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The class issues in the coronavirus pandemic

The coronavirus, which continues its spread throughout the world, does not discriminate on the basis of race, gender, nationality or sexual orientation. However, the one factor that is undoubtedly key in avoiding infection and improving the chance of survival is wealth.

As with every natural or epidemiological event, the coronavirus is intersecting with the reality of a society riven by social inequality. The conditions of life for the broad mass of the population make them far more vulnerable to getting infected and far less able to handle the consequences of the expanding economic catastrophe.

This class reality finds expression in innumerable ways. On Friday, the *New York Times* published an article, “Location Data Says it All: Staying at Home During a Coronavirus is a Luxury,” which documents the fact that the wealthy in the US, now a center of the pandemic, have been able to observe “social distancing” measures much more easily than the poor.



Fabian Ramirez, 11, and members of his family scavenge a trash container for vegetables discarded during the fourth week of a quarantine to help contain the spread of COVID-19 in Asuncion, Paraguay, April 2, 2020 [Credit: AP Photo/Jorge Saenz]

“Although people in all income groups are moving less than they did before the crisis,” the *Times* notes, “wealthier people are staying home the most, especially during the workweek. Not only that, but in nearly every state, they began doing so days before the poor, giving them a head start on social distancing as the virus spread, according to aggregated data from the location analysis company Cuebiq, which tracks about 15 million cellphone users nationwide daily. “

The analysis noted that by March 16, when the Trump administration finally began advising people to stay home, movements in all areas had already dropped. “But by that date, those in the highest-income locations had already cut their movement by nearly half. Poorer areas did not see a similar drop until three days later.”

In many major metropolitan areas, the top ten percent has reduced its movement effectively to zero. For the bottom ten percent, however, it approaches zero on the weekends before spiking back up during the work week. Many low-wage workers have been forced to keep working, under unsanitary conditions and without adequate protection. A KFF [Kaiser Family Foundation] Health Tracking poll released on Wednesday, conducted during the last week of March, found that 57 percent of adults in the US report being worried that they will put themselves at risk of exposure because they cannot afford to miss work. For the segment of adults who earn less than \$40,000 annually, the number rises to 72 percent, or nearly three-quarters.

Then of course there is health care. Low-income workers often lack health insurance or have to purchase private insurance with high co-pays and deductibles. Even before the virus struck, the life expectancy for the poor in the US was 20 years lower than the life expectancy for the rich, due in significant part to the class-based system of health care.

As for testing, workers are finding out that even if they have the symptoms of COVID-19—fever, dry cough, difficulty breathing—they cannot get a test.

Nathan Tetreault, a grocery store worker in southern Alabama, told National Public Radio that despite suffering from all of the symptoms he could not even get tested because he was too young and did not meet other criteria. The doctor told him, “Yeah, you’re on your

own.” After taking limited sick leave, Tetreault must return to work not knowing if he has the disease or is still contagious.

Such stories are being repeated thousands of times per day.

Immigrant workers, a significant share of whom are undocumented, will avoid seeking testing or treatment out of fear that they will be deported or expose relatives to removal from the country. Those held in Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention have been protesting, demanding release, as the disease makes its way through the crowded and unsanitary prison camps. The same conditions prevail for the country’s more than two million prisoners.

Meanwhile, the ultra-rich are retreating to the comfortable confines of their mansions, summer homes or fully stocked survival bunkers.

If they do come down with coronavirus, the rich can expect prompt testing results and concierge health care, safely away from the rabble in overwhelmed hospitals. A shortage of private-jet service has been reported, with so many wealthy people fleeing New York City and other cities. *Forbes* reports that billionaire entertainment executive David Geffen is sheltering on his multi-million-dollar yacht in the Caribbean.

The hardest hit areas of New York City, the current global epicenter, are in the poorest neighborhoods of Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx. Detroit, the poorest large city in America, where thousands still lack access to running water in their homes, hospitals are already being overwhelmed by cases, placing Michigan just behind New York and New Jersey for infections and deaths.

The economic consequences, of course, will also fall most heavily on workers, many of whom live paycheck-to-paycheck and have no savings to deal with a health care emergency.

Congress has handed trillions of dollars in bailout money to Wall Street, to prop up the banks and big businesses, while offering a pittance to the working class. As millions lose their jobs, the few thousands of dollars being given out per person comes too little, too late.

Already, workers are having to decide between paying for food for their families or paying for rent. It is estimated that 40 percent of tenants in New York City will not pay their rent this month. In every city, thousands of people have been queuing for hours at weekly foodbank drive-thrus, many turning to these services for the first time.

These conditions are repeated in different forms throughout the world. The Spanish daily *El País*, in an article documenting the disparities based on wealth, quoted a grocery worker in Madrid: “We are the third class of the Titanic. We are risking our lives for s*it. We are sold.”

The countries and regions with the most concentrated levels of poverty are the most vulnerable. When the virus spreads through refugee camps in the Middle East and North Africa, and through the slums and tightly packed working class neighborhoods of South America, Africa and South Asia, the consequences will be catastrophic.

As the pandemic grows, the class struggle is erupting, with a rising movement of workers at Amazon, grocery stores and in industry demanding that they be protected from the disease. Wildcat strikes by autoworkers last month, which came after workers tested positive for coronavirus, successfully forced the shutdown of most auto assembly in North America, despite a joint effort by the UAW and the companies to keep the factories running.

This growing working class movement must be guided by a conscious leadership with a clear anti-capitalist and socialist program.

The Socialist Equality Party demands the immediate shut-down of all non-essential production, including many service-industry companies that continue to operate. All workers who are laid off must receive full income. There must be a moratorium on all rent, utilities and other bills.

Health care must be free and accessible to all on an absolutely equal basis, regardless of income or insurance coverage. Immigrant workers must receive the same rights as all workers, and the same benefits.

The wealth hoarded by the rich must be confiscated and used to protect the lives of those essential workers who must keep working during the pandemic to produce ventilators and other needed equipment, and provide for those who will need to stay home.

These demands can be realized only by mobilizing the full organizational and social strength of the working class, based on a socialist program whose aim is the transfer of political power from the capitalist class to the working people. The inequality of capitalism must be replaced by the equality of socialism.

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