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The pandemic and the Left (Part 2) (Online Article)

Historical Note

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Content

The pandemic and the Left (Part 2)

Read the first part here.

What the pandemic taught us about the capitalist society we live in today

The coronavirus pandemic exposed and intensified various trends of contemporary capitalist reality. First of all, it made even clearer the inability of the bourgeoisie to rule. Contrary to voices from the so-called autonomist Left who claim that the pandemic is a plan of the bourgeois elites to strengthen their social dominance in times of crisis, quite the opposite seems to be true: the pandemic is a sign that the bourgeoisie and its bureaucrats do not have everything under control. The incompetence, the myopic micropolitics, and the particular interests of various lobbies of capitalists and bureaucrats (e.g., the opportunism of the big pharmaceutical industry for the sake of profit) are a much more likely explanation for the pandemic's authoritarian mismanagement than any other theory. After all, in the absence of a labor movement, the social sovereignty of capital and its austerity policies have not been challenged for a long time.[18] As aforementioned, several of the most developed western nations such as the U.S., Australia, etc. have shown themselves incapable of managing the pandemic rationally and effectively, issuing spasmodic and contradictory measures or trying to exploit the pandemic politically. The structural contradiction between the global interdependent economy and the nation-state system makes pandemic management even more difficult. The pandemic requires a coordinated international response, but in a system of imperialist rivalries (e.g., U.S.–China, U.S.–Russia) between competing nation-states, this is impossible.

The states that did best were the ones that had disciplined citizens who trusted them. Various studies have consistently found that a lack of trust in the authorities is one of the main reasons people refuse to get vaccinated. This is not surprising, since few of us have more than a vague understanding of how vaccines work. This leaves people with the need to trust the scientists who test the vaccine and the authorities that approve and distribute it. In such cases, transparent communication regarding all aspects of the vaccine — including any negative ones — is key for maintaining trust, even if it reduces vaccine acceptance in the short term. Surveys emphasize that trust between citizens and authorities

is ideally reciprocal, as authorities need to trust that citizens can deal with bad news and make responsible decisions. The case of Denmark is indicative. Denmark could afford to be more liberal in its approach than other states, increasingly relying on voluntary compliance rather than restricting individual freedoms by decree, because it is generally more authoritarian — with a very homogeneous, very docile population that has, for example, very low tolerance for religious or cultural diversity and very little political diversity.[19]

Most states, however, pursued an authoritarian, technocratic management. Perhaps what is happening is that bourgeois states are reacting in an authoritarian manner to the pandemic precisely due to their inability to handle it effectively. They are incapable of following any other path than the easy path of authoritarianism. Behind state authoritarianism lies the weakness and nakedness of the bourgeoisie. We live in a time of crisis for neoliberalism which is characterized by a lack of trust between citizens and rulers. The lack of trust forces technocrats to manipulate us through lies, telling us, for example, that the vaccines will end the pandemic so that we rush to get vaccinated.

Central to the management of the pandemic is the unprecedented collapse of liberalism as an ideology. In recent years we have witnessed the gradual disappearance of liberal ideology, with so-called progressives, feminists, and the Left responding to liberal principles such as freedom of speech and the presumption of innocence with growing suspicion and contempt. While caring for their own rights and the rights of minorities, they believe that those who disagree with them politically or ideologically do not deserve such rights. The progressives and the Left have embraced political correctness and social cannibalism, leaving the profession of liberal ideals to the Right and to conspiracy theorists. This development could not but have an impact on pandemic management. With the collapse of the social pole that has traditionally defended human rights, health and the economy have become the only factors in decision-making concerning the pandemic, with rights and freedoms being ignored or considered secondary. It is in this context that we observe the gradual erosion of our civil rights at the hands of the executive, as well as the lack of accountability of the executive to the legislature during the pandemic. But health is not the supreme human good: according to Marx, this is the freedom to express and develop our potentialities qua human beings. What is best and most necessary for people is to be able to self-determine and develop any of their capabilities and abilities, that is, to be free.

The Left supports the authoritarian state against the working class

The most worrying feature of the current situation, however, is the political absence of the Left. The Left has not taken any initiatives with respect to the pandemic, leaving the working class completely dependent on state paternalism. Someone will tell me, what else could the Left do since it does not have the necessary resources and knowledge that the state has to be able to manage the pandemic? But if we go back a few years and remember the AIDS epidemic, we will notice that the attitude of the Left then was different. Faced with the negligence of doctors and governments to tackle AIDS due to homophobia and other prejudices, Left-wing and progressive activists pressured the health sector to take the virus more seriously, improve public-private partnerships in drug production, speed up their licensing, and allow the participation of patient representatives at all stages of the process.[20] Such activism is largely liberal, and the Left needs to do much more than put pressure on the state if it wants to look worthy of its historic task, but I find it important to acknowledge that even such minimal actions are not happening today. We have naturalized both the role of the Bonapartist state and our political weakness.

The Left not only does not support the working class in the midst of the pandemic, but supports pandemic policies that weaken it. The majority of the Left supported the reactionary lockdowns. Lockdowns protect the rich (those who can work from home or can afford not to work) while failing to protect the poor — the so-called “essential workers” with their families and communities. The

lockdowns have slowed the spread of the coronavirus without protecting vulnerable workers, and have had many negative consequences: for example, a large increase in suicides and deaths from drug overdose, people dying from fear of leaving home to visit the hospital, an increase in domestic violence, elderly people dying alone in hospitals and nursing homes, school closures, 100 million people falling below the so-called poverty threshold, tens of millions dying of starvation, a sharp drop in vaccination rates for other diseases such as measles and mumps, etc. The biggest damage from lockdowns occurred in developing countries: 250,000 children in South Asia died of starvation as a result of financial misery due to lockdowns.[21]

The most important problem with lockdowns from a Marxist standpoint, however, is that they weaken the fighting capacity of the working class. Lockdowns undermine the ability of the working class to organize and fight, the only way in which workers can truly protect their interests and health and overthrow capitalism. The closure of entire sectors of industry and services has caused an economic crisis and thrown masses of people into unemployment, while our civil and worker rights have been restricted or banned. The distance work that has become the new normal for millions of workers isolates us and makes it difficult for us to organize in unions, making us more vulnerable to layoffs and unpaid overtime. Mass layoffs, wage cuts, union closures, and the intensification of work preceded the pandemic as social features of neoliberalism, but have now intensified. It is therefore imperative that the workers and the Left oppose lockdowns. Supporting lockdowns in the name of public health is a betrayal of the working class and of our revolutionary task.

We need to understand that the pandemic, like public health in general, does not stand above the class antagonism of capital and labor. The class interest of the bourgeoisie concerning public health is to maintain a healthy enough labor force to exploit at the cheapest possible cost, while protecting its own health. The bourgeois state — that is, the permanent state apparatus consisting of bureaucrats, the army, and the police, in short, the executive branch — is a mechanism of organized violence for maintaining the power and profits of the bourgeoisie. While Marxists are willing to support specific state measures for public health that benefit the working class, the dependence of the working class on the state is suicidal. Traditionally, the Left has fought so that its own organizations are responsible for the health and safety of workers, not the capitalist state. Only through its independent mobilization against the bourgeoisie can the working class defend its health and safety.

Finally, the Left participates in the effort of the state and of the so-called progressives to demonize anyone skeptical of the measures. For example, although the Greek Cypriot Left hates the current neoliberal nationalist government and criticizes some of its pandemic measures, it hates even more the Right-wing, conservative, and nationalist citizens who react to them. It tends to group all these citizens together as dangerous fascists or stupid conspiracy theorists and does everything it can to separate its position on the management of the pandemic from the position of said citizens. Social media is full of contemptuous comments about skeptics and the unvaccinated. Leftists write in favor of mandatory vaccination, downplay the police violence that has often been employed against the unvaccinated, and even tell us that they would rather die from the vaccine than live with people who do not accept the vaccine. The situation is the same abroad. Any criticism of the measures is demonized, and mandatory vaccination is promoted, with the Left largely supporting the essence of state management. Trapped in a superficial antifascism, the Left is more concerned about a fictitious fascist threat from ordinary citizens — the majority of whom belong to the working class — than with the real threat which is the authoritarian bourgeois state. The far Right, though, is just as marginal and weak as the Left: it is not an immediate social danger. Essentially, the majority of the Left and of the so-called “progressives” and “liberals” act as a state crutch in the management of the pandemic.

What is to be done

What would a genuine Left do differently in response to the pandemic? As the Spartacist League rightly points out in its article on the virus:

The working class derives its social power from its role in production. The labor movement needs to ***oppose*** layoffs and furloughs by fighting for union-run hiring and training, and for a shorter workweek with no loss in pay in order to spread work among all hands. The current crisis cries out for ***increased*** production and services: more and better medical care; mass construction of public housing; spacious and well-ventilated buildings for schools and day care; better public transport. Reopening and expanding the economy is necessary to meet the needs of working people and to combat unemployment and pauperization […] Unions are the elementary defense organizations of the working class. Their purpose is to defend workers on the job, not fight for the workers to stay home.[22]

In other words, a genuine revolutionary Left acting in accordance with the class interest of the working class would pursue the opposite pandemic policy from that of the current Left. In the first place, it would oppose lockdowns, layoffs, and working from home, and would fight for safe working conditions and better health and transport infrastructure. It would work to ensure that the pandemic's management does not restrict our freedom and does not lead to social isolation. It would also require the abolition of patents, so that vaccines and drugs can be mass-produced and meet the needs of the Third World. In the long run, it would fight for control of healthcare and safety to pass into the hands of our own labor organizations such as unions, as well as for the expropriation of hospitals and pharmaceutical companies.

It is impermissible for Leftists to agree with the bourgeoisie when it tells us that the struggle of the workers for their interests through unionization and demonstrations threatens public health. The organization and conduction of class struggle is necessary for our self-defense and for combatting the social cause of the mismanagement of the pandemic, that is, of capitalism. As Leon Trotsky put it in *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*: "In a society based upon exploitation, the highest morality is that of the social revolution. All methods are good which raise the class-consciousness of the workers, their trust in their own forces, their readiness for self-sacrifice in the struggle. The impermissible methods are those which implant fear and submissiveness in the oppressed in the face of their oppressors."[23] Cultivating fear of the virus and submissiveness to the state's administration is unacceptable.

The historical task of the Left is to form the working class into an independent political force seeking the overthrow of capitalism. To achieve this historic task it is necessary, among other things, to channel any generalized discontents of the working class against its real enemy, that is, against the bourgeoisie and its state. This also holds for the current widespread dissatisfaction of many people with the handling of the pandemic. A genuine revolutionary Left must recognize and highlight the rational core of this dissatisfaction, while simultaneously directing the discontented masses away from irrational and/or reactionary conspiracy theories. A real revolutionary Left would mobilize the working class to defend all the oppressed and unite them on the side of the workers in the class struggle. It would not allow the Right and the far Right to present themselves as defenders of our democratic rights, as is the case with Covid.

We are living through one of the greatest crises in the history of capitalism, and the task of the Left is to make use of and lead the working class's dissatisfaction with the state, not to support the bourgeois state against the working class. Until that happens, the state will continue to play games with our health and our way of life. There is no true health without freedom, and there is no possibility of freedom without the Left. Given the absence of a real Left today, it is our duty to build it. What is needed is new leadership of the working class.

[18] “Περί αντιεμβολιασμού και συνωμοσιολογίας: ο φόβος του Θανάτου,” Πρόταγμα, October 26, 2021, available online at <https://protagma.wordpress.com/2021/10/26/περί-αντιεμβολιασμού-και-συνωμοσιολ/>.

[19] Michael Bang Petersen and Alexander Bor, “Denmark appears to have beaten covid-19 — for now. Here’s how it did it,” Washington Post, September 20, 2021, available online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/09/20/denmark-appears-have-beaten-covid-19-now-here-is-how-it-did-it/>.

[20] Charlie Frank, “ACT UP, Fight Back: A History of AIDS in America,” Cosmonaut, October 30, 2021, available online at <https://cosmonautmag.com/2021/10/act-up-fight-back-a-history-of-aids-in-america/>.

[21] Dr. Jay Bhattachayra, “What Happened.”

[22] “Down with the Lockdowns!,” Spartacist (April 2021), available online at <https://www.icl-fi.org/english/esp/2021-04-lockdown.html>.

[23] Leon Trotsky, The Death Agony of Capitalism and the tasks of the Fourth International (1938), available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/>.

The views expressed are the personal opinions of the authors.

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