

One million dead from suicide, drug overdoses since 2007

Casualties of the social counterrevolution in America

1 December 2018

This year's report on mortality rates released Thursday by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reveal that the American working class is confronting an unprecedented social, economic, health and psychological crisis.

The CDC's findings show a staggering increase in the indices of social misery in just one year, from 2016 to 2017:

- Life expectancy dropped from 78.7 to 78.6 years, the third consecutive year-by-year decline.
- The age-adjusted death rate increased 0.4 percent, from 728.8 deaths per 100,000 people to 731.9 per 100,000 (including a 2.9 percent increase among young people aged 25-34).
- Drug overdose deaths increased 9.6 percent (including a 45 percent increase in deaths from fentanyl). Drug overdose is the leading cause of death for those under 55.
- Suicide rates increased in 2017 by 3.7 percent, from 13.5 per 100,000 to 14.0 per 100,000.
- The report's historical figures quantify the devastating impact on the working class of the financial crash of 2007-2008 and its aftermath.
- From 2007 to 2017, suicide deaths rose from 34,598 to 47,173, a 36.3 percent increase.
- Drug overdose deaths nearly doubled, rising 95.0 percent, from 36,010 in 2007 to 70,237 in 2017.
- The total dead from suicide and drug overdose since 2007 alone is 954,365 people—equivalent to the population of America's 10th largest city. This is more than the total number of US soldiers killed in all of America's wars, excluding the civil war. With 2018 nearly complete, the total dead has now likely crossed one million people.

The response of the political establishment to the report is entirely predictable: an article or two in the major newspapers, a quick segment on the evening news, and maybe a tweet from a handful of politicians.

But everyone knows that nothing will be done. The stock prices of the corporations peddling pills to disabled veterans and injured workers will continue to rise. By tomorrow, the CDC reports will be long forgotten, buried beneath the ruling class's anti-Russia and anti-China campaigns, #MeToo hysteria, and demands for internet censorship.

The cause of the deaths of 100,000 people per year from social misery is not a great mystery. It is the product of the capitalist system and the intended result of policies of deindustrialization and social counterrevolution carried out for more than four decades by both the Democrats and Republicans, in collaboration with the trade unions.

This is a widely recognized fact among medical professionals. A 2018 study published by the *American Journal of Public Health* titled "Opioid Crisis: No Easy Fix to its Social and Economic Determinants" blames "a multi-decade rise in income inequality and economic shocks stemming from deindustrialization and social safety net cuts" for growing differences in life expectancy between the rich and the poor.

In particular, the study notes the devastating impact of the massive wealth transfer carried out by the Obama administration after the 2008 financial crash. "The 2008 financial crisis along with austerity measures and other neo-liberal policies have further eroded physical and mental well-being," the report states.

While the banks and corporations received trillions in bailouts, millions of workers lost their homes, their jobs and their sense of dignity and purpose.

Last Monday, when General Motors announced that it was closing five auto plants and laying off 15,000 workers in the US and Canada, its stock soared nearly 7 percent. For the company's affluent shareholders—including the bureaucracy of the United Auto Workers union (UAW)—this news means longer and

more exclusive vacations, new and more expensive cars and homes, and plenty of jewelry and champagne for the holidays.

But for autoworkers, their families and the millions of residents of the impacted areas, it means desperation, drug addiction and death.

Those cities impacted by the GM plant closures—including Detroit and its Warren, Michigan suburb, White Marsh, Maryland and Lordstown, Ohio—are already among the most horribly affected by the opioid crisis after decades of cuts to jobs, wages and social services. The difference in life expectancy between the richest and poorest 25 percent is already 6.7 years in Youngstown, Ohio, near Lordstown. In metro Detroit the difference is 8.2 years.

GM's move was hailed by the corporate press. The *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post* (owned respectively by the multibillionaires Rupert Murdoch and Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos) praised the decision as a stroke of genius. *Automotive News* named company CEO Mary Barra "Industry Leader of the Year."

The duplicitous and staged anger among a relative handful of Democrats, Republicans and UAW officials to GM's move is totally fraudulent. All those politicians and union bureaucrats who are pounding the podium with one hand are accepting company payoffs with the other.

GM gave billionaire CEO Donald Trump \$25,000 for his 2016 presidential run and he reciprocated with massive tax cuts for corporations and the rich. That same year, GM gave more money to Bernie Sanders (\$33,000) than to any other senator. In 2018, GM contributed to the campaigns of a *majority* of those elected to the House and Senate, in equal parts Democratic and Republican.

As for the UAW, this organization of bribe-takers and company agents is responsible for decades of concessions, which have transformed auto towns like Dayton, Toledo and Kokomo from relatively comfortable communities to epicenters of the opioid crisis. In return, the union bosses have been well compensated. A growing list of current and former UAW officials is under federal investigation for accepting bribes from GM, Fiat-Chrysler and Ford in exchange for helping the companies increase exploitation and cut labor costs.

Under capitalism, the working class is entirely excluded from the decision-making process. The political establishment makes nothing available to help the victims of factory closures and deindustrialization, leaving them to die.

Instead of meeting the needs of the working class, the

ruling class pockets the wealth created by workers and allocates trillions of dollars to the military and intelligence agencies so that they can implement through military force the demands of the banks and corporations.

The Trump administration cut more than \$200 million from health programs to help pay the cost of locking up 14,000 working-class children from Central America, whose only "crime" was to flee their impoverished homelands in search of a better life.

In September, the Department of Health and Human Services announced that it was transferring \$16.7 million from the CDC, \$9.8 million from Medicare and Medicaid, \$87.3 million from the National Institute of Health and \$80 million from refugee care to establish internment camps for immigrant children. And Trump wants workers to believe that immigrants—and not the government and corporations—are to blame for plant shutdowns and cuts to wages and social programs!

The CDC reports provide a quantitative expression of the immense social anger and desperation that have built up in the working class, for which there has been no progressive outlet. The decades-long suppression of the class struggle imposed by the trade unions has forced workers to channel their anger inward, and in their isolation, many are taking self-destructive measures.

But this long period of one-sided class war is coming to a close. This year, which has seen a major increase in strike activity, is only the beginning of a new period that will be marked by increasingly powerful strikes and protests in the US and internationally.

Workers must build their own organizations—rank-and-file committees—to unite and coordinate their struggles across industries and national boundaries. In this way, workers can harness their collective social dissatisfaction and channel it in a political direction in the struggle against capitalism and for socialism. By unleashing their immense social power, workers will storm the commanding heights of the capitalist system and free up trillions of dollars to meet the urgent needs of the human race.

Eric London

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>