

May Day statement of the League for the Fifth International

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International Secretariat

The impending catastrophe and how to fight it

We will not pay for the pandemic! We will not pay for the crisis!

May Day 2020 will be unlike any other in history. There will be no mass rallies, no demonstrations, in all probability precious few public meetings of any size at all. The coronavirus pandemic has already killed 200,000 mainly in the richer, imperialist countries of the northern hemisphere. Now it is poised to engulf huge populations in the semi-colonial countries of Latin America, Africa and South Asia.

Even without the rallies and marches, however, International Workers' Day is a timely reminder that, while the virus itself respects neither borders nor social status, the pandemic it has caused clearly reveals the divisions and inequality within all countries.

Even before the public health emergency, global capitalism was facing an economic crisis comparable in scale to the Depression of the 1930s. The pandemic will ensure that it will be deeper and even more synchronised globally than the crisis of 2008.

All major economies, including both old and new imperialist powers, the US and China, Japan, Germany, France, Britain, Russia or the EU ? had already registered declines in GDP. The semi-colonial world, including countries with regional ambitions like India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Brazil or Argentina, will now be hit even worse.

After initially playing down the danger, most governments realised the need to ?lockdown? public life, including schools, restaurants and shops and to close national or even internal borders. In some of the richer imperialist countries, social security was guaranteed, at least in the short term, for most of the working class but ?lockdown? has a very different meaning in the semi-colonial world.

Here, ?social distancing? basically means imprisoning the urban poor and the working class in their favelas or the huge slums in the mega-cities or, as in India, forcing them out of the cities altogether.

In the imperialist world, governments and central banks have provided billions to support the huge corporations, both industrial and financial. But their reserves for countering the effects of the crisis are far more limited than in 2008. The measures taken then, such as Quantitative Easing, did not deal with the roots of the crisis. On the contrary, they resolved the short term danger of widespread bankruptcies at the cost of storing up longer term difficulties. Instead of a recovery to pre-crisis growth rates, stagnation and faltering growth led to increased rivalry between the imperialist powers and increased xenophobia within them.

Such developments limit all attempts at global coordination to fight either the pandemic or the economic crisis. Whilst some fronts, such as scientific research, reveal the potential for international collaboration, closure of borders and measures to 'protect' national economies will only worsen the economic outlook globally.

There can be no doubt, therefore, that the crisis will pose the question of massive destruction of capital, and not only of small or medium sized businesses, but even large corporations such as in the car industry. In turn, this will further threaten the world economy with protectionism and trade wars.

Increased global rivalry will also lead to more military confrontations, initially through the arming of proxies of the big powers. Despite the current reduction of CO2-emissions, it will, over time, also increase environmental dangers because agreements on serious measures to counter climate change between the US, China, Europe and other countries will be almost impossible.

Even before the full impact of the economic crisis has been felt, the pandemic has already made clear who will suffer most; the global working class and the semi-colonial world. In all countries there are clear patterns; those who work in the health sector, particularly the lower strata of the working class, often not covered by health insurance or social security; the nationally and racially oppressed; the youth and the elderly. Women will face not only the burden of increased domestic labour, imposed on them by the shut-down, but also increased violence against them and their children.

Already, in the US, more than 25 million have registered on the dole, in France more than 10 million are on short-time work and in Germany 4 million. This is only the beginning. The working class globally is threatened by an attack on its health, living standards and rights on a truly historic scale.

The masses in the semi-colonial, exploited nations will be hit particularly hard in the coming crisis. In India, millions of migrant workers have been forced back to their 'home' provinces, stranded without any medical provisions or income. This is just one dramatic example of the mounting human catastrophe we will face in the coming months. Most semi-colonial countries have no functioning health system and millions are threatened with starvation.

At the same time, the rich, imperialist nations who have plundered and exploited them, either turn their backs on these countries, as the US withdrawal of funds for the WHO demonstrates, or they limit their aid to rations which might limit the tragedy, but will maintain the chains of dependency and exploitation. Even within the EU, the stronger economies, like Germany or the Netherlands, are not prepared to give aid without conditions to Southern Europe let alone the countries of Africa, Asia or Latin America.

In the current period, it would be difficult to overestimate the challenges facing the working class, the poor peasants, the urban and rural poor and the oppressed nations. The crisis poses the question of how to fight back, how to prevent the ruling classes and their states forcing human and social costs of the pandemic, the recession and all the other aspects of the global crisis of capitalism, onto them.

Currently, most governments, in particular in the imperialist world, appeal to the national unity of all classes. They demand that the great majority of people accept the need for sacrifice in order to overcome the pandemic and economic collapse. In reality, this means that the workers and oppressed should suspend all struggles to ensure health provision and social benefits, to protect wages or jobs or to defend democratic rights until the crisis is over.

In this deceit, which can only serve the interests of the capitalists, the governments find all too many supporters amongst the leaders of the trade unions, social-democratic and Labour parties, as well as the

so-called 'left parties'. Many of them have called off wage struggles and agreed to social and economic pacts with the bosses or their governments. They claim that 'social partnership' and national unity are the only way to protect workers in the current situation. Just as in previous crises, by suspending the social, economic and political struggles of the workers they tie them to the fate of 'their' nation, 'their' state.

Given the historic crisis of capitalism, there is no room for big concessions. At best they may pick up some crumbs for small sections of the labour aristocracy from the negotiating tables of social partnership or from engaging in a policy of 'national unity' in bourgeois governments or as a fake opposition.

The real result of this is to help the ruling class to make the workers and peasants pay for the crisis of capitalism. The real result will be to further divide the workers and poor along lines of gender, nationality, ethnicity and age. The real result will be that the existing powerful mass organisations of the working class and the masses will be used as an obstacle to resistance as long as they are misled by the policies of social partnership and national unity.

However, there are already clear signs that this treacherous policy will be questioned by the unfolding of the crisis itself. Workers in Italy and Spain went on strike, demanding the closure of unnecessary production; likewise, workers in the US went on strike demanding safety measures to be implemented by the capitalists.

In Pakistan, left wing and women's organisations have started to organise support for workers threatened with starvation and hunger; in the favelas in Brazil, people organised themselves to introduce, organise and supervise elementary hygienic measures.

Such examples show that, even in such a defensive situation, where many workers and poor feel powerless and paralysed, where mass movements like the environmental movement in many Latin American countries seem to have been halted, resistance and struggle are still possible. Every such example needs to be supported, spread and taken up as an inspiration to our class. But in order to spread this and to form a broad united front of all working class organisations, of all social movements, of all the oppressed - it is necessary to break with the policies of social partnership and national unity.

Failure to do that will allow the far right, right wing populist, or even fascist, forces to exploit the anger of small capitalists and even desperate sections of the working class, welding them into reactionary mass movements demanding or supporting authoritarian or dictatorial regimes. Already before the crisis, we could observe this move to the right on a global level. If the working class proves unable to present itself as a global force of revolutionary hope and inspiration, the far right will mobilise as a counterrevolutionary, pseudo-radical alternative of racism, nationalism, sexism - leading to frontal onslaughts on all working class and progressive organisations and to bonapartist and dictatorial forms of rule.

Therefore, revolutionaries and all forces willing to fight in this defensive situation need to unite to build a global movement of resistance. Whilst many struggles will start on a local or national terrain, there can be no national solution to the current crisis. The pandemic, the recession, the environmental crisis, all need to be fought globally - or they will not be fought to an end.

We need to take the initiative now to create a common global movement, a united front of struggle under the slogan 'We will not pay for the pandemic, we will not pay for the crisis!' We call on all working class and peasant organisations, on all trade unions, all the parties claiming to represent the workers and the oppressed, all the social movements, to unite in such a struggle.

For this we should start now to build joint committees of action in the workplaces and the estates, to turn

neighbourhood assemblies into organisations of struggle. We call on all working class organisations ? including the mass trade unions and reformist parties ? to break with their policy of national unity, to break with subordination to the ruling class and to mobilise in struggle.

From past experience, we know that many of the leaders will reject, sabotage or even openly fight such a policy. This is why we direct this call not only to the leaders of these organisations but, above all, to their mass memberships. It is why we stand with them to fight to regain control of the trade unions by building rank and file movements to challenge the bureaucracy. This is why we support the rank and file in the reformist parties against their leaders, both to engage in joint struggle and to win them to a revolutionary programme and organisation.

The creation of a united front of struggle of the working class, the youth, women, poor and oppressed also requires clear demands and slogans that address the urgent needs of the day.

- Provision of free health care for all; nationalisation and expansion of facilities, paid for by taxation of wealth and capital assets, under the control of the working class.
- Massive investment in vaccine research and provision of testing and tracing systems!
- Cessation of all non-essential work! What is essential, or not, to be determined by working class and popular masses.
- No to all job losses ? full pay and benefits for all those who have no work! For a minimum wage, pensions, grants for students to cover their living costs!
- No to closing the borders for migrants and refugees! End the refugee camps and provide shelter. Full citizens? rights, housing, work or social benefits for all immigrants.
- Housing for all, no to all evictions of workers and poor. For provision of elementary housing, sanitary conditions in the shanty towns of the semi-colonial world.
- Land to those who work it. Expropriation of the large landowners and agrarian multi-nationals! For workers? and peasants? control of land use and agricultural production!
- For a global plan to fight the pandemic, hunger and poverty in the global south. Cancel all debts of the semi-colonial countries ? make the imperialists pay the cost by expropriation of their assets and capital without compensation and under workers? control.
- No to the scrapping of democratic rights; fight all attacks on workers? and trade union rights, repeal all anti-trade union laws and all limitations on the right to demonstrate, protest and strike.
- Self-defence organisations of workers and oppressed against right wing, racist or fascist organisations and state repression.

Clearly such demands will not be conceded by negotiations between capitalists, governments, trade union and reformist leaders, nor will they be achieved by piecemeal ?transformation? of the bourgeois state. Each of these demands would need to be fought for by means of mass political struggle, by occupations of workplaces and land, by sectoral or general strikes, by militant demonstrations and mass uprisings.

Revolutionaries support all such struggles. The current situation does not make the struggle for immediate demands, democratic rights or reforms superfluous, but it allows and requires them to be linked to the fight against the capitalist system as a whole. Every major meaningful social reform, every decisive measure to fight the pandemic in the interest of the poor, will necessarily run up against the profit needs of capital.

The campaign for working class control is central to link all these issues to the struggle for a society free of exploitation, where production and social life are organised to serve the needs of the many, not to increase the profits of the few.

Therefore, we fight for rank and file control of these struggles, for the creation of organs of workers? control ? workplace committees and committees of action in the towns and in the countryside. We fight for

the creation of local, regional, national and international social forums, which can build on the experience of the past. They can become organisations to coordinate mass actions, if they do not repeat the mistakes of the anti-globalisation movements when reformist, libertarian leaders were able to prevent them becoming anything more than talking shops.

Where the struggle takes an acute form, local or workplace committees can be transformed and developed into councils of workers, the poor, the peasantry and of rank and file soldiers in the army, to break the control over the repressive apparatus by the bourgeoisie.

If threatened by revolution, the bourgeoisie may make concessions and we need to take into account the lessons from the mass revolutionary movements and pre-revolutionary developments of the last decade. In the Arab revolutions, the masses proved capable of overthrowing long standing dictatorial regimes like Mubarak in Egypt. But, without revolutionary programmes and leaderships, which could have made the initial democratic revolutions permanent, developing them into socialist revolutions and creating workers? and peasants? governments, the counterrevolution regained the initiative, leading to defeat.

In Greece, consecutive general strikes led to the downfall of the traditional parties of the Greek bourgeoisie and brought a government to power led by a left reformist party. But Syriza capitulated to the EU, the European and Greek capitalists and eventually gave way to a right wing government.

These examples all demonstrate one thing. Those who do not want to fight the revolutionary struggle to the end, will not gain half a revolution, but a full counter-revolution.

Whilst we are in a defensive situation now, the defence of past gains and measures to overcome the pandemic and mass unemployment, poverty and hunger, will generate struggles that pose the question, Who is to rule?

Therefore, even to win such struggles, we will have to fight for power, the creation of workers?, or workers? and peasants?, governments. These need to break up the might of the bourgeois state apparatus and base themselves on workers? and peasants? councils, on the armed people, not on the bourgeois army. They need to expropriate and nationalise large scale capital under workers? control and reorganise the economy based on a democratically agreed plan, which would be geared towards social needs and environmental sustainability. Such a government must not confine itself to creating a new society in one country, but support the global revolution. Only in this way will it be able to sustain and expand the revolutionary gains and open the way for new chapter in human history ? socialism.

However, the revolution does not only require unity of the workers and oppressed ? it requires a leadership, a strategist, a revolutionary working class party and International. Today, there is no such party, indeed there is hardly an embryo of such a party. All those who claim to be revolutionaries are fragmented into small groups and currents ? and most of them even reject the need to build a new party on a clear set of ideas, on revolutionary theory and a revolutionary programme. But we do need such an organisation if we want to transform the workers? movement itself. We need an organisation that combines tactical flexibility in the coming struggles and its intervention in the movement, with political and programmatic clarity. The League for the Fifth International and its sections are committed to this objective ? if you agree with it, get in touch, join our ranks!

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