

USA: Trading Lives for Profit ? Updating the Reopening

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As inevitably happens during class struggle, the battle lines eventually sharpen into ?Which side are you on?? moments. That?s happening now with the Covid-19 crisis.

If there was ever a time when you could have had a response that prevented major damage to the economy and a public health crisis, that time is long past, lost in a myriad of twists and turns from the Trump administration that was a dark comedy of erroneous advice and dangerous policy shifts. A game played against the backdrop of electoral politics, naked opportunism, conspiracy theories and ideological purity. The two areas of public health and the economy are now in contradiction to each other. To reopen the economy under current conditions is going to kill people. Perhaps a lot of people.

But the ruling class and their bootlickers in the political class have made their choice. The right-wing Death Cult that rules capitalism today will reopen the economy no matter how many people it kills. And it?s doubtful that, once reopened, it will be shut down again by the bourgeois government no matter the negative effects on public health.

The Capitalist Response is Class Warfare

Make no mistake about it, we are definitely not ?all in this together?. The class lines are stark. While the bosses are relieved of working if they don?t want to, the rest of us are being forced back into the saddle in order to save the profits of those same bosses who, if ?working? at all, are working at ?home? in their palatial mansions or on their yachts and out of harm?s way.

Although it?s probable that this virus was originally spread by the wealthy flying in from overseas (after all how many of the working class is able to fly anywhere, much less overseas?), it?s not those same wealthy that are bearing the brunt of infection and death. That?s the working class and the poor and especially a higher proportion who are black, working class, and/or poor. And now, when all signs show that isolation, quarantine, masks, and social distancing do actually work in slowing the infection rates, the bosses are telling the rest of us to get back to work. Even though none of the guidelines that were supposed to signal when it was safe to reopen are being followed, particularly testing and tracing, in the majority of states that are reopening. They seem to have decided that two months was enough of a disruption to their profit chain and reopening is being mandated no matter the evidence and no matter the potential death rates from a second wave of viral infections. A second wave that is expected by almost everyone, experts and laymen alike.

The famous bailout that we discussed in a previous article that was supposed to provide the means for people to survive an extended lockdown in order to get the virus under control proved to be just as we

predicted, a bailout for businesses and the wealthy and a sellout for the rest of us. We've gone through two "small business" bailouts while many individuals are waiting on their first. 9000 churches, who pay no taxes to the state, have gotten one of these "small business" bailouts while some in their congregations are still trying to sign up for promised unemployment compensation. Many hairstylists, musicians, and others employed in the infamous "gig" economy have been trying and failing for over a month to access funds from the small business bailout and/or the new rules on unemployment compensation. The list of the failures for the working class in the implementation of the CARES act goes on and on.

And, as if to put an exclamation point on this inequity of federal largesse, state governors with the complicity of the Trump administration are encouraging businesses to "snitch" on employees that don't want to return to a dangerous and perhaps deadly environment in order to have an excuse to cut off their unemployment compensation benefits. This is a further oppression of those who might take issue with this forced reopening. And that's two-thirds of the population according to the recent Pew Research poll. It's clear that no matter how many people are against forcing people back to work too early, against their will, and in danger of their lives, the state at the behest of their bosses in business are saying it doesn't matter. The choice that is being forced is to work, get sick, and possibly die from illness or to not work, face financial ruin, and starve.

All this is occurring under conditions of massive unemployment rivaling the Great Depression, conditions that are assured of adding to the long term reserve army of labor and putting immense downward pressure on the wages and employment conditions of employees that are still working. According to latest labor department figures the first week of May saw 3 million people file for unemployment benefits with 40% of low-earning families having now lost a breadwinner. 36 million people have filed for benefits in the last two months. And as Americans lose their jobs they lose their healthcare benefits with them - 35 million of them according to estimates.

Workers in so-called "essential" positions like food service and transportation, never ones that were paid a living wage to begin with, have had any short-term "hazard pay" bonuses taken away even though times are just as dangerous now as they were a week ago when they were society's "heroes."

Against this massive state and systemic pressure to reopen come what may, there is only one sector of the population with the wherewithal to withstand it. That's the working class.

A Working Class Response - Strikes and More Strikes

Since March 1st there have been over 200 strikes of varying durations in the USA. Most of these strikes have been over profitable corporations not putting the safety of their employees over their profit margins. A lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and unsafe and unsanitary working conditions that facilitate the spread of the virus have been the primary reasons for most of these strikes. Another feature of the strikes is their "wildcat" nature, usually organized by non-unionized workers most directly affected by those conditions. Organized labor has provided some behind-the-scenes support for some of the strikes, but for the most part, the official unions have only been a part of roughly 20% of the strike actions to this point.

Another feature is the widespread nature of the strikes across all of the sectors that have been deemed "essential" and across a majority of states in the USA. Every type of business from healthcare facilities to meatpacking plants to agricultural workers to grocery store employees have walked off the job to protest having their lives put at risk solely for profit. Municipal workers too have been a part of this strike wave and for the same reasons. Garbage removal workers in Pittsburgh and New Orleans have walked off the job over the lack of PPE, as have bus drivers in several localities.

The fightback by the owners has also ramped up. Nurses have been fired for speaking out about the lack of protections on the job and the danger this presents to both the nurse and the patient. The giant Amazon corporation has fired several workers for organizing strike action. In New Orleans the striking sanitation workers have been replaced by prison labor. And lest anyone think that the political class will save workers, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and the Trump administration have put union organizing elections on hold in North Carolina and Colorado. And apparently in the spirit of "bi-partisanship," Democratic officials in Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and Nevada have made moves to strip workers and their unions and of their bargaining rights.

The Struggle Will Continue

Yet in spite of the inspiring efforts of the US working class in individual and small scale actions, the economy is still being reopened putting all of our lives at risk. Doctors, nurses, delivery drivers, meat packers and line workers, are still being fired for refusing to work in unsanitary and unsafe conditions. And unions are under the threat of losing their rights to represent their workers nationwide. This puts into stark relief the biggest need of all, a workers' party to unite these struggles into one coordinated effort to take control of society in order to protect our health and lives.

It's obvious, as shown by the organized "death cult" propaganda being put before the public every day, that once this reopening happens the owners don't intend to back off from it. Trump has already talked about a doubling of the number of deaths by the end of summer, but you will notice that he didn't talk about doing anything about it. Other than voluntary "social distancing" and isolation of endangered demographics like old people, asthmatics, the immune-compromised, and others that have shown higher death rates. This was yet another purposeful declaration that, no matter the public health risks, the economy and the owners' profits are more important than you.

Neither the health risks nor the assault on workers' rights are totally known at this point in time. The virus is called "novel" for a reason, because it's new. It's seems like daily we read about new ways that it attacks the body. The heart, kidneys, the vascular system, and even the brain have shown signs of being susceptible to coronavirus attacks, along with the lungs and respiratory system. We also can't take into account what the medium and long-term effects of infection will be because it's too soon to tell. When healthy young adults with no underlying conditions die of a stroke attributed to the coronavirus attacking and causing clots in the bloodstream, it's clear that no one is really safe from its deadly effects. And the list of "endangered" demographics continues to grow, with children being the latest victims shown to be at risk from a type of "toxic shock syndrome" caused by the disease.

It is incredible that in the midst of a pandemic that has shown up our healthcare system as incapable of providing the nationwide, universal provision needed to combat it, testing, PPE ventilators, intensive care beds, putting "America First" in the number of victims, the candidate who advocates Medicare for All stepped aside in favor of one who does not. This should be the time to convince a majority of Americans that their healthcare should be a right, equally available to all, the unemployed, those on low incomes, "illegals" etc. This should be a central demand of any working class program, fought for by a working class party, not be traded in during the race to be candidate for the second party of the billionaires.

As to the assaults on democratic and workers' rights, we've already seen the next steps in preliminary action. Recent demonstrations, backed by nefarious right-wing interests, and prominently featuring gun toting white nationalists and fascists in support of the bosses' attempts to "reopen" in cities and states that are trying to take a more reasonable line on the subject are just the initial tactics. We're already seeing the beginnings of armed militias "guarding" open businesses in hard hit states and cities. These "guards" will be the strikebreakers of tomorrow. And that's not even counting the repression of

marginalized and oppressed populations through state actions by police and other armed representatives of the capitalist order.

This is not a fight that will have a quick ending and it's not a fight that we can afford to lose.

Unite the Struggles

Until we have a workers' party, we have to fight through the organizations we have and those we can build up in our workplaces, localities, and at city and state level. The strike wave that we've seen up to now must continue and it must widen, becoming more organized and more disciplined as we go. The unions must become more fully involved as a leading force within the class as a whole, leading by example and using what organizing and financial clout they have in order to support all workers, not just their members. Individual workers, if they are forced by financial necessity or state pressure to return, must be involved in calling out businesses that don't attend to safety and distancing restrictions. Informational pickets need to be a regular sight at these non-compliant businesses to inform the public of their transgressions.

The inevitable retaliations for taking these actions in many cases will be termination of employment and this needs to be dealt with by the remaining employees on staff and interested supporters with further actions. Literal and figurative "sickouts" and public pressure to rehire and clean up their act with boycotts until they do. Solidarity must become more than a slogan in these cases. Termination from employment is better than termination from life, but neither should be allowed to be the "new normal."

Since the vast majority of the US workforce is currently unorganized into official unions, worker centers, whose previous focus might have been on narrow issues like wage theft or the worst of unsafe working conditions, must broaden this focus into looking after the general health and safety of the employees that they have influence over. Restaurant workers and immigrant Alternative Labor Organizations (ALOs) must come together as they have in Nashville, TN in order to develop strategies and tactics for enforcing public health demands on business owners. But this is not enough on its own. Other community groups like the AFL-CIO Labor Councils and DSA must play a part in these strategy sessions and not just with individual members, but as official partners.

These are just a few of the initial steps that we can see as necessary for taking the power away from the greed inherent in the rules of capitalism and into the democratic hands of the people. After all, it is the rest of us who will pay the price when "business as usual" leads to infections and deaths for ourselves and our loved ones. It certainly won't be the bosses and their hirelings in the political class.

Even in an election year, it will not be elections that solve this public health crisis. The crisis is happening now in real time and elections are months away. The politicians from both capitalist parties are, more or less and sooner or later, committed to going back the way things were, even though people will die because of it.

This crisis of both public health and the economy will be used and has already been and will continue to be politicized. Local actions, as outlined above, can be a start but it can't be the end. The politicians who support capitalism, and that's currently all of them, will use this public health crisis to finish the destruction of the concept of society at large and turn us into struggling individuals with no power to effect the changes that are needed on both a micro and a macro basis.

It's said that practice makes perfect and, with our very lives at stake, the practice needed to take and wield power in society against this premature and deadly reopening of economy will serve us well in the struggles ahead. Rest assured they won't close down the economy again no matter how much it might be

needed to save our lives. If we need a further lockdown, that job will be left to us. By any means necessary.

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