

Worker opposition grows as coronavirus spirals out of control

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Today marks six months since global health authorities were informed of a disease outbreak in Wuhan, China that would later be named COVID-19.

In this brief period of time, the number of cases has ballooned to 10 million, with half a million people dead. But “the worst is yet to come,” warned World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on Monday. “Globally, the pandemic is actually speeding up.”

Public health experts have watched in despair as governments throughout the world allowed the virus to spread, abandoning basic public health precautions and sacrificing the lives of the elderly and the sick in the name of expanding corporate profits.

The tone has been set by the United States, where the Trump administration has abandoned efforts to contain the pandemic, effectively embracing the policy of “herd immunity.”

This has produced a catastrophic resurgence of the pandemic throughout the country. On Monday, the United States set a record high of over 47,000 new cases. The weekly average of cases has grown to 39,000, up from a low of 21,000. Cases are increasing in 32 states, with hospitals in Arizona, Florida, and Texas near their capacity.

The global upsurge of the pandemic is the predictable and inevitable result of the back-to-work campaign, stemming from the ruling class’s demand to protect profits, not lives, with the claim that “the cure can’t be worse than the disease.”

This campaign, however, is being met with growing resistance by workers across the world.

On Monday, two thousand workers went on strike at six Amazon facilities in Germany after 40 workers tested positive at two facilities.

Like other major employers throughout the world, Amazon is not notifying its employees when workers

become sick, making it impossible to carry out contact tracing. To the extent that workers and health authorities know anything about the spread of the pandemic, it is over the obstruction of the company. In Minnesota, health officials have found at least 187 cases at two facilities.

Workers also stopped production at two Fiat Chrysler (FCA) auto factories in Michigan. Over the weekend, workers at FCA Jefferson North Assembly and FCA Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in the metro Detroit refused to continue working after reports that workers had had fallen ill.

The work stoppage was taken independently of the unions, and workers at both plants have set up rank-and-file safety committees demanding that they be notified of illnesses and that plants be shut down for deep cleaning every time a case is found.

- There have been a series of other actions over the past week in response to the pandemic and its economic fallout.

- On Friday, five hundred nurses at HCA Healthcare in Riverside, California went on strike to demand adequate staffing, safety equipment, and cleaning staff to combat the pandemic.

- Over 700 nurses in Joliet, Illinois are set to go on strike on July 4 in opposition to efforts to reduce staffing levels and speed-ups, which nurses say make it impossible to ensure safety.

- On Monday, thousands of nurses in Zimbabwe went on strike over pay.

- Over 4,000 shipbuilding workers remain on strike at Bath Iron Works in Virginia since last week in opposition to the shipbuilder outsourcing work to contractors.

- Also Monday, workers throughout Turkey took part in demonstrations against the government’s planned cuts to severance pay.

Up to this point, the global response to the pandemic has been dictated by the social interests of the capitalist class. Using the crisis created by the pandemic, the governments of the United States and Europe transferred trillions of dollars to the financial oligarchy through corporate bailouts and central bank interventions, which have driven stock markets to record highs in the face of the worst economic crisis in a century.

With these bailouts secured, the ruling elites focused on a single-minded campaign to get workers back to work at factories, warehouses, and other workplaces to generate profits for the corporations, regardless of the consequences for public health.

This has been accompanied by a campaign of economic blackmail. The Trump administration is demanding an end to emergency supplemental unemployment payments to unemployed workers on the grounds that such assistance is a “disincentive” for them to get back on the job.

But now, the working class is beginning to respond to the crisis. The demand by workers for safe workplaces and the full disclosure of individuals who have tested positive have corresponded to the demands of scientists and public health experts for the most vigorous action to contain the disease through public health measures.

Measures can be taken to stop the spread of the virus. As the WHO reiterated Monday, “the virus can be suppressed using the tools at hand.” If COVID-19 is not being contained, in the face of hundreds of years of scientific knowledge on how to manage infectious diseases, it is because the suppression of the virus cuts across social interests.

The dirty secret of capitalist society is that if the deaths of millions leads to greater corporate profitability and greater wealth for the capitalist class, then millions will die. The COVID-19 pandemic will not be contained without the intervention of the working class.

Workers around the world should follow the lead of workers at FCA in Detroit in forming rank-and-file workplace and safety committees to demand safe workplaces. The trade unions, beholden to the corporations and the state, will do nothing. Workers require their own organizations to coordinate actions across industries and internationally, ensure safe working conditions, and stop production when it is not

safe.

The development of a network of workers organizations must be connected to the building of a political leadership in the working class to direct the explosive social struggles that are emerging against the profit system.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International wrote on June 23:

When the apologists for the ruling class insist, “Don’t let the cure be worse than the disease,” workers must reply that the underlying social disease is capitalism, the pandemic is a symptom of this disease, and the cure is socialism.

COVID-19 must be fought on two fronts: the medical front, involving the most vigorous effort to suppress and contain the disease, and the political front, against the capitalist system and the governments that do its bidding. This is inseparable from the struggle to build the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, the Socialist Equality Parties, around the world.

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