

Covid-19 (United States): May Day Protests Call for Workers' and Immigrant Rights and Housing Protections Amid Pandemic

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May Day saw significant actions by workers in essential companies serving the general public during the shutdown, who held a mass strike to demand better health and safety conditions, and hazard pay.

These companies included Amazon, Instacart, Whole Foods, Walmart, Target and Fed Ex, who deliver food and other goods ordered online to people “staying home”. Workers called out sick or walked out during their lunch break (to avoid being fired). While these companies are making big bucks from the pandemic, they skimp on health protections and pay for dangerous work. In some, like Amazon, workers are in close quarters with each other.

Amazon owner Jeff Bezos has done very well for himself as a result of the virus, and is now the richest man in the world.

The May Day strike follows a walkout in March by Amazon workers in New York City and more than 10,000 Instacart workers nationwide. Whole Foods workers led a national sickout on March 31, and sanitation workers in Pittsburgh and bus drivers in Detroit staged wildcat strikes.

Around the country, nurses at well over 100 hospitals held “socially distanced” protests demanding personal protective equipment (still way not enough at this late date) and to draw attention to healthcare workers who have died while fighting the corona pandemic. These include not only doctors and nurses, but all of the people who clean and do other tasks to keep hospitals running.

There were other actions, including car caravans in major cities, addressing national as well as local concerns. One of these was immigrant rights.

While May Day originated in the U.S. in the mid 1880s over a struggle for the eight-hour day, it became the international workers holiday celebrated by socialists and communists.

The U.S. ruling class, with the connivance of conservative labor leaders, established Labor Day in September as an alternative. In recent decades, as the socialist movement has declined, May Day withered in the U.S.

Then in 2006 it was resurrected by hundreds of thousand of largely Latino immigrants, who knew about May Day from their countries of origin. This was part of a vast immigrant mobilization against a particularly harsh law being proposed against them in Congress (its was withdrawn as a result). But the tradition has continued, and was part of this year's May Day.

In New York City, a car caravan passed in front of NY governor Cuomo's office and Jeff Bezos'

penthouse apartment, calling for worker and economic protections. In Times Square demonstrators laid out body bags to represent victims of the virus. NYC is the U.S. epicenter of the virus.

Pablo Liberato, an activist with Make the Road New York was quoted on Democracy Now:

"A lot of people are struggling with rent right now. People are not able to pay rent. A lot of people are not working. Especially undocumented folks are not receiving any kind of money to be able to survive in this pandemic. So we want to make sure rent is cancelled, until we know what's going to happen next."

Meat Packing Plants Hard Hit

In Fredericksburg, Pennsylvania, on May Day over 30 cars circled the Bell & Evans poultry processing plant to demand it be shut down until worker protections can be guaranteed. Dozens of COVID-19 infections and two deaths have been linked to the plant.

Nationally, at least 20 meatpacking workers processing pork, beef and poultry have died from the virus; more than 5,000 have fallen ill. The real numbers are far higher due to lack of testing.

These workers stand close together, passing meat being processed down the line. The plants are breeding grounds for the virus. Most plants are in rural areas, close to the farms that raise the animals. In many largely rural states, these plants have become the epicenter of cases and deaths, and will be a source of contagion spreading in those states.

The workers in most of these plants are Latinos, including undocumented immigrants. Democracy Now interviewed an organizer, Alejandro, whose immediate and extended family members work in meatpacking plants across Iowa, South Dakota and Nebraska. He asked that only his first name be used out of concern for retaliation against his family.

"In Iowa, there are many meat and food processing plants," Alejandro said. "These issues are across the board It is very scary for my family. I have cousins who now have tested positive. My sister and her husband have tested positive just recently. Just incredibly scared."

"Even prior to the epidemic ... there have not been safe working conditions - very fast lines. These are workers that are standing on their feet for hours, overworked, working extended hours in a day and working, often forced, weekends.

"So these are very hard workers that are very dedicated to that work to provide for their families The reason these companies have a lot less workers right now, is because they're scared. I've been talking to families ... and they've been telling me that they want to work, but they want to be able to do it safely."

President Trump has just declared meatpacking to be an "essential" business, and has ordered all the plants to remain open.

Democracy Now also interviewed Sindy Benavides, the CEO of the League of United Latin American Citizens. "What [Trump] is asking our community to do is march into slaughterhouses and put their lives on the line. What he is doing is a lack of acknowledgment and completely voiding and annulling a person's right to work in a safe place," he said.

Trump is creating a situation for these workers to choose between going to work in these centers of the infection, or lose their jobs.

Opening Up the Economy - Many New Cases and Deaths Predicted

Trump has stated that he wants to end all “stay at home” policies, which have worked to reduce (but not eliminate) contagion. He says he wants all businesses to reopen soon.

Under his pressure, governors in many states have begun to reopen some businesses. Some are trying to do this responsibly, keeping strict safeguards and stating that if cases increase they will reverse course. Others, mainly Republicans, are allowing reopening with minimum restrictions, even in places where there is close personal contact such as hair salons, barber shops, tattoo parlors, inside restaurants, etc.

Many people have concluded from this relaxation of “stay at home” that the danger is over, and are not keeping safe distances, etc.

All these reopenings, even minimal ones, go against what the experts say is a precondition for ending “stay at home” – sufficient testing facilities to test for the infection among a nationwide statistically adequate sample – at least tens of millions – and tracing people who had close encounters with those infected to then test them in turn, which would take a large number of people to do the tracing.

Neither of these prerequisites has been anywhere near met because the federal government under Trump hasn’t even tried to do so from early February.

Moreover, the experts say, reopening has to be coordinated nationwide, not having the states do as they please, because new infections anywhere will travel everywhere. (This is true for countries, too, as this is a world wide pandemic.)

The relaxation of “stay at home” has led to a drastic new projection of an increase in cases and deaths by the end of this month. A front-page article in the May 5 *New York Times* begins:

“WASHINGTON – As President Trump presses states to reopen their economies, his administration is privately projecting a steady rise in coronavirus infections and deaths over the next several weeks, reaching about 3,000 daily deaths on June 1 – nearly double the current level.

“The projections, based on data collected by various agencies, including the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and laid out in an internal document obtained [May 4] by The New York Times, forecast about 200,000 new cases each day by the end of May, up from about 30,000 cases now. There are currently about 1,750 deaths per day, the data shows.”

Some right wing commentators argue that the economy ought to be completely reopened and let the pandemic run its course, accepting the consequent high number of deaths as a price that has to be paid.

Is this what Trump is inching toward?

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