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This System is Making Us Sick

Statement of the IWA Secretariat in Response to the Situations Surrounding the COVID-19 Pandemic

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March 16, 2020

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In many countries now, people are confronted with a huge health issue. Due to the nature of the capitalist system and its abuses towards working class people on so many levels, many more of us may become victims of ruling class negligence and disdain – the disease that already afflicts our society and social-economic relations. In this situation, like all others, we really need to rely on each other to preserve our health and our lives.

The Sections of the International Workers' Association have responded to their local situations in different ways. As advocates of the general strike to weaken the power of those who oppress and abuse us, we see no better time for the working class of certain countries to use this tool of struggle, to act in self-defense, to protect their health and promote the strength of collective action against the power of state coercion and capital.

Our unions have put forth various demands and calls for action on the local level and are engaging in some concrete struggles in a number of workplaces. On the global level, there are several general positions and demands which need to be propagated in response to the current pandemic.

1. All workers who have been forced out of work because of state-enforced measures employer decisions, economic cut-backs or other reasons or who are ill need to receive paid leave.

A great majority of the working class around the world barely make ends meet and cannot afford to lose income. Those that do are threatened to become victims again – among others, the victims of landlords and creditors. Several governments have already announced aid packages to businesses, but the elites are much less generous to working people.

After the pandemic has decreased, the working class must struggle to make paid leave a permanent right for everybody.

2. We advocate the immediate stoppage of work (with paid leave) for all the workers of non-essential industries and services in all areas which are threatened by the spread of this virus. Where the bosses or state threaten and coerce people to continue working despite the risks, we call for the organization of strikes, solidarity strikes and other forms of direct action. We need concerted solidarity and mutual support to show that we will not be stopped.

3. We demand immediate and significant wage increases for all medical workers (including other „non-medical” personnel in medical centers, such as cleaners). These wage increases are to be permanent. One of the greatest pathogens facing many countries around the world is lack of access to healthcare, caused by gross underfunding, as governments decide to divert money elsewhere, away from the most essential human needs. Many medical workers are severely undervalued and have spent years in struggle. They are exploited and disrespected on an everyday basis – yet we expect their total dedication to saving other people’s lives in situations like this and it is

sometimes at great risk to their own health and well-being. We must struggle to force the State – which we view as only the temporary custodian of our public collective money – to properly secure the health security of the population by readjusting social priorities. Further, the IWA reminds the working class that the State has usurped the power of people to decide things themselves and usually acts mainly in the interest of capital. We must take power back from it to introduce a truly social and egalitarian system of taking care of all the members of our society collectively.

4. We demand immediate bonus payments to all the other workers who are needed in various functions still so vital to keeping things running smoothly – from supermarket cashiers to food deliverers, producers and suppliers, from social workers to sanitation workers. Anybody who is working in increased risk and still working while others stay in their houses deserve our mutual aid and support. Where possible, we also call on people to help these people with their jobs, to give them a rest and to share the burden. If such workers are forced to work a lot of extra hours due to the situation, they should be given extra paid leave as soon as possible when the situation stabilizes.

We need to stress that many of these categories of workers, without which life itself would be barely possible in urban centers (such as farmers and other workers on the food supply chain) are among the worst paid workers in many countries. We must agitate and struggle to egalitize the value of labor and eliminate the huge contradictions of the capitalist logic, which fails to adequately compensate huge parts of the workforce they consider only as replaceable parts, not as vital members of our human community.

5. We demand absolutely free access to health services for all who may be affected by this current crisis. We must keep this demand as an area of permanent struggle.

6. We demand special emergency assistance for all people who do not have a roof over their heads or who live in poor sanitary conditions. In general, homelessness, housing poverty and various forms of tragic displacement lead to many deaths and illnesses each year, on top of the general misery. This is a problem of huge proportions on the world level. It must be dealt with, in particular by society's assistance and a permanent struggle against the class of those with capital who profiteer off their access to and possession of private property. The world has also responded poorly to numerous humanitarian crises caused by war and natural disaster, leaving its victims in precarious and often life-threatening conditions.

7. We demand that any materials which are needed by the population be provided, especially where people cannot afford it. Our collective public money should be used to ensure that vulnerable segments of the population have access to hygienic products, profilactics and medicine.

These seven demands are the minimum we need to push for and, in order to make the situation a little healthier in the end, we need to press for more social protection for the general population. This cannot remain a privilege of the rich.

The working class should finally realize that it is not the state or the bosses that keep the society running, but the working people themselves.

The expenditures we demand, to ensure the safe and fairer running of society as a whole, is our collective money and we have the absolute right to decide what kind of society we want to live in: one that treats the elderly, sick, less-privileged masses of people like expendable or one that cares for everyone and treats everybody as important and with respect. The State, the bosses and the others that live off the labor of working people must not be allowed to run things like they have any longer. Too many people have been made ill by this all and it has been going on for years and years. Enough is enough!

The system is ill and we need to cure it.

The best medicine against the disease ravaging our populations – and we are not talking about Coronavirus now – is mutual aid and solidarity of people.

During this time when many people are affected, we have witnessed various acts of solidarity initiated from the bottom up, sometimes so necessary where the system has failed to protect a vulnerable member of our human community. We call on people to embrace solidarity and to make it a part of their lives, not only in times of tragedy, but also as something regular. Solidarity builds community and community is something that can help any social struggle to gain benefit for everybody.

From the IWA, we wish all working class people health, safety and strength in the struggles and challenges you may face at this time. Remember that solidarity is our weapon, one that is so useful in times like these. We all need to organize – not only for now, but to fight for a better world for us all in the future.

IWA Secretariat
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