

United States: Why Has the Left Deprioritized COVID?

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The COVID-19 pandemic is the most globally disruptive health crisis in at least 100 years. It's likely that more than 100 million people have acquired long COVID - illness, sometimes serious, persisting for more than 12 weeks after an acute COVID infection. Length of life and quality of life have taken a sharp downturn in the United States, with Black and Latinx populations losing an average of four and three years in life expectancy respectively, and average life expectancy across all demographics declining 1.5 years. Older people and disabled people continue to make up the majority of COVID deaths, and the government-supported narrative that these people were "unwell anyway" belies the fact that the vast majority of them would have lived years or decades longer had they not contracted the virus. In the context of this social murder, the organized left has failed to show that another pandemic response is possible, and that our lives depend on fighting for it.

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The COVID-19 pandemic is the most globally disruptive health crisis in at least 100 years. The official death toll is 6.5 million people worldwide; the World Health Organization estimates the actual death toll to be [at least 15 million](#). It's likely that [more than 100 million people](#) have acquired long COVID - illness, sometimes serious, persisting for more than 12 weeks after an acute COVID infection - and we still don't know the effects of a COVID infection 5, 10, or 20 years later. Length of life and quality of life have taken a sharp downturn in the United States, where I live, with Black and Latinx populations losing an average of four and three years in life expectancy respectively, and average life expectancy across all demographics declining 1.5 years, [the sharpest decline since World War II](#). Deaths have been concentrated in already oppressed populations, notably among Black, Latinx, and Indigenous people and the poor. Agricultural workers died [at 2.6 times the rate](#) of "non-essential" workers; food service workers' death rates were similarly elevated. Older people and disabled people continue to make up the majority of COVID deaths, and the government-supported narrative that these people were "unwell anyway" belies the fact that the vast majority of them would have lived years or decades longer had they not contracted the virus.

In the context of this [social murder](#) - a form of heightened class war waged by the rich, who are increasing their profits by forcing poor people to continue working, with inadequate protection, through waves of infection - the organized left has failed to show that another pandemic response is possible, and that our lives depend on fighting for it.

Fragmentation and capitalist entanglement

The pandemic is touching every aspect of our lives as working-class people: workplace safety, access to healthcare, school safety, our ability to care for elders or enjoy our elderhood, or just the possibility of participating in social life without risking death or debility. For people at high risk of severe outcomes from COVID - which includes not only immunocompromised people but also anyone over 50, and anyone who has hypertension or diabetes, or is higher weight, or has asthma or depression - participating in social and economic relations has become a daily experiment in chancing death or hospitalization. Meanwhile, the political left in the United States and Canada has been curiously restrained in confronting the government's pandemic failures. Ad hoc mutual aid groups sprang up in 2020 and provided essential relief, but very few unions, nonprofits, or socialist organizations have responded to the pandemic in a way that reflects the crisis's severity and breadth. Leftist groups in the US have continued to organize mostly through the campaign frameworks of 2019, foregrounding Medicare for All, student loan forgiveness, climate change, and housing. These issues remain important, but the left's frequent failure to organize against or even name what's distinct about social murder during the pandemic has given cover to capitalists and their political parties. It has allowed the debate over pandemic policy to occur between the far-right and center-right, and in 2022, the unity between those forces has been realized in the removal of mask mandates, the end of free testing, [and the subordination of public health to corporate profit](#).

Although US President Joe Biden campaigned on a promise to contain the pandemic through increased federal safety measures like mask and vaccine mandates, and to continue the distribution of stimulus cheques and aid, he changed course shortly after the vaccines rolled out. By announcing, on July 4, 2021, that we'd nearly achieved "[independence](#)" from the virus, Biden declared that COVID had become a "[pandemic of the unvaccinated](#)." In doing so, he shifted the blame for COVID deaths away from his administration and onto the dying people themselves. Vaccinated people were dying as well, but that data was [downplayed](#) by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) [and the US federal government](#). This inaugurated the "individual responsibility" phase of the pandemic: up until summer 2021, states had been widely blamed for the COVID-19 deaths they allowed. Now COVID-19 deaths came to be seen as a personal failure of individuals to properly protect themselves. Blaming the unvaccinated for the ongoing pandemic works rhetorically much like blaming immigrants for declining wages: it shifts rightful anger at a miserable state of affairs onto a powerless target - and away from government.

If the vaccine was a carrot, the stick, in the US, was the end of federal unemployment benefits. Conservative governors and business owners had spent months [lobbying against those benefits](#), government programs that had [brought millions of people out of poverty](#), allowed many essential workers to avoid getting sick, and prevented countless deaths. Yet, on the whole, major unions didn't see unemployment as their issue. Faced with bad options, most people went back to work quietly, even though nothing had been done in the preceding year and a half to make their workplaces safer (provision of free N95 masks and upgrades to air filtration would have been easy, obvious measures). The capitalist government offered US workers not genuine safety but participation in a national myth of invulnerability. And in so doing - in pushing to reopen, to declare the end of a harrowing year and return to some form of "normal" - they encountered little opposition from any part of the political spectrum.

One reason [the left has struggled to respond adequately to the pandemic](#) on a national or international scale is left entanglement with capitalist political parties. While Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau eventually moved to shut down [the right-wing trucker convoy that occupied Ottawa](#) in winter 2022 to demand an end to vaccine mandates and other COVID protections, within a few months all provinces' governing parties had ended or dramatically scaled back their COVID

safety measures, more or less capitulating to the convoy's demands. In Canada and the US, major labour unions have been reluctant to criticize the NDP or the Democratic Party despite these parties' abandonment of workers to COVID. In the US, Democrats who are critical of the party's centrist mainstream, such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, have been nearly silent on COVID-19 since Biden took office, allowing the administration and Congress to oversee mass death without serious pressure from the party's left flank. During [a recent public conversation](#) with Ashish Jha, the White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator, Senator Sanders began by saying, "We're dealing with COVID fatigue - people are sick and tired of wearing their masks, sick and tired of not being able to go to a restaurant, go to a movie theater. What do you say to those people?" Instead of raising the atrocity of over a million deaths, many millions of newly acquired disabilities, the failure to waive vaccine patents, or the lack of social supports in the form of unemployment benefits, universal healthcare, or free testing and vaccines, Sanders invoked the Biden Administration's desired American voter: white, middle-class, not disabled by COVID or any other high-risk condition, not concerned about their unsafe workplace or the crumbling US health infrastructure, but tired of wearing a mask and still resentful about their consumerism being stymied in the interest of public health [for a couple of months in 2020](#).

Faced with the crises of the pandemic, perhaps the most common intervention by leftist groups across North America has been to start grassroots mutual aid projects, providing food, money, and other essentials to people in need. Kristen Smith, Vice-Chair for Programs of the Democratic Socialists of America Disability Working Group (DWG), has observed this phenomenon proliferating in the DSA. "Groups organizing in and of their own communities to support each other...what that's yielding is very decentralized," she tells me, "and it's difficult to share, network, and support between groups." Such localized responses have done impressive work in redistributing resources to people in need and building new political formations in the process. The downside of this emphasis on mutual aid has been a lack of cohesion and shared struggle at a national or international level. Smith also emphasizes that mutual aid groups' "acute care" responses have often been very stressful for participants, and a deeper reckoning with activist sustainability and collective care will be necessary if they're to continue.

Comrades today often fall into the trap of seeing disability and aging as personal problems outside of politics or, worse, as personal failures. As Brynne Olsen, Communications Secretary of DSA's DWG, puts it, "Many comrades see disability issues as identity politics, as opposed to issues of liberation." In May, the DSA's National Political Committee (NPC) announced that the 2023 convention - a biannual event where chapters send elected delegates to make policy decisions - would be held in person, with no virtual option for participation. In response, DSA's DWG is organizing for a hybrid convention, with both in-person and virtual options. DWG Recording Secretary Brandon Hull told me that a hybrid convention "not only supports accessibility for disabled people, but allows working-class people, the base the DSA is supposed to represent and be comprised of, to meaningfully engage in the convention. Many workers do not have time off from work, or cannot travel for financial, family, or other reasons. Choosing an in-person-only convention would exclude many disabled people and our perspective, and would reflect a classist decision that does not take into account how difficult and time-consuming travelling can be for working-class people."

It's troubling that the national body of the Democratic Socialists of America, the largest socialist organization in the United States, doesn't consider participation by their disabled members to be critical to building a socialist movement in the country. But that stance isn't out of step with the practices of leftist groups more generally. As Wendi Muse, a history PhD candidate and host of the LeftPOC podcast, tells me, "It's hard for people to acknowledge that they're at risk because of ableism. If they go into COVID healthy and come out damaged, they have trouble acknowledging it. That motivates this reluctance to talk about it on the left. If we frame our politics around the

solidarity of workers, what do we do about people who can't work? How do we frame that? Textbook leftism is about labour. If we have people who can no longer be labourers... how do we address that?" The fetishization of the abled worker renders invisible other members of the working class: sick and disabled people, and people who've aged out of the workforce. It even renders invisible the white, male industrial worker as soon as an accident or illness - anything from a job injury to depression to COVID-19 - takes him out of the factory and into the hospital, the rehab facility, the private home, or the shelter system.

Ableism is counterrevolutionary

Left failures to incorporate an analysis of disability and ableism are detrimental to our vision and organizing capacity. Capitalism itself is fundamentally ableist, awarding the food and shelter necessary for survival on the basis of an individual's ability to work for pay. Capitalism ensures its own survival by turning disabled people unable to work, along with other unemployed people, into a surplus population whose existence disciplines employed workers into accepting poor working conditions and little pay, lest they fall into the abject poverty and exclusion experienced by many disabled and unemployed people. Work under capitalism is a disabling process, as workers become debilitated through unsafe jobsites, injuries from accidents or repetitive stress, and the mental and psychological tolls of a work culture that is almost universally unsustainable. In her book *Border and Rule*, activist and writer Harsha Walia argues, "In contrast to neoliberal framings of disability as exceptional or symptomatic, debility is the quotidian, racialized biopolitics of 'working and warring.'" Walia shows work and war to be twin methods of disabling a racialized working class, where people without property are deemed "available for injury" either as targets of war and incarceration or as low-wage workers (or both). When we and our organizations fail to make these connections, understanding disability instead as exceptional and apolitical, we limit the horizons of what we can demand, during a pandemic where disabled people are rendered acceptable casualties so capitalism can continue undisturbed.

Beatrice Adler-Bolton, a disabled artist, scholar, and host of the left public health podcast [Death Panel](#), points to elite capture within the disability rights movement as one reason why today's left struggles to embrace an adequate disability politic. "There was a brand of disability activism in the US for a long time that was oriented around neoliberal libertarianism. Disabled people need to get a seat at the table, become employed. It was...[about] seeking representation and inclusion as a way out of institutionalization." Adler-Bolton cites the whiteness and middle-class character of the disability rights movement, which has emphasized access to employment and education instead of an overhaul of the racist capitalist system, as a key piece of history that informs current left failures to integrate disability and health justice into anti-capitalist organizing. "These movements [leftism and disability activism] have been siloed," she says. "If you care about disability, maybe you're involved in disability organizing and you're also involved in [separate] left organizing. Just in the same way that it's taken the rest of society a really long time to understand that disabled people are all around you, the left in the US is playing particular catch up compared to other countries as a specific result of the particular brand of activism that helped win some of the major victories here and those strategies."

In contrast with many unions today, the early trade-union movement prioritized disability as a condition of work. Adler-Bolton tells me about [an early railroad union](#) that started its own long-term care facility to support members who were disabled by losing hands or fingers on the job. "The union took [workers] and their families into this facility they built when the railroad companies abandoned them. The brotherhood formed not just to protect [workers from suffering] further injuries, but more to protect their brothers who were being kicked out of their jobs, and were destitute and had no

recourse.” For Adler-Bolton, this history illustrates why the distinction between “workers” and “unemployed, disabled surplus populations” is false: how work and disability are intertwined. “We are all sick under capitalism, and we’re all made sick by work – especially under COVID.”

Outside of the formal labour movement, too, a left approach that recognizes the centrality of disability to the workings of capitalism isn’t unprecedented. In 1970, the Young Lords, an organization that fought for self-determination for Puerto Ricans and all colonized people, [occupied Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx to demand better healthcare](#). In 1977, disability rights activists [occupied a federal building in San Francisco for 26 days](#), demanding the right to access any service that receives federal funding: hospitals, universities, schools, public transportation, government buildings, libraries, and more. That sit-in wouldn’t have succeeded without the support of the Black Panther Party, Gay Men’s Butterfly Brigade, and United Farm Workers, who provided the occupation with food, security, and personal attendant care. These groups understood that their members had a stake in disability rights, whether or not they were disabled themselves.

The left needs to unite against pandemic ableism, not out of goodwill or charity towards disabled leftists, but for our movement’s survival. Organizations limit their potential membership when they romanticize pre-pandemic organizing practices, where everything happened in person and those who couldn’t attend due to disability or illness, lack of transportation, a work conflict, or family caregiving duties simply couldn’t participate. When unions fail to understand – or act on the understanding – that scarce, poverty-level disability benefits and the end of pandemic unemployment supports are political attacks on all workers, whose exploitation happens in relation to the parallel misery of unemployment, they miss an important opportunity to help build power for the working class as a whole. The last two years have been a high point for union organizing: from Amazon warehouses to Starbucks and Trader Joe’s stores, we’ve seen an upswell of new worker organizing in the logistics, retail, and service sectors. Some of that activity has foregrounded COVID safety, as when, in January 2022, [the Chicago Teachers Union refused in-person work without adequate protections](#) as the winter Omicron surge erupted. Those workers organized with an understanding that while they might be well at the moment, the conditions of their work could disable or kill them, and like the government as a whole, their bosses would not prioritize preventing those outcomes.

Despite such powerful labour actions, workplace COVID health and safety measures have been rolled back in classrooms, hospitals, warehouses, restaurants, grocery stores, and transit agencies across North America. We’ve seen the triumph of a capitalist ideology that tells us that if we get sick, we should continue to work, and if we die or become disabled, it’s our own fault. To challenge the ruling class who have made record profits over the last two years and the political parties who manage affairs for them, we need to organize collective action that builds bridges between our individual workplaces, issues, or identities. We need to work together as teachers, nurses, school staff, retail workers, seniors, and disabled people whose lives are increasingly dangerous and isolated, to shut down production and consumption to demand a public health response that puts life over profit. To get there, we need to call the pandemic what it is: an exercise in eugenics, a mass disabling event, and an escalation of racialized class warfare. The left’s job is not to accept the narrative of events that corporate media and government officials give us – “the pandemic’s over” – but to craft our own, showing each other how many more people could be kept alive with policies such as universal free healthcare and housing; abolition of prisons, borders, and nursing homes; and broad mask requirements, ventilation upgrades, and widespread, accessible testing. We don’t need to accept mass infection. To survive this pandemic and the next one, we need to recognize that we all have a stake in transforming this extractive system, and together we have the power to shut it down.

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P.S.

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