

What wasn't done, what is being done, and what should be done

On the fight against COVID-19

The novel coronavirus is sweeping the world. It can be carried by people who show no symptoms. There's no vaccine for it. And it's a killer. (According to the World Health Organization, WHO, COVID-19's mortality rate is 3.4 percent while the seasonal flu has a mortality rate of 0.1 percent.) Thus, despite initial measures like quarantining individuals known to have the disease, in Washington state we had our first reported case on January 21, our first reported death on February 29, and we now have 1,377 cases and 83 deaths with March not finished.

Meanwhile, the global COVID-19 death toll now exceeds 11,500, and Italy has had 627 people die from the virus in one day. How high the death toll will rise depends on what is done to stop the spread of the disease as well as to treat those who have caught it. China (including Hong Kong), Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea have now made good progress in stopping the spread of the coronavirus, but the general response to this global pandemic has been that governments have acted too slowly, haven't done enough, and sometimes have acted abysmally. Indeed, the spread of the coronavirus remains out of control in a large number of countries, including the United States. Why?

Lack of preparations

* **The CDC.** For years WHO and others have warned of pandemics caused by new pathogens. But few countries have taken these warnings seriously, particularly the United States. Indeed, while the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a tiny budget of around \$6 billion, Obama was already squeezing it while he was president, and Trump has continued on this path. In February this year--in the midst of the growing coronavirus pandemic--he even proposed a 9% cut in the CDC's funding for next year, which now won't happen.

* **Hospital beds.** Large numbers of people with COVID-19 have to be hospitalized in serious or critical condition. But the U.S. only has 2.77 hospital beds per 1000 people (number 32 in the world), whereas Italy has 3.18 beds per 1000 people, and Italy's hospitals have been overwhelmed! People die in intensive care units gasping for air because there are not enough respirators. Doctors, nurses and other staff work until they drop

from exhaustion. Doctors are forced to choose between who they will try to save and who they must let die. Tent hospitals have been set up, yet the problem of too few doctors remains. And Italy has 37.6 doctors per 10,000 people contrasted to the U.S. only having 24.5 per 10,000! On top of this, doctors and nurses themselves are getting sick with COVID-19, and five Italian doctors have died from coronavirus, taking the death toll among medics up to 13 people. (Several doctors have died in China too, including doctors who were 29, 34, 42, and 51 years old.)

* **Test kits.** The CDC's handling of testing has been a murderous scandal. It should have ordered crash production of large numbers to test kits in January, but it didn't. The Trump administration then refused the test kit offered by the World Health Organization. Then, after weeks of delay, in February the CDC sent out a flawed test kit. Moreover, during all this time local labs were prohibited from using their own tests. The result was that almost no one in the U.S. had enough test kits, while South Korea was testing 10,000 people a day.

In Seattle, Dr. Helen Chu and colleagues eventually defied the CDC prohibition and began testing. But had they been allowed to test earlier, this might have gone a long way toward stopping the spread of the coronavirus throughout Washington and the rest of the country.

Nevertheless, at this late date there still aren't enough test kits! Chinese billionaire Jack Ma has offered to donate 500,000 testing kits and one million masks to the U.S., with his foundation saying that the donation is "readied for shipment." Will Trump accept?

Masks, protective clothing and hospital supplies. The CDC or Trump should have ordered mass production of these too, but they didn't. The result is that many nurses and other hospital workers have been working unprotected, with numbers of them getting sick with COVID-19, as well as unwittingly spreading it before they're diagnosed as having it. Additionally, a member of Trump's coronavirus task force, Dr. Anthony Fauci, has said that the U.S. has only stockpiled 13,000 respirators.

What has been done?

Despite their late starts, governments and employers around the country have taken unprecedented actions in

trying to stop the spread of the coronavirus. They've all suddenly found money that they've previously denied having. Sick leave is being given where it was never been given before. Amazon is limiting deliveries to necessities, and it's hiring an additional 100,000 employees in its warehouse and delivery networks. It has also said that it would raise their pay by \$2 per hour through April. There has been a loosening of the requirements for collecting unemployment benefits. There are moratoriums on evictions in several cities. Detroit has turned the water back on for people who had it shut off because they couldn't pay. Other cities are suspending payments for electricity. COVID-19 tests will now--finally!--be given free of charge. Small businesses are being given aid. Numerous school districts are finding ways to provide childcare and meals when they close schools. King County has set up seven sites for quarantining homeless people and for easing likely hospital overflow.

But there are also many failings in the measures taken so far, and they've been taken too timidly. For example, the first bans on public gatherings allowed for too large of crowds. There was a similar timidity about lockdowns, e.g., why wasn't part or all of King County locked down many weeks ago? The disease spread from there to the rest of the state, and a genome study showed that someone from this area carried COVID-19 to California, creating a new cluster there.

And there have been fiascos. Most notably, Trump's travel ban on flights from Europe seemed necessary, but since it didn't include U.S. citizens and permanent residents, thousands and thousands of them flew back to this country from heavily infected Europe. But their temperatures were not taken as they got off the planes (a strategy used with success in Asia) Instead, they were packed into huge lines in the terminals with no social distancing. More, at Dulles International a line for infected people was just inches away from the line for (presumably) uninfected people. As a local activist commented, "if you were *trying* to spread COVID-19 across the country, you couldn't do any better."

What is to be done?

In ordinary times the U.S. government cares very little about the health of the people. (Witness the minuscule CDC budget, or that the richest country in the world stands at number 29 in the quality of its health care, or that we don't have universal health care.) But seeing the crashing economy in China due to the COVID-19 epidemic, the government was alarmed about the same thing happening here. It and local governments therefore acted, but too slowly and timidly.

On the other hand, the masses of people have not been quite as slow and timid. Naturally, they've been washing their hands, social distancing, staying home when possible and so on. But stopping this pandemic requires more than individual actions. It's a problem that must be dealt with collectively, and through collective struggle that makes demands on governments and employers. Further, all the attempts to slow the spread of and mitigate the coronavirus will not work if the livelihood of the workers is not taken care of. Thus, sections of the people have also been protesting and signing petitions demanding things like protective masks and clothing in hospitals. Auto workers in the U.S. and Canada have walked out on brief strikes for anti-virus protection. Hospitality workers in New Orleans disrupted the mayor's news conference to demand the health and safety of workers and the public be a priority. Teachers in New York threatened a mass sickout to make Mayor di Blasio close the schools and the entire state has now closed them.

Various governments and employers are now to some extent taking the measures being demanded. These include paid sick leave, moratoriums on evictions, social distancing in factories, care for the homeless population and more.

All these struggles must continue, and this tendency among the masses should be further developed. There's also a need for struggles to ensure that the various levels of government follow through with their promises. And while there have been demands to close the concentration camps on the Mexican border because the coronavirus will spread like wildfire in them, infect staffs and then infect the general population, Trump has not done this. Instead, he continues his incitements against immigrants, refugees and "foreigners," and he insists on calling COVID-19 the "Chinese flu."

The future

We must presently do all we can to stop further spread of this coronavirus plague. But when the pandemic ends we will surely be living in a changed country. Won't larger numbers of people then be asking, Why can't we always have paid sick leave for everyone? Why can't the moratoriums on evictions be made permanent? Why can't the sheltering of the homeless be made permanent? Why must the water in Detroit be shut off again? Why can't Amazon workers always be paid \$2 per hour more? And why can't we have universal health care?

Moreover, in the midst of this crisis there's a spirit of solidarity growing up among the masses of people. There's a growing realization that **NO ONE IS SAFE UNLESS EVERYONE IS SAFE!**

Seattle Communist Study Group 3/21/2020

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