

Covid-19: "We will do whatever is necessary" - really?

Martin Suchanek, GAM Infomail 1095, March 14, 2020 Tue, 17/03/2020 - 08:07

Martin Suchanek, GAM Infomail 1095, March 14, 2020

"We must do everything we can to show the cohesion in our country" - said German Chancellor Angela Merkel at a press conference on 12 March. A similar note was struck by many other governments but, in the last few days, they have changed their tune dramatically.

Just a few days ago, Brazilian President Bolsonaro described the Corona pandemic as a "fantasy". Donald Trump played down the danger for weeks and spread fairy tales about the alleged precautions in the USA. Now he has discovered a new culprit, the "foreign" virus from the EU.

At the same time, China has been able to slow down the spread of the virus in its own country and is showing falling infection rates, even if not all the regime's success stories should be taken at face value. The Chinese state apparatus also covered up and deceived its own population right at the beginning of the spread of the disease. The success of containment to date may show the potential of a centralised and despotic system to concentrate resources quickly, but it was accompanied by draconian measures against the working class. The deep class antagonisms of Chinese imperialism naturally also manifested themselves in the "social provision" for the new bourgeoisie, the state bureaucracy on the one hand, and for workers and peasants on the other.

Pandemic

While, at the beginning of 2020, it was still open whether the corona virus would spread beyond China, it is now clear that we are dealing with a pandemic, that is, a disease spanning several continents. It can also be taken for granted that we are at the beginning of its spread in almost all countries. In the next one or two weeks, most European countries and the USA will probably have similar rates of spread and, in terms of population, similar case numbers to Italy. Many of the semi-colonial countries, that is, countries that are politically and economically dependent on the imperialist powers, could be particularly affected by the spread of the disease because of their limited economic resources.

Even among experts, the probable extent of the pandemic threat is of course uncertain. What is certain, however, is that its impact will be greater than that of a "normal" influenza. At the same time, as things stand today, most forecasts assume that the death rate and numbers will remain below those of "Spanish flu". Between 1918-1920, 25 to 50 million people died from this unusually virulent influenza virus of subtype (A/H1N1).

By March 13, 2020, the World Health Organization recorded 135,031 infected, 80,942 of them in China, with 4977 people fallen victim to it, 3180 of them in China. On the positive side, 69,64 are considered to have recovered (64,192 in China; <https://www.welt.de/vermishtes/article206504969/Coronavirus-Alle-Karten...> [1]).

The speed with which the disease is spreading is particularly worrying. Forecasts suggest that 60 - 70 percent of the population could be infected within the next two years. Even if no one can predict exactly how the disease will progress, or the effectiveness of various defences, the threat to health cannot be doubted. Especially at risk are the elderly, the poor and people with pre-existing health problems.

In this situation, all governments, including those that yesterday glossed over the situation, promise to do everything in their power to contain the pandemic, slow its spread and improve the protection of the population.

Nowhere is there any reason to trust these ladies and gentlemen. Many of the measures themselves are questionable even at first sight.

National salvation?

Many governments have responded with border closures, controls, suspension of air traffic. The US President surprisingly announced an entry ban for all citizens of the Schengen area. With this he accepted, whether consciously or "unintentionally", another collapse of the international stock exchanges. Finally, upon request, he revised part of his master plan, the suspension of trade in goods with the EU.

Trump is not the only one, of course, who believes in sealing off the borders. The EU countries themselves are also tightening their external and internal controls. Italy has imposed a nationwide quarantine. India has cancelled all entry visas, numerous countries are closing their airports to guests from real or supposed "hot spots" (particularly, but not only, China, South Korea, Iran and Italy) or have put travellers from these countries in quarantine for two weeks.

In the current crisis situation, no one is likely to refuse increased health checks, tests etc. per se. Some of them have little medical value and do little more than reassure the public that "something is being done?". For example, measuring body temperature at airports has only limited use, as people can be infected even without a raised temperature.

What is striking and characteristic of the bourgeois system is, of course, the selective nature of many measures. The basic tenor is national isolation.

Even if the EU is outraged at the affront by the USA and Trump, we should not close our eyes to the fact that it is sealing off its own external borders against refugees, and it's not only right-wing populist governments. It took weeks of wrangling to get 1,400 children from Greek refugee camps accepted. This is just a drop in the ocean, the "humanitarian" accompaniment to a daily barbarism.

In the refugee camps in Greece, Turkey or Syria, and even in the national policies within the EU, an essential feature of the civil pandemic fight is already evident. It is a matter of saving one's own citizens, one's own nationality. The health of others, humanity as a whole, becomes a secondary factor.

In practically all countries of the world, state isolation is automatically accompanied by racist, nationalistic and xenophobic attitudes. People who look "Asian" are looked at with suspicion. Anti-Chinese and anti-Asian chauvinism and racism have increased significantly in Europe. The fact that this segregation may also be directed against other people does not negate this general tendency.

The ultimately purely national focus and more or less openly nationalistic or even racist character of bourgeois bailout policies is evident in all countries because it is an essential feature of the capitalist system. National governments pursue the interests of their respective national capitals, in the fight against a pandemic as in everything else.

This does not only mean isolation, it also sets narrow limits to the cooperation between the countries,

which would actually facilitate progress and to which many people pay lip service.

For example, countries such as Germany, France, the United States, China or Japan, will try to limit the consequences for their economies, that is to say, for their national capital as a whole. They may even try to limit the effects on strategically important sections of the working class, for example, in the export industry, through loans, economic stimulus programmes, short-time work compensation, so that they are better placed than their competitors for a distant future "recovery" when they can cut them out of the market.

However, only a few countries have these possibilities, i.e. the great powers and economically stronger countries of the imperialist blocs. Even for the more developed semi-colonies, so-called regional powers, these reserves hardly exist. They are already much harder hit by the global economic crisis, and so their options for fighting a pandemic are all the more limited.

Just like all other global problems and crises, the corona virus will probably hit them many times harder than any other, should it spread further. The development in Iran illustrates this.

The position of individual countries in the global division of labour determines to a large extent the ability of their health systems to delay the spread of the disease and to combat its effects. Of course, a policy of national isolation means that the semi-colonies are thrown back on their own limited resources, limited because, within the framework of the imperialist world order, they have been plundered over decades, even centuries, because their economies are dominated by the capital of the great powers.

Class question in health care

Pandemics can and will of course occur in all social formations. Even a future classless society could not give any guarantee against this. In the bourgeois system, of course, the form of combat reflects the class character of society itself.

National isolation is ultimately based on this. It is an enormous obstacle to cooperation in the fight against the pandemic, in research into vaccines, and even in the implementation of protective measures. It is closely linked to the private, capitalist nature of production and research itself. Finally, all products intended to protect the population and for medical tests (disinfectants, test kits, etc.), as well as the development of vaccines by pharmaceutical companies, are a means of enrichment for capital, of profit-making.

For this reason, the business secrets of the companies are to be preserved in all "cooperation". Whoever first develops an antidote will be rewarded with a gigantic monopoly profit for years to come under global capitalism.

In addition, health care has long since become a branch of business like any other. The fact that the state and social security systems themselves have been increasingly undermined financially and, in many places, privatised, is now taking its revenge. Contrary to the fair-weather speeches of Health Minister Spahn, the German health system, for example, is not prepared for a pandemic. The reserves are missing - and where should they come from when, according to calculations of the trade union ver.di, 162,000 jobs in the health care system in Germany alone, including 70,000 in nursing care, are vacant!

The solution proposed by Spahn: The minimum staffing levels for the personnel per ward should be abolished - in plain language: The employees should care for more patients per shift.

Something similar, if not even more drastic, is revealed in other countries. In the USA, for example, a large part of the population has no health insurance at all, despite the "socialist" Obama Care. Even for a virus

test, a large part of the insured must pay out of their own pockets, if a test kit is available at all.

Here, the class character of the entire medical system is strikingly revealed. Health represents either a cost factor for the total capital in the form of the state health system that has to be reduced, or in the private sector it is a means of making money like any other.

Employees and patients fall by the wayside - finely graded according to their class position in society. For the poorest sections of the working class, there is at best a "minimum supply" in the imperialist countries, in more and more semi-colonies there is none at all. Even in countries such as the USA, there is neither a legal entitlement nor an obligation to provide care for uninsured patients.

Stop public life - secure profits

The class character of society is also revealed in other ways. For example, more and more governments are suggesting that people avoid public gatherings. In more and more countries, universities, schools, kindergartens, cultural institutions, swimming pools have been closed. Meanwhile, political assemblies and demonstrations are also banned above a certain size. We will come back to the associated restriction of democratic rights later.

It is also remarkable what is maintained, even in countries like Italy. Of course, health care, grocery stores etc. are still needed. But the Italian Government has also made a notable exception in the quarantine regulation for Lombardy and northern Italy. Wherever possible, production should continue and work as normally as possible, including in the various other sectors of the Italian economy - something that the large companies have dictated to their employees anyway, without even asking the government.

Thus, not only FIAT (now FCA) and others continue to produce, as if the risk of infection when working for the exploiters were less than when demonstrating against them. Migrant workers should continue to slave away in the extremely exploitative work as harvest workers, with many desperately trying to escape. But it is also remarkable that there have been work stoppages in several factories.

"While in Italy everything is under corona quarantine, the workers must continue to work so that the profit of the companies does not diminish. The FIAT workers refuse to continue working just to keep the profits and have called for a strike". (Jules El-Khatib on Twitter on 10 March, https://twitter.com/ju_khatib/status/1237409558064254983 ^[2])

There were also other strikes at Ikea, at slaughterhouses and in the port of Genoa.

What is also remarkable about the struggles in Italy is that the large workers' organisations support the government policy, that the strikes were organised by opposition or smaller unions.

This basic strategy of stopping public life, of keeping the damage to "our" economy, i.e. the profit margins of the companies, as small as possible, is of course also what the German government is proposing. Even economic stimulus programmes and cheap loans are now on the agenda - to boost production and subsidize companies.

Meanwhile, all the employees can hope for is short-time work compensation, i.e. less income. Anyone who is not employed in a sector affected by (temporary) closures, or who does not do any work that can be done from home, will still have to travel to work.

While the ruling class can hope for the support of their government, the masses of citizens are being prepared for cuts. They too must "do their share" - as if the wage earners, including the risk groups such as the old, the poor, the sick from the working class, did not have to bear a higher risk anyway.

However, in its measures against the virus, the state does not rely on nationwide measures such as the installation of disinfectants in all public buildings and large squares, free tests or the production and free distribution of respiratory protection. Even when kindergartens and schools are closed, working parents cannot count on public support; they have to do their part independently and privately.

Class policy

As the above explanations show, the spread of the virus and its control is not only a medical problem in the strict sense of the word. How the pandemic is contained, how quickly and for whom a vaccine is available, who bears the costs of the measures, etc., these are social issues, class issues.

Against this background, all the measures taken by the government to restrict the political rights of the working class, indeed the masses of the population, the right to strike and demonstrate must be viewed extremely critically. They must be rejected.

Of course, no left-wing force, no workers' organisation will hold assemblies lightly if the risk of infection is high. It is also quite possible that in order to combat a pandemic it may become necessary to control travel to and from certain areas. But the question is, who determines this? State authorities, bourgeois, capitalist governments or the labour movement, above all, the trade unions.

For workers to be able to organise themselves, they also need democratic rights, which they can exercise during the current situation. For example, it would be useful for meetings in the factories and offices to be informed by experts from the health sector, who enjoy the trust of workers and trade unions - preferably trade union members in the industry - and also to discuss which measures are useful and which are not.

We reject a general ban on entry or the sealing off of the external borders. Rather, it is a matter of providing help for people in need in the so-called "Third World", for the refugees in Greece, Turkey or Syria - also by opening the EU's external borders. With regard to people who may have been infected with the coronavirus, the same rules should apply as for anyone else, free tests and medical care should be made available.

The working class, trade unions and workers' parties should campaign for the disclosure of trade secrets and all research results of state and private institutes. If a vaccine is found, it must be made available to all free of charge and must not be misused for profit.

The private corporations will certainly resist such a demand, after all, it endangers their profits, their very business purpose. Therefore, this must be combined with the struggle for workers' control and the expropriation of the industry without compensation.

The struggle for workers' control is by no means limited to the health sector. Striking workers in Italy rightly argue that their health is more important than the profits of the corporations. In the face of such a crisis, the question also arises as to which sectors and activities should be maintained and which not.

For example, it is clear that many more people are needed to work in the health sector. Of course, the lack of training of professionals over the years means that it is easy for the service to be overwhelmed. On the other hand, people can very well be trained for auxiliary activities and capacities for care can also be built up. In addition, there is the private part of the health care system, which is partly designed for very wealthy and numerous patients. All these clinics and capacities should be integrated into the general health care system and opened to the mass of patients. If the owners of these facilities resist, they must be expropriated without compensation.

For all people, there must be public health care, free and unrestricted access to medical facilities. Stays in hospitals or in quarantine have to be covered by the insurance or by the public health system, like normal sick leave, not by the masses.

In short, it is a question of combating the class-specific nature of the measures. This can only happen, however, if the working class, above all the trade unions, presents itself not as the social partner of capital and government, but as a social force in its own right.

Precisely because capital and government also want to shift the burden onto the masses and thus also the risks of the pandemic, the latter must not lightly accept the blanket restriction of democratic rights. Instead, it must use these hard-won achievements to implement an effective programme to combat the pandemic.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/covid-19-we-will-do-whatever-necessary-really>

Links:

[1] <https://www.welt.de/vermischtes/article206504969/Coronavirus-Alle-Karten-Zahlen-Daten-zur-Ausbreitung.html>

[2] https://twitter.com/ju_khatib/status/1237409558064254983