

Covid-19 (USA): A Crisis of Vast Unknowns

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Two realities confront the United States — now the world leader in confirmed Covid-19 cases, even while emerging conditions are incomparably more horrific in much of the Global South — during the coronavirus pandemic and associated economic meltdown. First, this is a crisis that would seriously challenge the most competent, clear-sighted, effective and well-prepared national political leadership. Second, that’s not the political leadership we’ve got, by a long shot.

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We are acutely aware that the situation prevailing as these lines are written, in early April, will look enormously different in days. Our society and the world have entered a crisis of vast unknowns. Most important to state at the outset, the class struggle isn’t “self-isolated” or quarantined.

Taking the form of protests, wildcat strikes or stay-at-homes, resistance has begun at this writing among the front-line fighters for our lives and their own — medical workers, grocery store workers and deliverers, Amazon warehouse workers without basic safety protection, bus drivers and more. We have little doubt that the examples will significantly multiply over the coming weeks.

These workplace and community actions signal the start of the fight that will be needed if working people and communities of color aren’t ultimately to be burdened with the full cost of a looming and unfolding disaster.

Suddenly Bernie’s slogan of “Medicare for All” seems the most obvious answer to the medical emergency we are facing. As other extraordinary measures are rolled out — expanded unemployment benefits, paid sick leave and moratoriums on utility shutoffs and evictions — working people see how political will made the impossible a reality. Why not demand they be made permanent?

It’s critical to understand that the reality of race in America isn’t on lockdown either. Statistics are inadequately compiled, but every reporting city and state shows death rates among African Americans at nearly three times their proportion of the population. People of color are working disproportionately in the health care and service sectors. These are vital jobs especially in this moment of the pandemic, yet these workers are doubly exposed. First, at work, and then in communities with higher rates of air pollution and less access to clean water.

National and Global Emergency

The mess that Donald Trump and his army of sycophants made has brought irreparable harm,

including potentially hundreds of thousands of lives. The spectacle of the government's own medical experts — and the embattled state and local authorities — scrambling to compensate for federal indolence is simultaneously comical and terrifying. But here we won't dwell on the precious weeks lost and the public disorientation caused by the big twit's assurances that "the Chinese virus" wouldn't hit the United States, that it would magically disappear, and then that he had known from the beginning that it was "a very serious problem."

All that has been well-covered in major media. The damage is done, and Trump's daily rambling, shambling, dissembling pronouncements make matters worse. But there are deep systemic issues to be explored in what's still the early phase of a global emergency, with good reasons to fear that it might be apocalyptic.

The ultimate human cost of the pandemic can't be known at this time — whether only severe, or extreme, or possibly apocalyptic. Will tens of millions die globally, and millions in the USA — or luckily only some hundreds of thousands around the world and tens of thousands here, or somewhere in between?

The extent and duration of the economic collapse is a grim prospect, but another unknown. Trump's promise of a short recession followed by a "fantastic reopening" is less likely than a more protracted downturn, or the onset of a global Depression. Upbeat pronouncements coming from the White House team of kleptocrats don't deserve to be taken seriously, but underlying weaknesses of the economy pose a more fundamental problem.

Financial markets fell, over just a few weeks, by the 30% or so that would have been expected over the course of a recession that was looming already before the coronavirus outbreak. Their continuing wild gyrations tell us only that "the market" doesn't know what to expect.

The stability of political institutions is a big question mark. Will they emerge largely intact, or sharply altered in some ways? Globally, authoritarian regimes (India and Hungary in the lead) are trampling basic human and democratic rights. Here in the USA, what would the November look like if the virus infection rate curve hasn't "flattened" well before then? What new dirty tricks or voter-suppression schemes might emerge in states controlled by the right wing? Clearly the insistence of the Wisconsin legislature to hold the primary at the height of the pandemic — forcing voters to choose between staying at home and forego their right to vote or waiting in line and risk exposure to the virus — illustrates how far Trump's acolytes are prepared to go.

The potential for violent social panic can't be totally discounted if the public health crisis is protracted. The episodic, ugly violent harassment of Asian Americans walking the streets could become more systematic attacks on targeted (Chinese, Asian, or immigrant) communities if ignorance and desperation turn toward finding scapegoats. Trump's "Chinese virus" ravings are calculated to buttress his pseudo-populist nationalist appeal, not to provoke mob action, but racist demagoguery is a notorious enabler of nativist and white-supremacist violence.

We don't have to imagine full societal breakdown to envision the potential bankruptcy and disappearance of millions of neighborhood businesses, restaurants, non-chain grocery stores and the like. That's an acute issue, for example, in Detroit — where in early April the confirmed infection rate has doubled every three days.

Will food deserts in our cities become even more severe? One commentator on CNBC suggested that at the end of the pandemic, the only retailers left might be Amazon, Walmart and Costco. That might be the logic of capital concentration in an extreme crisis, but is it a place where we'd enjoy living?

A Diseased System

Conventional coverage treats the coronavirus pandemic as an external shock to the system — something like an asteroid striking the earth. Quite the contrary, it's very much embedded in the functioning of the system itself.

What's technically called the "SARS -Covid 2" pathogen, like the avian and swine flu, HIV, SARS, MERS, Zika and Ebola viruses of recent years, as well as the 1918 flu virus (which may well have originated in southwest Kansas) and probably the more familiar viruses of distant origin, are the result of animal-to-human transmission. That the current one began in a Wuhan live market is a happenstance that tells us nothing about where the next one comes from.

These outbreaks are a product of both the way present-day industrial agriculture is organized with mass concentrations of animals in the most horrific conditions, and increasing human encroachment into the natural habitats of nonhuman animals with which we share the planet. Already in the 19th century, many thinkers including Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were concerned with the consequences of the capitalist transformation of agriculture and destruction of nature, so it's not as if the problem just suddenly jumped up.

Meanwhile, the escalating crisis of the medical system is the inevitable product of applying the "lean production" and "just-in-time" regimens of today's production system, together with the stripping of social budgets under the prevailing global regime of neoliberal capitalism.

That's why, for example, the backup supply of N95 masks in the United States depleted in a previous epidemic wasn't restored. It's why it wasn't only Donald Trump's stupidity (although that didn't help) dictating that we don't want "extra doctors and nurses" around when they aren't immediately needed, as if trained medical personnel could be conjured up like auto parts on demand.

We are left with doctors and nurses reusing personal protective equipment in ways what were never intended, with retired health care workers returning to the front lines. Thousands of DACA recipients work as health care workers, risking their lives but still in the danger of deportation! Ordinary people, many perpetually demonized by the right wing, are performing miracles of community mutual aid and solidarity.

The system's bankruptcy, not only Trump's arrogant ignorance, lay behind the cynical dismantling of the cross-agency pandemic response unit the Obama administration had constructed. And the neoliberal neglect of elementary public health practices is not only in America: The British National Health Service was resource-starved under successive Conservative party governments. Italy's medical service was cut for years, just in time for the coronavirus disaster.

Focusing on the U.S. situation, the urgent necessity of universal health coverage and Medicare for All has never been so obvious — except of course to the insurance industry, the political establishment, and in particular Joe Biden, who scolded Bernie Sanders that "they have that in Italy, and it didn't help."

Some 35% of all Americans remain uninsured or underinsured — with millions more losing their coverage as they become unemployed. This patchwork coverage has a lot to do with why hospital emergency rooms were stressed before the coronavirus emergency, and why so many people in this country have inadequately managed conditions like diabetes, asthma and coronary disease that contribute to making Covid-19 disease all the more deadly.

The lack of adequate medical care for tens of millions interacts of course with the prevalence of

poverty, pollution, shortages of rural medical resources, and other consequences of inequality that aggravate the crisis. In Detroit, thousands of people had their water turned off. Although the Michigan governor has ordered an emergency restoration of service, the Water Department lacks the capacity to quickly implement the order.

There are even worse impacts on the most vulnerable populations — those in the overcrowded prisons and immigrant detention centers, the 1.5 million who live in nursing homes that are frequently understaffed. Then there are 11 million undocumented immigrants who get nothing from the multi-trillion-dollar relief bill and may be terrified of seeking medical care, survivors of domestic violence forced to “shelter in place” with their abusive, sometimes murderous partners.

Looking Ahead

We haven’t begun here to contemplate what will happen to nations in the Global South — countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America with wholly inadequate health infrastructure. In India, migrant workers are starving as they walk hundreds of miles home. In Brazil, the pandemic-denying lunacy of far-right president Jair Bolsonaro in defiance of his own government experts makes Donald Trump look like a sober statesman.

There are absolutely desperate circumstances facing refugee populations — in Syria, on the U.S.-Mexican border, in Bangladesh with the Rohingya flight from Myanmar — or the situation in Gaza, the world’s largest open-air prison where there isn’t even clean drinking water.

For imperialism, the coronavirus crisis is no occasion to “shelter in place” — exactly the opposite, it’s a moment to unleash greater class and race violence on the world’s poor. The U.S. government’s murder-by-sanctions policies haven’t abated. Washington’s squeeze has tightened on Iran, where the import of medical supplies is crippled by the twin scourge of sanctions and collapsed oil prices. The U.S. Justice Department’s indictment of Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro ramps up Washington’s attempt to foment a military coup and civil war in that shattered country.

On the other side of this immediate crisis, the class war at home will be hardly less brutal. Right now relief packages are desperately required, but afterward the public will be lectured that those trillions of dollars thrown at bailing out the Boeings and other distressed corporations must be “paid for” — by austerity for the working class and non-affluent population, of course. Look for big attacks on Social Security, on Medicare and Medicaid and food stamps and public education and every social program that actually benefits people.

The capitalist class, whose blind pursuit of profit and stock market gains did so much to create the present misery, will insist on society drawing all the wrong conclusions. Don’t even think about Medicare for All now, let alone nationalizing (horrors!) the pharmaceutical industry whose profit drive is essential to developing and marketing the critical vaccines and therapeutic drugs for this pandemic and the coming ones.

Don’t raise taxes on the corporations and the rich at the time when their “enterprise” is required for the economic recovery — or at any other time for that matter. And above all, this is no time for action on climate change and the environmental collapse. How can we even imagine indulging in a Green New Deal when our most precious airline and oil industries are going belly-up?

Any alternative course will have to come from an aroused working class public, not from corporate America and most certainly not from the entrenched establishment in the Democratic Party. And it will have to be global, an expression of outrage over a system and government policies that have

universally failed to meet basic human and ecological needs.

The resistance of those heroic frontline workers for their own sake and ours can be the start of mass, anti-austerity social solidarity. We don't want to predict here outcome of a long, bitter struggle. As a statement by the National Committee of Solidarity early in the crisis stated, the present pandemic and economic crash "is not (fortunately) the end of civilization, nor is it (unfortunately) the end of capitalism."

Having said that, the world that emerges afterward will look considerably different, in ways that partly depend on social movements and political intervention. Whether, when and how that response emerges is among the great unknowns.

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P.S.

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