U.S. the New Epicenter

At the same time, Trump has been the world’s poster child for recklessness in his absolutely criminal approach to the crisis. Trump’s initial response was to dismiss the threat of the virus and a month was lost in establishing widespread testing for COVID-19 or other urgent measures. He then failed to take the steps needed to step up the supply of protective gear or tests for frontline workers, including the nurses and doctors in increasingly crisis-wracked hospitals.

The U.S. is the new global epicenter of the pandemic with projected deaths of between 100,000 and 240,000 Americans. Currently, New York State and especially New York City is the national epicenter but there will soon be other epicenters, including Louisiana, Florida, and a number of key cities on the East Coast and in the Midwest.

In spite of the horrific human costs, Trump and the U.S. ruling class are itching to reopen the economy, in an attempt to restore profits and stock prices.

Calls to Reopen the Economy

On March 24, Trump vowed to lift coronavirus restrictions by Easter. Under intense pressure to back down, he adjusted his message, calling instead for April 30 for a general return to work.

But Trump is far from alone in the demands to return to business as usual at any cost to workers’ health and lives. Most brutal have been the right wing pundits like Glenn Beck who have called for “economic patriotism,” particularly by older Americans, to immediately go back to work and die as needed, to get the economy back on track.

The difference between the “economic patriotism” of right wing pundits and the wider elite is mainly in the degree of directness, not intent.

The mainstream view of the ruling class was summed up bluntly by the CEO of Cisco and Cargill: “We’ll gradually bring those people back and see what happens. Some of them will get sick, some may even die, I don’t know. Do you want to take an economic risk or a health risk? You get to choose.”

It is absolutely true that an economic catastrophe is underway alongside the pandemic. There are projections that 30% of American workers may be unemployed within the next month, rivaling the Great Depression. But while Coronavirus has had a huge impact it was the tipping point for a global capitalist crisis with deep roots and which already had the potential to be more serious than the Great Recession of 2008-9 even before the pandemic.

Of course economic activity needs to reopen at some point, but under what conditions, in whose interests, and how are these decisions made? Representatives of workers in key sectors from manufacturing to education need to have a direct say and veto in this process. Reopening the economy is not just about “flattening the curve” of the virus. It must be linked to a clear strategy, putting the lives and health of workers first, and with real resources to deal with new outbreaks which are inevitable.

Left to their own devices the bosses and the corporate politicians will move to reopen sectors of the economy heedless of workers’ safety. And if they ask us to put our lives on the line for their profits, we will need to organize in our unions and with our co-workers to fight back.

We should also be clear that the ruling class and Trump may use the opportunity of the pandemic to move to restrict basic democratic rights which we should also resolutely oppose.

Getting Organized in the Crisis

In order to win Medicare for All, affordable housing, or other real gains in the context of the global meltdown of capitalism, we need to get organized.

This pandemic has laid bare how rotten and brutal capitalism is. It doesn’t have to be like this. We need to fight not only for emergency measures during the pandemic but also for an alternative to this sick system – for a socialist world in which the resources of society and big corporations are democratically owned and planned in a sane and sustainable way, for our needs instead of their profits.

Let’s show the billionaires that we won’t die for Wall Street.
Stimulus Package: Corporate Robbery Disguised as Coronavirus Relief

Joshua Koritz

The stimulus package signed by Trump totals to an unprecedented $2.2 trillion. While most of it goes to big business, there are some important provisions for working people. Taxpayers earning up to $99,000 will receive up to $1,200 and unemployment benefits are extended, increased by up to $600 a week, and extended to gig and contract workers. In addition, hospitals are bailed up by $130 billion, state budgets receive a subsidy, and $367 billion is reserved for small businesses. This is still far, far short of what working people are going to need to get through the biggest economic crash since the Great Depression.

But if you thought $2.2 trillion was huge (and it is), you’re missing what the corporate media refuses to explain: there’s an additional $4.2 trillion in loans being leveraged by money in the bill compared to the $250 billion for payments to working people. This reduces working people’s share to just 4%!

The media continues to play its role of selling this bill to the American public. Making payments to working people out to be an unprecedented generous gift, it downplays the amount given to big business. Fox News cynically refers to it as a “Relief Package” on its homepage. They are attempting to sell a bill that gives corporate handouts by saying it will give relief to people wondering if they’ll be able to rent and buy groceries in April. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez exposed the lie tweeting “there is absolutely no good reason why Senate Republicans are tying a historic corporate giveaway to getting relief money in the hands of families.”

Devil’s in the Details

Politico reports several of the strange provisions that made their way into the final bill. This includes fast-tracking “innovative sunscreen,” harbor dredging help, and allowing casinos to get part of the bailout! The New York Times identified a section of the bill that could give real estate tycoons tax benefits worth up to $170 billion.

Not included in the bill? Treatment for coronavirus for the uninsured or underinsured. Any provision to protect pensions. A way to address the children who rely on meals at school for nutrition - no increases to SNAP benefits.

Bernie Sanders and others point out that as long as working people are suffering due to the coronavirus lockdown, they should receive $2,000 per month payments to prevent falling behind on rent, bills, and being able to feed themselves and their families. How much would that cost? If it was checks to all 330 million living in the U.S., it would come out to $600 billion. Multiply that by a conservative estimate of four months and you get $2.64 trillion - still less than the amount being made immediately available to big business.

Again: Bailout Workers Not Wall Street

Big business has now admitted who the “essential” workers really are. They are the people who can’t work from home and that corporations are still working through the shutdown. Truck drivers, nurses, warehouse workers, grocery store workers - all facing the hazards of COVID-19 without adequate PPE. We are in need of a real relief package that doesn’t cut in the super wealthy and biggest corporations.

Bernie Sanders and AOC pushed back against aspects of the bailout for big business. Sanders lacerated Republicans for trying to strip out the increase in unemployment benefits. While Bernie and AOC were under enormous pressure to vote for this bill because of the promise of bailouts for the rich; and freeze on all rent and mortgage payments. Any corporations asking for a handout should be taken into public ownership and control to make sure they are run for the good of society, not for the profits of their shareholders. The free market has failed us in the face of COVID-19 and now Trump and the corporate politicians are shelling out trillions to save the companies and the conditions that got us here. We need a socialist system that prioritizes human health, safety, and needs. This system of profit has to go.

Rent Strike 2020: What You Should Know and How to Get Organized

Dana White

The Coronavirus crisis has made it clear how criminally unprepared our society is to deal with a public health crisis of this scale. Extreme wealth disparities that have long existed in the U.S. and across the world are now even more evident as the pandemic has pulled them into focus. While working people increasingly have suffered the consequences of our system’s lack of preparation, President Trump and Congress have targeted their most urgent interventions on preserving the wealth of billionaires and their corporations rather than bailing out working people.

In one of the most egregious examples of this, the Federal Reserve has pumped trillions of dollars into Wall Street in the past few weeks. In stark contrast, most working people will be receiving a $1,200 one-time payment sometime in the next week. A meager $1,200 payment doesn’t even cover the $1,216 median monthly cost of a one-bedroom apartment. In addition to our one-time stimulus check, we are expected to set aside all other basic necessities to keep a roof over our heads. Come May 1! Millions of people were already unable to pay their rent on April 1 and even more will be scraping their penny jars to pay even a portion in May and in later months especially given that approximately 50 million people (30% of the total workforce) will have lost their job by the end of the month.

Suspend and Forgive

A mood has been steadily growing to fight for a suspension and forgiveness of rent payment during the Coronavirus crisis. AP News reported in March that the rent strike idea is “gaining steam,” and more progressive politicians like Bernie Sanders have also called on Congress to enact a rent suspension during the duration of the crisis. In early March, a set of petitions were launched by Washington congressional candidate Josh Collins calling for a rent suspension across all 50 states. Over three million people have now signed onto the petition, and Rent Strike 2020 was launched to organize these millions of petition signatures into a wider coordinated national rent strike movement.

The rent strike petition calls for a suspension on rent, mortgage, and utility bill collection for two months. To be completely clear we don’t just want the payments to be deferred because that will just delay the reckoning and the unemployed will not be able to deal with rent arrears in two to three months time.

In the likely event that a rent suspension is not enacted, we would absolutely need to have built a coordinated, united rent strike to force the hand of the political establishment to take action in protecting tenants against evictions and rent arrears.

What Is A Rent Strike?

There have not been widespread rent strikes in the U.S. since the 1930s Great Depression era. While the initial shock of the Great Depression left many people in desperate situations, there were also millions who ended up fighting back. In New York City, for example, a movement of rent non-payment led to 77,000 formerly evicted tenants being restored to their homes.

A strike typically means a withholding of something - whether that something is someone’s labor power, someone’s rent, or something else. A rent strike would mean a campaign for widespread non-payment of rent where millions of people would stand up to say that this coronavirus crisis should not leave any of us without a roof over our heads. Millions will find themselves unable to pay rent in May, just as in April, but a rent strike goes beyond isolated individuals being unable to write a check to their landlord. A rent strike will require hundreds of thousands, even millions, organizing together to withhold their rent on May 1, including those with sufficient funds nevertheless withholding their rent in solidarity with their neighbors.

Organizing a Rent Strike

There is no doubt that if we do not achieve suspension and forgiveness of rent nationally and forced to strike this will entail risks. But there is strength in numbers! With a mass of people participating in a rent non-payment campaign, the court systems will be increasingly overwhelmed to respond to the situation and even more pressure will be brought down on legislatures to enact rent suspensions and moratoriums. This level of risk means that the most highly-organized and united rent strike is the best possibility of winning major victories like forgiveness of rent and mortgage payments.

People will need to organize with their neighbors to stand together come May 1 and prepare to defend their right to stay in their homes afterwards. Even as the Coronavirus has put certain limitations on talking to and meeting with our neighbors, the need for social distancing can’t stop us from fighting back! We can exercise appropriate social distancing while still beginning to put a rent strike plan in motion with our neighbors. Simply posting flyers about joining a Rent Strike 2020 Facebook group can help you identify neighbors who may be interested in helping organize. The next step is to call a meeting of neighbors (over the phone and/or video in this case) to talk about how to proceed together. Once a majority of tenants in a building are on board with the rent strike, they can approach their landlord with their demands for rent suspension and their intention to collectively withhold rent.

As working people are faced with hardships brought on by a system criminally unprepared for a global pandemic, we can fight back! Get organized with your neighbors, and check out the Rent_Strike_2020 Organizing Toolkit to get started.
Deadly Lack of PPE in U.S. Hospitals

Erin Brightwell

From China to Europe to New York, the coronavirus crisis has stressed health care systems to their breaking points and beyond. Patient care jobs in hospitals are now more risky and stressful than workers ever could have imagined. As part of this writing, reports out of New York City hospitals are horrifying: workers given one set of personal protective equipment (PPE) to use all shift, some making do with garbage bags, forced to endure extremely dangerous working conditions with no rest, and emergency departments busting at the seams with no effective way to segregate known positives from those awaiting results.

Unsurprisingly, the lack of PPE and hospitals being stretched way past their capacities means that workers are contracting COVID-19. The New York Times is reporting that over 200 workers at one major New York City hospital have gotten the virus and two NYC nurses have died from COVID-19. The deaths of these nurses, and they will not be the last U.S. health care workers to die of the virus, are not a sad circumstance of fighting a pandemic but a criminal act of the Trump administration and the capitalist system as a whole.

Health care providers becoming ill is a frightening prospect for individual workers, and it’s also a key phase in a deadly cycle that we’ve seen play out in other countries hit hard by the pandemic. If hospitals are petri dishes for the coronavirus, then staff, paramedics, and EMTs all become vectors for transmission on the job and in their homes and communities. Health care workers seem to be at elevated risk of developing serious symptoms and needing hospital beds.

Blood on Trump’s Hands

The criminal inaction primarily of the Trump administration and secondarily of the entire political establishment is directly responsible for shortages of PPE and lack of hospital capacity where the virus is surging. In 2019, the Trump administration actually conducted extensive modeling on what could happen in an epidemic. The draft report from the exercise cited potential problems with hospital preparedness, including getting enough PPE to hospitals. The shortage of PPE was predictable and was in fact predicted, yet the Trump administration still refuses to take the necessary steps to address the problem: nationalize the medical supply industry and rapidly ramp up production with a coordinated plan of distribution to the hardest hit areas.

The federal government’s long, failed quest to build a stockpile of relatively inexpensive, portable and easy-to-use ventilators illustrates the disaster of relying on private industry to supply essential medical equipment. In 2010, the government was in contract with a company to build tens of thousands of new ventilators in the event of the kind of pandemic we are facing now. Two years and several million taxpayer dollars later, the ventilator company was acquired by a larger medical device firm that killed the project, probably because the new ventilators would have undercut the larger company’s existing product line. Under capitalism, the system is set up so profits come first, even before life-saving emergency equipment.

Trump’s various statements on the shortage of PPE utterly defy logic. He’s denied that there are shortages, he’s told us to trust the criminal administration of workers fighting for our safety at Facebook.com/Groups/WorkersSpeakOut.

Workers Speak Out: Walmart Janitor

Sophia, Ohio

At the store, we’ve made some changes that might help stop the spread of the illness: wiping down the shopping carts, putting out more hand sanitizer, reducing our hours, building a second make-shift break room in the back hallway to discourage crowding during our lunch hour. But I’m not sure any of that actually will do any good.

I’m really worried about the cashiers. They don’t have a choice about standing face-to-face and up close with dozens of customers coming through their lines every day, touching all the items the customers have touched, standing in the front of the store where the traffic is the heaviest. They’ve been given vinyl gloves to wear, but I’m not sure that’s going to help.

I wish there were more maintenance workers on staff. There are only four who work day shifts, and only two who are in the store at any given time. This is not enough even during normal times. I’ve been wiping things down like crazy, especially the doors and the time-clock machine. I wish I had time to wipe down everything during my shift, but I don’t. So I concentrate on things I think are important, or things I am told are important, which are often aesthetic and not safety-related.

I had a conversation with one of my managers that disturbed me a couple weeks ago. I told him I needed to take time to clean the break room thoroughly each shift. He told me, “Appearance for the customers is more important than appearance for the staff.”

I told him, “It’s not about appearance, it’s about safety.”

And he answered, “Customer safety is more important than staff safety.”

“I wasn’t really sure how to process that. But what can I expect? I’m really scared. I’m the only one in my family who isn’t quarantined, so if they get sick, it will be because I gave it to them. I try not to think about it. I listen to podcasts while I work to keep my mind off the current nightmare. I pretend I’m an army nurse in World War II, and that makes me feel a bit better. “Keep calm and carry on.” That’s all I can do at this point.

I’m scared, but I’m also looking at the silver lining. Times of crisis are opportunities for change. During this crisis, I’m looking around and I see people helping each other and supporting each other and loving each other in ways I never imagined possible. I see people considering action and activism they never thought to do, daring to want things they never dared to want before. I see daily acts of bravery and love for neighbors. I feel hopeful about this situation in the long run.

Things won’t go back to the way they were. We can’t let them, and I don’t think they will. I want to live in a world where human life has value, where ordinary people are not treated as disposable afterthoughts. I want to become more active in the socialist movement because I desperately want to make this happen, and don’t want to spend the rest of my life sitting on my butt when I could be helping to build a better world.

This is why I applied to join Socialist Alternative. Because a better world really is just around the corner if we actually work toward it.

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Workers Speak Out

Workers Speak Out is an initiative of Socialist Alternative. It is a blog that hosts the experiences of ordinary people working through this pandemic. If you’d like to share your experience, email workersspeakout@gmail.com! www.workersspeakout.com

Join a community of workers fighting for our safety at Facebook.com/Groups/WorkersSpeakOut
Deadly Lack of PPE

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the market, he’s attempted to deflect responsibility for PPE and ventilator shortages to the governors, saying about the federal government, “We’re not a shipping clerk.” With incredible disrespect for the frontline workers who are forced to risk their lives with every shift, Trump more recently suggested that New York hospital workers were stealing PPE, “Where are the masks going, are they going out the backdoor?”

Health care workers are absolutely desperate to get, in particular, disposable N95 masks, the standard protective mask that can filter small particles including viruses. Hospitals are not only soliciting donations of N95s from organizations that might have a bigger supply on hand, but even asking ordinary individuals to check their garages and bring in any unused masks they have. Nurses have posted on social media begging for donated masks. Meanwhile, the going rate for N95s has skyrocketed and a large crowd of “entrepreneurs” has suddenly materialized to match hospitals with overseas supplies and pocketing pure profit on each deal.

Hospital administrators, who work far from the bedside, are sending down edicts that display their callous disregard for workers as well as their desperation in the face of the crisis. In many cases, hospital management is trying to cover up the PPE and infection control problems and workers are being threatened for speaking to the media. In at least two cases, desperately needed frontline health care workers have been fired for whistleblowing. Health care workers are standing up to the hospital bosses and to the Trump administration in response. Nurses have held protests outside their hospitals (maintaining social distancing), fighting for the right to wear their own PPE on the job in California and for the right to have adequate PPE in New York. The nurses’ union is leading the fight to maintain scientifically appropriate standards for infection control while hospital administrators and the CDC are lowering requirements instead of joining with the unions to force state and federal governments to fix the PPE shortage.

Nurses and their colleagues on the hospital floors, from doctors to housekeeping staff, have the immediate experience that — combined with a comprehensive understanding of the science of how this virus is transmitted — can keep health care providers safe. Hospital safety committees, made up of workers on the ground, should be elected to organize staff on the job and ensure infection control measures are followed with adequate PPE provided, and to take action, up to and including walkouts if necessary.

Hospital workers caring for patients during a pandemic face real dangers under the best of circumstances. But hospitals turning into cesspools of contagion, staff being infected en masse, and workers dying of COVID-19; these worst-case outcomes that we are seeing play out are not inevitable but the result of systemic failures. The Trump administration, previous administrations, the private health care system, and for-profit medical supply industry are directly responsible for the chaotic and woefully inadequate preparations for this crisis.

Health care in the United States was already a crisis for millions of uninsured and underinsured people before the coronavirus crisis hit. The pandemic has horrifyingly exposed the total inability of capitalist health care to meet the needs of patients, workers, and communities in an emergency. Now more than ever, what is needed is a nationalized health care and medical supply system, run democratically by workers and patients, for the good of all of society instead of the profits of a tiny few.

Onto the Ballot!
Virtual Signature Launch

You need to see this. Tax Amazon launched its signature-gathering campaign to tax Seattle’s biggest corporations to fund social housing and a Green New Deal. Speakers include Reverend Angela Ying, Councilmember Kshama Sawant, and Amazon worker and labor activist Matt Smith - followed by a comprehensive training in collecting online ballot petition signatures and pledges to mail in print petitions!

If you live in Seattle - Sign the official petition here!

To get our tax on the ballot, we need a powerful online outreach campaign to collect 30,000 signatures from Seattle voters in the coming months. In the interest of the social distancing urged by scientists, we’re demanding that Washington State accept online petition signatures that we collect online. Sign the petition now demanding that the state of Washington accept online candidate and initiative petition signatures!

At the same time, the fight to get our tax on the ballot can’t wait! This will require a major online outreach campaign through phone calls, texts, and social media.

We are up against the most powerful corporations in the city of Seattle, and we will need to build a powerful movement to win a historic victory for working people.

Sign the petition demanding the state of Washington allow online candidate and initiative petition signatures!

Donate now or sign up to volunteer to help take our tax to the ballot!
Frontline Workers Fight Back

Keely Mullen

For decades the billionaire class has relentlessly sought to drive down the wages of workers, destroy their health benefits and rip up job protections including basic safety. Now that we are neck deep in a global crisis and the bosses have been forced to admit that not only nurses and EMT personnel but grocery workers, truckers, poultry plant workers, warehouse workers and even agricultural workers are in fact “essential.”

However, despite this promotion-in-name-only, most essential workers are being asked to put their lives on the line with close to zero safety equipment, meager – if any – increases in pay, and still completely inadequate health care and sick days.

In reaction, frontline workers are beginning to fight back in force. From Instacart shoppers to Pittsburgh sanitation workers and Amazon warehouse workers to nurses, ordinary people are taking action to demand safety on the job.

Explaining her decision to organize her coworkers, Vanessa Bain – a lead organizer of the rebellion at Instacart – said to us: “We felt there was no other choice left before we have to start crowdfunding funerals of our coworkers but to walk off.”

Essential workers across industries are making a similar set of demands: adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), enforced safety measures, paid sick leave, and hazard pay. They are asking that their infected coworkers are not forced to come into work out of fear of a missed paycheck.

That they are not forced to work without masks, gloves, or basic sanitizers and risk infecting their loved ones when they go home at night.

It is not enough to be thanked and applauded, frontline workers are demanding their bosses take concrete steps to address this crisis.

Where We’ve Won

Workers have organized a number of walkouts, protests, and strikes over the past month to win the demands outlined above. In some important cases, they’ve been able to win!

In Detroit, bus drivers organized a wildcat strike and within 24 hours were able to win all of their demands! Bus drivers often rely on nearby restaurants to go to the bathroom and wash up during breaks. With all restaurants and bars closed in Detroit, one of their demands was for portable restrooms with hand sanitizer to be set up around the city. They were able to win both the hiring of more cleaning staff and a very thorough cleaning protocol which includes the use of a new rag for each bus, gloves, disinfectant wipes, and masks (“upon request”) for every driver. They also won a fare cancellation for the duration of this pandemic!

In Colorado Springs, workers at a local Joann Fabric organized a one day protest in order to demand the closure of their store to customers. Rather than a slowdown in traffic at the store, Jessica DeFronzo – a lead organizer of the protest – reported “back to back Black Friday levels of customers.” The workers picketed outside their store, urging customers to call corporate in support of their demands, and within a day they got word that the store would close to customers and remain open only for curbside pickup.

Health Care Workers Fight Back

Nurses and other health care workers are being asked to carry out superhuman tasks to slow the spread of this virus. They are working in overcrowded, under-resourced hospitals with a deadly shortage of PPE. To bring attention to this horrifying fact, nurses in a number of hospitals across the country, such as Kaiser in San Francisco and Jacobi Medical Center in New York, have gathered outside the hospitals and staged “social-distance-protests.”

While there’s a lack of data, it is undeniable that there is a high rate of infection to COVID-19 among health care workers. This is by no means a surprise as they are working in extremely close contact with confirmed COVID-19 patients and are – in some cases – wearing only garbage bags and constantly reused masks to protect themselves. This crisis is only going to intensify as more and more states near their peak and hospitals across the country reach capacity and beyond. Nurses, doctors and other health care workers will be put under more and more pressure and will be forced to resist.

Challenges We Face

While the mounting fightback of frontline workers is nothing short of heroic, it is not without its challenges.

Many of the workplaces that have been first to take action have been non-union. This has meant that lead organizers are starting from near-scratch in building up an organized base to take action. For example at Instacart, the core organizing for their strike was done through a Facebook group of 15,000 workers. While it is incredible that they were able to build that network from nothing over the past period – it remains a workforce of 175,000 workers at the company. Carrying out a strike of already atomized workers in the gig economy without a union is a behemoth task. Without real, on-the-job organization that can build toward united action of the workforce, it is very difficult to force the hand of the bosses. But as with the teachers revolt such online efforts can be the first stage for building a powerful union.

Another challenge facing workers is that in the era of social-distancing, traditional shop-floor organizing has been made more difficult. There is increased isolation on the job and many workplaces are being run with a reduced workforce. This is by no means insurmountable. In forthcoming material we will detail organizing strategies for workers in this unique situation.

Who Is Really Essential?

This crisis has made it abundantly clear who is truly “essential” in our society. It is not the billionaire bosses who are hiding out in their mansions. It is the millions of workers on the front lines who are keeping the gears of society turning.

As Derrick Palmer, an associate at Amazon’s Staten Island warehouse said to us, “Jeff Bezos is sitting in his billion dollar mansion or whatever, and he’s looking at us like ‘well we’re nothing, but at the end of the day he wouldn’t be in that mansion if it wasn’t for us. He’s piggybacking off of us.”

Essential workers have kept the grocery stores stocked, have kept the hospitals running, have delivered needed supplies. We are the force that keeps society running. We need to do away with the deadly system of capitalism and fight for a society where the priorities are set democratically by working-class people ourselves.