the hands of healthcare workers.

While finding and using existing PPEs is urgent, existing supplies are only a fraction of current and impending need. Also essential is the production of new ventilators and other PPE on a vast scale and on an emergency basis. President Trump has invoked the Defense Production Act, which allows the government to take command of production facilities and use them to meet public needs. But so far he has not used the Act to order the production of the PPEs that are necessary to protect the lives of frontline workers exposed to infection every day. Maria Castaneda says, “We keep hearing about the Defense Production Act.” We need to immediately use the Act to “repurpose to production of PPEs and ventilators” so we can “mass produce this equipment” that is direly needed to respond to the “public health crisis” that is “still surging in many of our communities and states.”

Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers, which includes school staff, nurses, and many other workers directly exposed to the virus, emphasized the centrality of PPE:

“SEIU, the nurses, the nurses union, all of us are trying to focus on this. We need to scream about this protective equipment because we are killing the people who are supposed to be helping us treat the disease. We need all of us, all of our communities to be out there with a clarion call that we

need to protect the frontline providers who are protecting us. They are getting sick.”

She added, “I have one member of my union who has already died today. There will be many more but we have to do everything we can and figure out ways to do things in concert.”

Environmentalists: “An incredibly overriding hunger for us to work together”

The first of the environmental leaders to respond was Annie Leonard, executive director of Greenpeace. After saying, “I hope I can do this without crying,” she continued, “I am left with just an incredibly overriding hunger for us to work together and the sense of the collective power that we can have if labor activists and climate and justice and democracy activists stand together.” She proposed specifically that:

“One immediate campaign that we could all throw down on is the Defense Production Act. The fact that we have the means of making more supplies and are not leveraging those fully, is so vile and unacceptable.”

Ken Kimmel of the Union of Concerned Scientists said, “I don’t know how to thank all these healthcare workers and transit workers and others who are putting their lives at risk for society. I am very eager to harness whatever power UCS has as the voice of the scientific community to try to help here in any way we can.” Eric Pica of Friends of the Earth said, “We will amplify asks that you have, we just need to know where to target our members and our social media. It’s something that we’re willing to throw in on and help make

an impact.” Evan Weber of the Sunrise Movement said “President Trump has the power to make these masks, to make these ventilators and is just sitting on his hands while people die.” We are “feeling a lot of energy around that” and “would love to work with you” to make a lot of noise around that. “If we could use that act in 1941 or ‘42 to build 300,000 airplanes, we can sure as hell use it to make a lot of masks right now in 2020, and maybe in 2022 we can use it to stop the climate crisis.” But right now “we just really, really want to be in solidarity with you all and do whatever we can to follow your leadership.”

Keya Chatterjee of the Climate Action Network summed up: It’s just obviously a moment for us all to come together and say, “Make the goddamn masks.”

“Immediately exercise the full pow-

ers of the government”

One of the first fruits of this collaboration was the letter from unions and environmental, environmental justice, business, and scientific communities to President Trump demanding “immediately exercise the full powers of the government available to you” to protect workers and confront the coronavirus crisis. It included the following specific demands worked out over the previous days with union leaders:

- Immediately distribute the respirators and other personal protective equipment held in the Strategic National Stockpile.
- Use all powers of the federal government to more aggressively and broadly deploy the Defense Production Act,



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There have been at least 45 walkouts for coronavirus protection already and there is growing talk of a nationwide strike to force the government to act. It's time to choose life over death

to speed immediate production of new protective equipment and ensure it is routed to states for distribution across acute care, home care and long term care settings, as well as other industries whose workers confront the risk of exposure on a daily basis in their workplace. We ask you to do this while fully enforcing environmental protections and ensuring that communities near sterilization facilities do not face additional public health threats.

- Identify reserves of respirators, including N95s and PAPRs, and other PPE equipment in other industries, such as construction, and redistribute them to healthcare providers and other frontline workers.
- Immediately direct the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Department of Health and Human Services to instruct the Pentagon where to send the 2,000 ventilators it says it has in its military stocks.
- Direct FEMA to work directly with manufacturers and distributors to purchase PPE and other equipment and stop forcing states to compete with the federal government and each other. FEMA should institute a transparent process to allocate PPE, ventilators and other equipment from the Strategic National

Stockpile based on state population need.

- Require the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to institute the emergency temporary standard for infectious disease and health protections related to COVID-19 and prevent any further erosion of health and safety guidelines throughout the federal government and across the economy.

What if President Trump refuses these demands—or if he talks the talk but doesn't walk the walk? As Senator Bernie Sanders just wrote, "We cannot rely on Trump. Congress must lead the way in this unprecedented crisis." The AFL-CIO, SEIU, and other unions are backing Senator Chris Murphy's Medical Supply Chain Emergency Act ordering the federal government to take over the companies that produce or could produce PPE and commanding them to start turning out ventilators and other protective equipment—just as the government forced American auto companies to turn out planes and tanks in World War II. And if Congress refuses to act? There have been at least 45 walkouts for coronavirus protection already and there is growing talk of a nationwide strike to force the government to act.

It's time to choose life over death.

Z

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Feature



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The Future May Be Female

By Rebecca Gordon

Before I found myself “sheltering in place,” this article was to be about women’s actions around the world to mark March 8th, International Women’s Day.

From Pakistan to Chile, women in their millions filled the streets, demanding that we be able to control our bodies and our lives. Women came out in Iraq and Kyrgyzstan, Turkey

and Peru, the Philippines and Malaysia. In some places, they risked beatings by masked men. In others, they demanded an end to femicide—the millennia-old reality that women in this world are murdered daily simply because they are women.

In 1975 the Future Was Female

This year's celebrations were especially militant. It's been 45 years since the United Nations declared 1975 the International Women's Year and sponsored its first international conference on women in Mexico City. Similar conferences followed at five-year intervals, culminating in a 1995 Beijing conference, producing a platform that has in many ways guided international feminism ever since.

Beijing was a quarter of a century ago, but this year, women around the world seemed to have had enough. On March 9th, Mexican women staged a 24-hour strike, un día sin nosotras (a day without us women), to demonstrate just how much the world depends on the labor—paid and unpaid—of... yes, women. That womanless day was, by all accounts, a success. The *Wall Street Journal* observed—perhaps with a touch of astonishment—that “Mexico grinds to a halt. Hundreds of thousands of women paralyzed Mexico in an unprecedented nationwide strike to protest a rising wave of violence against women, a major victory for their cause.”

In addition to crowding the streets and emptying factories and offices, some women also broke store windows and fought with the police. Violence? From women? What could have driven them to such a point?

Perhaps it was the murder of Ingrid Escamilla, 25, a Mexico City resident, who, according to the *New York Times*, “was stabbed,

skinned and disemboweled” this February. Maybe it was that the shooting of the artist and activist Isabel Cabanillas de la Torre in Ciudad Juarez, a barely noted reminder to an uninterested world that women have been disappearing for decades along the U.S.-Mexico border. Or maybe it was just the fact that official figures for 2019 revealed more than 1,000 femicides in Mexico, a 10 percent increase from the previous year, while many more such murders go unrecorded.

Is the Pandemic Patriarchal?

If it weren't for the pandemic, maybe the *Wall Street Journal* would have been right. Maybe the Day Without Women would have been only the first of many major victories. Maybe the international feminist anthem, “El violador eres tú” (You [the patriarchy, the police, the president] are the rapist), would have gone on inspiring flashmobs of dancing, chanting women everywhere. Perhaps the world's attention might not have been so quickly diverted from the spectacle of women's uprisings globally. Now, however, in the United States and around the world, it's all-pandemic-all-the-time, and with reason. The coronavirus has done what A Day Without Women could not: it's brought the world's economy to a shuddering halt. It's infected hundreds of thousands of people and killed tens of thousands. And it continues to spread like a global wildfire.

Like every major event and institution, the pandemic affects women and men differently. Although men who fall sick seem more likely than women to die, in other respects, the pandemic and its predictable aftermath are going to be harder on women. How can that be? The writer Helen Lewis provides some answers in *The Atlantic*.

First of all, the virus, combined with mass quarantine measures, ensures that more people will need to be cared for. This includes older people who are especially at risk of dying and children who are no longer in school or childcare. In developed countries like the United States, people fortunate enough to be able to keep their jobs by working from home are discovering that the presence of bored children does not make this any easier.

Indeed, last night, my little household was treated to a song-and-dance performance by two little girls who live a couple of houses down the street. Their parents had spent the day helping them plan it and then invited us to watch from our backyard. What they'll do tomorrow, a workday, I have no idea. A friend without children has offered to provide daily 15-minute Zoom lessons on anything she can Google, as a form of respite for her friends who are mothers.

As recently as a week ago, it looked as if shuttered schools might open again before the academic year ends, allowing one *New York Times* commentator to write an article headlined "I Refuse to Run a Coronavirus Home School." An associate professor of educational leadership, the author says she's letting her two children watch TV and eat cookies, knowing that no amount of quick-study is going to turn her into an elementary school teacher. I applaud her stance, but also suspect that the children of professionals will probably be better placed than those of low-wage workers to resume the life-and-death struggle for survival in the competitive jungle that is kindergarten-through-twelfth-grade education in this country.

In locked-down heterosexual households, Helen Lewis writes, the major responsibility for childcare will fall on women. She's exasperated with pundits who point out that people like Isaac Newton and Shakespeare did their best work during a seventeenth-century

plague in England. "Neither of them," she points out, "had child-care responsibilities." Try writing *King Lear* while your own little Cordelias, Regans, and Gonerils are pulling at your shirt and complaining loudly that they're boored.

In places like the United Kingdom and the United States, where the majority of mothers have jobs, women will experience new pressures to give up their paid employment. In most two-earner heterosexual households with children, historic pay inequalities mean that a woman's job usually pays less. So if someone has to devote the day to full-time childcare, it will make economic sense that it's her. In the U.S., 11 percent of women are already involuntarily working only part-time, many in jobs with irregular schedules. Even women who have chosen to balance their household work with part-time employment may find themselves under pressure to relinquish those jobs.

As Lewis says, this all makes "perfect economic sense":

"At an individual level, the choices of many couples over the next few months will make perfect economic sense. What do pandemic patients need? Looking after. What do self-isolating older people need? Looking after. What do children kept home from school need? Looking after. All this looking after—this unpaid caring labor—will fall more heavily on women, because of the existing structure of the workforce."

Furthermore, as women who choose to leave the workforce for a few years to care for very young children know, it's almost impossible to return to paid work at a position of similar pay and status as the one you gave up. And enforced withdrawal won't make that any easier.

Social Reproduction? What's That? And Why Does It Matter?

This semester I'm teaching a capstone course for urban studies majors at my college, the University of San Francisco. We've

been focusing our attention on something that shapes all our lives: work—what it is, who has it and doesn't, who's paid for it and isn't, and myriad other questions about the activity that occupies so much of our time on this planet. We've borrowed a useful concept from Marxist feminists: "social reproduction." It refers to all the work, paid and unpaid, that someone



Large group of unidentified women sitting in road at Gwanghwamun plaza in protest against unequal pay and unfair employment opportunities in South Korea

Photo by aminkorea/Shutterstock.com

It's a painful coincidence that women are being confined to their homes just as an international movement against femicide is taking off



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has to do just so that workers can even show up at their jobs and perform the tasks that earn them a paycheck, while making a profit for their employers.

It's called reproduction, because it reproduces workers, both in the biological sense and in terms of the daily effort to make them whole enough to do it all over again tomorrow. It's social reproduction, because no one can do it alone and different societies find different ways of doing it.

What's included in social reproduction? There are the obvious things any worker needs: food, clothing, sleep (and a safe place to doze off), not to speak of a certain level of hygiene. But there's more. Recreation is part of it, because it "recreates" a person capable of working effectively. Education, healthcare, childcare, cooking, cleaning, procuring or making food and clothing—all of these are crucial to sustaining workers and their work. If you'd like to know more about it, Tithi Bhattacharya's *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* is a good place to start.

What does any of this have to do with our pandemic moment? How social reproduction is organized in the United States leaves some people more vulnerable than others in a time of economic crisis. To take one example, over many decades, restaurants have assumed and collectivized (for profit) significant parts of the work of food preparation, service, and clean up, acts once largely performed in individual homes. For working women, the availability of cheap takeout has, in some cases, replaced the need to plan, shop for, and prepare meals seven days a week. Food service is a stratified sector, ranging from high-end to fast-food establishments, but it includes many low-wage workers who have now lost their jobs, while those still working at places providing takeout or drive-through meals are risking their health

How social reproduction is organized in the United States leaves some people more vulnerable than others in a time of economic crisis

so that others can eat.

One way professional class two-earner couples in the United States have dealt with the tasks of social reproduction is to outsource significant parts of their work to poorer women. Fighting over who does the vacuuming and laundry at home? Don't make the woman do it all. Hire a different woman to do it for you. Want to have children and a career? Hire a nanny.

Of course, odds are that your house cleaner and nanny will still have to do their own social reproduction work when they get home. And now that their children aren't going to school, somehow they'll have to take care of them as well. In many cases, this will be possible, however, because their work is not considered an "essential service" under the shelter-in-place orders of some states. So they will lose their incomes.

At least here in California, many of the women who do these jobs are undocumented immigrants. When the Trump administration and Congress manage to pass a relief bill, they, like many undocumented restaurant workers, won't be receiving any desperately needed funds to help them pay rent or buy food. Immigrant-rights organizations are stepping in to try to make up some of the shortfall, but what they're capable of is likely to

prove just a few drops in a very large bucket. Fortunately, immigrant workers are among the most resourceful people in this country or they wouldn't have made it this far.

There's one more kind of social reproduction work performed mostly by women, and, by its nature, the very opposite of "social distancing": sex work. You can be sure that no bailout bill will include some of the nation's poorest women, those who work as prostitutes.

Women at Home and at Risk

It's a painful coincidence that women are being confined to their homes just as an international movement against femicide is taking off. One effect of shelter-in-place is to make it much harder for women to find shelter from domestic violence. Are you safer outside risking coronavirus or inside with a bored, angry male partner? I write this in full knowledge that one economic sector that has not suffered from the pandemic is the gun business. Ammo.com, for example, which sells ammunition online in all but four states, has experienced more than a three-fold increase in revenue over the last month. Maybe all that

ammo is being bought to fight off zombies (or the immigrant invasion the president keeps reminding us about), but research shows that gun ownership has a lot to do with whether or not domestic violence turns into murder.

Each week, *Washington Post* advice columnist Carolyn Hax hosts a chat line offering suggestions for help of various sorts. For the last two weeks, her readers (myself included) have been horrified by messages from one participant stuck in quarantine in a small apartment with a dangerous partner who has just bought a gun. Standard advice to women in her position is not just to run, but to make an exit plan, quietly gather the supplies and money you'll need and secure a place to go. Mandatory shelter-in-place orders, however necessary to flattening the curve of this pandemic, may well indirectly cause an increase in domestic femicides.

As if women weren't already disproportionately affected by the coronavirus epidemic, Senate Republicans have been trying to sneak a little extra misogyny into their version of a relief bill. In the same month that Pakistani women risked their lives in demonstrations under the slogan "Mera jism, meri marzi" ("My body, my choice"), Republicans want to use the pandemic in another attempt to—that's right—shut down Planned Parenthood clinics.

The *Washington Post*'s Greg Sargent recently revealed that the \$350 billion being proposed to shore up small businesses that don't lay off workers would exclude nonprofits that receive funds from Medicaid. Planned Parenthood, which provides healthcare for millions of uninsured and underinsured women, is exactly that kind of nonprofit. Democratic congressional aides who alerted Sargent to this suggest that Planned Parenthood wouldn't be the only organization affected. They also believe that:

"...this language would exclude from eli-

gibility for this financial assistance a big range of other nonprofits that get Medicaid funding, such as home and community-based disability providers; community-based nursing homes, mental health providers, and health centers; group homes for the disabled; and even rape crisis centers."

Meanwhile, Mississippi, Ohio, and Texas are trying to use the coronavirus as an excuse to prevent women's access to abortion. On the grounds that such procedures are not medically necessary, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has ordered abortion providers to stop terminating pregnancies. Earlier, Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost sent letters to abortion providers in that state forbidding all "nonessential" surgical abortions.

A Return to Normalcy?

When Warren Harding (who oversaw a notoriously corrupt administration) ran for president in 1920, his campaign slogan was "a return to normalcy"—the way things were, that is, before World War I. What he meant was a return to economic dynamism. As we know, the "Roaring Twenties" provided it in spades—until that little crash known as the Great Depression. Today, like Harding, another corrupt president is promising a prompt return to normalcy. He's already chafing at the 15-day period of social distancing he announced in mid-March. At his March 23rd press conference, he hinted that the United States would be "open for business" sooner rather than later. The next day, he suggested that the country reopen for business on Easter (a "very special day for me"), saying he wants to see "packed churches all over our country." He can't wait until everything, including our

deeply unequal healthcare and economic systems, gets back to normal—the way they were before the spread of the coronavirus; until, that is, we can go back to being unprepared for the next, inevitable crisis.

Unlike the president, I hope we don't go back to normal. I hope the people of Venice come to appreciate their sparkling canals and their returning dolphins. I hope that the rest of us become attached to less polluted air and lower carbon emissions. I hope that we learn to value the lives of women.

I hope, instead of returning to normalcy, we recognize that our survival as a species depends on changing almost everything, including how we produce what we need and how we reproduce ourselves as fully human beings. I hope that, when we have survived this pandemic, the world's peoples take what

we have learned about collective global action during this crisis and apply it to that other predictable crisis, the one that threatens all human life on a distinctly warming planet. Z

Rebecca Gordon, a TomDispatch regular, teaches at the University of San Francisco. She is the author of *American Nuremberg: The U.S. Officials Who Should Stand Trial for Post-9/11 War Crimes* and is now at work on a new book on the history of torture in the United States.

This article first appeared on TomDispatch.com, a weblog of the Nation Institute, which offers a steady flow of alternate sources, news, and opinion from Tom Engelhardt, long time editor in publishing, co-founder of the American Empire Project, author of *The End of Victory Culture* and *The Last Days of Publishing*. His latest book is *A Nation Unmade By War* (Haymarket Books).



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Feature



Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi
Photo by Frederic Legrand - COMEO/Shutterstock.com

Leadership During Coronavi- rus Times

By Badri Raina

After his “lockdown” address to the nation, Prime Minister Modi made two more appearances on national television to enthuse the populace to show solidarity in the fight against the coronavirus pan-

demic.

He stressed the need of “social distancing” and enjoined on all citizens to participate in symbolic gestures such as shutting off electric lights for nine minutes on the night of

April 9. Earlier he had called upon citizens to thump household utensils from their windows/balconies to applaud the work being done by medical staff fighting the virus on the dangerous frontlines.

Although there has been criticism that Prime Minister Modi had yet again taken to vacuous photo-ops rather than make any concrete announcements on how to tackle the destitution that millions of Indians are suffering, many are willing to grant him a solipsistic cultism if that helps bring awareness to the country as a whole.

The prime minister's repeated self-presentations may also convey to frontline corona warriors that they have the attention of the numero uno, although health-watchers also voice the view that such attention had best be translated into an active and speedy redressal of the inadequately protected conditions in which staff, nurses, doctors are now operating under, for the most part. Claims made by government that these lacunae are being expressly remedied have not seemed borne out by facts on the ground in health facilities across the nation. Not to speak of the attacks made by frightened citizens on doctors and nurses accused of spreading the virus as they have gone among some neighborhoods to perform their tasks of screening, or just out buying provisions for their families—a shabby occurrence that may not, of course, be attributed to governmental deficiencies.

There are also those, of course—women and men, all as concerned with the well-being of all Indians as the prime minister is—who have felt that the “lockdown,” although a necessary step, did not sufficiently analyze or care about the consequences of the suddenly announced measure for the vast masses of Indians who would find themselves evicted by their landlords, lose their wages, have little or no recourse to ameliorative arrangements either for their health care or economic suste-

nance. These consequences, as we see every day since the lockdown, have been traumatic in the extreme, as stories of unconscionable misery have been televised pertaining to hopeless and helpless thousands trudging from various parts of the nation.

Many have been inevitably reminded of the days and months following the declaration of “demonitization” some years ago—an event whose deleterious effects still bog the fortunes of millions of citizenry, especially in the informal sectors of the workforce. As people died then in expectant lines in front of banks, so they have wilted in search of a home and succor, excluded from the calculations of policymakers until their sufferings began to occupy media center-stage.

It may be noted that where the United States has set apart ten percent of their GDP for ameliorating the devastated living conditions of Americans affected by the virus, India has thus far allocated no more than 0.5 percent of our GDP for the purpose, unaccompanied by any viable plan of action detailing how even this meager amount is to be reached to those sansculotttes who are now caught in midways of cities and towns, not knowing what the next hour has in store for them.

That the U.S. has made a grievous mess of handling the pandemic overall, thanks in large measure to cussedly inept, if not criminal negligence, from their top leadership must also be noted, setting off Modi's initiatives in better light. He has indeed drawn appreciation from the World Health Organisation for his active marshaling of measures against the pandemic.

Nonetheless, criticisms at home, it would be wrong to think, are driven by pique. It would be a sad day indeed when it is thought that those who speak for the wretched of the nation are conspirators against the glory of the realm.

The Indian prime minister may be commended for making visible his concern to the



Beawar, Rajasthan, India - A shopkeeper wear facemask as a precaution from coronavirus pandemic 'COVID-19' in Beawar

Photo by Sumit Saraswat/Shutterstock.com

nation—a sort of salutary assurance that the most powerful Indian is looking on, without understating the gravity of the moment—unlike the American President.

But, here is the further point.

As in times of war, leadership is not so problematic when the dangers that confront us are of a universal nature. Be it a pandemic or a war, uniting the nation incurs few ideological conundrums, tactical ones may be, since those nut cases who may oppose measures taken against an invading enemy or a virus that makes no discrimination between citizen and citizen are universally seen as just nutcases, unless, of course, the wars and the pandemics be of our own making. Just to recall, the entirely gratuitous American assault on Vietnam was to divide America as it had been divided at the time of the Civil War. Same with the American invasion of Iraq. Lead-

erships that engage in such blatantly expansionist acts of dominance then cannot but find it impossible to unite all their citizens behind unjust wars.

The real test of leadership has, however, always been how they choose to meet national exigencies that tend to be born of divisive perceptions and prejudices—times when bringing about national unity is of utmost importance and far harder to obtain.

This is the reason why a Churchill may have succeeded phenomenally in galvanizing England against the pernicious rise of fascism, his lack of ability or intent to do so against social evils left much to desire. It will be recalled that Churchill lost the favor of his own party after the war against Hitler was won, evidence that peace times make very different sorts of demands on leaderships that “heroic” wartime leaders do not always measure up to.

The real test of leadership has, however, always been how they choose to meet national exigencies that tend to be born of divisive perceptions and prejudices—times when bringing about national unity is of utmost importance and far harder to obtain

In the context of India's very recent history, for example, it has remained a troubling question as to why Prime Minister Modi could not have addressed the nation with the same alacrity and concern as he does now, when brutal internecine killings were happening in the northeast of India's capital city. Or indeed when unconscionable instances of mob lynchings were happening, or when gruesome caste and gender oppressions have come to the fore. Or, when scions from the prime minister's ideological camp made public utterances of the most deplorable kind, wounding the prospects of national unity in far-reaching ways in contravention of the principles enshrined in the constitution which alone legitimize the state's executive authority. A minister in the central cabinet was heard in a public rally to provoke the crowd into saying how those protesting the Citizenship Amendment Act ought to be shot (<https://scroll.in/video/951289/watch-anurag-thakur-minister-of-state-for-finance-lead-goli-maaro-saalonko-slogans-at-rally>), and the President of the Bharatiya Janata Party, no less, was to exhort voters in local elections to so violently press the electronic button as to send a "current" to Shaheen Bagh were very old and young women, mostly Muslim housewives, had been sitting in protest dharna for months (<https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/amit-shah-wants-vote-to-send-current-to-shaheen-bagh/>

cid/17398560). Yet Modi then thought nothing of such occurrences.

Indeed, as we write, news comes from various states of India of renewed assaults on Muslims who are sought to be universally blamed for the blunder that happened at the Tablighi Markaz in Nizamuddin in Delhi. A ruling party Member of Parliament from Karnataka has spoken of an alleged "Corona Jihad Conspiracy" (<https://www.news18.com/news/politics/pfi-says-will-file-criminal-case-against-bjp-mp-shobha-karandlaje-over-corona-jihad-remark-2566899.html>), and an important spokesperson of the same party of an "Islamic insurrection." The question that begs itself is this: Are such moves conducive to the national unity that the prime minister rightly seeks to firm up in order to combat the pandemic that afflicts all creeds, castes, classes? And, if that be so, may not the nation expect the prime minister to seize the moment to make an appearance on national television to nip such nefarious political activity in the bud?

After all, it will be conceded that in the absence of leadership efforts and initiatives of a prolonged and determined kind, such divisive and hate-filled occurrences must continue to bedevil the sort of national unity that alone can lend inner strength and cohesion, as well as credibility to national unity. For example, in America, the suspect inability of polit-

ical leadership to wage a credible and determined war against racism continues to render their national unity a fragile and unconvincing project. Not to speak of the fact that when political leaderships are found wanting or leaning at times of such internal conflicts, those that man the country's institutions take appropriate hints of how not to do what they are sworn to do.

The problem, of course, is that national leaders confronted with such divisions and fractures cannot credibly lead their nations to humanist unities unless they first revisit the ideological building blocks of which they happen to be products. And unless, in so examining their own ideological DNAs, they find the courage and broad-mindedness to transcend their own inherited social and political constructions, their calls for national unity can hardly carry weight or effect.

Is it not therefore the case that just as a Donald Trump finds it self-alienating to denounce racism in America, Prime Minister Modi finds himself rather silenced when minority sections in India come under attack from majoritarian assertions?

And when top leaderships at such times seem on furlough, or, worse still, dormant in a sort of quiescent assent, national unity goes for a grievous toss.

Such times indeed demand a shift in the icons that "heroic" leaders worship in times of war or some universal catastrophe—from a Churchill, as it were, to a Lincoln, a Gandhi, a Martin Luther King, a Mandela—since these latter it is who left us models of how to lead when internecine bigotries afflict the fate of peoples. Hardly as simple a thing to do as to lead nations when enemies are common and uncontroversial.

With respect to Prime Minister Modi, it may be that even as he draws positive comment from the WHO, for instance, for his alert attention to the corona problem with respect

to India, a time may come when his approval among Indians also begins to transcend sectarian divides and apprehensions, leading to his metamorphosis into a leader who may truly be depended on to unite all Indians behind values of universal equality and non-discriminatory justice at the hands of state institutions, when the last oppressed citizen may spontaneously expect that any and all social and inter-sectional atrocities will draw from him the same energy and conviction that is now on display.

Nothing indeed would seal his place in history as decisively as such a turn of his leadership content. That he has the percipience to understand his own problematic is without doubt.

Were that to happen, a time may come when Modi will remind us of Jawahar Lal Nehru, as much in terms of his international standing, which has happily been growing, as in the matter of credible and committed efforts to unite all Indians across social and sectarian divides with personal initiatives of the kind that are now to the fore. As, indeed, in the matter of putting the welfare of the disenfranchised first among his national concerns.

Modi has quite some distance yet to get there, but if he does embark on that journey, it will be an input to a more meaningful national unity than may be invoked only at times of peril that afflicts all Indians without regard to their placement in social, religious, or class terms.

Nehru may also be emulated in terms of the quality of our commitment to democratic principles and practices.

It may be useful to recall that an article titled "Caesarism," severely critical of Nehru, once appeared under the pseudonym Chanakya in a leading national journal, *Modern Review*, in 1937 when Nehru was elected President of the Indian National Congress for the third time, deriding Nehru as a man with dictato-



Kolkata, India -- Effect of a nationwide lockdown to block the spread of COVID-19. The otherwise busy streets seen almost deserted

Photo by suprabhat/Shutterstock.com

rial tendencies, and cautioning the people to be vigilant against this trait in him (<https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/want-no-caesars-nehrus-warning>). It came to be subsequently revealed that the author of the article was Nehru himself.

If, therefore, citizens of the republic sometimes voice critical apprehensions of their leaderships, the exercise of that fundamental right must not be viewed as enemy activity but constructive contributions to democratic con-

solidation. Nor may leaderships in democratic states be inimical to facing interrogation from institutions like the media, or the intelligentsia at large, since only a transparent covenant of question and answer between leaderships and the led can truly constitute unities of lasting firmness and yield legitimate hegemonies conducive to self-confident national strength.

Feature



The Era Of Mass Strikes Begins On May 1, First Day Of General Strike Campaign

By Kevin Zeese & Margaret Flowers

On Friday, May 1, an ongoing General Strike campaign begins. This campaign could become the most powerful movement in the United States and reset the national agenda. It comes when the failures of the U.S. political system have been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered an economic collapse in a presidential election year. The General Strike campaign will be ongoing with actions on the first of every month. Strategic strikes of workers, students, consumers, prisoners, and renters will also

Participate in Popular Resistance's Zoom call on April 29, 2020, at 7:00 pm Eastern/4:00 pm Pacific to learn about what will be happening on May Day and how you can be part of it. Register at bit.ly/MayDayMeeting.

continue.

This new era of mass strikes builds on successful strikes by teachers, healthcare workers, hotel workers, and others. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in the last two years, there has been the largest number of major work stoppages in 35 years with more than 400,000 workers involved in strikes in both 2018 and 2019. This continues in 2020 with a wave of wildcat strikes.

People must commit to an ongoing campaign of strikes starting now and continuing after the election. FDR faced more than 1.4 million people striking after he was elected, which forced him to put the New Deal and workers' rights legislation in place. The next president should be subjected to continuous strikes with specific demands. Striking is the most powerful tool of the people. We need to learn to use it effectively.

United action magnifies popular power and shows those in power that they cannot ignore us any longer. You can participate by sharing this article with other people and urging them to participate. Follow and share the hashtags #CoronaStrike, #GeneralStrike, #May-Day2020, #GeneralStrike2020, and #PeoplesStrike.

General Strike

CCOVID-19 exposes the fact that essential workers who provide food, healthcare,

and deliveries to our homes are mistreated and underappreciated. Workers are underpaid and are not being provided with protective equipment or allowed sick leave. The COVID-19 rescue laws have given trillions in funding to investors and big businesses while leaving people and small businesses with crumbs. Twenty-six million people have filed for unemployment but states are not processing claims quickly and the COVID-19 rescue only provided an inadequate one-time \$1,200 payment. Millions of the newly unemployed are losing their health insurance.

The #GeneralStrike has five demands:

- (1) Protection from Covid-19
- (2) Safe Housing.
- (3) Living Wages.
- (4) Medicare for All.
- (5) Equal Education.

We would add a sixth urgent demand—saving the postal service.

The tactics of the General Strike will vary over time. During this initial phase of the COVID-19 virus, there will be car caravans, sickouts, and signs on windows supporting the strikes. People will use social media to show support for the demands. On May 1 and beyond there will be webinars on the strike and the issues raised by it.

With a campaign of strategic and general strikes very likely going on until 2022, peo-



How to take part in #redforkeyworkers on May Day

- 1. Put on your favourite something red**
- 2. Write out your message of solidarity**
- 3. Take a pic of you wearing red holding up your message**
- 4. Upload your pic to social media using #redforkeyworkers**
- 5. Encourage other co-workers to join in and share other #redforkeyworkers posts**

ple can take control of the country and put the necessities of the people at the top of the agenda. Jane McAlevey points to three areas where workers have decisive power. These include logistics, healthcare, and education.

- Logistics includes providing food, delivery, transit, and other services that keep the economy functioning. Workers disrupting these areas makes the country ungovernable by creating economic dysfunction.
- Despite being essential, healthcare workers lack protective equipment and basics such as tests. Healthcare workers have stood against the dangerous so-called “Liberate” protests Donald Trump is en-

couraging to prematurely re-open the economy. Nurses have protested the lack of protective equipment and been fired for doing so. These acts of defiance must be supported as we also demand national improved Medicare for All so everyone has access to high-quality healthcare. We must build our public health system so never again will the country be unprepared for a pandemic.

- Teacher’s unions have developed the model for all unions to follow, strikes for the common good. Teacher strikes have been successful because they have represented the interests of students and the communities where they live. Poverty, inadequate

If tenants are made homeless, people will take over buildings to be housed, assets of landlords could be nationalized, and social housing could escalate

housing, brutal policing, and ICE raids undermine the ability of teachers to do their jobs. Making demands for the common good unites us to work for what we need.

Recently, there have been wildcat strikes. These can include a variety of work stoppages, e.g. people taking sick days, work slowdowns, work disruptions due to flat tires on delivery trucks, and other ways that prevent work from being accomplished. To follow strike actions, visit On The Picket Line or check out an interactive map of strike actions at Paydayreport.com, or the “Dual Power” map by Black Socialists in America. Get in the loop and get connected at General Strike 2020.

Rent Strike

As unemployment reaches Depression-era levels, with one in six U.S. workers being unemployed, and the government unable to process unemployment benefits and refusing to provide a basic income, people are unable to pay their rents. According to data from the Rentec Direct property management software platform, “The rent received by property managers in the U.S. by April 8 was 17% less than it was through the first eight days of March. Other data point to a similar trend. For example, data from the National Multifamily Housing Council found that 69 percent

of renters paid their rent between April 1 and April 5, down from 82% in the same period in April 2019.” According to the *New York Times*, 40 percent of New York City tenants may have skipped their April payments.

In January before the pandemic, a Harvard University report found that nearly half of U.S. renters are “cost-burdened,” meaning they spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, a quarter of renters—11 million people—are “severely cost-burdened,” spending more than half of their income to make rent. There was already a housing crisis in the U.S., the economic collapse has magnified it.

This economic reality is turning into an organized and growing rent strike against corporate landlords. Calls for an expanded rent strike on May 1 are growing. In Kansas City, Missouri, tenant advocates tweeted: “Highway takeover in an hour. We will have tenants spanning the state, every five miles, from Kansas City to St. Louis.” Tenant groups from South Carolina to Los Angeles called for a rent strike in May as have groups in Chicago, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Denver, Bloomington, St. Louis, and New York. Cancel the Rent car caravans were recently held in many cities. Rent strikes are building into a nationwide revolt with calls for rent strikes going viral in unlikely places like Georgia. How will this evolve? If tenants are made homeless, people will take over buildings to be housed, assets of landlords could be nationalized, and social housing could escalate.

Together, we can transform this moment of isolation into a moment of shared strength, support and compassion

Rent strike organizers say, “We are banding together: folks who cannot pay and those who will join them in solidarity. We refuse to pay for the right to live. Many will have to choose between rent and food, and many won’t have enough for either. We will not sacrifice our lives to keep the market afloat, or to fill the pockets of real estate lenders and landlords... Together, we can transform this moment of isolation into a moment of shared strength, support and compassion.” Rent strikes are demanding:

- Forgive unpaid rents and waive mortgage interest and defer mortgage payments for the months of April, May, and June;
- Cease evictions of any renters and foreclosures on any homeowners during the full duration of the crisis—for at least six months;
- Use their political power to call on public officials to support housing relief for the tens of millions of American workers who have lost their jobs.

The COVID crisis has magnified a reality in U.S. housing—housing has been turned in a profit engine for the super-rich. Rentals have been corporatized and controlled by some of the wealthiest individuals in the world. The Action Network reports: “Companies like Greystar, Equity Residential, and Lincoln Property Company control the rents for apart-

ments in every state in the United States, while billionaires like Sam Zell founder and chairman of Equity Residential and Barry Sternlicht of Starwood Capital effectively serve as landlords for millions of us. These enormous companies dictate the rent and home prices in communities across the country.”

As a result, polling shows that a majority of people across the political spectrum support canceling rent payments and suspending home mortgage payments during the coronavirus pandemic. By a margin of 22 percent, voters strongly favor suspending or forgiving rents, for those under 45 years of age, the margin is 50 percent.

Building Power For An Effective General Strike

We do not yet have the organization to conduct a massive General Strike and only a few unions are aggressive enough to conduct strategic work stoppages. We must use the General Strike campaign to build our power and learn how to strike.

The foundation of all movements is education. We must constantly work to educate people about what is going on around them. This means overcoming the corporate media, which reports from the perspective of major corporate interests and the two Wall Street-funded parties. Independent media and

social media are areas of activism that must always be a priority.

Subscribe to our daily digest for ongoing movement news and choose articles to promote in your social media networks. Each of us should act with the intention to build our social media networks so we become an effective media outlet. If the tens of thousands of people who receive this newsletter behave as media outlets, we will change the national dialogue.

We must organize to bring people into the movement. Mass movements win, fringe movements fail. How do you organize? Organizing is as simple as talking to people who are not yet part of the movement, listening to their concerns, and showing them how joining together we can solve problems. This requires the patient and steady systematic building of relationships in the community. Talk to your neighbors, participate in apolitical neighborhood email groups, and speak with those who deliver to your home.

In the workplace, talk to co-workers, form clandestine strike committees, and speak and listen to each other. Work stoppages can vary in form. Workers can use the tactic of “Work to Rule,” following often ignored workplace safety and other rules, resulting in a slowdown. The bosses will fight back, so this will not be easy. Workers need to build community support so bosses are isolated and the conflict is broadened.

There are also tactics for at-home workers where sickouts and slowdowns are easy to adapt. Workers can call in sick during the first week in May. Even mild symptoms can result in a day or two off work. With the stress of COVID-19 and the economic collapse, a “mental health day” is needed for many.

Then, we must mobilize people. When people are in the movement, a union, or an organization, they are ready to be mobilized in mass action. This requires showing this is a strate-

gic campaign, not one protest, but a series of escalating events that build and are focused on achieving change. We discuss how you can create a strategic campaign in the free Popular Resistance School, How Social Transformation Occurs, eight web-based classes and readings we urge you to use.

If you are not part of a union or organization, become an active supporter of their actions. Show up, join them, call the media, religious leaders or neighbors, and urge them to show up. If you see a picket line, join the workers or bring food and beverages. See yourself as the media and report on strikes, share their stories, and use your social media networks. If a union organizer is fired, come to the aid of that person including highlighting the injustice, insisting the person gets their job back, and raising funds to support them. We can support local strikers through “GoFundMe” pages or join a local Mutual Aid team.

In the coming era of strikes, we must remember that an injury to one is an injury to all. Show solidarity with the general strike. Wear red on Friday. Display a strike poster in your window. Wear a red or black or lavender bandana. Change your Facebook cover image. As the era of strikes builds and people develop the skills, confidence, and courage to exercise their rights, the potential for transformational change will grow in ways that we cannot yet foresee.

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