

Coronavirus Stories

Crisis, Response, Resistance

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We include here personal accounts from members and allies of Black Rose/Rosa Negra across the U.S. speaking on the direct impacts and responses to the coronavirus crisis underway. Some have been directly affected as healthcare workers, laid off service workers, or having to undergo self-quarantine. Others are on front the lines of the responses through organizing tenants or mutual-aid efforts.

Chrysanthe, Los Angeles

So far five of the dozen neighborhood based chapters of the Los Angeles Tenants Union (LATU), including the Vermont Beverly chapter that I organize with, have endorsed a list of demands which includes an immediate moratorium on evictions, an immediate suspension of rent collection, demand for housing to the unhoused, and suspension of ICE enforcement. The demands originated last week when the Hollywood chapter drafting a statement responding to the situation with other chapters signing on and suggesting amendments.

Local chapters are assessing the current and projected impact on members and community, such employment, evictions, food, medical care access, isolations, and general well being. In my chapter each organizer is following up with the tenant associations and members that they've worked with.

Lynn, Rochester, NY

I work in an auto parts plant that's organized with the UAW or United Auto Workers union and I'm a former steward and last year was active with the strike auto worker at my plant. Last week the governor ordered that 50-75% of the workforce needed to stay home and the day the plant manager sent out a letter saying our plant would stay open until the 27th [of March]. I was at home self-quarantining because I had recently travelled abroad so I started posting in our plant's Facebook group about taking action and I posted articles about wildcat walks out that were happening in other UAW plants. On other union Facebook pages I saw that whole departments were announcing they were walking out.

People were of course pissed and started commenting in the Facebook group while on shift. We also started calling local media and politicians to see if that might add the pressure. Management rolled over and announced the plant closure within three hours!

Greg, Detroit, MI

I work in a restaurant at one of the local hotels. Before each shift, the managers hold a meeting with staff to give us information about the night's food and drink specials and reservations. When panic around the coronavirus started escalating, upper management attended one of these meetings and let us know that at the end of the week, the hotel was going to be closing until early April. They were having meetings with our union reps (HERE) and had come to an agreement that we would get paid for the first week off, since the schedule was already posted but everything else was up in the air.

The next day, my wife was discussing with other tenants in the laundry room all of our losses of income and how that would affect our ability to pay rent and other bills. She had looked up our house on Zillow and found that the rent our landlord collects in one year is more than the total cost of what he paid for the house in 2013. So in the seven years he's owned this property, he has collected 9 times what he paid for it through our rent and the value of the home has increased by more than \$150,000. He definitely hasn't put that much money into repairs and we are responsible for raking the leaves, cutting the grass and shoveling the snow. We are working on a plan to petition him with the other folks who live in our house, and possibly working out a strategy to speak with other people who rent from this same landlord to see if they'd be interested in joining us.

A few days later, we got word that the union had negotiated with hotel management that we would be continuing to get paid based on the hours we normally worked, pre-shut down. This is an amazing victory for the union! There's still a lot of work to be done though, so I'm going to continue to keep in touch with our reps and to build relationships with my coworkers. There's always work to be done to build stronger and more militant unions.

Eli M, Durham, NC

So far, I've been organizing locally for mutual aid with my neighbors on my block and in my wider neighborhood. We're taking a "neighborhood pods" approach. We've shared a document with info and a flier template.

We also started a Durham citywide public Facebook group for mutual aid organizing here. Within less than a day, we already had over 300 members and active discussions going. Since then we've formed a dozen neighborhood committees, or pods, that are surveying residents using google forms and organizing responses.

Luz Sierra, Miami, FL

It's been crazy in our hospital since everything happened with the coronavirus. Our hospital removed all surgical and N-95 masks [a higher level mask used in healthcare] from the floor. We used to easily have access near "contact rooms" [rooms where infected patients are isolated] and a supply room. But now they are all gone and we can only request them when we have what's called a "droplet" or "airborne" patient – meaning they are actively infected and have respiratory issues. Because of shortages they are making us enter contact rooms without any masks which is part of the protective equipment we typically use.

But yesterday at work we have a possibly COVID-19 infected patient in isolation but he was sent home before getting his full lab results from the CDC test kit. And then they were sending in another patient showing symptoms into the same room with them. Several nurses confronted the infection control doctors about this.

Many of the workers are pressuring management to give them masks but only a few have been successful.

John Slavin, Richmond, VA

I help run a non-profit community science lab called Indie Lab which is being used for sterilization of materials before they go out to people. We're working on getting things like mass produced face masks, ventilators, oxygen concentrator etc. We printed our first prototype 3D printed masks and got resources centralized to get them to medical personal in different parts of the state. We are also doing support work to help with the development of a COVID19 rapid test through performing testing validations.

I'm also part of an international collaborative research team of scientists and coders which includes high level scientists, including from MIT. There are hundreds in different working groups creating open source technology around designing face masks, creating test kits and following all the data and information on the outbreak. One thing is clear is that Trump has been intentionally holding back on the supply of testing as a way to suppress the numbers of confirmed cases.

Kara, Seattle, WA

I started coming down with a cough and shortness of breath two weeks ago. I still don't know if I was actually exposed to COVID-19 but my symptoms aligned. I do have insurance through the Affordable Care Act but since testing isn't available I decided to stay at home and self quarantine. I mostly relied on friends dropping off groceries because my quarantine started ahead of the forming mutual aid networks but now I'm getting plugged in and hoping to help from home and then eventually do more direct service delivery.

It's been over 15 days and I've recovered, but all the uncertainty around information and how slow the state responded was hard. The most difficult part though was feeling useless while being quarantined but also knowing the ethics of potentially exposing someone. I had the ability to stay home to protect others, so I did.

Antonio, Boston, MA

Working in the building trades I have a lot of experience filing for unemployment when jobs come to an end as it did for me right before the outbreak of Coronavirus. So I made my focus on helping neighbors file for unemployment via the newly formed mutual aid network. What's been interesting with this work is I'm connecting with tenants of large landlords who can't and won't pay rent on April 1st. I really think mutual aid work that reaches outside left activists and non-profit staff could help build resistance and organization if we go into it with that mindset and intent.

The network seems to have been set up largely by local Non-Profit Industrial Complex staff. There will be lots to challenge within the network but I think it makes sense. Already I've seen the non-profit staff folks in the network kind of "blank stare" me when I asked who is taking on housing issues. The local movement just went through about 5 years of pushing for municipal and state policy to slow down displacement of tenants. They focused lots of energy on this, and from what I could tell, also largely stepped back from building tenant organizing in favor of recruiting "ally" volunteers to help them lobby. But guess what? They lost. Only in the last year

or so have there been some more grassroots attempts to build tenant power. We could have been doing that all along but now we can do it in the middle of a pandemic.

Adam Weaver is member of Black Rose/Rosa Negra in Miami, FL.

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