

Coronavirus and the Ill Health of Capitalism

Anarchist Communist Group

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The COVID-19 crisis has thrown a glaring searchlight on the state of health of capitalism. Here we analyse in detail the origins of the disease, its global consequences and what we, the working class can do about it.

First of all we have to look at how COVID-19 originated and at the same time dispose of various conspiracy theories that are circulating like how it was invented by the Chinese government to cull the elderly and infirm. The Coronavirus crisis must not be used to scapegoat Chinese, Italian or Spanish people here in the UK and throughout the world.

In 1970 there was a famine in China which affected more than 36 million people. The Beijing regime failed to adequately deal with the famine. As a result, it let go of its state hold over agriculture and food and allowed private entrepreneurs to trade. A section of this new layer of private enterprise began to domesticate wildlife, which included snakes, turtles and bats. At first illegal, this trade was allowed to flourish by the regime and in 1988 it legalised the trade, saying that wildlife was now a 'natural resource'. This boosted this trade.

As a result, huge markets appeared, selling all sorts of animals, including rhinoceroses, crocodiles, snakes, ducks, wolves and mice, alongside domesticated animals like pigs and chickens. These were packed closely together, often in the same cages. In this way, it was easier for diseases to pass from species to species, from animal to animal and then on to humans.

The SARS virus appears to have originated in 2003 in a market in Guangdong province, with its source the masked palm civet. SARS, itself a coronavirus, spread globally and resulted in 774 deaths. In response the regime banned the trade of wildlife as food.

Those capitalists making big profits out of the trade then lobbied the Chinese government to relax these laws, resulting in a decision to allow the trade of 54 species as food. Later, more animals were added to the list, including in 2016 elephants and pangolins (scaly anteaters).

As a result the COVID-19 epidemic broke out in 2019 and has now spread globally, with many thousands of deaths. It is believed that the disease was transmitted from a bat to a pangolin, and then spread to humans via a market in Wuhan. The Chinese government failed to learn from the original SARS outbreak, and seems unlikely to draw any further lessons for the future.

It should be seen that the long-term answer is not the development of vaccines, but the cutting off at the source of the growth of these viruses. This means that animal welfare is of the highest necessity. Swine flu probably originated in Mexico as a result of industrialised pig pens, and similarly the origins of bird flu and mad cow disease are down to similar reasons. AIDS was a virus that jumped from monkeys to chimps to humans as a result of the bush meat trade. The equation must be that animal welfare = human welfare.

The spread of COVID-19

The development of an increasingly globalised capitalism allowed the spread of the disease. As it spread from country to country, it was shown how many healthcare systems, after years of austerity measures, were not up to the task of coping. And of course, the continued need for capitalism to create profit has hindered measures to control and quarantine the disease.

The Coronavirus crisis has tested capitalism and its state structures to the limit. In Britain on both a national and local level, government has been shown to be wanting, as both the Johnson government and local councils have dithered, have failed to act or have remained silent. The media has highlighted the rash of panic buying, itself due to the encouragement of selfishness in

neo-liberal economies and the attack on community outlooks. On the other hand, the ideas that we advance, those of mutual aid and solidarity, are illustrated by the growth of (at time of writing) over 500 mutual aid networks that have emerged rapidly in the UK. As one ACG member noted recently: “In the village where I live, Facebook organising has produced more than 350 names in four days, volunteering various kinds of help, including visits to elderly and disabled by local known people, street by street, free exchange of surplus daily necessities, a local shop and a community centre offered for food collection, assembling food parcels and deliveries, free taxi to Iceland to pick up supplies, meals for free school dinner kids, even dog walking (there are 1000’s of dogs here). Meanwhile, deafening silence from Local Authority and councillors, and the cuts to the NHS and social care have been laid bare for everyone to see.”

Capitalism itself has received a body blow from the COVID-19 crisis. Already in a stagnant state, the world economy has been damaged as profits and Gross Domestic Products are affected. Industrial production has slowed right down and a small initial recovery has been set back by this crisis. Any fall in profits will be answered by the boss class attacking the wages and conditions of the working class in the months to come.

At the same time, some capitalists, especially those in the pharmaceutical and health industries, have or will raise prices on hand gels, soaps and face masks and will do the same with any vaccines that are developed (as was illustrated in the past by the AIDS crisis).

The Government’s Response

Whilst some governments have closed down educational establishments and all restaurants, pubs, bars and cafés, the Johnson regime has vacillated over this. In part this was influenced by the number of so-called experts gathered around the new regime, a collection of cranks and social-Darwinians encouraged by the closest adviser of Johnson, the Gollum-like Dominic Cummings. These fostered ideas of “herd immunisation” where mass infection will create immunity in the long run, failing to take note of the large number of deaths in the process, or rather seeing this as a way of culling the elderly and infirm. The government has been forced to backtrack on this. As well as this, the Johnson government does not want to order the closure of catering establishments because it will then have to offer substantial compensation. The Government’s announced an emergency £350 billion financial package most of which will end up in the private sector, just like Alistair Darling’s £500 billion to the banks in 2008. The bulk of Darling’s handout went into shareholders pockets and there was little to show in terms of employment growth or improved wages. Instead, the working class had ten years of imposed wage freezes and benefit cuts to pay for bailing out the banks.

Johnson has already shown his first priority. By refusing so far to order pubs and restaurants to close, he has tried to protect the profits of big insurance firms from claims by thousands of small businesses. He may well be forced to change tack, locking down city by city due to the rapid spread of the virus and massive pressure from small businesses. Whatever happens, just as in 2008 it’ll be us that will have to compensate the rich and pay the price for the economic meltdown.

Meanwhile 8,000 private hospital beds are being rented to NHS for £2.4million per day during the crisis.

The Johnson regime has failed to act decisively, offering advice rather than decisions, in terms of calling for people of over 70 to self-isolate, failing to close down restaurants, pubs, bars and cafés, as has been the case in other countries, and has only just announced that schools will be closed from next week.

Many people will voluntarily self-isolate, but there are big problems there already. One of the pieces of advice given out by the Johnson government was for self-isolators to order food online. However, the supermarkets are already massively overloaded, with many sites down, and for example, Sainsbury's not being able to offer any more home deliveries right through the month of April. Rationing of essential items like soap, hand gel, painkillers etc has been slow in coming or not taken place at all, the responsibility of both the government and the supermarkets.

Many older people, disabled people who have a wide range of impairments including learning difficulties/disabilities, those who have mental health issues and long-term health conditions, will face loneliness and possible depression as a result of isolation. For others, the home is a place of danger, as for those suffering from physical and sexual abuse in their families. Any travel restrictions would further aggravate the chances of people escaping from their abusers.

The closure of day care centres, social centres, libraries, etc will further exacerbate this feeling of isolation and loneliness and unless the mutual aid networks are built up massively over the coming months, many may die in isolation.

For the homeless, of whom at least 5,000 are rough sleepers on the streets, the Coronavirus crisis will be a disaster, as they are among the most vulnerable, cannot self-isolate and if living in temporary accommodation or homeless shelters, face overcrowding and higher risk of contagion. Many homeless charities have withdrawn on street support in order to protect volunteers adding to the potential risks faced by rough sleepers. Meanwhile many buildings lie empty, as for example Balfron Tower in Tower Hamlets, sold off by the housing association Poplar HARCA for homes for the rich which still lies empty.

The State will attempt to strengthen its position by using the Coronavirus crisis to reinforce its powers. This is already the case in China, Spain and Italy where police and troops are controlling the movement of populations. In Italy some strikes have been banned under old legislation that has been resurrected, and the UCU strike in Britain has been severely affected by the crisis. The ballot in favour of strike action among postal workers is already being affected by the union bureaucrats and the State may well intervene to back them up.

While the media trains its unblinking focus on panic buying, thereby magnifying and amplifying the worst in human nature, most of us will also have seen the stirrings of mutual aid and solidarity in our communities. Perhaps a leaflet has been put through your letter box offering to collect shopping and prescriptions. Perhaps you've seen groups set up on social media. Perhaps you've volunteered to be a friendly ear to those who are isolated. These bottom-up, self-starting initiatives have not had the same media focus, perhaps because they demonstrate that precisely when we're supposed to be at our most anxious and atomised, we somehow find ways to connect and share and work together.

These stirrings of solidarity and mutual aid are in stark contrast with the government's response of abandoning working-class people to hardship and uncertainty. This is of course a health crisis, but it is also a looming economic crisis and potential social disaster. As measures to create more "social distancing" threaten to decimate many sectors, such as retail, catering and health & social care, or indeed anything requiring social contact, causing many to worry how they will pay bills, how they will afford housing, how they will put food on the table, not to mention who will

provide much needed personal care and support for those vulnerable people in supported living and residential care etc, the government seems oblivious to the stark reality faced by ordinary people: if we can't earn, we are very quickly in a dire situation.

Our stirrings of mutual aid and solidarity are rightly looking for ways to support the vulnerable, to give reassurance to each other, to build community at a time when we need our essence as social animals nurtured. But if the government will not bail us out during this Coronavirus crisis as they found themselves able to bail the banks out during the financial crisis, then we will need to use our new networks to shout that message too. And not just to point out the state's inaction, but to show that there is action we can take ourselves. Standing together we are stronger and more able to face down demands from banks and landlords, from utility companies and councils. We can give our mutual aid networks real teeth.

Some of the demands we should put forward for the Coronavirus crisis:

- Guaranteed continuance of sick pay from the first day for those affected by the virus. No victimisations or sackings for self-isolation.
- Guaranteed income for those affected by closures in educational establishments, the catering industry, health and social care industry etc. This includes a guaranteed income for gig workers in these workplaces.
- Increased funding of domestic violence services as result of increase in abuse as result of crisis (as in China and Italy already).
- Those receiving benefits should not be required to sign on during the current emergency and should be automatically be given their benefits
- Requisitioning of all empty property for the homeless, one of the most vulnerable sections of society most vulnerable to the crisis.
- Private hospital beds should be requisitioned and put at the service of the NHS without charge.
- An immediate moratorium on rent, mortgage payments and utility bills. Where these are not enforced, organising of rent and mortgage strikes, resisting disconnections of utilities. No evictions! No Disconnections!
- Rationing of essential items like soap, hand gel, toilet paper, pain killers. An end to profiteering by companies around these essentials.
- Reinforcing of the mutual aid networks.

While the state continues to act slowly and, in an ad-hoc manner with no regard for the working class here are some practical measures we can all take:

- Get in touch with your local mutual aid group to see how you can help.
- Donate (if you can) blood.
- Provide support for those self-isolating.
- Take acts of solidarity such as resisting evictions and disconnections

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