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www.afgazad.com afgazad@gmail.com

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David North

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The pandemic, profits and the capitalist justification of suffering and death

The Trump administration's cynical announcement of a set of fraudulent "guidelines" that will serve to legitimize a rapid reopening of businesses and a forced return to work, in unsafe conditions, brings to an end any public pretense of a systematic and coordinated effort within the United States to prioritize health and to protect human life in combatting the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The premature return to work that the Trump administration is orchestrating will lead to countless thousands of deaths, which could be prevented if a rigorous program of social distancing, supported by a massive program of testing and contact tracing, were implemented and sustained during the coming critical months.

There is absolutely no significant factual evidence, let alone scientific analysis, that can be cited to justify Trump's announcement. Leading epidemiologists have already publicly

challenged the validity of the statistical model being used by the White House. Referring to projections by the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, epidemiologist Ruth Etzioni of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center told the medical journal *STAT*: "That the IHME model keeps changing is evidence of its lack of reliability as a predictive tool. That it is being used for policy decisions and its results interpreted wrongly is a travesty unfolding before our eyes."

The pandemic is exacting a horrifying toll in human life. During the 24 hours that preceded Trump's announcement, the COVID-19 coronavirus claimed 4,591 lives in the US. This number was more than a 75 percent increase over the 2,569 deaths during the previous 24-hour period. Over the past three days, the nationwide death toll has risen from 26,000 to over 36,000.

It is widely recognized that the official figure substantially undercounts the total number of deaths. The discoveries of bodies of elderly patients in two different nursing homes are only the most frightful examples of the gap between the official and real death toll. At this point, there is no reliable tally of people dying outside of hospitals, either of an undiagnosed COVID-19 infection or of causes related to the pandemic.

This is a global pandemic. There are, as of this writing, 2,216,000 cases and 151,000 deaths. These statistics are no more reliable than those provided for the United States. The previously reported figures are already being revised upward.

Trump's blatant ignorance and gangster-like persona imparted to the announcement of the guidelines the sociopathic and generally putrescent atmosphere that pervades all his public appearances. But his policies are not simply those of an individual. The criminal form in which the policies are presented is determined by the economic and social interests of the class Trump serves.

For the financial-corporate oligarchy, the pandemic has been viewed, above all else, as an economic crisis. Its principal concern, from the start, was not the potential loss of life but the destabilization of the financial markets, the disruption of the process of profit extraction, and, of course, a substantial decline in the personal wealth of the members of the oligarchy.

While in February and March, the Trump administration publicly downplayed the seriousness of the crisis, officials at the Treasury Department and the Federal Reserve worked in close consultation with the major banks to structure and implement a multi-trillion-dollar bailout that would dwarf that which followed the financial collapse of 2008.

During the first three weeks of March, the news was dominated by the mounting international and national impact of the pandemic on public health. Public attention was focused on the drama of the cruise ships, the deaths in Italy and the initial reports of infection in Washington state. The urgent need to implement quarantines and shut down non-essential businesses was, despite Trump, widely acknowledged.

On March 19, the "CARES Act" was introduced in the Senate. The rapid passage of the bailout of the entire financial industry was taken for granted. Indeed, corporate executives, kept well informed by their political servants in Congress, took advantage of the plunge on Wall Street to buy back billions in company shares in anticipation of the massive rally that would follow the final passage of the CARES Act.

As soon as the CARES Act was introduced, the focus of the media began to shift toward an aggressive campaign for a return to work. There could be no delay. The massive increase in fictitious capital—more than $2 trillion in digitally created debt—was to be added to the Federal Reserve's balance sheet within less than a month. Additional trillions of dollars of debt will be added in the coming months. This represents, in the final analysis, claims on real value that must be satisfied through the exploitation of the labor power of the working class. The greater the debt incurred by the state-sanctioned creation of fictitious capital, the more urgent the demand for a rapid end to restraints on the process of profit extraction.

Thus, on March 22, even as the CARES Act was making its way toward passage, Thomas Friedman, the leading columnist of the *New York Times*, initiated the campaign for a return to work: "*What the hell are we doing to ourselves?* To our economy? To our next generation?" he shouted. "Is this cure—even for a short while—worse than the disease?"

The latter sentence provided the slogan for a campaign that became increasingly insistent in the weeks that followed. Arguments against excessive concern for the protection of human life became more and more brazen. Evading an examination of the socio-economic interests that had prevented an effective response to the pandemic, the *Times* began extolling the benefits of human suffering. "As much as we might wish, none of us can avoid suffering," opined columnist Emily Esfahani Smith on April 7. "That's why it's important to learn to suffer as well."

On April 11, the *Times* dished up further musings on the benefits of suffering and death. Ross Douthat, in a column titled "The Pandemic and the Will of God," invited readers to consider "how suffering fits into a providential plan." Another essay, by Simon Critchley

of the New School in New York City, proclaimed that "To Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die." Pretentiously invoking the authority of Descartes, Boethius, More, Gramsci, Heidegger, Pascal, T.S. Eliot, Montaigne, Cicero, Dafoe, Camus, Kierkegaard and even Boccaccio—all within the confines of one newspaper column—this academic blowhard summed up the wisdom of the ages by advising his readers, "Facing death can be a key to our liberation and survival."

The brutal practical agenda underlying these rather ethereal ruminations on suffering and death found blunt expression in the text of a round-table video conference organized by the *Times.* Participants included Zeke Emanuel, who is notorious for arguing that physicians should not seek to prolong life beyond the age of 75, and Peter Singer, a bioethics professor at Princeton, whose advocacy of euthanasia for debilitated infants led to protests upon his appointment to the university post 20 years ago. The *Times* is entirely familiar with Singer's views, as it wrote extensively two decades ago on the controversy generated by his arrival at Princeton.

The text of the video conference discussion was posted in the on-line edition of the *New York Times Magazine* on April 10, under the title "Restarting America Means People Will Die. So When Do We Do It? Five thinkers weigh moral choices in a crisis."

In its introduction to the text, the *Times* asserted that it will become necessary to accept that there is a "trade-off between saving lives and saving the economy." While in the short term the two goals may be aligned, in "the longer run, though, it's important to acknowledge that a trade-off will emerge—and become more urgent in the coming months, as the economy slides deeper into recession."

In its analysis of the "trade off," the *Times* proceeds from the unquestioned premise that economic interests can only be those of the capitalist class. The profit system, private ownership of the productive forces and vast personal wealth are unalterable and eternal. Therefore, the "trade off" requires, inevitably, the sacrifice of human life, specifically, the lives of working people.

Singer declared that it is impossible to provide an "assistance package for all those people" for a year or 18 months. "That's where we'll get into saying, Yes, people will die if we open up, but the consequences of not opening up are so severe that maybe we've got to do it anyway."

It goes without saying that none of the *Times*' panelists called attention to the fact that Congress had just injected several trillion dollars into the coffers of the banks and

corporations to save executives and shareholders. Nor was it noted that there are approximately 250 billionaires in the United States, who have a collective net worth of close to $9 trillion. If this wealth were expropriated and distributed evenly among the 100 million poorest households in the United States, it would provide each household with a monthly income of $5,000 for 18 months!

Of course, the expropriation of this gargantuan sum of privately held wealth—which is entirely legitimate and necessary in the context of a massive social crisis—is not an option which the *Times* and its panelists are even prepared to consider as a theoretical possibility. But they are willing to accept the deaths of countless thousands as a matter of practical, i.e., capitalist necessity.

The subordination of life to the profit system is not confined to the United States. It is being proclaimed as a universal principle by the ruling elites in Europe. The *Neue Zurcher Zeitung*, the main voice of the Swiss ruling class, posted an article yesterday, that asks:

Do you want to live forever? This was the question Frederick the Great asked his soldiers at the Battle of Kolin in 1757, when they gave way to the enemy. One is inclined to ask the same question again in view of the disputable relationship between the corona sick and deceased on the one hand and the population as a whole and those suffering from common diseases on the other.

Some things here seem to be—literally—crazy. But also the collateral damage of disease with its wanton acceptance of the destruction of the economy provokes the whole question. Anyone who wants to put it drastically could say: We choose economic suicide to prevent individual elderly people from passing away a few years earlier than would be expected under normal circumstances.

The advocacy of a policy that accepts, and even advocates the culling of the aged and weak finds its most explicitly fascistic expression in a lengthy essay published on April 13 in the German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel.* Titled “We need to talk about dying,” it is written by Bernard Gill, a sociologist who has been associated with the Green Party.

In a sweeping assault on the development of science, Gill denounces the “heroic narrative” that celebrated the great nineteenth century scientists Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch “as heroes who made microbes visible, manageable and therefore controllable.” Gill protests:

In this story of creation, the microbes are aliens, which threaten us and therefore hold us down with power are best exterminated. “Our” lives against “their” lives—scientific

knowledge and well-organized defensive struggle until the final victory of hygiene, which promises eternal life in a germ-free environment.

But this is a violation of nature. “Our life,” Gill declares, “is not conceivable without death.” But those who seek “to contain the infection with all means, also fights dying with all means.”

Gill advocates an acceptance of the natural spread of the pandemic—based on the program of “herd immunity”—which views “dying as a natural process that is individually painful for those involved, but from a distance makes room for new life.” With this approach, Gill argues, “we come to terms with the microbes in the knowledge that our life without death is unthinkable. We console ourselves with the prospect of new life.”

These are arguments with which Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, who committed suicide 75 years ago this month in his Berlin bunker, would have readily agreed.

Deeply reactionary and inhuman ideas are wafting about Germany. But there, no less than in the United States, they arise not from the sick psychology of individuals, but from the needs of the capitalist system.

The same publication, *Der Spiegel*, that provides a forum for Gill, warns that the German auto industry cannot endure a prolonged shutdown.

The longer the corona crisis lasts, the louder industry calls will grow for politicians to finally name a date for the easing of the shutdowns in order to provide companies with some planning security…

The automotive industry in particular is facing a trial of strength for which there is no historical precedent. In order to prevent a collapse, companies need to get their shuttered factories opened again this spring.

Involved as well are critical issues of global competitiveness. *Der Spiegel* continues:

There are also geostrategic interests. Executives at companies in Europe want to strengthen the European market in order to establish it as a counterweight to the United States and China as economic powers...

This is all the more true given that China, where the coronavirus originated, appears to be emerging from the crisis faster than the rest of the world.

The COVID-19 coronavirus confronts mankind with not only a scientific-medical problem, but also a political and social challenge. The response of the ruling classes to the

coronavirus pandemic reveals that its interests are incompatible with human progress and the very survival of mankind.

In its failure to prepare for the pandemic, its chaotic and disorganized response to the coronavirus once the outbreak began, its subordination of every social need to its own economic interests, its nationally-grounded sabotage of all possibility of a unified global response to the disease, and its open justification of the reactionary and neo-fascistic program of social euthanasia, the ruling class is demonstrating the necessity of socialism.

For humanity to survive, the subordination of society to the money mad capitalist elites must be ended.

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