

SEP (US) Congress resolution

The global pandemic, the class struggle, and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party

1 August 2020

This resolution was adopted unanimously by the membership of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States at its Sixth National Congress, which was held online from July 19 to July 24, 2020.

1. The COVID-19 pandemic is a trigger event in world history that is accelerating the already far-advanced economic, social, and political crisis of the world capitalist system. It is creating conditions for an immense intensification of the class struggle on an international scale. The working class is confronted with a crisis for which there is no progressive solution, apart from a revolutionary struggle against capitalism, leading to the conquest of state power, the establishment of democratic control by the working class over the economy, the replacement of the anarchy of the market with scientific planning, the ending of the nation-state system, and the building of a global socialist society dedicated to equality, the elimination of poverty and all forms of oppression and discrimination, a massive rise in the standard of living and the level of social culture, and the protection of the environment.

2. In defining the pandemic as a “trigger event,” the *World Socialist Web Site* has compared it to the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, which initiated a chain of events culminating in the outbreak of World War I. “Had the assassination not taken place,” the WSWS wrote, “it is doubtful that war would have come in August. But sooner or later, perhaps in the winter of 1914 or in the following year, the economic and geopolitical contradictions of European and global capitalism and imperialism would have led to a military conflagration. The assassination accelerated the historical process, but it acted upon preexisting and highly inflammable socioeconomic and political conditions.” [1]

3. While the specific conditions that produced the coronavirus have an accidental and contingent character, the response to the pandemic has been determined by the pre-existing conditions of capitalist crisis and the interests of the ruling class. The capitalist class has continued and intensified the same parasitic economic relations and social policies that it employed during the previous period.

4. When World War I began, it was assumed by all belligerents that it would be over relatively quickly. However, the conflict dragged on and on, year after year, because the capitalist ruling elites, who dictated government policy, considered the sacrifice of the lives of millions of workers an acceptable cost in achieving their geostrategic interests in the conflict. It required the intervention of the working class—in the form of the 1917 Russian Revolution and a wave of revolutionary struggles throughout Europe—to force an end to the carnage. In the present situation, the greatest obstacles to implementing an effective response to the pandemic are the economic and geo-strategic interests of the capitalist class, which has benefited from the crisis. The US and global stock markets continue to rise—and are now once again approaching record levels—along with the number of infections and deaths. The reckless return

to work in late May—before effective control over the spread of the virus had been achieved—was dictated entirely by the need of the corporate-financial elite to resume the untrammled exploitation of the working class to generate profits.

5. The situation is critical. The pandemic is spiraling out of control. As of mid-July, more than 13 million people globally have been infected. The death toll is nearly 700,000. New cases are at record highs, and the virus is accelerating rapidly throughout Latin America, the Middle East and South Asia.

6. The epicenter of the pandemic is in the United States. More than 4.5 million have been infected, or more than one out of every 100 people in the country. New cases are more than 70,000 a day. Hospitals in Florida, Texas and Arizona are at or over capacity, and nurses are running out of protective equipment. By the end of the summer, the official death toll will be in the area of 250,000 to 350,000—more than twice the US combat deaths in World War I, the Vietnam War and the Korean War combined.

7. Alongside the spread of the pandemic, there is a growing social crisis. Globally, the United Nations estimates that 265 million more people are at risk of starvation as a result of the pandemic. The International Labour Organization anticipates a loss of income for workers of up to \$3.4 trillion. In the United States, tens of millions remain unemployed, despite the end of lockdown measures, and 100,000 small businesses have closed permanently.

8. The disastrously inept, disorganized and inhumane response of the United States to the pandemic has exposed not only the incompetence and criminal character of the Trump administration, but also the political and moral bankruptcy of American capitalism and its ruling elite, whose social physiognomy has been shaped by the most extreme and truly criminal growth of “a whole system of swindling and cheating by means of corporation promotion, stock issuance and stock speculation.” [2] On this basis, and on a scale that even Marx could hardly have imagined possible, the ruling class has carried out, for the last 40 years, a policy of redistributing wealth from the working class to the rich.

9. The massive inflation of the stock market through speculation and financialization has produced unprecedented levels of social inequality, with three individuals possessing more wealth than the bottom half of the population.

10. “How long will it be until the pandemic is brought under control?” This is a question being asked by billions of people. The usual response is that the pandemic will continue until an effective vaccine is developed. This fatalistic answer is premised on the assumption that the COVID-19 crisis is almost exclusively a medical problem. What is left out are the social and political dimensions of the fight against the pandemic. As the uprising of the working class was necessary to bring an end to World War I, the class conscious intervention of the working class, in a struggle against capitalism, is necessary to create the conditions for an effective

social response to the disease. Even if a vaccination is near future, and even if it provides long-term immunity, which is not guaranteed, its distribution will be subject to the profit interests of the corporations and the geostrategic conflicts between the major capitalist powers. Moreover, the pandemic's containment will not bring the social and economic crisis to a conclusion. As was the case in the aftermath of World War I, the pandemic will leave deep scars and have long-lasting consequences. There will be no return to the conditions, as bad as they already were, that existed before its outbreak. The economic, social and political crisis will develop on the basis of the conditions created by the pandemic. The scope and intensity of the class struggle will increase, not diminish.

11. In justifying its reckless reopening of the economy, the capitalist media proclaimed: "The cure [the shutdown] must not be worse than the disease." In reality, the pandemic is a symptom. The disease is capitalism. The necessary treatment is the international class struggle. The cure is socialism.

12. To understand the present situation and chart a course for the future, it is necessary to review how the crisis has developed in the country that has become the global center of the pandemic, the United States.

December 2019–March 27, 2020: The outbreak of the pandemic, the suppression of information and the rescue of the corporate-financial elite

13. The first stage began with the initial outbreak of the virus in China, in December 2019, and its international transmission through Europe and into North America, and lasted until March 27, 2020, when President Donald Trump signed the so-called CARES Act. It was during these critical months that the Trump administration and congressional leaders of both capitalist parties—acting on the instructions of the corporate-financial elite—made the socially catastrophic decisions that prioritized the rescue of the banks, large corporations and powerful Wall Street investors, over preventing the spread of the pandemic and saving lives.

14. By early January 2020, the trained epidemiologists of the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control realized that the coronavirus had the potential to develop into a major global health care disaster. The previous experiences with the Swine Flu and Ebola outbreaks had provided the medical community with data that left little doubt about the consequences of a pandemic. As far back as 2005, pandemic specialist Laurie Garrett warned, in an article published in *Foreign Affairs*, of the dangers posed by the H5N1 avian influenza:

If the relentlessly evolving virus becomes capable of human-to-human transmission, develops a power of contagion typical of human influenzas, and maintains its extraordinary virulence, humanity could well face a pandemic unlike any ever witnessed. [3]

Garrett provided a chilling description of the American and international consequences of a viral pandemic transmittable from human to human. The United States, she wrote, "could be looking at 16 million deaths and unimaginable economic costs." [4] Garrett continued:

The entire world would experience similar levels of viral carnage, and those areas ravaged by HIV and home to millions of immunocompromised individuals might witness even greater death tolls. In response, some countries might impose useless but highly disruptive quarantines, or close borders and airports, perhaps for months. Such closures would disrupt trade, travel, and productivity.

developed doubt the world's stock markets would teeter and perhaps fall precipitously. [5]

15. Clearly, the United States government and its intelligence-gathering agencies understood by the first days of 2020—and, in all likelihood, by the second half of December—that the world stood on the very brink of a health care disaster. Whatever the precise timetable of the United States' gathering of information, reports of the danger began to seep into the global press during January. The *World Socialist Web Site* provided its first detailed account of the coronavirus on January 24, 2020. Just four days later, the WSWS explained:

[W]hile the governments of the world, particularly the United States, have made meticulous plans for large-scale war during the past quarter-century, no such resources or forethought have been devoted to combating the rash of epidemics that have plagued the planet over the same period. [6]

16. Despite the extreme health danger posed by the spread of the pandemic, the ruling class was virtually exclusively concentrated on the economic impact of a pandemic, that is, how the disease would impact the stock market and the personal wealth of the richest one to five percent of society. The capitalist oligarchy feared, first of all, that unambiguous public acknowledgement of the danger would lead to a financial panic, causing the markets "to teeter and perhaps fall precipitously."

17. Its concerns were not unfounded. The US Federal Reserve Bank had responded to the historic financial crash of 2008–2009 by flooding Wall Street banks and investment firms with hundreds of billions of dollars. The 2008–09 crisis was itself the outcome of a protracted decay of capitalism, which found its most noxious expression in the process known as financialization, that is, the ever more extreme separation of the accumulation of wealth by the corporate-financial elite from the process of production. This unprecedented financial bailout, known as "quantitative easing," had provided the corporate financial elite with ultra-low interest loans—"free money"—which were used to orchestrate share "buy backs" that inflated the value of equities and other speculative assets.

18. Even before the pandemic struck, it was becoming increasingly clear that the US and world economy were perched on a mountain of debt (fictitious capital), whose volume far exceeded the productive and profit generating capacity of the real economy. The spread of the pandemic threatened an economic shutdown that would cut off the flow of revenues required to service massive levels of debt. As the Bank of International Settlements explained, in a report issued in April 2020:

The COVID-19 shock is placing enormous strains on corporate cash buffers. Corporate financial statements from 2019 suggest that 50% of firms do not have sufficient cash to cover total servicing costs over the coming year. [7]

19. The report continued:

No other recession in modern times has hit the corporate sector as badly as the COVID-19 shock. Firms are now facing unprecedentedly large declines in revenues as nation-wide lockdowns are imposed to safeguard public health. The ability of

firms to withstand these exceptional circumstances will determine whether the COVID-19 recession leaves a lasting scar on economic activity through widespread corporate bankruptcies. [8]

20. In this situation, the financial interests of the corporate-financial elite were incompatible with and hostile to all public health measures that restricted the inflow of revenues. While a massive corporate-financial bailout was being prepared behind the scenes, between January and March, the Trump administration repeatedly claimed that the pandemic would miraculously disappear, with little impact on lives. Federal and state governments, run by both the Democrats and Republicans, refused to take any action to shut down non-essential production.

21. On February 28, the ICFI issued a statement calling for a “globally coordinated emergency response” to the pandemic. With the number of cases approaching 100,000 (compared with more than 12 million today), the ICFI warned, “the danger cannot be overstated.” The statement called for an international mobilization of scientists to develop countermeasures to contain, cure and ultimately eradicate the virus; a massive allocation of resources for health care and treatment; and the redistribution of wealth to support all those impacted by the virus. [9]

22. The WSWS defined the deliberate inaction of governments as “malign neglect.” [10] The attitude of indifference on the part of governments to the virus was conditioned by concerns over its impact on the markets. The ruling class was well aware that the economic consequences for businesses would require a bailout that would far exceed what was provided following the 2008 crisis.

23. Rather than taking measures to stop the virus and save lives, the ruling class used the months of February and March to prepare and implement a multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street. The scale of the intervention testified to the desperation of the economic situation. Between February 19 and March 23, as it became impossible to conceal from the public the danger posed by the pandemic, the S&P 500 index lost one third of its value.

24. In opposition to the ruling class’ policy of “malign neglect,” the working class began taking action to protect itself against the pandemic. Walkouts and protest actions were organized by workers employed by Instacart, Amazon and Whole Foods. Auto workers in the United States and Canada carried out a series of wildcat actions, which coincided with a wave of strikes and protests in Europe. Articles published on the WSWS and statements by the SEP, including the March 14 statement, “Shut down the auto industry to halt the spread of the coronavirus!,” were read and shared by tens of thousands of workers. Under growing pressure from the working class and with the bailout legislation still in preparation, the federal, state and local governments were compelled to accede to a lockdown of the economy.

25. In late March, Congress passed, with a nearly unanimous vote, the CARES Act, which gave hundreds of billions to corporations and sanctioned the multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street by the US Federal Reserve. In a matter of weeks, the balance sheet of the Fed grew from \$4 trillion to more than \$7 trillion, as it bought up assets and debt from banks and major corporations.

26. The passage of the CARES Act brought the first stage of the crisis to a conclusion. In a letter dated March 28, to Nick Beams, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, US SEP National Chairman David North assessed the events of the first three months of 2020 in the context of the historic crisis of the capitalist system.

Not surprisingly, the bourgeois media has attributed the staggering fall in the global markets entirely to the pandemic. But this is not sufficient. Before the coronavirus began to spread, it was apparent

that the wild rise in share values had assumed a malignant character, fueled by the limitless availability of QE funding and the historically unprecedented suppression of interest rates by the Fed and central banks in Europe. There even emerged the phenomenon of negative interest rates. The mountain of fictitious capital made possible the innumerable gimmicks employed by the ruling class to drive shares ever higher (such as share buybacks) and enrich itself.

The most striking feature of the market sell-off of the last three weeks (notwithstanding the three day “dead cat’s bounce”) was its astonishing speed. Trillions were lopped off share values in a matter of days—faster than any other decline in modern history. The velocity of the collapse was determined by the unreal character of the previous magical levitation of share values. This is what led immediately to hysterical demands for the multi-trillion-dollar bailout. The passage of the bailout—with a few crumbs to hold back a social explosion for a few months—is the continuation, on a new and even more gigantic scale, of the creation of fictitious capital, i.e., the conjuring up of value independent of production. The bourgeoisie knows full well that this gigantic economic Ponzi scheme cannot last. And, for this reason, the pandemic becomes a real problem. It is one thing to expand debt levels when production is taking place. It is quite another to do so when production is seizing up all over the globe. The disparity between the expansion of debt and the massive decline in the production of value through the labor process (in all the forms in which it is manifested) cannot be concealed. And this gives rise to the demands from Trump and the capitalist oligarchs for a speedy resumption of work. “The cure to the pandemic cannot be worse than the disease.”

We are approaching a critical stage in the historical crisis of capitalism. Confronted with bankruptcy as a result of the collapse triggered by the pandemic, the ruling class is demanding that its state place at its disposal trillions of dollars to stave off bankruptcy. At the same time, it is preparing to employ the same state to launch, as soon as it has completed the necessary political and logistical preparations, a ruthless attack on the working class.

March 27–May 31, 2020: The back-to-work campaign and the protests against police violence

27. This analysis was rapidly confirmed by events. Once the bailout was implemented, the focus of the ruling class turned to the imperative to resume full economic production, in order to force the working class to pay for the bailout and finance the staggering levels of fictitious capital generated by the Federal Reserve.

28. The campaign for an end to the lockdown and a rapid return to work was initiated and given political legitimacy by the *New York Times*, the main media voice of powerful corporate-financial interests affiliated with the Democratic Party. On March 22, with the CARES Act approaching passage by Congress, Thomas Friedman wrote a column titled “A Plan to Get America Back to Work.” Friedman claimed that the United States had “stumbled” into a lockdown. Providing the signal for a massive anti-lockdown propaganda campaign, Friedman wrote:

But as so many of our businesses shut down and million begin to be laid off, some experts are beginning to ask: “Wait a minute! *What the hell are we doing to ourselves?* To our economy? To the next generation? Is this cure—even for a short while—worse than the disease?”

29. Sarcastically referring to “the advice of serious epidemiologists” as

“group think,” Friedman began touting a program of herd immunity, only “sequestering those among us most likely to be killed or suffer long-term by exposure to coronavirus infection... while basically treating the rest of society the way we have always dealt with familiar threats like the flu.” Irresponsibly touting anti-scientific nonsense, Friedman downplayed the danger of the pandemic, declaring, “as with the flu, the vast majority will get over it in days, a small number will require hospitalization and a very small percentage of the most vulnerable will tragically die.” Since Friedman wrote those words, the “very small percentage” of fatally infected amounts to over 130,000 deaths in the United States.

30. The line of the “liberal” *New York Times* was echoed throughout the media. The *Wall Street Journal* declared: “The crowd that demands the economy remain locked-down until there’s a vaccine, miracle therapy or daily testing of everyone in the country seem to think the government can replace the private economy... the virus will be with us for a long time unless there’s a vaccine, so we have to learn to live with it and have a functioning economy.” [11]

31. The forcible reopening of the economy coincided with and was justified by the assault of the Trump administration on the World Health Organisation (WHO) the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and on the science of the pandemic itself. Trump’s bombastic and ignorant promotion of untested drugs, such as Hydroxychloroquine and Remdesivir, was taken to frightening levels when he suggested, on April 24, that people inject themselves with bleach and insert ultraviolet lights into their bodies. His declaration that if testing was not performed, cases would not be found, is of a piece with the policy of herd immunity, with the underlying attitude of “let it rip.” Warnings by epidemiologists, virologists and medical staff of the dire consequences of prematurely lifting restrictions were dismissed and ridiculed. Nothing would prevent workers from being herded back into factories, schools and workplaces.

32. The relentless pressure for a re-opening of the economy, the staggering absence of essential equipment or a coherent medical strategy, the sheer incompetence of government actions, and the brutal indifference of major corporations to the health and safety of their workforces, rapidly translated into an explosion of infections and deaths. As for the economic measures implemented by the government, unemployment rose to levels not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Millions of workers became dependent on food lines. Hundreds of thousands of small businesses were deprived of the financial assistance that they had been promised.

33. But for the rich, the pandemic has been a financial blessing. The passage of the CARES Act initiated the most dramatic and fastest recovery of share values in history. Between March and May, the main market indices rose by 30 percent. Discussing the chasm between Wall Street and Main Street, the *Economist* explained, with unabashed bluntness:

Much of the improved mood is because of the Fed, which has acted more dramatically than other central banks, buying up assets on an unimagined scale. It is committed to purchasing even more corporate debt, including high-yield “junk” bonds. The market for new issues of corporate bonds, which froze in February, has reopened in spectacular style. Companies have issued \$560bn of bonds in the past six weeks, double the normal level. Even beached cruise-line firms have been able to raise cash, albeit at a high price. A cascade of bankruptcies at big firms has been forestalled. The central bank has, in effect, backstopped the cash flow of America Inc. The stock market has taken the hint and climbed. [12]

34. Throughout March and April, in dozens of articles and statements,

the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party warned repeatedly of the catastrophic outcome of the ruling class’ back-to-work campaign. On March 24, responding to Friedman’s column, it called the policy of the ruling elite a form of “socially sanctioned euthanasia... In the face of the greatest crisis facing American capitalism, the ruling class is revealing itself to be not just parasitic, but homicidal.” [13] On April 11, the SEP issued a statement declaring that “the aim of the Trump administration and the American ruling class as a whole is to ‘normalize’ the pandemic, that is, to acclimate the population to the fact that large numbers of people will die for some time to come...” The death of workers is to be treated as “a cost of doing business, with those who succumb to the disease replaced by others.” [14]

35. On April 18, the WSWWS called attention to comments in the *New York Times* and in the international press arguing against excessive concern for the protection of human life. One comment in the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* declared that measures to stop the pandemic meant choosing “economic suicide to prevent individual elderly people from passing away a few years earlier,” while another in the German *Der Spiegel* argued that stopping the pandemic violated the principle that “life is not conceivable without death.” “These are arguments,” the WSWWS noted, “with which Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, who committed suicide 75 years ago this month in his Berlin bunker, would have readily agreed.” [15]

36. The response of the ruling class to the pandemic produced a significant growth of social tensions and class struggle. The trigger for the eruption of mass demonstrations was a series of incidences of police violence. On March 13, police killed Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky after barging into her home while she slept. In early May, dashcam footage was released of the February 25 murder of Ahmaud Arbery in Brunswick, Georgia by a former police officer and public investigator and his son. Then, on May 25, Memorial Day, four police officers participated in the brutal murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with the horrific scene captured on cell phone footage viewed by millions of people.

37. The murder of Floyd ignited multiracial and multiethnic demonstrations in every major city in the US, including in the traditionally conservative deep South, and in countries on every continent. After decades of suppression of social protest and class struggle, with the active complicity of the trade unions, anger and resentment burst into the open. While the protests were sparked by police violence, their underlying causes were anger over the protracted and severe decline in living standards, the crushing debt levels imposed upon youth and the bleakness of their prospects for the future, pervasive social inequality and its consequences, the constriction of democratic rights, and the impossibility of effecting meaningful change and improvement in social conditions within the framework of the existing political structures of the two-party system.

38. The Socialist Equality Party welcomed and supported these protests. On May 30, the SEP explained, “These demonstrations—which are taking place in the midst of the pandemic despite the serious risks involved—are a powerful and inspiring manifestation of a deep-rooted commitment to the defense of democratic rights, hatred of fascistic police and the Trump administration, and a profound commitment to the unity of all sections of the working class.” [16] These demonstrations vindicated the SEP’s analysis that a genuinely progressive alternative to the Trump administration could emerge only on the basis of a mass movement *from below*, and not from a palace coup, instigated *from above* by the Democratic Party, in alliance with sections of the military and intelligence agencies that are disgruntled over Trump’s handling of relations with Russia and China. In a statement published in 2017, the WSWWS predicted:

Mass struggles are on the agenda in the United States. Protest rallies, demonstrations and strikes will tend to acquire a general nation-wide character. The political conclusion that flows from this analysis is that the fight of the working class against Trump and all that he represents will raise ever more urgently the necessity of a political mass movement, independent of and opposed to both the Republicans and the Democrats, against the capitalist system and its state. [17]

39. The Trump administration is directly responsible for both the murder of Floyd and the police crackdown on demonstrators. Last October, Trump delivered a diatribe against socialists and the “radical Left” in Minneapolis, supported by cops who waved banners reading “Law & Order vote Trump.” Trump has repeatedly encouraged police violence as part of his efforts to develop a rightwing, fascistic base of support for the policies of the financial oligarchy. In the weeks leading up to the murder of Floyd, Trump promoted far-right demonstrations to “liberate” Minnesota, Michigan, Virginia and other states from any restrictions aimed at containing the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

40. At its root, however, police violence—which claims the lives of more than 1,000 workers and youth of all races every year—is a product of class rule. The epidemic of police murder persisted under Obama and takes places in states and cities throughout the country, whether controlled by Republicans or, including in the case of Minneapolis, Democrats. Under conditions of growing social unrest, the police, increasingly integrated with the military, will be used as a force of violent repression.

41. Therefore, the SEP concluded, police violence can be opposed only through the mobilization of the working class against the ruling class and its state. “The fight against police brutality must be fused with the growing movement of the working class against unsafe working conditions, mass unemployment, social inequality and mass poverty. It is a fight against the capitalist system and for socialism. [18]

42. In explaining the historic significance of the protests against police violence, the SEP drew particular attention to the international character of the demonstrations as a reflection of the impact of economic globalization and revolutionary transformations in the forms of communication, the revolutionary consequences to which the ICFI pointed as early as 1988. In a statement published on June 15, the SEP wrote:

These interrelated processes have intensified the essential contradictions between the ossified system of national states and the reality of a global economy. Moreover, the process of globalization has created the basis for a unified, international movement of the working class against capitalism. The possibility of the global unity of the working class is not a utopian vision. Its concrete realization arises from the existing conditions of global capitalist production... [19]

June 1–July 2020: Trump’s coup and the racist politics of the Democratic Party

43. The response of the Trump administration was to attempt to stage a presidential coup, overturning the Constitution and deploying the military throughout the country. On June 1, Trump held a press conference in the Rose Garden of the White House, in which he declared his intention to invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807 to brand opposition to police violence as “domestic terrorism.” As federal police launched a violent attack on citizens engaged in peaceful protests outside the White House, Trump declared that he was the president of “law and order.” If cities or states

did not take measures the White House deemed sufficiently aggressive, Trump said, “I will deploy the US military and quickly solve the problem for them.”

44. Trump’s moves to overturn the Constitution took place as the White House was aggressively pushing the back-to-work campaign. Floyd was killed on Memorial Day, which was promoted as a key milestone in the reopening of the economy. Trump declared, in a call to governors before the Rose Garden speech: “It’s a movement. If you don’t put it down, it will get worse and worse.” That is, what began as protests against police violence could rapidly develop into a broader movement of the working class against capitalism.

45. The Democrats ceded all opposition to Trump’s plotting to top military figures and retired generals, who were worried that such an action would set the country very rapidly in the direction of civil war. No top Democrat issued a major statement exposing the far-reaching consequences for democratic rights.

46. Joe Biden, the Democrats’ presumptive nominee for president, responded by praising the “four chiefs of staff [for] coming out and ripping the skin off Trump.” If Trump refused to leave office if defeated in the 2020 elections, Biden said, “I promise you, I’m absolutely convinced they [the military] will escort him from the White House in a—with great dispatch.” As the WSWS wrote:

As Biden’s comments make clear, the Democrats consider the military the ultimate arbiter of politics in the United States. Neither Congress nor the Democratic Party lifted a finger against this presidential declaration of authoritarian rule. It was only because of opposition from the Pentagon brass, which felt such a military action was both poorly prepared and *not yet* necessary, that Trump pulled back. [20]

47. The Socialist Equality Party was alone in alerting the working class to the dangers of Trump’s actions. In “A call to the working class! Stop Trump’s coup d’état!,” published on June 4, the SEP wrote:

The target of the conspiracy in the White House is the working class. The corporate-financial oligarchy is terrified that the eruption of mass demonstrations against police violence will intersect with the immense social anger among workers over social inequality, which has been enormously intensified as a result of the ruling class response to the coronavirus pandemic and the homicidal back-to-work campaign.

Nothing could be more dangerous than to think that the crisis has passed. It has, rather, just begun. The working class must intervene in this unprecedented crisis as an independent social and political force. It must oppose the conspiracy in the White House through the methods of class struggle and socialist revolution. [21]

48. These warnings were confirmed in July by the Trump administration’s deployment of federal paramilitary forces in Portland, with threats of further deployments in other cities, in blatant violation of the Constitution and its Bill of Rights. Unidentified agents in military gear, operating under the Department of Homeland Security, seized unarmed protesters and threw them into unmarked cars to be transferred to unknown locations.

49. In response to this unprecedented assault, the mayors of Chicago, Washington, D.C, Atlanta and Kansas City cosigned a letter drafted by Portland’s mayor, in which they declared: “Unilaterally deploying these

paramilitary-type forces into our cities is wholly inconsistent with our system of democracy and our most basic values.” In an interview with the fascistic Fox News commentator Sean Hannity on July 23, Trump warned, “We will go into all of the cities, any of the cities. We’re ready. We will put in 50,000, 60,000 people that really know what they’re doing. And they’re strong. They’re tough. And we could solve these problems so fast.”

50. The dictatorial implications of Trump’s resort to armed force against political opposition is made explicit by his public threats to remain in office regardless of the results of the upcoming election.

51. It was not only Trump who was unnerved by the mass protests. The sections of the capitalist class and the affluent middle class aligned with the Democratic Party, always extremely sensitive to any sign of working class militancy and socialist influence, intervened to hijack the demonstrations and misdirect them along explicitly racist lines. In opposition to this reactionary tendency the SEP warned:

The aim of the racial sectarians is to deflect attention from the police as an instrument of the capitalist state and the front-line guardians of *class rule*. Moreover, the efforts to impose a racial narrative on the demonstrations are contradicted by their obviously multiracial, multiethnic and multinational character.” [22]

52. Determined to disorient the protest movement and suppress the growth of the class struggle, the *New York Times* intensified its campaign—which it had initiated in August 2019 with the launching of the 1619 Project—to discredit the American Revolution, the Civil War and its principal leaders. What began as a legitimate demand for the removal of the statues of leaders of the Confederacy became the occasion for defacing and removing statues that memorialize the lives of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Grant and even a prominent abolitionist.

53. In opposing the campaign to take down statues of the leaders of the American Revolution and Civil War, the WSWS explained that while Trump pitches his appeal to the most politically disoriented elements in American society, in a manner intended to incite racial antagonisms, the Democratic Party

employs another variant of communalist politics, evaluating and explaining all social problems and conflicts in racial terms. Whatever the particular issue may be—poverty, police brutality, unemployment, low wages, deaths caused by the pandemic—it is almost exclusively defined in racial terms. In this racialized fantasy world, “whites” are endowed with an innate “privilege” that exempts them from all hardship.

This grotesque distortion of present-day reality requires a no less grotesque distortion of the past. For contemporary America to be portrayed as a land of relentless racial warfare, it is necessary to create a historical narrative in the same terms. In place of the class struggle, the entire history of the United States is presented as the story of perpetual racial conflict. [23]

54. Racism exists and is particularly promoted among the reactionary layers drawn into the police departments. It is, as are all forms of bigotry and discrimination, fomented as a tool of the ruling class. However, the United States is not divided into a “white America” and a “black America” that have distinct interests, nor do all “white people” benefit from police violence and oppression, as is claimed by the promoters of racist politics.

55. Despite the efforts to make race the central axis of American politics—an effort which is closely bound up with the reactionary demand of sections of the African American bourgeoisie and upper-middle class for “reparations”—the overwhelming social reality of the United States is economic inequality, which is rooted in the division of society based on class. A recent examination of the distribution of wealth and income by the noted economists Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman found

a sharp divergence in the growth experienced by the bottom 50% versus the rest of the economy. The average pretax income of the bottom 50% of adults has stagnated at about \$16,000 per adult (in constant 2014 dollars, using the national income deflator) since 1980, while average income per adult has grown by 60% to \$64,500 in 2014. As a result, the bottom 50% income share has collapsed from about 20% in 1980 to 12% in 2014. In the meantime, the average pretax income of top 1% adults rose from \$420,000 to about \$1.3 million, and their income share increased from about 12% in the early 1980s to 20% in 2014. The two groups have essentially switched their income shares, with eight points of national income transferred from the bottom 50% to the top 1%. The top 1% income share is now almost twice as large as the bottom 50 percent, a group that is by definition 50 times more numerous. In 1980, top 1% adults earned on average 27 times more than bottom 50% adults before tax, while they earn 81 times more today.

Six months of the pandemic: Results and Prospects

56. Six months after the COVID-19 virus was first detected, it is spreading throughout the United States. Earlier talk about the potential dangers of a second wave of the pandemic in the fall have given way to the realization that the first wave has not been brought under control and is still wreaking havoc throughout the country. Even the broadcast media has become far more cautious and sparing in its use of stock phrases, heard so often in April and May, such as “glimmers of hope,” “turning the corner” and “light at the end of the tunnel.” The most recent official estimate of fatalities is that 225,000 Americans will succumb to the disease by November—a figure that will prove in all likelihood to be well below the actual toll.

57. Despite the fact that the ruling oligarchy subordinated all considerations of public health to protecting Wall Street investors, the economic situation is becoming increasingly desperate. The spectacular rise in the stock market, since the passage of the CARES Act in March, has been a speculative phenomenon unrelated to any recovery of the real economy. But concern is being voiced in financial circles that the Federal Reserve’s digital money printing cannot go on forever, and that its actions are increasingly ineffective. The *Financial Times* recently warned of “the limits of Fed power:”

This spring’s remarkable actions undoubtedly delivered a positive jolt to the economy. But it will be extremely difficult for the Fed to deliver a similar shock to sentiment again anytime soon; we are now in the territory of incremental action. And the Fed cannot plug the ever-widening holes in the balance sheets of insolvent companies, replace lost consumer demand or reverse all job cuts. Even fiscal support can probably only delay, not remove, the pain.

To understand this, consider airlines. This spring, US carriers received fiscal support and pledged in exchange to not cut staff until October 1. But in the past two weeks, Delta has announced 17,000 early retirements and United sent furlough notices to 45 percent of its

US employees.

58. The first half of the year has been dominated by the response of the ruling class to the pandemic. The response of the working class will come to the forefront in the second half. The disastrous consequences of the ruling class' policies have delivered a staggering blow to the legitimacy of the capitalist system. The corporate response to economic collapse—mass layoffs, wage-cutting, demands for the further slashing of expenditures for Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security and other vital and already underfunded social programs—will meet with growing resistance in the working class. Opposition will mount to working in unsafe conditions and to school re-openings that facilitate the spread of the COVID-19 virus. There will be opposition to evictions and foreclosures. Therefore, the Socialist Equality Party foresees an immense growth of working class struggle, which, through the intervention of the party, will assume a politically class conscious and anti-capitalist character.

Imperialism and the danger of war

59. The American ruling class recognizes the mortal threat posed by the growth of social militancy and political consciousness within the working class. As we have already explained, it is prepared to employ whatever means it considers necessary to counteract the danger to its rule: from the use of racial politics to divide the working class, the intensification of police state measures to suppress progressive and, above all, socialist opposition, and, finally, the repudiation of constitutional norms and the open resort to dictatorship.

60. But these domestic tactics will proceed in tandem with an enormous escalation of imperialist militarism. As in all other spheres of economic, social and political policy, the pandemic is accelerating the preparations of American imperialism for war. At the very beginning of 2020, prior to the outbreak of the pandemic in the United States, the *World Socialist Web Site* called urgent attention to the implications of the Trump administration's assassination of Iranian Major General Qassem Suleimani on January 2, 2020:

Even as 2020 is just getting under way, the murder of Major General Qassem Suleimani, ordered by President Donald Trump, threatens all-out war between the United States and Iran, with incalculable consequences. The involvement of an American president in yet another targeted killing, followed by bloodthirsty boasting, testifies to the far-advanced derangement of the entire ruling elite.

61. Despite the tactical decision to delay further military strikes against Iran, the WSWS warned, "Nothing that has happened in the last two days has changed the military objectives of the United States. The same geopolitical imperatives that brought about this week's crisis will bring about new ones."

62. Throughout the pandemic, there has been no letup in the bellicose policies of the United States. In May, the Trump administration backed an aborted coup attempt in Venezuela by US-led mercenaries. US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo has maintained a heavy travel schedule, demanding support for American threats against Russia and its primary geo-political rival, China. The Trump administration has sought to generate hostility by referring regularly to the "Wuhan virus," even to the point of claiming, without any evidence, that China set out to infect the American public. This wild claim has been supported by the *Washington Post* and leading media commentators such as Fareed Zakharia. Not to be outdone in war-mongering, the *New York Times* fabricated a report that

Russia had paid Taliban fighters to kill American soldiers in Afghanistan.

63. In the final analysis, the war preparations of American imperialism are driven by its efforts, as it confronts a growing challenge from China, to maintain its position as the global hegemon. The long-term erosion of its economic dominance compels the United States to rely increasingly on military power. This tendency has been accentuated by the economic and political impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The decision in early July to send two aircraft carrier strike groups into the South China Sea testifies to the recklessness that prevails within the highest levels of the US government.

64. The danger of war should not be underestimated. There are many examples in the twentieth century of a crisis-ridden regime—that of Hitler is the most notorious example—resorting to war as a solution to what it perceives to be a desperate crisis within the borders of its own country. In particular, the Trump administration's belligerent attacks on China are driven in large part by its need to direct enormous social tensions within the United States outward against an external enemy.

65. The accelerating crisis of world capitalism is not only fueling the US war drive against China and Russia. It is also intensifying conflicts between the US and the major imperialist powers of Europe, particularly Germany. At the same time, the unending imperialist wars and regime change operations in the Middle East and Latin America have created the unprecedented refugee crisis, with more than one percent of humanity—nearly 80 million people—forcibly displaced. The pandemic is having a particularly catastrophic impact on these migrant populations.

66. There is no answer to this danger apart from the development of a powerful anti-war movement of the American and international working class.

Tasks of the Socialist Equality Party

67. The work of the party is guided by the unshakable conviction that the working class is the basic and leading revolutionary force in society, and that the American working class, notwithstanding the immense challenges that it confronts, in the most powerful bastion of world imperialism, will rise to the level of its historic tasks.

68. A quarter century has passed since the founding of the Socialist Equality Party in June 1995. Previously, the American co-thinkers of the International Committee of the Fourth International had existed as the Workers League (which had been founded in 1966). The transition from a league to a party was a response to the breakdown, in the 1980s and early 1990s, of all the old nationalistic and bureaucratically dominated mass parties and trade unions. The previous tactic of placing demands on the old organizations—with the expectation that the growth of the revolutionary party would assume the form of a radicalization within the framework of these organizations—was superseded by objective processes and events.

69. Drawing the necessary political conclusions from the altered situation, David North motivated the transition from the Workers League to the Socialist Equality Party:

If there is to be leadership given to the working class, it must be provided by our party. If a new road is to be opened for the masses of working people, it must be opened by our organization. The problem of leadership cannot be resolved on the basis of a clever tactic. We cannot resolve the crisis of working class leadership by "demanding" that others provide that leadership. If there is to be a new party, then we must build it.

70. As a result of this initiative, which was implemented by all the sections of the International Committee, the Fourth International has been

able to vastly expand its political influence in the working class. The launching of the *World Socialist Web Site* in February 1998, which arose out of the transformation of leagues into parties, has been a crucial factor in establishing the role of the ICFI as the authoritative representative of socialism. During the past quarter century, the reactionary role of petty-bourgeois agencies of imperialism like Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and the Left Party in Germany, to name only a few, has been thoroughly exposed. Bernie Sanders' aborted presidential campaign—into which the International Socialist Organization and countless other middle-class tendencies had dissolved themselves—differed from these other organizations only in the American-size scale of its pragmatic fatuousness and programmatic bankruptcy. The International Committee can reaffirm the words written by Trotsky in the founding program of the Fourth International: “Outside these cadre [of the ICFI] there does not exist a single revolutionary current on this planet really meriting the name.”

71. The Socialist Equality Party must act upon the revolutionary implications of the present crisis. Opposition to the policies of the ruling class is growing. Even as the pandemic rages out of control, the Trump administration, with the backing of the Democratic Party, is demanding a reopening of the schools in the fall, risking the lives of hundreds of thousands of teachers and students. Federal unemployment benefits will be eliminated or scaled back by the end of this month, as the financial oligarchs seek to use the social crisis facing millions of people as a form of economic blackmail.

72. In November 2019, shortly before the outbreak of the pandemic, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a high-level think tank, made the following assessment of the world situation:

Mass protest movements are roiling politics around the globe... Protesters are frustrated with perceived corruption and economic inequality. Often young, angry, and urban, protesters are not an organized opposition proposing the substitution of their party or ideology for an existing one but a leaderless movement demanding their voices are heard. In some cases, protesters' demands are clear; more often they are muddled. Across the board the aggrieved want change in systems that feel outdated, broken, or nonresponsive. [28]

73. On January 3, before there was any news of the expansion of the coronavirus beyond China, the Socialist Equality Party published a statement defining the 2020s as a “decade of socialist revolution.” Pointing to the mass demonstrations and strikes in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Colombia, Chile, France, Spain, Algeria, Britain, Lebanon, Hong Kong, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Kenya, South Africa, India and many other countries, the SEP wrote that “the objective conditions for socialist revolution emerge out of the global crisis.” [29]

74. As with all elements of the capitalist crisis, the pandemic is vastly accelerating the growth of social opposition in the working class. As great as the crisis is, however, it does not lead automatically to socialism. Writing in 1935, another period of explosive social conflicts, on the eve of the Second World War, Trotsky explained that “Marxism, the only scientific theory of the proletarian revolution, has nothing in common with the fatalistic hope for the ‘final’ crisis. Marxism is, in its very essence, a set of directives for revolutionary action. Marxism does not overlook will and courage, but rather aids them to find the right road.” He continued:

There is no crisis which can be, by itself, fatal to capitalism. The oscillations of the business cycle only create a situation in which it

will be easier, or more difficult, for the proletariat to overthrow capitalism. The transition from a bourgeois society to a socialist society presupposes the activity of living men who are the makers of their own history. They do not make history by accident, or according to their caprice, but under the influence of objectively determined causes. However, their own actions—their initiative, audacity, devotion, and likewise their stupidity and cowardice—are necessary links in the chain of historical development. [30]

75. Criticizing the bureaucratic fatalism of the Stalinists, Trotsky added, “a revolutionary situation does not fall from the sky. It comes about in the class struggle. The party of the working class is the most important *political* factor in the development of a revolutionary situation.”

76. The work of the Socialist Equality Party during the second half of 2020 will develop under conditions of an escalating political crisis. The upcoming presidential campaign will provide further evidence of the political bankruptcy of the two main capitalist parties, which are the servants of the financial-corporate oligarchy. However bitter their tactical differences, the Democrats and Republicans are equally committed to the defense of the capitalist system. Regardless of which party wins the election—and that requires the debatable assumption that the election will be held—the tendencies that found such noxious expression during the Trump administration will persist and worsen. It is undeniable that Trump is a fascistic gangster. But he did not slither like a snake into an American Garden of Eden. Trump is nothing other than the individual personification of the most parasitical, ruthless and reactionary ruling class in the world. The policies of his administration are less a break with than a continuation, under conditions of intense crisis, of those of Reagan (1981–89), Bush I (1989–1993), Clinton (1993–2001), Bush II (2001–2009) and Obama (2009–2017).

77. The Democratic Party and its pseudo-left agents seek to present the election in existential terms, warning of the catastrophe that awaits the country should Trump be re-elected. But the catastrophe has already struck, and it will continue should Joseph Biden become president. The assault on the working class will continue. As for foreign policy, the Democrats have made clear that they intend to escalate the confrontation with Russia and China.

78. The presidential campaign of the Socialist Equality Party is based not on electoral calculations, but on the logic of the class struggle. The SEP candidates, Joseph Kishore and Norissa Santa-Cruz, will utilize the campaign to encourage the independent militancy of the working class, raise its political consciousness and understanding of the socialist perspective, and prepare workers and youth for the struggles that lie ahead, regardless of which capitalist party wins the election. Above all, the SEP will utilize the campaign to explain to American workers that they are part of an international class, and that the struggle against capitalism in the United States can be successful only to the extent that it is waged on the basis of an international strategy, opposed to all forms of nationalism.

79. The size and geographic scope of the mass demonstrations of 2019 demonstrate the growth of a globally integrated international working class, now comprised of 3 billion people. The past 30 years have seen a massive shift away from agricultural work, as hundreds of millions of peasants and farmers migrated to the cities and joined the ranks of the working class. In 2007, for the first time in world history, a majority of humanity lived in urban areas. The working class is increasingly interconnected by technology, with over 2 billion people accessing the internet for the first time, between 2014 and 2019.

80. Within the framework of this internationalist strategy, the central focus of the activity of the party must be on intervening systematically in the class struggle and winning to the party the most politically conscious

workers and youth. The party must bear in mind the words of Trotsky: “What are the tasks? The strategic task consists of helping the masses, of adapting their mentality politically and psychologically to the objective situation, of overcoming the prejudicial traditions of the American workers, and of adapting it to the objective situation of the social crisis of the whole system.” [31]

81. Trotsky wrote in the founding program of the Fourth International: “The strategic task of the Fourth International lies not in reforming capitalism but in its overthrow. Its political aim is the conquest of power by the proletariat for the purpose of expropriating the bourgeoisie. However, the achievement of this strategic task is unthinkable without the most considered attention to all, even small and partial, questions of tactics. All sections of the proletariat, all its layers, occupations and groups should be drawn into the revolutionary movement. The present epoch is distinguished not for the fact that it frees the revolutionary party from day-to-day work but because it permits this work to be carried on indissolubly with the actual tasks of the revolution.”

82. In carrying out this work, the SEP advances, as advised by Trotsky, transitional demands—that is, demands and initiatives that connect the issues and needs arising from a concrete situation to the strategy of socialist revolution. In relation to the coronavirus pandemic, the SEP calls for and will fight for an end to the reckless and criminal back-to-work campaign; the repeal of the corporate-Wall Street bailout; an emergency program to provide economic security for all unemployed people and vastly expand the health care infrastructure; the expropriation of the wealth of the corporate and financial elite to address the urgent social crisis facing tens of millions of people; and the establishment of workers’ democratic ownership and control of the major banks and corporations.

83. All of these demands proceed from the foundation that the response to the pandemic must be based on what workers and society as a whole need, not what the capitalist system and the financial oligarchs are prepared to give. They lead inexorably to the ultimate conclusion: the need to establish workers’ power and abolish capitalism.

84. Specific tasks flow from this perspective:

a. The intensification of the party’s fight to develop a network of rank-and-file safety committees linking every factory, office and workplace. These committees, democratically controlled by the 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. This must be connected to the fight to develop a socialist leadership in the working class and the recruitment of workers into the party.

b. The continuation of the party’s defense of the progressive content of the two American Revolutions, which is indissolubly linked to the fight against the racial-communal politics of the Democratic Party and its pseudo-left middle class agencies. The claim that the United States is riven by racial antagonisms, and that white workers are to blame for the conditions of black workers, is false and politically reactionary. The SEP opposes the demand for reparations, which is a petty-bourgeois policy aimed at dividing the workers and advancing the capitalist ambitions of a privileged section of the African American bourgeoisie and upper-middle class, which wants greater access to the wealth monopolized by the top one percent.

c. A broad and active campaign to build the International Youth and Students for Social Equality on the campuses and schools and among working class youth. In particular, the IYSSE must organize and lead opposition among youth, in alliance with educators and the entire working class, to the campaign to reopen the schools under unsafe conditions.

d. The SEP and IYSSE must wage an unrelenting campaign in defense of all immigrant workers who continue to be subjected to relentless persecution by ICE. The party and its youth organization demand an end to deportations. They call for migrants to be welcomed and for those incarcerated to be released from custody. They demand an end to the separation of families and the provision of decent housing and financial support to asylum seekers and refugees. Immigrants must be provided every opportunity to enjoy secure and productive lives within the United States with full citizenship rights.

e. The SEP must intensify its campaign against war and militarism, which threaten to unleash a Third World War. All factions of the ruling class are committed to the geostrategic interests of American imperialism. The fight against war must be based on the working class; it must be anti-capitalist and socialist; it must be independent from and hostile to all political parties and organizations that defend the capitalist system; and, above all, it must be international, uniting and mobilizing the vast power of the working class in a unified global struggle to end capitalism and its nation-state divisions, and establish world socialism.

f. The struggle against state oppression and war is indissolubly linked with the fight against internet censorship and the defense of the right of journalists to expose state crimes. The SEP and the IYSSE must continue to campaign for the unconditional freedom of Julian Assange, for the end of the persecution of Chelsea Manning, and against the censorship of the WSWS and other left-wing, anti-war, and socialist websites and individuals by technology giants such as Google and Facebook.

85. The political impact and effectiveness of the SEP’s initiatives and campaigns depend on the recruitment of working people into the party. Revolutionary politics does not unfold in some sort of distant, ethereal and super-human realm. Even the most favorable objective conditions need to be acted upon by politically conscious workers, who have been educated by the party. The establishment of rank-and-file safety committees in auto plants in Detroit, Toledo and other parts of the country has demonstrated the vital role played by the party in the development of the working class as a politically and socially conscious force.

86. The party must patiently explain to workers and youth the nature of the crisis and the strategy of the struggle for socialism. But the need for *patient explaining* must not become a justification for *passive contemplation*. Opportunities to translate *political understanding* into *practical actions* must not be missed. The aim of the party is to lead workers in struggle.

87. All of the work of the SEP will be carried out in the closest collaboration with the International Committee of the Fourth International. There is no national solution to the global pandemic, as there is no national solution to any of the great problems confronting the working class—inequality, exploitation, war, environmental degradation. The building of a mass socialist movement in the American working class must be connected to the mobilization of the billions of workers throughout the world, the massive social force that can finally put an end to capitalist barbarism and chart a new way forward for mankind.

88. At its Summer School one year ago, the Socialist Equality Party, based on a review of the development of the Trotskyist movement and the objective situation, concluded that the ICFI had entered a new historical stage. SEP National Chairman David North defined this stage as one “that will witness a vast growth of the ICFI as the World Party of Socialist Revolution:”

The objective processes of economic globalization, identified by the International Committee more than 30 years ago, have undergone a further colossal development. Combined with the emergence of new technologies that have revolutionized communications, these processes have internationalized the class struggle to a degree that would have been hard to imagine even 25 years ago. The revolutionary struggle of the working class will develop as an interconnected and unified world movement. The International Committee of the Fourth International will be built as the conscious political leadership of this objective socio-economic process. It will counterpose to the capitalist politics of imperialist war the class-based strategy of world socialist revolution. This is the essential historical task of the new stage in the history of the Fourth International. [33]

89. To carry out its immense political responsibilities, the party and its cadre must be firmly rooted and educated in the historical experiences of the Marxist movement. The immense history embodied in the ICFI must be brought into the developing movement of the working class. The intersection of the objective radicalization of the working class and the practice of the party will create the conditions for the victory of the working class, the abolition of capitalism, and the socialist transformation of world economy.

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<http://www.wsws.org>