

Covid-19 (Canada): Why the Boss Is Happy to Let You Die

Capitalism And The Struggle For Life

Saturday 13 March 2021, by [GORDON Todd](#) (Date first published: 28 December 2020).

Capitalism has a high threshold for needless death. [1] We are now nine months into the coronavirus pandemic in Canada, and it has been nearly a year since the first documented cases. We find ourselves with significantly worse numbers than at any previous point since the virus first tore its way through communities, care homes, hospitals, and workplaces last winter. The late-spring and summer decline in cases in Canada merely a brief interregnum in the longer-term escalation of viral contagion, we now face a rapidly deteriorating situation. While Canada's new case and death rates are not at the levels of those in the United States or the European Union (let alone the hot spots of the global South), the patterns are nevertheless quite similar. [2]

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Incredibly, despite the duration of the pandemic and the opportunity afforded in Canada by its summer easing, governments were no better prepared for the second wave than they were when the crisis first broke in March, their current response amounting to little more than a shrug of the shoulders and victim blaming in many provinces. Hospitals risk being overwhelmed, long-term care homes are once again potential death traps for their residents and workers, workers' health and safety continue to be callously disregarded by bosses, many schools are simply inadequately prepared to be open, and there is no end in sight, save for a vaccine the roll out of which for most people will start sometime in 2021. Anyone hoping governments will be chastened by the experience and inspired to at least do better next pandemic - [and there will inevitably be a next pandemic](#) - would do well to remember that the SARS crisis was less than two decades ago and the recommendations of the 2007 SARS Commission on responding to future infectious disease outbreaks were ignored last winter even when the dangers of the coronavirus spreading through Canada were [clear to politicians and public health officials](#).

The laissez-faire response of governments to the most recent wave seems irrational: allowing cases to skyrocket while failing to invest in adequate testing, contact tracing, and personal protective equipment for frontline workers; failing to enforce proper health-and-safety measures needed to limit viral spread in workplaces; inadequately preparing hospitals for the predictable increase in admissions; permitting non-essential businesses like bars and restaurants to remain open long after they should have been closed.

[But there is a conscious cruelty underpinning societies governed by capital and its profit-driven laws of motion](#), the marrow of which is a racialized and gendered system of class domination. From the standpoint of capital, health, well-being, and indeed life itself must be subordinated to its all-consuming purpose: the accumulation of wealth. The laissez-faire response to the coronavirus pandemic is calculated and purposeful, and it reveals much about how our society is organized.

Squandering flesh and blood

In fact, the federal and provincial governments have long known the public-health dangers of chronically underfunding hospitals and intensive care units, leaving long-term care homes in the hands of largely unregulated private profiteers committed to cutting costs on the backs of residents and workers, and encouraging the steady decline of working conditions across economic sectors. Alarms have been sounded by unions and public healthcare advocates, among others, about these things for years, their warnings tragically proven correct in the coronavirus pandemic. [3] The problem is that such dangers are not experienced by the rich and the politicians who act on their behalf. A politician may feign deep sympathy like Justin Trudeau, or bewilderment like Doug Ford, at the havoc being wreaked on peoples' lives, but in their actions before and during Covid both types have evinced a commitment to a form of class rule that renders many expendable.

Such a ruthless attitude towards the health and well-being of workers and the poor, especially but by no means exclusively women and people of color, is of course not new. It is better understood within the broader arc of violence, suffering, and neglect that have accompanied the capitalist system since its dawn. Settler societies such as Canada were born out of deadly viral contagions, which accompanied military violence and forced starvation, to abet their colonial projects of dispossession. Just as in Europe, nineteenth- and early-twentieth century capitalist development in North America was a catalogue of horrific working and living conditions, including the use of various forms of forced labor -slavery, debt bondage, and Master's and Servant's laws - in which disease, malnourishment, extreme overwork, injury, and death routinely stalked the workforce.

Treating workers as mere bodies to be used up and discarded, capitalism, Marx observed in the nineteenth century, "squanders human beings ... more readily than any other mode of production, squandering not only flesh and blood, but nerves and brain as well." [4] This is to say nothing of the wars into which the poor have been conscripted as warm bodies in the service of empire. Nor was it coincidental that the 1918 flu epidemic, or "Spanish Flu", interest in which was renewed with the outbreak of Covid-19, found succor in the misery, suffering, and squalor of the First World War.

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While this expendability of human life is, as I discuss below, baked into our society's DNA, the privilege of the rich and powerful leavened by it has been fiercely upheld when challenged. Poverty, slavery, fetid slum living conditions, colonial violence in the name of white supremacy and "civilization" - all found their defense from the pens and mouths of some of the most grandiloquent advocates of liberal rights. [5] Efforts to gain freedom from bondage or colonial rule, and to improve working and living conditions - to assert, in other words, a basic humanity in the face of the physically- and psychically-destroying effects of capitalist rule - were routinely met with state-sanctioned brutality. Ruling class order was not to be defied.

Capital and the value of life

As a defining thread of capitalism's history, such cruelties are not coincidental but *constitutive* of the system.

The ruling class does not care about our lives *as such*. Their general predisposition is a calculated indifference to human well-being and to life itself, and that indifference is enacted upon some lives more than others. They are animated by a ruthless rationality, not just that some lives are more important than others, but that *something* - capital - is more important than most peoples' lives. It follows that this dynamic is not merely a product of a given politician or business leader's decision-making, however easy it is for us to call out the ethical degeneracy of a person who consciously makes choices that lead to the suffering of others. Such people certainly deserve to be held accountable. But individual capitalists are, after all, "merely *capital* personified," as Marx pointed out. The point Marx was making was that the decisions of individual capitalists are framed by the survival-of-the-fittest world of market imperatives they inhabit (and in turn reproduce with their decisions) in which profit, not human need, rules.

The owners of capital are bound up within a structural logic, the logic of *capital*, to which they must abide and as individuals cannot escape (short of committing class suicide). The capitalist who cannot compete with their rivals in pursuit of market share by, among other things, cutting wages, ignoring worker safety and wellbeing, disregarding environmental concerns, or expropriating indigenous land and resources, perishes, hence the constant compulsion to expand and accumulate more wealth while cutting costs. That individual capitalists seem more than happy to make decisions that ruin lives and ecologies does not obviate the wider systemic logic of the capitalist system that conditions how they function. The ruthless disregard for life is an essential not contingent feature of a society in which everything (human and non-human life included) is subordinated to the death drive of the profit motive.

If productive wealth in capitalist societies (that is, capital) is monopolized by a small fraction of the population, most people - dispossessed of direct access to the means of life - in turn have but one means to survive: to "enter the market" and sell the only commodity they possess, their *potential* or capacity to labor, what Marx called labor power. Most people today simply cannot survive outside of market relations. With the purchase of labor power [6], the employer obtains in turn the living labor of the worker, the physical and mental energies she expends at work. As Marx showed in his powerful dissection of capitalism's "laws of motion," as bearers of labor power, the potential worth of most people in the eyes of capital lies simply in their ability to set in motion through their living labor the means of production (the technology, tools and raw materials of the workplace), and thus to produce new value.

Without this army of workers who survive on the sale of their labor capacity, and through which bosses access their living labor energies, capitalism cannot exist. No new wealth would be created, and accumulation would stop. "Every child knows a nation which ceases to work ... even for a few weeks, would perish," [Marx sardonically notes in response to the economist's claim that the capitalist is the creator of new wealth](#). Labor is the "living, form-giving fire"; it "raises the means of production from the dead merely by entering into contact with them, infuses them with life so that they become factors of the labor process, and combines with them to form new products." [7]

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What our rulers *are* concerned about is the existence, in sufficient quantity, of the commodity labor

power and, in turn, of the unpaid domestic labor performed primarily by women that is central to the reproduction of future labor capacity. [8]] Of course, labor power is a property of living human beings who are more than mere labor capacity. But to say that what capital needs reproduced is not life *per se* but labor power is to insist that, from the viewpoint of capital, the concrete needs, desires and wellbeing of human beings must be subordinated to that one commodity they have to sell or to their role in reproducing it, and thus to market imperatives. The worth of one's life is inseparable, in other words, from their usefulness to capital and its unyielding pursuit of new value. If the capitalist is "capital personified," in the eyes of the capitalist "the worker is nothing more than personified labor-time," [9] a quantum of physical and mental energy to bring machinery, technology, raw materials, etc. to life for capital in its pursuit of profit. And thus, as Cleaver observes, "[a]ny time spent by the working class that is not work — exactly the time workers fight to increase — is dead time for capital." [10]

Striking at the heart of the capital-labor relation upon which capitalist society is based, and claims to the freedom supposedly contained in it, Marx averred that "the concept of the free laborer contains the pauper." [11] Precarity, poverty, and physical and intellectual deprivation are imminent to the experience of the worker under capitalism; if not immediately present for some, they are nevertheless always lurking in the background. Formally we have the freedom to quit our job if we do not like it or demand better wages and working conditions, for instance, but that may mean the freedom of unemployment and hunger. We are thus forced to endure conditions we would never voluntarily choose. If we cannot find a buyer for our labor power (such as the unemployed) or are incapable of working (such as the elderly or sick), our worth to capital disappears and our disposability increases.

Indeed, capitalist accumulation depends on the constant reproduction of the able-bodied unemployed, what the dismal scientists sanguinely and fetishistically refer to as the "natural rate of unemployment." This is produced through capital's incessant revolutionizing of the means of production: living labor, which requires food and rest and can organize or talk back to the boss, is constantly replaced by machinery. And it faces constant competition from the "reserve army of labor" in the global South as multinational capital actively displaces land-based communities around the world, forcing them to search for buyers of their labor power. Their desperation serves as a check on the ability of workers in the North to demand better wages and working conditions. The devaluation of the unemployed is a means to reassert the class domination of the employed.

We can also see this perverted logic as it pertains to the elderly and sick at work in a recent *Atlantic* article by Ezekiel Emanuel, a bioethicist named as one of the members of Joe Biden's incoming Covid-19 Advisory Board. With "the constricting of our ambitions and expectations" that come with aging, Emanuel asks whether life after 75 is really worth living. He thinks not. "The American immortal," Ezekiel writes, "once a vital figure in his or her profession and community, is happy to cultivate vocational interests, to take up bird watching, bicycle riding, pottery, and the like. And then, as walking becomes harder and the pain of arthritis limits the fingers' mobility, life comes to center around sitting in the den reading or listening to books on tape and doing crossword puzzles." It is easy to see how this aligns with capitalist ideology. What good are people who no longer work for a wage? Insofar as their continued existence does not contribute to accumulation, keeping the elderly alive becomes a burden. "The deadline" of 75, [Ezekiel notes in one of his most revealing passages](#), "also forces each of us to ask whether our consumption is worth our contribution."

A special animus is reserved by the state and capital for those who actively resist the imposition of market relations on their lives and ecologies, such as indigenous peoples. Classical liberal theorists, from John Locke to John Stuart Mill, integrated into their defense of political and legal rights theoretical justifications for violent colonial dispossession based on the supposedly uncivilized character of any nation that foregoes the "improvement" afforded by the adoption of private

property, the exploitation of nature, and unrelenting accumulation of capital. Liberalism and colonialism were seen as perfectly compatible.

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The unremitting commitment to capitalist development in general, and resource extraction in particular, is the default position from which the Canadian state engages indigenous nations. Those nations with the misfortune of living in the way of a development project (such as a pipeline, a mine, an urban expansion) and with the gall to resist it are met with the police, paramilitary, and (in the case of the 1991 Oka “crisis”) military power of the state. Still other nations that have withstood full absorption into market relations are intentionally left to survive in permanent crisis, in which police violence, poverty, the lack of clean water, and relatively high infectious disease rates are common, as is the case in Canada.

If capitalism has a wider logic that engenders the devaluation of peoples’ lives, it nevertheless cannot be abstracted from one’s race, gender, age, citizenship and geographic location. The bodies that are exploited or made disposable are always marked by these things, which has been made brutally clear in the coronavirus crisis. The death rate in Canada in the first wave, for instance, was driven by widespread outbreaks in nursing and retirement homes, most of which were privately run for profit. Residents were subjected to fetid conditions as the poorly paid, precarious and largely racialized staff lacked proper protective equipment, and were quickly overwhelmed. Often working in more than one home in order to make ends meet, they potentially exposed a wider network of residents. [12]

In Canada, workers of color and women have been more likely to face unemployment or, if still working, exposure to Covid. In the first wave, after the aforementioned long-term care homes it was farms and meatpacking plants, with their largely migrant workforce. By design, the status of these workers in Canada leaves them with limited access to basic legal rights. In the second wave, the northwestern part of the Greater Toronto Area, with its large racialized population, many of whose residents sweat in the non-unionized factories and warehouses found throughout the region, has been pivotal in driving the massive spike in cases in Ontario. Workplaces more generally have [accounted for thirty percent of outbreaks in Ontario and forty percent in Quebec in the second wave.](#)

Workers in the global South, meanwhile, already facing greater unemployment and worse working conditions than their counterparts in the North, have suffered much higher Covid case and death rates, and with meager access to health and social supports.

Life or capital?

So many lives that do not count, or count very little, in the actuarial tables of capital. Whenever they have been able to capital and the state have treated people as disposable, content to let them suffer or die from overwork, disease, and hunger.

In those moments when the ruling class appears to recognize the sacredness of the lives of others, it is not because of a fundamental change in its values, but because of struggles from below against dispossession and for better working conditions, a *living wage*, greater respect for peoples’ lives – because these struggles were able to successfully impose limits on the power of capital and the state. There are also moments when capital’s wanton disregard for life may threaten its own

interest, as Marx discusses in his analysis of the working day in *Capital*, but even there it still took mass struggle to push the state to impose a shorter workday on British capital, and the latter still violated the law when it was able as Marx details. Thus what changes in our rulers in these moments is not a commitment to life per se, but their strategy of rule, driven by the need to compromise.

Consider, for example, the post-Second World War conjuncture in the global North, with the development of broad welfare states in most countries and a regime of stronger labor rights. This was a period more than any other in capitalist history in which the working class in these countries was able to significantly improve its living standards. Workers were able to lessen their dependence on market imperatives, and become more than mere labor power. Within limits, they were able to pursue what capitalism normally negates more thoroughly: “time for education, for intellectual development ... for the free play of the vital forces of ... body and ... mind.” [13] But this period was framed by a historically unique pattern of capitalist growth unlikely to be repeated again in which high levels of corporate profitability and thus capital accumulation endured for over two decades.

Despite the relative ease with which demands for social reform could be accommodated given the exceptionally high rates of profitability and accumulation for capital, every gain for workers was a product of struggle. The reforms of the postwar era came about through a militant and mass strike wave across North America and Europe following the end of hostilities, alongside the threat posed to capital by “communism” in the context of the Cold War. Those social gains were, however, experienced very unevenly, with women and people of color far less likely to benefit from the development of welfare states and improvements in working-class living standards. They were driven to organize their own specific struggles against oppression to gain greater access to capitalism’s so-called “golden age”. The welfare regimes of the global South, meanwhile, were only very partially developed and patchily implemented across the same era.

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Emerging in the late 1960s and the decade of capitalist crisis that followed, the last four decades of neoliberalism in Canada have been precisely about rolling back the social gains of the postwar period: imposing market relations deeper into our lives by cutting the welfare state, driving down working conditions for workers born in Canada while increasing access to the even more precarious labor power of the global South (both through Canadian foreign direct investment in the South itself and domestically through the use of migrant labor). The coercive character of the state was enhanced over this period, just as expectations of the working class were lowered. It did not happen overnight, however; neoliberal restructuring was met by fierce resistance, and required a protracted effort by the state and capital, and a not insignificant dose of repressive power against union militants and social movements.

Nevertheless, the ruling class has been successful at intensifying precarity and devaluing peoples’ lives over the neoliberal period. From the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh to Fiera Foods in Toronto, from the extractive zones of Latin America to Canada’s agro-industry, the actions of Canadian capital have led directly to the death of thousands of workers, peasants and indigenous people over the last couple decades, along with the wider systematic violation of labor rights and

dispossession of land-based communities. While obviously brutal in its devastating impact over a relatively short period of time, the coronavirus experience has been less a departure from, than a part of the resurgence of capitalism's aggressive disregard for human health and wellbeing.

Factory collapses or mass Covid outbreaks: in the absence of resistance from below, neither chastens the ruling class. The opposite, in fact: each episode of violence enacted upon workers or the oppressed is taken as a learning experience. As Frederick Douglass warned, the powerful discern from these moments, "the exact measure of the injustice and wrong which" they can impose on others. If they think they can get away with more, they will most certainly attempt to do so; the gravitational pull of capital is always downwards. Working conditions and the health and wellbeing of communities, not to mention ecological sustainability, will be readily sacrificed by the ruling class on the altar of profit, perhaps even, as the nineteenth-century history of the battle over the working day or the current dystopic prognosis for our climate reminds us, to the point of potentially threatening the very conditions of its own existence.

What has guided the Canadian ruling class in response to Covid is the attempt to find that balance between doing as little as possible to protect the health of workers, migrants, and indigenous people, while keeping the virus from completely overwhelming the economy and thus accumulation. Hence the oscillation in many jurisdictions between letting the cases rapidly escalate and temporary lockdowns, without any serious investment in measures that could significantly reduce the virus's spread (such as rapid testing and backward contact tracing). Even the benefits programs introduced by the Canadian government have come with expiration dates that will most certainly precede an end to the economic part of the crisis, politicians making clear they are temporary and not a replacement for the badly broken pre-existing support programs for the poor and unemployed, like Employment Insurance or provincial welfare schemes. Such assurances from politicians, however, have still not assuaged fears from the business community and mainstream media that Covid-benefits are a disincentive to work - that is, a threat to market dependence and the availability of labor power. At the same time, the deterioration of workers' health and safety, has been encouraged by a vicious combination of porous labor law (itself a product of decades of neoliberal anti-worker revanchism) and [conscious decisions by ministries of labor not to enforce basic legal standards](#). Facing the worst conditions have been the racialized workforces of the warehouse, factory, agricultural, education, and frontline caregiving sectors. These sections of the working class are also unable to access Covid benefits. The granting of some temporary relief for a section of workers on one end is accompanied by the enforcement of market discipline and ruling class power on the other.

Beyond the pandemic

The inescapable contradiction between the needs of capital and the needs of people, between capitalism and life, has been vividly illustrated by the coronavirus crisis. The urgency of our situation will continue to grow as the pandemic extends deep into 2021 and maybe 2022, while future pandemics, possibly even more devastating than this one, lie in wait on the distant (or not so distant?) horizon. Moreover, the end of the coronavirus pandemic does not mean the end of the wider global capitalist crisis it detonated, as global capitalism never fully recovered from the 2008 Great Recession. The global economy was staggering towards another major downturn well before the pandemic started.

The devastation wrought by the pandemic demands an immediate and urgent response, which we have begun to see from organizations like the Decent Work and Health Network, Migrant Rights Network, education-sector unions, and tenants' unions. There is still a risk, however, that the ruling

class will seek to normalize the present level of cavalier indifference to peoples' health and well-being beyond the pandemic. Entreaties to the good graces of our rulers cannot substitute for the building of movements that fight for a reinvigorated social safety net, much stronger protections for workers, migrant justice, and indigenous sovereignty. At their core, such movements insist that peoples' lives cannot be reduced to market transactions and the profit forecasts of business. In doing so, they help us in building a more powerful and much-needed response, in theory and practice, to the question that has been so plainly posed in this crisis: capitalism or life?

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P.S.

Spectre

<https://spectrejournal.com/why-the-boss-is-happy-to-let-you-die/>

Footnotes

[1] Thank you very much to Sue Ferguson and Jeff Webber for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

[2] The US summer decline was far more modest than Canada's or the EU's and it had a brief bump in August before picking up sharply in September.

[3] On the healthcare crisis, see the work of Pat and Hugh Armstrong:
<https://fernwoodpublishing.ca/book/about-canada-health-care-2nd-edition>,
<https://fernwoodpublishing.ca/book/a-place-to-call-home>

[4] Marx, *Capital* vol. 3: 182

[5] Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History* offers extensive discussion of this. Working conditions in the first century of industrial capitalism are discussed in many places, but one powerful indictment can be found in Marx, *Capital* v. 1, chapter 10 especially. For quotes on arguments that poverty is a necessary condition to enforce labor market discipline, see M. Neocleous, *The Fabrication of Social Order*.

[6] The price of labor power, that is workers' wages, is shaped by the costs of reproducing workers and their families (including food, shelter, education, etc.), which itself is framed by the struggle over living standards between capital and labor: what, for instance, is considered an adequate diet or shelter or form of recreation and cultural or intellectual pursuits? One way capital has historically kept the cost of labor power down, social reproduction theorists remind

us, is by imposing a significant share of the burden of its reproduction on the unpaid labor of the family, and in particular of women.

[7] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 361; *Capital* vol. 1: 308.

[8] The state in some capitalist societies does play a role, usually limited, in social reproduction. Public education, healthcare and childcare supports, are examples of this. But in most capitalist societies social reproduction remains the product of domestic labor performed in the household, the burden of which is still disproportionately shouldered by women. On social reproduction theory, see, for, example, Tithi Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory*[<https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745399881/social-reproduction-theory/>], Sue Ferguson, *Women and Work*[<https://btlbooks.com/book/women-and-work>], Aaron Jaffe, *Social Reproduction Theory and the Socialist Horizon*[<https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745340548/social-reproduction-theory-and-the-socialist-horizon/>]

[9] *Capital* vol. 1: 352.

[10] Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, Loc 2690.

[11] Marx, *Grundrisse*: 604

[12] In response to growing public outrage, the government eventually called in the military. A subsequent military report on the situation described the use of unsanitary medical instruments, “cockroaches, rotten food, patients with ulcers left bed-bound, staff moving unit to unit wearing contaminated gear.” For the capitalist owners of these facilities, which still remain largely unregulated by government, neither the lives of the racialized workers or elderly residents mattered so long as profits were there to be made.
<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/Covid-19-coronavirus-ontario-update-may-26-1.5584665>

[13] Marx, *Capital* vol. 1: 375.