



BUILD A FIGHTING LABOR MOVEMENT

SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVE

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Bryan Koulouris

If it wasn't obvious before, it is clear as day now: working people make this economy run. While billionaire hoarders and corporations get bailed out and millions of us are laid off, workers on the frontlines have been risking everything to deliver essential goods and services for society. While politicians and CEOs didn't prepare to provide the necessary safety equipment or health system needed in this crisis, frontline workers have been taking action to "flatten the curve" of this tragedy.

Everybody now recognizes that the heroes of this pandemic are the workers in health care, retail, grocery, food production, transit, logistics, education, and beyond. Workers, union and non-union, have also been getting organized and taking action to fight for safety, wages, rights, and benefits. Victories have been won through strikes, protests, and walkouts by Detroit transit workers, Colorado Joann Fabrics retail workers, Boston grocery workers, and many more.

Corporations like Amazon have been retaliating by firing non-union worker organizers who are trying to protect themselves, their co-workers, and their communities. Politicians from both parties, including Democrats

in Nevada and Minnesota, are attempting to suspend union contracts and collective bargaining rights while the federal government is trying to make it harder to organize unions. Faced with a deadly lack of safety and the threat of mass unemployment, millions of workers are looking to continue and intensify the fight against the billionaire hoarders who are trying to turn us all into sacrificial lambs at the altar of their profits.

Getting Organized

Over three million people signed the "Rent Strike 2020" petition initiated by socialist truck driver and Congressional candidate Joshua Collins that demands a suspension of rent, mortgage, and utility payments with no debt owed. To win these demands, renters are getting organized across the country to plan "rent strike" actions. This type of organizing with clear, bold demands, audacious action and creative use of "social distancing" organizing on social media and in our communities, is the type of example union leaders should be pointing to.

While workers are getting organized on the job and in their communities, most union leaders are lagging behind and failing to take action. If unions put their resources behind

coordinated action on May 1 for keeping all workers on payroll at full pay, rent cancellation, Medicare for All, safe workplaces, and other clear demands, then millions of workers would be inspired to get organized. If big unions took decisive action, then the discussion about "reopening the economy" would include debates about workplace democracy and the vast inequality of capitalism exposed by this pandemic. Instead, union leaders are often focusing their resources on getting Joe Biden elected, a loyal servant of Wall Street who has been largely absent during this crisis and fails to inspire working people.

Some unions and workplace actions are showing the way forward though, and we should build on this. Socialist Alternative has initiated Workers Speak Out, and leaders of walkouts at the Amazon warehouse facility in Staten Island, the Joann fabrics strike in Colorado, the Instacart walkout, and other organizing attempts at non-union workplaces have come together through this effort. The Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 1005 in Minneapolis, with Socialist Alternative members helping to lead the effort, won free transit fares for all and is providing safety equipment for workers.

Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the United Electrical Workers (UE) have also initiated efforts to help non-union workers organize. If these efforts by socialists were taken up by much bigger unions, it could lead to one of the biggest organizing drives in the history of this country. Some bigger unions, like National Nurses United (NNU), have done an excellent job in organizing social distance protests and making clear demands for workplace safety and Medicare for All. Yet the rest of the union leadership has gone missing, just like their friend Joe Biden.

A Fighting Way Forward

Unions are at their best when they fight for all working-class and oppressed people. There is a mass mood for organizing drives at workplaces across the country as more and more people are realizing the billionaires and politicians aren't going to solve our problems. Millions are also feeling backed into a corner by this pandemic and are thinking about striking back. Big unions should follow the lead of the socialists organizing non-union workplaces, the nurses unions organizing protests, and Rent Strike 2020 activists. May 1 can be a flashpoint of united struggle to show our potential power.

If union leaders don't step up, then they need to get out of the way. Rank-and-file workers in unions with weak leaderships should build caucuses with clear demands and a strategy to take struggles forward to replace the current leaders. Non-union workers should get organized and reach out to fighting unions like UE and NNU.

In every upturn of union organizing, socialists played a key role – from the 1930s and '40s to the 1960s and '70s. Socialists know that working people make the economy run and have the power to shut down capitalism. Through organizing collectively, we can change the world from one run for the greed of a few to a global system based on cooperation, solidarity, and a planned economy to benefit people and the planet.

We don't want a return to "normal." The capitalist "normal" after this pandemic subsides will be mass unemployment and an attempt to make working people pay for a crisis that capitalism made worse. We need to get organized and fight for workplace democracy and building the power of unions, renters organizations, the unemployed, and the oppressed. This can lay the basis for creating a new "normal" of socialist change.

The Socialist Plan to Fight the Crisis

Immediate Overhaul of Health Care

We demand the government immediately direct national resources to produce medically necessary equipment, ensure fast testing of the whole population, and equip medical staff and the public with necessary safety equipment.

Re-open closed hospitals, immediate construction of new hospitals to care for the influx of patients. For a massive accelerated hiring and training of medical staff. All with union rights and pay. Establish free medical clinics in all neighborhoods. Take over empty buildings when necessary. For a dramatic ramping up of testing capacity, with accessible testing centers in each community.

For a massive expenditure of public resources to be directed to develop a vaccine. Oppose Trump's plan to privatize the vaccine. We need a public entity to ensure transparency and speedy production of a vaccine, free for all. Any corporations looking to exploit this crisis for profiteering should be brought into public ownership with democratic workers and community control.

Establish Safe Working Conditions

All workers have the right to a safe workplace. No one should have to choose between income and safety.

Workers have the right to strike and refuse work until safety policies are in place. We call for the creation of elected worker committees to protect the needs of workers on the job including the establishment of thorough safety and cleaning protocols.

Stop the attacks on union rights! No suspension of collective bargaining or the right to form a union.

For "hazard pay" to all essential workers. All essential workers should be paid at least "time and a half" during the pandemic.

Full Pay for the Unemployed

All workers to be paid full wages if they lose their job due to the pandemic or the recession. This includes the millions of workers who are falsely labeled "independent contractors" or work in the gig economy.

All workers without paid work should be eligible for monthly federal payments equivalent to a living wage of \$15 an hour or \$600 per week.

For a freeze on all rent and mortgage

payments with no debt accrued. For an emergency plan to house the homeless.

Protect People, Not Profits

Free health care for all. End private-profit decision making in medicine. For public ownership of medical facilities, the pharmaceutical industry, and medical device companies.

Confiscate the wealth of the billionaire hoarders with compensation to be given only on the basis of proven need. Use these resources to fund emergency medical supplies, food and necessary services for all working people.

Representatives of workers in key sectors from manufacturing to education need to have a direct say and veto in the process of reopening the economy. This 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.

No to Austerity

Any state budget proposed during this crisis should include zero cuts to social services.

Profiteers will look to use this crisis as an opportunity for mass privatization. No

privatizing public education, mail services, transit, or other public services.

Tax the rich and major corporations to pay for a continuation of expanded unemployment benefits and ongoing financial support to those who have lost a paycheck.

We Need a New Party to Address the Crisis

Turn the Bernie Sanders campaign into a movement to address the pandemic with online, workplace and community organizing to win our socialist demands. Bernie should not put his efforts behind the racist, sexist, billionaire-backed Biden and instead launch a new party for working people.

For immediate online conferences of Sanders supporters to organize together to address the crisis and lay the basis for a new party by, of and for working people with no donations from corporations or billionaires.

For a Green New Deal that benefits working people. Take the fossil fuel companies into public ownership to immediately address climate change. Hire and train tens of millions of workers to help build a new democratically-planned economy based on non-carbon energy. For people and the planet, not corporate profits!

Trump Inaction Fuels Disaster

Tony Wilsdon

The threat posed by COVID-19 was not a secret. The devastating spread of the virus in China, and the fact that it could be transmitted person-to-person was world news by the middle of January. The science of virus transmission and the steps to minimize its reach was also well documented in scientific literature. Experts had not only predicted that a pandemic would occur at some point, but the Center for Disease Control had plans to protect the public.

What was the response of Trump? In January and February, when decisive action could have saved tens of thousands of lives and limited the economic dislocation from the virus, Trump denied the virus was a threat. His message veered from "it will be fine" to "it's a plot by the Democrats." Yet the Trump administration had spent the previous two years slashing the government agencies responsible for handling a potential outbreak.

What should have been done was also clear. Massive testing, social distancing,

and ramping up production of safe medical equipment so everyone, especially nursing staff, had sufficient stock on hand.

Doing that would assume a federal government that was willing to primarily serve the interests of the public and was willing to take command of economic decision making. But this is capitalism not socialism. Under capitalism, CEOs of major corporations have a decisive impact on economic policy, and the government is there to serve their interests, including the current multi-trillion dollar corporate bailout.

Pandemic in the U.S

Once it was clear that the pandemic had already spread to the U.S., Trump then projected himself as commander-in-chief and invoked the War Powers Act, giving him the power to direct industry. But he then failed to follow through on any concrete steps. This failure put his stamp on the subsequent pandemic that has now spread across the nation without any necessary initial counter measures from the administration.

The crashing stock market in mid-March focused his mind on the consequences the pandemic could have on his chances for re-election. This led to surprising bipartisan efforts to inject money into the economy. But the fine print shows that the promises of protecting regular American were just that, promises. There is no general, long term protection from foreclosures or evictions and while unemployment benefits have been extended, there are millions of undocumented workers and others who will get nothing and even for those who do it will be far from enough. Instead, the administration has worked feverishly to ensure that the lion's share of the benefits go to the wealthy.

Now we see Trump demanding the economy be "liberated" from Democratic governors who are enforcing social distancing rules. With his popularity falling in the polls, Trump has reverted to his usual method of first stirring up his base of supporters into a frenzy.

Meanwhile workers on the front lines have had to bear the real burden of "keeping the economy going" without adequate

and necessary protection. Nurses are scapegoated for refusing to work without protection. Trump and the federal government have done nothing to protect them.

Trump's policies are rooted his position as a real estate mogul, and spokesperson for the most self-serving, self-centered wing of the capitalist class. The concerns of the public in the face of a virus is not on their agenda.

What would make a real difference is the existence of a true workers' government with socialist policies. It would have had the immediate goal of ramping production of tests, masks, ventilators, and other safety equipment. It would have put in place teams of health professionals across the country and skilled workers to test the public and immediately ensure safe distancing. A free health care system would have been in existence to encourage all with potential symptoms to be tested. And if after all that, limited lockdowns were still necessary, all the citizens would have safety committees in their workplaces and secure income to sit out the virus.

Rent Strike 2020: The Coming Battle

Rob Rooke, Oakland

The current collapse of the U.S. economy in the wake of the COVID-19 has thrown working class people's lives into turmoil. Anxiety about the virus is compounded by economic concerns: how to pay the rent, affording food and health coverage.

Some grocery store shelves are still empty while almost all prices seem to be rocketing. During April, for millions, money ran out. Long lines at food banks are reminiscent of the Great Depression. In Santa Rosa, California, the Empire Food Bank used to give out 650 meals each day and is currently handing out 120,000 meals a day, and are expecting that number to double. Millions of workers across the country are visiting food banks for the first time in their lives.

In this context, the calls for a Rent Strike on May 1 and beyond have won support. Some three million people have signed the Rent Strike 2020 petition, and many thousands have joined Facebook rent strike groups, city by city. People are weighing up how to spend any cash left and how to stretch their federal \$1,200 checks. California Governor Newsom argued in mid-April that "social normalcy is months away."

While mortgage relief to homeowners has been swift in many states, for renters, uncertainty has prevailed. Faced with the potential of millions of eviction orders, a majority of states have issued eviction moratoriums, some lasting several months after shelter in place orders are removed. A few cities are allowing renters to forego late fees if they can prove that they have had the virus. Those tenants would in later months be expected to pay back their owed rent. This debt would be added to the mountain of student, health care, auto and other debts. And given that 44% of workers earn less than \$18,000 this is an economically unmanageable situation.

Taking Action on the Rent Strike

In April, some one-third of apartment

tenants were unable to pay rent on time and thousands of retail stores, hotels, and fast food chains also did not pay rent. This month, however, for renters will be a bit different as many tenants will be watching the mail for their \$600 top-up on their unemployment checks. However, many workers, including those who are undocumented will likely not be getting any financial help.

Rent Strike 2020 is a campaign that is based on organizing. It does not argue for everyone to simply stop paying rent. Instead this movement is about people organizing together and taking collective action in defense of their homes.

Housing is a Right

When looking into their own finances, renters will be wondering whether they will be able to survive the coming period if they pay their full rent. In the last month a record 22 million people applied for unemployment benefits. Unemployment is expected to rise as high as 47 million workers by June and an estimated 35 million will lose their employer-based health care.

As tenants move to organize they will never see rent the same way again. Renters will be googling their landlords, figuring out how many buildings they own and in some cases being able to figure out how much money the landlords are making out of them. The biggest corporate landlord, Mid America Apartment Communities, owns nearly 100,000 units of housing and made \$973 million in profits off their tenants in 2019. Tenants will also ask why they have been paying half their paychecks in some cases to a landlord who does not need the money. Very few, if any, landlords have been visiting food banks during this crisis. Millions of renters are.

During the summer and into the fall, there will be many battles to keep people housed. This will be a priority. A "Can't Leave! Won't Leave!" movement would receive broad sympathy among all of those whose lives have been thrown into turmoil by the establishment's disastrous response to the COVID-19



threat. As shelter-in-place restrictions are removed, mass organizing around these eviction cases, both at the courthouse and outside the homes of those facing eviction can gain huge community support.

As the crisis unfolds this year, the rent strike movement will also need to adopt wider demands for total rent debt forgiveness, for Corona-era evictions to be struck from tenants' records, and for wider political changes to challenge the massive housing insecurity that is now pervasive in the U.S.

Wider Goals for the Movement

Bernie Sanders' campaign in 2016, and again in 2020, pointed the blame for inequality on the billionaire class and their dominance of politics. Sanders was responsible for popularizing the ideas that politicians should take no corporate donations, that we need Medicare for All, and the cancellation of student debt. In the California primary, Sanders won the areas with the most renters. He argued for a national rent control law. The millions of volunteers for Sanders' campaign could make a huge difference in the Rent Strike fight. To do so this would require organizing people into a new group, separate from Bernie's campaign and independent of the Democratic Party. Such a new group

should be formed around Bernie's program and could represent the basis for a new working-class political party independent of big business money.

Renter activists should look to our past to learn from successful rent strikes from Buenos Aires to Soweto to Glasgow. In the 1964 Harlem rent strike, tenants forced the Mayor of New York to go after private slumlords who for decades had let buildings decline. In Toronto, more recently, two rent strikes forced landlords to lower rent hikes. This current situation is not simply about the ability to afford a rent hike, but for many it is about being able to pay any rent at all.

The \$600 top-up to their unemployment covered in the Corona Recovery Act will make a huge difference to those families and individuals that are eligible for it. But it will only last until the end of July. The landlords are already salivating at the chance to get their hands on our checks. Renters must organize. They must plan for a protracted battle over the coming months. Austerity layoffs by local and state governments have already commenced. Many retail, hotel and restaurants may never reopen. We cannot afford the old levels of rent. We cannot afford a system that puts profitability over people's health and well being. We need a socialist future.

Beyond Sanders' Campaign: Working People Need Our Own Party

*We reprint below a shortened version of the statement by **Seattle socialist City Councilmember Kshama Sawant** after Bernie Sanders ended his campaign on April 8. Since then, unfortunately, he has given a fulsome endorsement of Joe Biden and gone further in capitulating to the establishment of the Democratic Party.*

Sanders has decided to quit at a time of unprecedented crisis facing working people when the need for socialist change has never been more clear. The coronavirus epidemic has fully exposed the massive inequality in American society and the catastrophic

effects of decades of attacks on working people's hard won gains and cuts to social services including healthcare.

The Disaster that Is Joe Biden

The presumptive Democratic nominee is now Joe Biden, a loyal servant of Wall Street for many decades who has supported cutting Social Security and Medicaid; was a leading proponent of the policies that created mass incarceration; led the charge in the U.S. Senate against Anita Hill who testified to Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas' vile sexual harassment; and vigorously

supported the Iraq War. Biden's mental faculties are also clearly not what they were. He has been essentially absent during the coronavirus crisis.

It is reflective of the establishment's desperation to stop Sanders after the momentum he gained by winning the first three primaries that they coalesced around Biden. They fully recognized his desperate weakness as a candidate and spent months trying to find a different candidate to rally around without success. But while they managed to block Bernie they have only delayed a reckoning. Even if Biden somehow defeats Trump he will have to deal with a crisis comparable to the Great

Depression which will completely expose the inadequacy of the Democratic leadership and fuel the desire of millions to create a new working-class party.

Despite all this and despite poll after poll showing Sanders beating Trump, Bernie has accepted defeat. The Sanders team has been reduced to hoping to extract verbal "concessions" from Biden to the progressive agenda. But it would be frankly delusional to accept any mealy-mouthed promises from Biden who, as recently as a couple weeks ago, said

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A New 1930s Lesson

"The shock to the global economy from COVID-19 has been both faster and more severe than... even the Great Depression." That comment by economist Nouriel Roubini on March 24 indicates the growing possibility of global events entering an entirely new period.

In this article **Per-Åke Westerlund of Rattvisepartiet Socialisterna**, Socialist Alternative's sister organization in Sweden, shows that there are a whole series of parallels between the situation we are entering and the Great Depression of the 1930s. Learning the lessons of this history is essential.

The 1930s was a decade during which the fate of the entire capitalist system was on the line. If a mass revolutionary socialist movement on an international basis had been built in time, the hatred and willingness to struggles could have ended the system. The best novel of the decade, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, pictures a family's hardship during the Depression. Steinbeck said of his book "I want to put a tag of shame on the greedy bastards who are responsible for this [the Great Depression and its effects]."

The 1920s — Speculation and Bubbles

The period preceding the Great Depression has many similarities with the period before the crisis of 2008–9, as well as the following decade when none of the causes of the 2008–9 crisis were addressed. The 1920s laid the basis for the depression that was triggered by the crash on Wall Street in October–November 1929. However, studying the processes and similarities, it's important to understand the fundamental reason for these crises is the capitalist system itself.

One main contradiction in the system is the drive toward global markets and global production, while the capitalist class remains dependent on the national state and its forces to compete internationally and to rule over the workers and the oppressed in its own country.

The end of the 1800s and early 1900s saw a simultaneous process of globalization and strengthening of the national states. Similarly, the rapid globalization in the 1990s and early 2000s, was accompanied by a continued increase of military spending, although this was a bit slower immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Capitalist globalization is not a harmonious process, but is always building up new sharper

contradictions. The globalization phase a century ago ended in World War I, the bloodiest conflict the world had then seen. The war was ended by the Russian and German revolutions, with sharp inter-imperialist conflicts remaining. The Communist International, founded in 1919, predicted a new imperialist war if the working class did not take power.

U.S. imperialism came out of the war economically strengthened, in contrast to all other imperialist powers. During the 1920s, 60% of global capital flow came from the U.S. Its economy was seen as a model, with Wall Street as the global financial center and big monopolies dominating. Capitalist propaganda said that every household soon would have a car. Herbert Hoover won a landslide victory in the presidential elections in 1928, predicting the "final victory over poverty."

In Europe, the capitalist classes feared the revolutions that had shaken most countries after the war. The war was followed by a sharp economic downturn, adding to the already high debt burden from the war. The way to implement the austerity the capitalists wanted was through international agreements, predecessors of the European Union.

Propaganda said market forces would ensure peace. As in recent decades, inequality increased sharply in the 1920s. In the U.S., wages increased 1.4% a year while shareholders' incomes rose 16.4% annually. A way to sustain consumer spending was to introduce installment payments, increasing household indebtedness. The 200 largest companies owned 69% of wealth and 56% of profits.

1929 — the Bubble Bursts

Credit and foreign loans exploded in the years before 1929. New financial instruments were invented. Investment banks were founded for the first time. Manufacturing companies became financial speculators. The big U.S. banks became involved in global financial affairs.

Politicians and capitalists were worried over bubbles and speculation, but did not dare to act for fear of triggering a crisis. A company owned by Goldman Sachs, GS Trading, more than doubled its stock market value from its start in December 1928 to February 1929. In the summer of 1929, shares in the U.S. rose by 25%.

This is the same pattern seen in the 2000s and 2010s. "Too big to fail" banks were bailed out to the tune of trillions of dollars and corporations used the river of cheap money to engage in speculation and stock buybacks.

How big was "the market" in the 1920s?



Eviction defense was a common practice during the Great Depression. This crowd would move the family back in after the police served the eviction.

In 1929, a mere 600,000 Americans out of a total population of 120 million owned shares. That is less than one percent, although the really important traders of course were even fewer in number.

The crisis came earlier to Europe. In Germany it began 1927. The powers that Germany was paying war debts to — France, Britain and the U.S. — refused to lower their demands, escalating the crisis.

The crash was not one event, but a process following Black Thursday on October 24, 1929 when the Dow Jones average dropped 23% in two days. The Federal Reserve, the big Wall Street banks and the government did everything they could, used every possible measure at hand. Several times, the crisis was declared over, for example by President Hoover on May 1, 1930. However, a further collapse on Wall Street in November 1930, started a three-year downward spiral.

The Crisis Spreading

The Great Depression was a chain reaction. The stock market crash started a deflationary spiral — meaning a general and sustained drop in prices — spreading to production, commodities, and world trade.

Deflation meant an increased burden on everyone with debts, more or less freezing new loans. Industrial production experienced a record drop. Ford laid off three-fourths of its workforce, from 128,000 to 37,000, over a period of 18 months. This had devastating effects. However, in today's Corona crisis, the pace of job losses is actually much higher.

GDP was cut in half from 1929 to 1931. The social consequences of mass unemployment were catastrophic. There was food, but no money to buy it with.

Globally, states defaulted, starting in Latin America in 1931 with Bolivia, followed by Peru, Chile, Brazil, and Colombia. In Europe, Hungary was the first to default, also in 1931,

followed by Yugoslavia, Greece in 1932, Austria and Germany after the coming to power of the Nazis in 1933.

Nationalism and Protectionism

In any major crisis, the bourgeoisie becomes increasingly nationalistic, thereby further aggravating the crisis. In a parallel process, opposition parties, and even some on the "left" parties tend to urge "national unity."

During the Great Depression, nationalism and protectionism deepened the crisis. As with Trump today, the biggest economies led the way, having much bigger leeway to go their own way, while remaining dependent on the world market. In 1933, the new U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt, arrived at an international conference in London and declared that every country had to address its own economy — currency, debts and deficits. The British government agreed, stating that foreign exposure was their Achilles heel.

This meant that in the worst global economic crisis ever seen "no one was in charge," according to Charles Kindleberger in his history of the Great Depression. Today we also see the growth of protectionism and trade conflict even before this crisis as well as the weakening of international capitalist institutions. Leaders like Bolsonaro in Brazil, Modi in India, Xi Jinping in China, and Trump in the U.S. promote virulent nationalism and chauvinism.

The now notorious Smoot-Hawley Act passed by Congress in 1930 included 21,000 tariffs on imports. Nationalism and protectionism were now spreading fast. "Canada first" was the winning slogan in elections in that country. Britain and France tightened their trade within their colonial empires. Germany formed a Reichsmark bloc with Hungary and the Balkan countries.

World trade fell from just under \$3 billion in January 1931 to \$944 million two years later. Unemployment rose to a staggering 24% in the

ons for Workers and Socialists

U.S. and over 30% in Germany.

FDR

Roosevelt's presidency has mistakenly been given credit by many on the left for solving the crisis. In fact, Roosevelt took some measures disliked by the capitalists to soften the effects. He also sharply criticized the speculation, debts, and bubbles of the previous period. However, his goal was not radical change but to "save the system of private profit," as he told those criticizing him.

However, as today, those arguing for privatization, shrinking the public sector, and reducing its debts, came begging to the state to save them. Business applauded state intervention and support, decisions to build bridges and roads, as well as other measures that gave them profits although many were also extremely hostile to other measures Roosevelt supported like setting up Social Security. In making necessary concessions, he acted in the interests of the capitalist class as a whole.

Capitalist governments were especially concerned to prevent the working class taking decisive action against the bosses and the capitalist system as a whole. Roosevelt was particularly interested in stopping the strike wave which began in 1934.

Under Roosevelt's New Deal, unemployment dropped from 15 to 9 million, but many of the new jobs were on minimal wages.

By mid 1937, production in the U.S. was back to the level of 1929. Workers' struggles had increased wages and therefore consumption. But then came a new sharp downturn, Black Tuesday October 19, 1937. A new phase of the crisis followed with a sharp fall in production and commodity prices. For example, cotton prices fell 35% and rubber 40%, hitting

countries whose economies centered on the export of commodities.

The crisis in 1937–8 proved that the New Deal was far from solving the crisis. The underlying weaknesses in the system continued to trigger new crises. And still, only an economy as big as the U.S. had the resources to try this. In most countries, the ruling class handed over state power to dictatorships and even fascism, in order to prevent revolution.

What seemed to be a gain in a single country was still a loss for the global system. There was no "world power" or cooperation, no "lender of last resort," as Kindleberger and others explain. Only with war production and a command economy in World War II did the U.S. economy really begin to "recover."

Class Struggle and Revolutions

The 1920s and '30s were a period of revolution and counter-revolution, of extreme twists and turns. No-one analysed this period more sharply, with concrete advice to the labor movement and left parties than Leon Trotsky, who led the Russian revolution and was purged and deported by the Stalinist dictatorship.

In line with Marx, Trotsky explained how the fundamental cause of the crisis was the inability of capitalism to rationally develop society's productive forces and the collision between the development of the productive forces and the limits of the nation state. Also, the only way forward was to resolve the class struggle between the capitalist class and the majority, the working class, through the latter taking power, resulting in international socialism.

Despite the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union, the memory of the victory over the tsar and capitalism was still fresh in the 1930s. The established parties were

undermined by the crisis, alongside banks and other institutions of capitalism. There was a mass radicalisation in society and an explosion of struggle.

In the U.S., the class struggle sharpened in 1934, after an initial period in which the crisis stunned workers. One and a half million workers were on strike in 1934, with the Los Angeles Times describing a strike in San Francisco as a "communist revolt." The Teamsters' strike and uprising in Minneapolis, led by the Trotskyists, was a model of workers' organizing. The unemployed were getting organized and mass struggle against evictions was spreading. Police repression against workers was massive and brutal. Sit-in strikes started in 1936, and increased to 477 sit-in strikes the following year. The new industrial trade union federation, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), started in 1935, exploded to five million members in 1936.

Internationally, there were revolutions and mass struggles in many countries, with France and Spain at the forefront in 1935–36. The "leadership" given by the then Stalinist Communist parties and the social democratic parties led to devastating defeats, as had their failure to block Hitler coming to power in 1933, despite having mass parties and an organized, even armed, working class. This underlines the serious and decisive task today to build workers' organizations and parties that can achieve victory and abolish capitalism.

After the Great Depression and Today

Following the experience of the Great Depression — the economic failure, the horrors of fascism and World War II, plus the

strengthening of Stalinism following the war — the capitalists had to put on a democratic face. They were forced to give concessions such as the National Health Service in Britain, welfare systems in some European countries and to give up colonies (although keeping their economic stranglehold on poor countries). A number of institutions kept a lower profile such as stock markets, banks, and financial institutions generally. In the era of the post-war upswing this was a price they were prepared to pay.

However, political radicalisation in the 1960s and '70s, class struggle and colonial revolutions, declining profits and economic crisis in the mid 1970s, led the capitalists to turn to neoliberalism and attacks on workers and the "welfare state" everywhere. They were seemingly successful, especially with the fall of Stalinism, the decline of the labor movement and the acceptance of neoliberalism by many "left" parties across the world.

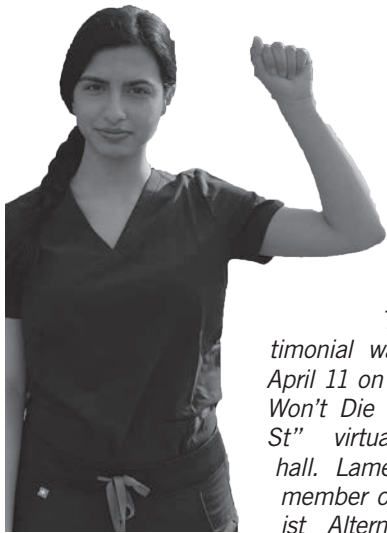
Now, this period has come to an end. We will see a combination of concessions and attacks, stimulus and austerity, from the capitalists, who with the new crisis have turned even more toward nationalism. This crisis will deepen the anger at the reality of capitalism today that fueled support for Jeremy Corbyn, Bernie Sanders and even, in a distorted way, Trump. It will fuel the class struggle and the search for a political alternative to corporate politics but if the left does not meet the challenge it can also create even more space for the populist right and far right.

The 1930s show us that capitalism will survive even the biggest crisis if there is no conscious working class movement to abolish it. The task in this new crisis is to build such parties, movements internationally.

Food lines in LA in 2020 (L) and New York City in 1932 (R).



Workers Speak Out – Detroit Area ICU Nurse



This testimonial was given April 11 on the “We Won’t Die For Wall St” virtual town hall. Lamees is a member of Socialist Alternative in the Detroit area.

I work in a surgical trauma ICU. Our unit typically takes patients who have been in car accidents, gunshot victims, post-suicide attempts, etc. I say this to convey that we are used to taking care of extremely sick and unstable patients. That being said, a few weeks ago we got our first corona patient. They were placed in a negative pressure room and all proper precautions were taken. Nurses and techs had the equipment they needed to perform safe patient care. Fast forward to now. Our entire 20-bed unit is now a corona intensive care unit with some of the sickest patients in the hospital.

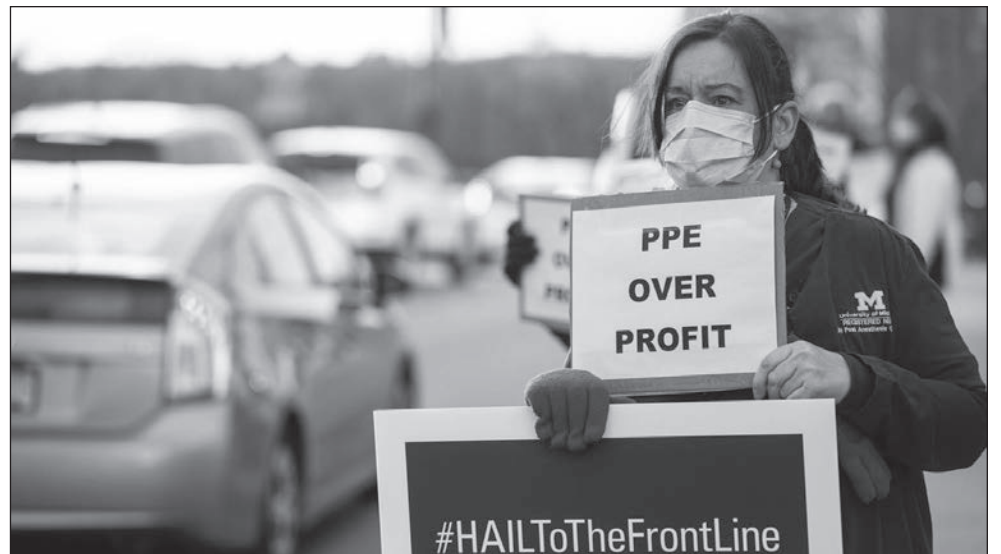
On a typical day two months ago maybe 2 out of 20 patients would be considered extremely unstable to the point where you felt like you could barely leave the room. Now, on every shift every patient seems to be this sick and [nurses] are taking care of two of them at once. We reuse the same gown and respirator all shift then turn in our respirator to be “disinfected” and re-used again. This practice risks self-contamination and has forced the vast majority of my coworkers to move out of their homes to prevent getting their families ill. We have all accepted that we will get corona virus. The only question is

will we show symptoms and if so, how bad?

As many of you know, we are short on protective equipment and ventilators. Perhaps what you don’t know is that we are starved of virtually all supplies. Continuous renal replacement machines which are arguably one of the most important machines aside from ventilators to save these patients are in short supply. We have 19 in the hospital and last week ten were on my unit alone. We are short on fentanyl and propofol which are pain and sedation medications. We are even short on central line kits which we need to provide IV medication. Yesterday, I was notified that we are running short on tube feeding and we should administer tube feeds for 12 hours before switching the machine over to another patient, depriving them of necessary nutrients to fight off the virus. This is all happening at a hospital that DOUBLED its profits in 2019.

Our hospital is near capacity. Non-ICU nurses have been transferred to our unit to help meet demand but find themselves unable to treat patients they have not been trained for. And yet, we are still short staffed. Nearly every hour someone on the unit gets so close to dying that a team of nurses have to rush into the room to give medications or perform CPR. When CPR has been performed, nurses are often out sick for one to two weeks with corona symptoms due to the aerosolization of the virus that happens during CPR.

This past week, two of my patients were crashing at the same time. I yelled into the hallway for help. No one came. Everyone was in their own isolation rooms tending to their own very sick patients. At the start of another shift, I was greeted with five white body bags with COVID written on them. That means five deaths in one shift, perhaps a first for our unit. Our morgue is at capacity. If there is a death, you turn over the room as fast as you can, and accept another critically ill corona patient. Families call you begging for updates on their loved ones and you hardly know how to explain their state. All you can do is hold the phone to their loved one’s ear as they beg them to live. I will never forget holding the phone to a child’s ear as his mother and father begged him to survive. In the midst of this chaos nurses across the country are facing pay cuts of up to 20% as a thank you. Welcome to the new normal for health care



A Michigan nurse protests the lack of PPE, April 15, 2020.

workers.

Wayne County has the seventh highest rate of corona in the nation. The severity of the illness in Metro Detroit is directly related to high levels of asthma, high blood pressure, and diabetes found in low-income communities due to inadequate food, health care, and poor air quality. It is no surprise that the overwhelming majority of my corona patients are black and that our system is failing them.

It didn’t have to happen this way. We knew for months that corona was coming. Rather than buying necessary supplies, hospital administrators chose to pay for this with our lives instead of their profits. Even barren manufacturing plants were not put to use until recently to produce the supplies we so desperately need. Imagine what would have happened if we had public ownership of manufacturing plants and repurposed them months ahead of time in order to produce these supplies. Meanwhile there are some hospitals that have protective equipment but are short on ventilators. Others have ventilators but are short on something else. When profits come first, every hospital is bound to hoard their resources unnecessarily. A centralized socialist response would include immediate resource sharing across all hospitals to save lives.

When hospitals realized the extent of the crisis, they canceled elective surgeries. These are the major sources of revenue for any hospital. Now some administrators are saying that they are struggling to avoid bankruptcy. These are the limitations of a for profit healthcare system. Even hospitals like mine which are “non-profit” still operate to cut costs and make money. It is clear that we need universal health care but it is even

clearer that we NEED public ownership of all hospital systems in the U.S. as well as the pharmaceutical industry to prevent putting profits over lives.

No one can possibly think that capitalism is doing a good job of managing this crisis. New York alone has more cases than any country. We still pay more per capita than any country in the world with worse outcomes. A week ago, nurses at Detroit’s Sinai Grace hospital walked off the job after complaining about unsafe conditions. Nurses reported they had 25 patients each. They gained national coverage in highlighting the horrendous conditions they are facing.

The working conditions are terrible in many industries. The truth is they always have been. “Essential” workers have always been essential. The only difference is that with this crisis, we have been pushed to new levels of anger and with that, new levels of action. The crisis is teaching all of us, me included, just how much power workers hold and how group action can win us concessions.

Crises like these expose the flaws of our system. Public health experts have been screaming for years about how ill prepared our health care system would be during a pandemic. The bosses of health care ignored it and prioritized profits over preparing for the inevitable. We are living with that now. We will never escape a repeat of a crisis like this one while for profit healthcare is the standard. This is why a socialist response is the only response. This situation is frightening but it is also one of the best opportunities available to us to demand a better future. There has never been a better time to highlight the failures of capitalism and to point to a clear way forward.

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Millions Need Safe Jobs and Housing – Tax Amazon

Logan Swan

As the coronavirus health crisis necessitates closing down non-essential sections of the economy, unemployment has exploded. A full third of renters nation-wide missed rent payments in the first week of April. Already a city with high and rising housing costs, Seattle is in desperate need of affordable housing. It is the rich who should pay for the disastrous collapse of their system. The Tax Amazon campaign is bringing a ballot initiative to do just that, funding affordable housing and safe jobs for working families, paid for by the same corporations Trump is bailing out.

The victory of Kshama Sawant's re-election campaign and the campaigns of other candidates opposed by big business in 2019 set a mandate from people in Seattle: Tax big business to address the housing crisis.

The movement to Tax Amazon is strong and growing today – despite multiple attempts by the political establishment to kill it and the disorienting impact of the coronavirus crisis – because it reflects the actual needs of working people in Seattle for affordable housing, living-wage jobs, and progressive taxation. This public health crisis, fueled by the inequality and profit-driven priorities of capitalism, has only served to underline these basic material needs of working families.

Going into this crisis the majority of Americans couldn't afford to miss a paycheck, while over two-thirds had less than a thousand dollars in the bank. With millions facing layoffs

and loss of income, this system has given us no economic breathing room. Despite temporary relief for some workers included in the federal stimulus package, the lion's share will go directly into the pockets of the billionaire class.

Strategy – Ballot and/or Legislation

In recent weeks, the campaign to Tax Amazon has seen an outpouring of support as more and more families realize that collective struggle is necessary to defend our physical and economic security during this crisis.

We have a two-pronged strategy to get our initiative on the ballot. We will gather digital signatures and build pressure to make the state accept them. But because we know the state does not act in the interest of working people, we won't rely on that and will be using every safe means at our disposal to get print signatures also.

The Tax Amazon campaign hosted nearly 150 people in a virtual signature gathering launch in early April. Speakers included labor union members, frontline workers, tech workers, and Socialist Alternative member Kshama Sawant, who is leading the fight in Seattle City Council. The initiative would build up to 8,000 new permanently affordable homes over the next ten years, and upgrade tens of thousands of homes to Green New Deal standards through a tax on the biggest two percent of companies in the city.

The other point of the initiative is

pressuring the City Council to pass legislation brought forward by Kshama Sawant and councilmember Tammy Morales. This bill would immediately implement a \$200 million relief for workers that would roll into an annual tax on big business for \$500 million to build social housing and upgrade existing housing to Green New Deal standards.

To overcome the challenges of social distancing we've developed a creative social media and phone-banking approach to gathering signatures, having supporters reach out to personal networks to host virtual house parties and public meetings; and phone-and-text banking Seattle residents directly to secure their signatures. Sign up to help out and donate today.

What We Stand to Win

If we win, \$300 million every year would go towards sustained employment and building up to 8,000 union-built homes in the next decade. This investment would surpass all the development Amazon has put into their Seattle campus to date.

These affordable units will provide an



alternative to the failed private market for housing. The existing units that are out of reach for many and sometimes sit empty will have to compete with a growing option for affordable living.

Perhaps most important, workers across the country will have a concrete example proving that we can stand up for ourselves and build the movements we need to take what's being denied to us by a system that is willing to send us to work sick and throw us out into the street. I hope you'll join us in this fight, we have a world to win!

Beyond Sanders' Campaign: Working People Need Our Own Party

continued from p. 3

he would veto Medicare for All if Congress actually passed it!

We understand why millions are so desperate to get rid of Trump that they would support almost any opponent. But we also know who Joe Biden is and he's no "friend" of working people, women, black people, or immigrants. We won't support him and neither should Sanders.

Why We Endorsed Bernie Sanders

Socialist Alternative and I endorsed Sanders in November and went all out to win this election. We have no regrets about our stand based on the enormously positive elements of the movement he helped create. Going back to 2016, Sanders electrified millions because of his radical pro-working-class platform, his call for a "political revolution against the billionaire class" and his popularization of "democratic socialism." This time Sanders went further saying billionaires "should not

exist," while talking about a "government of the working class" and declaring that his role as president would be "organizer in chief." He called for a Green New Deal and even for taking parts of the energy industry into public ownership.

But the key reason we supported Bernie so strongly was the same reason the ruling class feared him. His 2016 campaign helped inspire mass struggle, including the teachers' revolt in 2018 and 2019 and the beginning of a rebirth of the labor movement in this country.

At the same time we have always been frank about Sanders' limitations and our important differences with him. Going back to 2016 we pointed to the contradictory character of his campaign: on the one hand by refusing all corporate money it pointed to the potential for a new party but at the same time it was also dragging people back towards the Democrats.

Furthermore, we have never agreed with Sanders' explanation of socialism which

seems to be a combination of FDR's New Deal and European social democratic governments. These are examples of trying to save the bankrupt system of capitalism, not getting rid of it. This is a failed project, as is further underscored by the present pandemic and the threat of climate catastrophe.

In the wake of the Super Tuesday coup and the growing challenges facing his campaign, Sanders did continue to put forward bold proposals to address the emerging dual crisis of the pandemic and economic collapse. But while he raised a number of criticisms of the stimulus bill which contained a staggering bailout for corporate America, he mistakenly voted for it under pressure.

This along with consistently referring to Biden as "my friend" points to a bigger problem. Sanders approach of pulling his punches truly does not work in the new situation we find ourselves in; now is the time to resist the ruling class' false appeals to "unity," to call out who is responsible for the catastrophe and to build a ferocious resistance regardless

of the howls of the corporate media.

What Now?

Millions are asking "what now?" Sanders' decision to suspend his campaign is undoubtedly a real setback to the left. But it also should be the end of illusions in the left's ability to transform the Democratic Party. There is a real danger of demoralization but millions are also having their eyes opened. This is forcing many to ask – in a time of tremendous crisis – what type of leadership the working class needs.

In the meantime the best activists, seeing the road blocked on the political terrain, will turn to the mass struggles that are developing even in the middle of the lockdown. The key contribution Sanders could make to the further development of the movement he built in our view is to admit the unviability of reforming the Democratic Party and to help launch the effort to set up a new party.

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May 1 Day of Working- Class Action

Keely Mullen

On May 1, many workers – both “essential” and those working from home – are planning to strike and protest for safe working conditions, an end to corporate bailouts, and for the right to organize.

Amazon warehouse workers are teaming up with Whole Foods workers to demand safe working conditions from their shared boss, Jeff Bezos. They are in discussion about joint action against Amazon on May 1. Amazon, a corporation raking in record profits during the Coronavirus crisis, has been the target of walkouts by its workers across the country since the lockdown began. Coordinated action of workers across Amazon’s empire on a united set of demands would be a huge step towards rebuilding a fighting labor movement.

Some grad students in the University of California system are also planning a strike on May 1 to demand an end to corporate bailouts that come at the expense of public education and services. They are demanding full investment in public services under the slogan, “Not one dollar cut, not one job lost.”

Socialist Alternative in Action

Socialist Alternative supports anyone taking action on May 1. With our limited resources, we are committed to doing whatever we can to build the biggest actions on May 1. This is why we have launched a “Pledge to Strike Back on May Day” which calls for coordinated “social distance” workplace action in union and non-union workplaces alongside solidarity protests in working class neighborhoods on May 1.

We are calling on the union leaders to drive this effort and use it as a launching pad for organizing drives in non-union workplaces across the country. This pledge has the support of prominent strikers like Derrick Palmer – an organizer of the walkouts at Amazon’s Staten Island warehouse, Vanessa Bain – an organizer of the Instacart strike – as well as local leaders in transit workers and nurses’ unions who have been on the front lines during this pandemic.

This pledge calls for:

No return to work without safe workplaces, including PPE and social distancing. For workers to vote on whether or not to return to work.

Hazard Pay of “time-and-a-half” for all frontline workers.

Full sick pay for all workers who become ill or have to care for family.

Suspension of rent, mortgage and utility bills with no penalty or requirement to pay back landlords or utility providers.

Medicare for All NOW!

Defend and extend union rights! For \$2,000 a month government payments to all U.S. residents, paid for by taxes on the billionaires and big corporations.

Through our Workers Speak Out initiative, Socialist Alternative has hosted a series of industry-specific town halls of nurses, educators, warehouse workers, and grocery workers. Through this we’ve been able to facilitate discussions between workers across the country who have shared their experiences, compared notes, and are developing plans to carry the struggles at their workplaces forward.

May 1 is shaping up to be a day of intense activity through the combined workplace action and rent strikes being organized across the country. This pandemic demonstrates the necessity for a fundamental reshaping of the U.S. labor movement and May 1 could provide the launching pad.

Rent Actions!

Already across the U.S., renters have taken things into their own hands. Tenants from Los Angeles to Boston are organizing tenant meetings online, over the phone, and in zoom calls, safely breaking out of their isolation. Facebook rent groups are springing up in cities across the country, with people encouraging each other to reach out to their fellow renters through fliers, posterage, and social media.

Tenants are already collectively acting to negotiate rents down. This is not a rent payment plan, like so many corporate landlords are promoting, which would see all renters go deeply into debt. Rent Strike 2020 is arguing that tenants should get together and win the majority in their building to propose a significant rent reduction. This rent reduction could be a 25% cut in rent or a 50% cut in rent, whatever tenants think they can reasonably pay and survive. Additionally, for those who cannot afford anywhere near what the majority consider a reasonable demand, they should pay only a token amount, and be included in the negotiating with the landlord. No renter should be left behind during this COVID disaster.

While food, health care, and utilities can be cut off, renters have one certainty: that they currently live under a roof. They should not move out if they cannot afford the rent. Eviction moratoriums will eventually be lifted, but these moratoriums give tenants a window in which to begin to organize.

Rent Strike 2020’s demand for a rent payment freeze with no late fees or accrued debt, alongside a mortgage payment freeze is the immediate political solution required by this crisis. Unless eligibility for unemployment benefits is made truly universal, then there will be many individuals and families left behind. This movement is a fight to prevent renters being punished for this Coronavirus.