

# The Grand Reopening - Profit and Death in the USA

Marcus Otono Sat, 25/04/2020 - 13:02

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We've seen it coming for weeks now: actually for months if you count the initial denigration of the threat of the coronavirus and Covid 19 for the US by the Trump administration. Even after Trump pivoted and decided that the death toll from this easily spread viral infection would play havoc with his reelection campaign, the signs always pointed towards the swift reopening of the US economy. He first floated the idea of an Easter weekend reopening. When that was shot down by the facts of an increasing infection and death rate, he pointed to May 1st. Now, Trump is recommending a phased in, three step process that might get at least parts of the economy in some states going sometime in mid to late May. There have already been some governors in the more right wing states that have begun the process of reopening public facilities like beaches and public parks. And in the most egregious example of reopening without any concern for the health of its citizens comes from the US state of Georgia where the right-wing, Republican governor Brian Kemp had decided to reopen not only gyms, but also hair salons, nail salons, barbershops, and bowling alleys, along with churches by May 1, even while coronavirus infections and deaths in his state are still climbing. This is also the governor who was so clueless that he claimed on April 2 that we didn't know that people who were infected and asymptomatic could spread the virus. So, he's not just ignorant, but criminally ignorant. And the governor of Tennessee also just announced that this southern and right-wing state will reopen by May 1, even though infections, hospitalizations, and deaths are all still rising.

Considering that the true rate of infections is mostly unknown because of the dearth of testing and, more importantly, considering that the death rate attributed to Covid 19 is still rising even in states that aren't especially hard hit, this plan seems to be optimistic. Indeed optimistic is a kind description; murderous would probably be more accurate. But then capitalism is always ready to sacrifice to the god of Mammon on the altar of profit. As long as that sacrifice doesn't involve themselves or their profits that is. Workers' and citizens' lives? Sure, that's an acceptable cost for keeping the profit chain intact and, in this case, restarted.

## The Plan

The three stage program put forth by the Trump administration is not really that much of a plan and it's definitely not very detailed. It's a couple of pages (at most) of bullet points that doesn't address the ?hows? of getting to the scientific targets that are supposed to be required before even Phase One is put into place. I guess we should all be happy that there are some standards in place at all considering that just a couple of days before the release of the plan, Trump was basically asserting the ?Divine Right of the Presidency? to tell us all that he would be the ?decider? of when the country opened back up for business. When that assertion wound up getting negative feedback from some of his strongest supporters, he made yet another pivot and ?decided? that the state governors and local officials would have the final say. At least for now. It's likely, given Trump's penchant for reassigning blame to anybody and anywhere other

than himself, this last pivot was made in order to set up local officials for the blame if things go south and too many people die from this rash reopening of the US economy.

Phase one is supposed to be put into place when there are two weeks worth of decreasing coronavirus infections and Covid 19 illnesses and will include keeping "social distancing" restrictions in place and bans on gatherings of more than 10 people. Among other restrictions still to be kept in place, businesses that have been closed will be allowed to reopen if they can keep to those restrictions. For example, bars and restaurants will remain closed, but gyms will be allowed to reopen if they can keep their patrons from coming within 6 feet of each other. Probably the biggest sop to the business community is allowing "elective" surgeries. These are the ones that make the most money for hospitals and clinics in the medical field. The for-profit healthcare system in the US relies on these "electives" for a lion's share of their profit margins even in normal times. These elective surgeries will take resources away from treating the virus that's currently plaguing us, even if it just reallocates medical personnel into non-essential, but more profitable, areas.

The biggest problem with this scenario is the testing process. It has not gone well to this point. Both the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCs) and state governors, along with Dr. Deborah Birx and Dr. Anthony Fauci within the White House Coronavirus Task Force, acknowledge this fact on testing. Without the testing we have no idea how many people are infected in the general population, how many are actually sick and need to be quarantined and socially isolated rather than just "distanced", and therefore, what are the realistic chances are for a massive second wave of infections, illnesses, and deaths after any reopening takes place. Even the ultra-capitalist propaganda outlet the Wall Street Journal has noted the chaotic response to the lack of testing supplies and equipment. This is a direct result of 40 years of the continuing reliance on the "market" to meet the needs of the population. It does not work that well at any time to meet the needs of the people and especially not during a crisis. Nothing is coordinated or even gets done without the consideration of profit and what is done is done in a scattered and piecemeal fashion.

Trump's plan relies on widespread testing to tell us where we are and we're currently running, at best, at about half where we need to be on this testing.

### The Pressure to Reopen

Of course, none of this will make much of a difference in whether the country reopens for business or not. A segment of the bourgeoisie and their toadies in the political class, especially on the right, have decided that four to six weeks of interruption of their profit chains is quite enough. They are hell bent on reopening no matter whom it kills.

The "reopening" of the economy campaign began with Trump himself, speaking of the tanking economy, tweeting that we can't let the cure (the shutdown) be worse than the disease (Covid 19) on March 22. That was followed with several on the right echoing this, most prominently the Lt. Governor of Texas, Dan Patrick, saying that old folks and the immuno-compromised, the ones most at risk of dying from the infection, would in fact be willing to die for the economy and, specifically, Wall Street. This sparked an immediate response with the hashtag #Notdying4WallStreet trending strongly on social media.

You would think that this kind of pushback would have damped down this kind of talk, but not so much. As recently as April 7, US Congressman Trey Hollingsworth of the 9th district of Indiana said that if there's a choice between deaths and reopening the economy, the economy would have to come first. It should be noted that Hollingsworth's net worth is estimated at \$50 million making him, undoubtedly, one of the owning class in the US. He's also known, ironically as this shows, as a "pro life" (read anti-abortion rights) politician and a staunch fundamentalist Christian. Hollingsworth also received a vociferous pushback for his comments, but it's obvious that no amount of opposition will change the mindset of the right-wing,

capitalist Death Cult in the USA. The economy and Wall Street are more important than the lives of the working class people that they exploit for their profit.

This pressure to reopen ramped up even further the week of April 14th with the beginning of a street campaign of sometimes armed demonstrations by Trump supporters, white nationalists, and even outright fascists in state capitols across the nation. These demos, backed and promoted by a Who's Who of the right, like Fox News, the Koch "dark money" political non-profits, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, the Coors brewery, right-wing political groups, and Donald Trump himself, consisted of a few hundred people at most, but gained widespread press in the capitalist media.

Of course, none of these billionaires and multi-millionaires are backing these protests out of the goodness of their evil hearts. They're doing it because they also agree that their profits are more important than the lives of the ordinary US people. The strategy behind this tactic of often armed intimidation by fascist elements, is to intimidate governors and local officials into reopening the economy as soon as possible. The weapons carried imply that death awaits any politician that holds up the economic restart.

So between Trump and right-wing politicians pushing to reopen business as usual, armed thugs in the streets pushing for the same outcome, and business interests in the massive petite bourgeoisie sector of the US economy and their backers in the big bourgeoisie, we can expect a grand reopening of the US economy sometime in early to mid May. No matter what inadequate testing results show and no matter how many people die as a result.

#### What Else Can We Expect?

All of this pressure to get us back to "normal" is coming on the heels of polls showing that the American people do not want to reopen the economy amid the current uncertainty over the spread of the virus and the disease. A massive majority of the population, almost two-thirds according to the respected Pew polling firm, think that the US will reopen too quickly. We can now see that this majority was correct to be concerned. Or maybe Americans have just become more observant. It was, after all, logical that this was coming and coming too soon for the comfort of the people most affected by the disease. That is the working class that toil every day for inadequate wages and will be on the front lines and the first victims of any resurgence of this pandemic. While the wealthy owners whine about losing their profits the working class are in danger of losing their very lives.

As to what we can expect from this, likely, premature reopening of the US economy, there are a few things that we can gather from the initial worldwide response to the virus and then extrapolate from there. Michael Roberts, the respected Marxist economist that we've referenced before, has put together an initial analysis of the response (<https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/2020/04/20/covid-19-and-containment/>) and come to some preliminary conclusions based strictly on the numbers, something that he does well. The facts are pretty well indisputable.

- 1) Covid 19 is much deadlier than the seasonal flu. Even under the most benevolent readings of mortality, Covid 19 is ten times as deadly and as much as 100 times as deadly if you take the more pessimistic scenarios.

-2) The containment strategy actually works in reducing this mortality as shown in the South Korean, Chinese, and German strategies. Roberts estimated that the containment strategies that have been in effect worldwide has reduced the death rate from Covid 19 by 80%.

-3) Capitalism and capitalist governments were unprepared to handle this pandemic. We will add that this unpreparedness was mostly brought on, as we've referenced before, by the neoliberal, "just in time" production chains that required everything to be done to maximize profits and minimize costs in the medical field and support industries. In the US this model has resulted in hospital closures, layoffs of

healthcare providers and support personnel, and the lack of beds and equipment needed to treat a huge influx of new patients, especially in the ICUs. This model also left, for most countries, no other option than containment and shutting down business as usual or risk overwhelming national healthcare systems.

- 4) The more severe the lockdown, the less deaths have resulted. See "containment works?".

- 5) The countries that used a less severe strategy on lockdowns not only caused more deaths among citizens, they also didn't do any better economically. The world capitalist economy is so interrelated today that even when a country's economy continued on apace, as in Sweden, they had no one to sell to on the global market. So these countries lost in both areas, more citizen deaths and reduced economic activity.

Making predictions in a situation that changes daily is always hazardous, but some things stand out as probabilities. The Grand Reopening of the US economy is likely to be a bust in both the health and economic sense. Parts of the country, especially in the more conservative states, that reopen while infections and deaths are still rising will result in even more infections and deaths and will also probably not see much of a boost in economic activity. People in fear of their lives are not going to go out and about to buy the latest gadget on the market. There might be an initial burst of activity from pent up demand, but as the death rate rises this will be a short lived. In addition, travel between states is likely to spread the virus even wider, infecting more and more people in suburban and rural areas that have so far avoided the worst of the pandemic. In these more rural areas, a flood of new infections will exacerbate the lack of care facilities, hospitals, and critical care resources and more will die.

The pressure to reopen on the economies of the harder hit areas on the coasts and the upper Midwest, which are showing signs of getting things under control, will be immense when everybody else opens. Add in expected pressures from the Federal government and the Trump administration by the withholding of aid and/or the support of lawsuits against states that don't reopen. It's difficult to see New York, California, or Michigan holding out too long before they're forced to reopen too.

In short, cases will spike again once containment measures are relaxed and more people will sicken and die. And any economic gains will be short lived and not sustained for more than a brief time at best.

### What We Can Do

As usual in any capitalist crisis, it's the working class that will shoulder the brunt of it all. The US working class was already inadequately paid, inadequately housed, inadequately served when ill and charged more for it than anywhere else in the world. 44 million Americans are uninsured and another 38 million have inadequate health insurance. Eight out of ten of these are workers or their dependents. In addition, millions of the insured avoid or delay going for medical treatment because of a fear of the ruinous costs. The front line medical personnel do what they can and often give heroic efforts while being understaffed and underprotected from getting sick themselves. They, like all American workers, have less protections on the job and less support when without a job. And if they complain about it, they risk being unceremoniously fired. And now we all will face the prospect of literal death on the job and in the air because the wealthy owners can't give up a small percentage of their ill-gotten gains for the good of the rest of us, the ones who actually create the wealth that the capitalists expropriate from our labor.

Instead of ramping up proven methods of containing the virus and deaths, the US bourgeoisie is preparing to put us all at risk again. Some will say that we need to work and earn money to pay the mortgage or rent, utilities, food, student loan and credit card bills and car notes. Indeed, there have been some on the left who have defended the classic fascist style demonstrations seen lately on these very grounds. But putting our lives at risk is not the only solution available. As an alternative to "work or starve?", we could expropriate some of the massive profit that has accumulated at the top over the last four decades and declare a Jubilee on debt. Or at the very least a moratorium on repayment of debt until the end of the year. Instead of rationing healthcare we could reopen hospitals that closed because they weren't profitable

enough and put them all under workers' control and make them free at the point of use. We could expropriate businesses that make necessary medical equipment, put them under workers' control and begin cranking out PPEs and ventilators for need and at cost rather than for profit. We could plan for pandemics as much as we plan for wars of choice and regime changes. We could bring drug companies under public control and let their workers run them in order to speed the research and development of vaccines and treatment options for not only coronavirus and Covid 19, but also for the next pandemic.

The burning need for a free-at-the-point-of-use medical service for all is as clear as day as a result of this crisis. Yet Bernie Sanders ? self-proclaimed democratic socialist - whose most famous policy is Medicare for All has just withdrawn from the presidential race and endorsed Joe Biden who will not endorse such a demand. Clearly only a party of and for the working class and action by the working class can hope to address the massive health care catastrophe US capitalism threatens us all with.

Considering that even the minor benefits enacted for the working class in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, signed into law by Trump on March 27th, are difficult to access because of the inadequacy of the registration system for unemployment benefits, these potential benefits could be renamed as another "stimulus", a grant and given out to US citizens rather than making people "register" for them. And while the one-time stimulus came out pretty quick for most of us, the ones who needed a paper check had to wait until Trump could put his name on it. It's likely that another small business bailout will be passed and administered before individuals can access all the benefits mandated by the CARES act. That shows the priorities of governmental help in the US. Business and profit are the main concerns; workers come in a distant third, after the bourgeois politicians that support business interests.

There's only one way to change this paradigm and that's an involved working class that is willing to stop abetting the criminals that run US businesses and their toadies in government. And the best way to stop them is to stop working and stop paying any bills, except for the ones necessary to keep body and soul together. A strike on non-essential work, a rent and mortgage strike, withholding of payments to banks for any debts are all proven strategies for stopping this criminal endangerment of our lives for the bosses' profits. And any job that's deemed ?essential? should be paid like it's essential and under the control of these essential workers themselves.

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