

# Build rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to prevent transmission of the COVID-19 virus and save lives!

21 May 2020

The coronavirus pandemic continues to exact a horrific toll in the United States, which has already lost more lives than any other country in the world. More than 1.5 million people in the US have been diagnosed with COVID-19. The death toll is approaching 100,000. Every day, there are more than 20,000 new cases and approximately 1,500 deaths.

Globally, the coronavirus has killed nearly 330,000 people and infected more than five million. This is according to official statistics, which vastly understate the real impact. The rate of infection is accelerating rapidly in Eastern Europe, Asia, South Asia and Latin America, particularly in Brazil, which has overtaken Spain as the country with the third largest number of infections.

The coronavirus knows no national boundaries. The growth of infections in other parts of the world will inevitably impact the United States as well. Robert Redfield, the director of the Centers for Disease Control, told the *Financial Times* that the rapid spread in the southern hemisphere will mean that there will likely be a flare up again in the US later this year.

“We’ve seen evidence that the concerns it would go south in the southern hemisphere like flu [are coming true],” Redfield said, “and you’re seeing what’s happening in Brazil now. And then when the southern hemisphere is over, I suspect it will reground itself in the north.”

These warnings expose as lies the claim by the Trump administration that the worst of the pandemic is over. In the United States itself, the pandemic is not under control. With New York State barely recovering from a tidal wave of infections that cost the lives of nearly 30,000 people, the COVID-19 pandemic is now surging through the states of the Midwest and the South.

A new study published in the medical journal *Health Affairs* by researchers at the University of Washington estimates that by the end of the year the death toll in the United States alone will rise to between 350,000 and 1.2 million people. And this is without taking into account the relaxation of physical distancing measures that is currently being carried out.

The danger of a rapid acceleration in the rate of infection is being increased by the premature and reckless “reopen the economy” and “get back to work” campaign. The Trump administration and Democratic and Republican governors throughout the country are reopening businesses and factories. All 50 states have begun relaxing, and in some cases completely ending, restrictions on economic and recreational activity. The White House, state officials, substantial sections of the media and extreme right-wing forces are creating an environment in which basic social distancing measures are being ignored.

Underlying this campaign is the concept of “herd immunity.” This means, in practice, the abandonment of all efforts to stop the spread of the virus. By allowing the disease to spread without constraint, the ruling class is ensuring that tens or hundreds of thousands more people will die.

The impulse for this campaign is the drive to restore the flow of corporate profits. Without a careful plan to implement a safe return to work, based on science and rigorously enforced, there will be an enormous increase in the rate of infection, resulting in serious illness and death.

The COVID-19 virus will spread rapidly through factories, warehouses, office buildings, shopping malls and all other places where large numbers of people congregate. There is an immense danger that workers, unknowingly infected on the job and not yet showing symptoms, will return to their homes and neighborhoods and transmit the disease to their families, loved ones and friends.

Service workers are being thrust into dangerous environments as retail stores open up. Amazon workers have worked throughout the pandemic with inadequate safety equipment, and at least seven have died. The pandemic continues to expand among meatpacking workers, forced to continue working on the orders of the Trump administration. As transportation systems expand operations, airline and transit workers face a perilous situation. More than 100 transit workers have already died in New York City alone.

Health care workers, who will face a sharp escalation in new cases over the coming weeks, have inadequate personal protective equipment. A recent survey found that 87 percent of US nurses are forced to reuse protective equipment, and 72 percent work with exposed skin or clothing.

And in an ominous sign of things to come, within days of bringing back tens of thousands of autoworkers, there were several reported cases of COVID-19 among workers at major production and parts plants.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) opposes this reckless back-to-work campaign and the re-opening of non-essential workplaces as the pandemic continues to spread. If infection, sickness and death are to be prevented, it is necessary to create a new form of workplace organization that oversees and enforces safe working conditions.

Therefore, the SEP advises workers to form rank-and-file safety committees in every factory, office and workplace. These committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, should formulate, implement, and oversee measures that are necessary to safeguard the health and lives of workers, their families and the broader community.

There can be no “business as usual!” The pandemic exposes the urgent necessity for a complete restructuring of the processes of production, distribution and economic activity in general. The lives of working people and their families must not be sacrificed in the interests of corporate profits and the private wealth of billionaire oligarchs.

In response to the demand of Trump, the politicians of both big business parties and the media for the “reopening of the economy,” the question should be asked: “Whose economy?” The economy of Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, Wall Street swindlers, and the richest one to five percent of the population? Or the economy of the working class, which produces all the

wealth of society but lives from paycheck to paycheck—if they happen to have a job?

### **The response of the Trump administration to the pandemic**

The dangerous situation confronting workers is the product of a deliberate class policy. Epidemiologists have warned for decades that a pandemic was not only possible, but inevitable. These warnings were ignored. Rather than investing in viral and bacterial research and building hospitals, Wall Street financiers demanded the dismantling and privatization of large sections of health care infrastructure.

The subordination of social needs to the unrestricted pursuit of profit has resulted in tens of thousands of workplace injuries and deaths annually. Even prior to the pandemic, 150 workers have died on average every day from preventable work-related injuries and illnesses. American workplaces are notoriously unsafe and unsanitary. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) functions as little more than an arm of the corporations. Since the pandemic hit, OSHA has received nearly 14,000 complaints related to COVID-19 and has not issued a single citation or penalty.

As the pandemic began its global spread in January and February, the concentration of the Trump administration and the American ruling class was not on protecting lives but protecting profits. Its initial response was to try to downplay the danger and keep businesses operating as usual. The Trump administration failed to put in place a system of mass testing, contact tracing and isolation, while claiming that the virus would just “wash away.”

As the scale of the pandemic in Europe emerged, mass anger—including the eruption of wildcat strikes in the auto industry—forced the federal and state governments to implement elementary measures to contain the virus. Almost immediately, however, the Trump administration and the media began to raise the alarm that the “cure cannot be worse than the disease,” that it was necessary to get the country “back to work.”

From the standpoint of the ruling class, by late March the most important action had already been taken: the passage of the CARES Act, passed with the unanimous support of Democrats and Republicans, which authorized the multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street and the corporate elite, with no restrictions. Every day, more than \$80 billion is funneled into Wall Street by the US Federal Reserve, sums that far exceed the measures taken even after the 2008-2009 financial crisis. This has fueled the continued rise in the markets, amidst increasing death and social devastation.

The vast debts built up by the bailout of the rich must be repaid through the exploitation of the working class. To justify its reckless and criminal policy, the Trump administration has sought to whip up far-right demonstrations, which have been promoted in the media. Both the Democrats and Republicans, moreover, are seeking to scapegoat China and shift the blame from the American financial oligarchy.

The Trump administration is sidelining scientists who have warned about the danger of the back-to-work policy, including Anthony Fauci, the longtime director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. The Centers for Disease Control is being marginalized, and Trump is threatening to fire the agency’s director, Robert Redfield.

At the same time, the massive social distress caused by the starving of workers is being used to force a return to work. While unlimited sums have been allocated to the rich, millions of workers have received nothing. As businesses resume operations, workers who refuse to endanger themselves and their families will be cut off from all assistance.

While the Trump administration is spearheading this campaign, it has the support of the entire political establishment. The Democrats are going along with the back-to-work campaign, and many of the states implementing the resumption of production are controlled by Democrats, including Michigan, which is restarting auto production under the

leadership of Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

As for the media, it is doing whatever it can to try to minimize the danger of the virus. Every day brings reports of a “new hope” for a vaccine or a cure. However, the possibility of a viable vaccine, which scientists say would not be ready until sometime next year, is not an argument for a return to work. If a vaccine is developed, all the more tragic will be the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives as a result of the back-to-work campaign.

### **The nature of the coronavirus**

The interests of two classes stand in direct opposition to each other. The aim of corporate executives and managers, acting in the interests of Wall Street investors, is to increase profit and extract the largest quantity of work in the shortest amount of time. For workers, it is a question of maintaining a safe environment that ensures their health and safety.

Rank-and-file safety committees must be organized to demand and implement measures to protect workers lives. These measures must be based upon a scientific understanding of the nature of the disease.

The coronavirus is highly contagious and spreads through liquid droplets when people talk, breathe, cough or sneeze. People are infected when virus particles enter their mouths, noses or eyes through direct transmission or after touching a surface where the particles have fallen.

Scientists have shown that the pathogen is also present in tiny airborne particles, known as aerosols, which can be suspended in the air for longer periods and travel much further than the recommended six feet of social distancing. The distance that the virus can travel is also affected by how loud someone is speaking.

Large factories where thousands of workers labor close to one another on an assembly line are particularly vulnerable to becoming vectors for the rapid spread of the disease. “The plant is an environment where it’s loud and people have to shout at each other to be heard, there could be a lot of virus being transmitted through the air,” Julia Heck, an epidemiologist and Adjunct Associate Professor and researcher at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Studies show that an infected person can be contagious two or more days before showing any symptoms. Therefore, the measures being implemented in many workplaces, like daily temperature taking and handing out substandard facemasks, are inadequate. By the time someone has a high temperature, they could have spread the disease throughout the plant.

After attending a choir practice in Washington state in early March, 52 out of 61 people were diagnosed with COVID-19 and at least two died, even though they had not shaken hands or stood close to one another. In the meatpacking plants, it is widely suspected that the virus, which has infected more than 12,000 workers and killed more than 50, is spread through high-pressure air-conditioners that shoot airborne particles through an enclosed area.

In addition to the danger workers face when they congregate to enter and leave plants, or during meal and bathroom breaks, workers on an assembly line, in a warehouse or in a retail business are handling the same tools and moving products. The virus can remain on surfaces for varied times: metal (five days), glass (up to five days), plastics (2-3 days), stainless steel (2-3 days), cardboard (24 hours) and aluminum (2-8 hours).

### **The tasks of rank-and-file safety committees**

What will be the function of rank-and-file safety committees?

They will represent and fight for the safety of workers, in opposition to the demands of management and the profit principle. They will draw up detailed regulations and standards that must be monitored and enforced. Where conditions are violated, there must be a stoppage of work.

Core objectives of these committees should be:

• **Controlling work hours and line speeds.** In every factory, business, office and workplace, rank-and-file safety committees, working in conjunction with a panel of trusted scientists and health experts, must determine working conditions and production rates and schedules. Working hours and line speeds must be reduced to allow for sufficient rest, health care monitoring and regular deep cleaning.

• **Guaranteeing personal protective equipment.** Each worker should be properly fitted with the *highest quality* facemasks (including N-95, N-100 or P-100, according to conditions) as well as gloves, face shields and other necessary PPE. These must be regularly changed out, to make sure they continue to provide maximum protection. Workers should also undergo training for donning and removing PPE.

• **Ensuring safe and comfortable working conditions.** Of concern is not only the amount of protective equipment. To be safe, workers must be able to wear protective equipment for extended periods of time. All plants must have adequate air conditioning and ventilation, particularly with the beginning of summer, that is organized in such a way that it does not contribute to the spread of the virus.

• **Enforcing regular testing.** All workers must have access to regular testing for the coronavirus. Production schedules must be organized to accommodate testing and contact tracing. If a worker tests positive, the facility must be closed for at least 48 hours for deep cleaning.

• **Demanding universal health care and guaranteed income.** Any worker who tests positive must be isolated and provided immediate medical treatment, while his or her full income is guaranteed. All workers who came in contact with the infected workers must be quarantined and regularly tested, while receiving their full income. In addition, if anyone's family members report symptoms, the worker should be tested and isolated until cleared by a medical professional—with no loss of pay.

• **Ensuring the distribution of information.** To preserve their safety, workers must have access to all information about infected workers so that appropriate measures can be taken, including halting production if necessary. Management at Amazon and other corporations have deliberately concealed information about coworkers testing positive and terminated workers who have exposed unsafe conditions.

• **Ensuring Job security.** No worker should be victimized for calling attention to unsafe working conditions or refusing to work. Any worker who has been fired for speaking out against unsafe conditions must be rehired with full back pay.

#### **What will be the cost of implementing this program? Who will pay for it?**

The working class cannot be made to pay for ensuring its safety. The costs necessary to ensure safe working conditions, as well as to provide health care and full income for all workers, must be borne by the corporations and the capitalist ruling elite.

The maintenance of a safe working environment is an immensely complex task that can only be achieved through a scientific and rational plan, in active consultation with health care experts in every workplace.

No confidence can be placed in corporate management to secure

workers' safety. Nor can workers rely on the trade unions. Only a small minority of workers are unionized, and the unions that do exist function as little more than arms of corporate management. They support the return to work and are collaborating with the companies to enforce it.

This is why workers require their own organizations. In every factory, workplace, and office, workers should organize and elect trusted and respected workers who will represent them. They should utilize all available tools, including social media, to reach out to workers throughout their industry and in other sectors to coordinate their activities and share information.

A critical task of these committees is to organize workers internationally. In every country, there are a growing number of strikes and job actions by nurses, meatpacking, transit, auto and other workers demanding safe conditions.

#### **The fight for socialism**

The mobilization of the resources of society against the pandemic requires scientific planning, which at every point comes into conflict with the pursuit of private profit and individual wealth.

The SEP insists that the fight against the pandemic is inseparably linked to a struggle of workers against the ruling class—the corporate and financial oligarchy—and its dictatorship over economic and political life. It is, therefore, a fight against capitalism and for socialism, the restructuring of society on the basis of social need, not private profit.

This is by its very nature a global struggle. The pandemic is a world problem and can only be fought through the international collaboration of workers and all those committed to defending human life. In the fight against the pandemic, workers must reject all efforts to divide them along racial, ethnic and national lines. In particular, the campaign by the American ruling class to blame China for the crisis and divert attention from its own criminal role must be opposed.

The pandemic has exposed the reality and bankruptcy of the capitalist system, which is a barrier to human progress and the very survival of the human species. The response of the ruling class to the pandemic will produce enormous social opposition and resistance.

A socialist political leadership in the working class must be built! This leadership is the Socialist Equality Party. The SEP in the US is part of an international movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, which publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*. We also publish workers' newsletters, including the *Autoworker Newsletter*, the *International Amazon Workers Voice*, and the *Teachers Newsletter*, which have thousands of readers all over the world.

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* will provide all the assistance it can to workers who want to establish rank-and-file safety committees. We urge all workers to study our program and make the decision to join the SEP.

*Fill out the form below to be contacted by a representative of the SEP and to receive updates on the pandemic and the struggles of the working class. We also urge workers to send reports of conditions in your workplaces. All requests for anonymity will be honored.*

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (US)

To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>