

Shattered by pandemic, world needs new beginnings in revolutionary activity, thought

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CONTENTS:

Why we print the Draft Perspectives in <i>News & Letters</i>	2
Introduction: Deep crises demand a path to liberation	2
I. The failed pandemic response and the fetishism of the economy	6
II. The true pandemic war	
A) <i>The capitalists' class war</i>	10
B) <i>Subjects of revolution fight back</i>	13
C) <i>Pandemic class war reveals the social structure</i>	17
III. Pandemic sets in motion the latent economic collapse	19
IV. What to do in the face of compounding crises—medical, economic, political, and the philosophic void	23

Why we print the Draft Perspectives in *News & Letters*

In 1975 News and Letters Committees printed its Draft Perspectives Thesis in *News & Letters* for the first time. The organization has continued the practice ever since. What follows is the 1975 explanation of why we decided to take such action and why we continue to do so:

With this special issue, News and Letters Committees are breaking totally new ground for the Marxist movement. Publishing the Draft Perspectives Thesis for our coming national gathering directly in the pages of our paper is unprecedented, not only for all other organizations, but even for our own. We do it because our age is in such total crisis, facing a choice between absolute terror or absolute freedom, that a revolutionary organization can no longer allow any separation between theory and practice, philosophy and revolution, workers and intellectuals, “inside” and “outside.” We ask you to join in the discussion of these Perspectives with us. We are not presenting any “pat answers” to the question, “Where Do We Go From Here?” We are raising the questions that demand answers—and we ask you to help us in working them out.

Introduction: Deep crises demand a path to liberation

Because the economic and political crises wracking the capitalist-imperialist world are so horrendous...it is all too tempting to express oneself solely in opposition to what is, without ever specifying what one is for, so weighted down does one become by all these crises crying out for an end....It only assures the transformation of that type of bare opposition into one form or another of halfway house.

—Raya Dunayevskaya¹

Pandemic shattered the world in 2020. It has not shattered the roots of the global system that powered its spread and hobbled society’s response. That will take revolutionary action, shoots of which are already sprouting across the planet, from widespread labor strikes to growing recognition of the role of capitalism in undermining the health of humanity and the Earth. For

¹ “What to Do Facing the Depth of Recession and the Myriad Global Political Crises as Well as the Philosophic Void,” [Perspectives Report to the News and Letters Convention](#), Sept. 4, 1982, p. 1.

precisely that reason, those in power are maneuvering to suppress revolt and dissent, to deploy racism/nationalism/sexism and militarize thought, and to keep the toiling billions at work or impoverished enough to be desperate for work.

The mounting toll only begins with the thousands of deaths—over 150,000 confirmed as of April 17—and millions to come. Staggering numbers of people have been thrown out of work, from the 22 million who filed for unemployment in the U.S. in just four weeks to most of the over 350 million informal workers in India.² A large part of India's 45 million migrant workers, lacking income and shelter, began walking home for hundreds of miles, with dozens known to have died along the way. The social dislocation does not stop there, as state responses in many countries have engendered fear, isolation and bigotry, and violence on the part of both police forces and racists. Abuse from husbands, partners or parents is on the rise.

Any suggestion that we will return to normal after a brief episode is an illusion. The pandemic is likely to last 18 months or longer, according to a U.S. government plan leaked on March 13. Nor is this the final disaster. It has been 100 years since the last comparable pandemic, the influenza pandemic of 1918-19, which killed 40 to 100 million people. But this is not a 100-year epidemic because conditions have changed. Human destruction of and encroachment into wildlife habitat has vastly accelerated since World War II, and the intensifying climate crisis is adding to the avenues that release new viruses into our globally connected society, as happened with HIV, Ebola, SARS, Zika, H1N1 and the current virus.

² The world has 2 billion informal workers. On the plight of informal workers in Mexico and South Africa, see "[COVID-19 manifests the crisis of capitalism, shows the urgency of a new human society](#)" by J.G.F. Héctor, newsandletters.org, March 24, 2020, and "[COVID-19 among the Shackdwellers.](#)" May-June 2020 *N&L*.

The climate and extinction crisis will force us to deal with multiple intersecting catastrophes. Puerto Rico is still trying to recover from Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017 and a swarm of earthquakes from Dec. 28 to Jan. 11, and bracing for the beginning of the hurricane season in June—all on top of being ravaged by centuries of colonialism and decades of neoliberal structural adjustment.

Even after the pandemic subsides, society will be very different. We are already in the midst of a battle over how society will change in responding and adapting to the pandemic. That calls for the deepest solidarity, internationally as well as at home, participation in liberatory social movements and battles of ideas, and theoretical preparation for the battles ahead, including revolution, counter-revolution and the question of what happens after the revolution.

COMPREHENDING TODAY'S CAPITALISM

It is for this reason that the Marxist-Humanist Perspectives grapples with the meaning of events, not a roundup of the news but an effort to comprehend the current stage of capitalism and the current stage of activity and thought in revolt against it.

Those who only oppose neoliberalism fail to grasp the historical development of capitalism's inherent contradictions. However, necessary as it is to point at capitalism and call for its abolition, that cannot satisfy us. What is needed is to grasp the meaning of current and historical struggles for liberation, in activity and in thought, as they illuminate the negation of what is and the positive in that negative as the foundation of a new human society.

That includes the trends and transformations of the new period of global capitalism's disintegration opened by the economic crash of 2008. Central to that period were the

revolutions of the Arab Spring and all the revolts that were at least partially inspired by them, and the counter-revolutions that met those revolutions and revolts. It did include a broad undermining of popular legitimacy of the existing order, which powered the quest to overturn capitalism and create a new society, and as well false alternatives including new flavors of fascism.

With all this, the ideological pollution of the Left intensified. It is in this context that we can take the measure of Trumpism, which is not just about one individual who is so monstrous that Democrats can depict him as some kind of aberration instead of a crude manifestation of this dying system, but rather Trumpism beyond Trump as the expression of the system's senescence that could actually lead to the destruction of civilization.

The absolute opposite to this is not just socialism as a generality. The questions of what kind of socialism and what kind of revolution are needed reveal the crying need for a philosophy of liberation. What can make a difference after the revolution between allowing a return to the old, dying system, or making revolution in permanence real? What should be clear, but is too often evaded in the fight to oppose the powers that be, is that to avoid the failure of revolution and thereby the success of the counter-revolution that drives us onward to barbarism and climate chaos, what is needed above all is the unity of philosophy with revolution.

I. The failed pandemic response and the fetishism of the economy

I think [the coronavirus] will help accelerate the return of jobs to North America. —Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross

America should stay at work.

—Larry Kudlow, economic adviser to Donald Trump

As long as we can turn the crisis into an opportunity to restore production and social life in an orderly fashion...we will be able to achieve the economic and social development goals set for this year.

—China's maximum leader Xi Jinping

The magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic, with over two million confirmed cases as of mid-April, in almost every country in the world, is overwhelming and can be expected to skyrocket. *This never had to happen.* Every step of its growth resulted from capitalism's inhuman, out-of-control momentum, from its likely emergence out of ecological disruption to government lies, coverups and delays that allowed it to spread unchecked initially in the interest of not disrupting business. The official responses were dictated, time and again, by the rulers' fetishistic devotion to production for production's sake.

Each aspect of the crisis reveals social ills that were already catastrophic but little addressed because they mainly affect the working classes, the poor, people with disabilities and people who are oppressed because of their race, class, sex, nationality, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, or immigration status.

CLASS AND RACE DETERMINE DEATHS

In U.S. cities and the rural South, African Americans are dying at far higher rates from the virus—in Chicago, nearly six times the rate of whites—due to higher unemployment or

working in riskier occupations, poverty, inferior health insurance coverage, institutional racism of the medical system, and living or working in more polluted places. The same factors bring Latinx people elevated rates of COVID-19 sickness and death. Undocumented immigrants are excluded from stimulus checks and unemployment benefits. At the same time, police are [harassing Black people for not wearing masks](#), or for being where the cops think they shouldn't be. Cops even assaulted a child selling candy at a Harlem subway station. As determined as the corporate media are to forget it, the passion of Black Lives Matter burns on, and can be expected to burst out again.

Ever since the SARS epidemic of 2002-03, scientists have been warning of the need to prepare for a pandemic. At that time, the Bush administration was preoccupied with fabricated threats to justify invading Iraq. The warnings continued, and in 2016 the Obama administration issued a comprehensive report on the 2013-15 Ebola epidemic. Later it held an exercise simulating a viral pandemic and found severe weaknesses, including projected shortages of ventilators and other critical medical supplies. A 2019 Trump administration exercise found similar results.³ Last year, Trump White House economists warned that a pandemic could kill half a million in the U.S. and devastate the economy.

Trump ignored all of it. His White House “fired the government’s entire pandemic response chain of command” in 2018,⁴ worked to slash public health spending, undermined the Federal Emergency Management Agency and attacked science and scientists. He has been

³ David E. Sanger, Eric Lipton, Eileen Sullivan and Michael Crowley, “[Before Virus Outbreak, a Cascade of Warnings Went Unheeded](#),” *New York Times*, March 19, 2020.

⁴ Laurie Garrett, “[Trump Has Sabotaged America’s Coronavirus Response](#),” *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 31, 2020.

slashing away at the already measly safety net, including Medicaid and food stamps, and accelerating the decades-long trend of healthcare industry consolidation, hospital closings in rural areas, and pricing the poor out of healthcare.

The predicted shortage of ventilators and personal protective equipment such as medical face masks came to pass. The lack of preparation and the denial and delays by authorities are the reason the outbreak became a pandemic and the reason they imposed partial shutdowns of economies across the world. The lack of testing materials is catastrophic. When tests were available, the well-connected got tested regardless of need while many people were wrongly turned away, and the federal government in some cases prohibited legitimate uses.

With materials like ventilators and masks in short supply, the administration funneled what it had based on political favors, not need. Trump told states and hospitals to find their own supplies. Unqualified son-in-law Jared Kushner, taking charge (sort of) of COVID-19 crisis management, announced, “It’s supposed to be our stockpile. It’s not supposed to be states’ stockpiles that they then use.” One of its uses turned out to be bounty sold to speculators. States, hospitals, and profiteers had to bid against each other, jacking up prices. Hospitals sometimes found their supply orders were [seized without warning](#) by the federal government for unknown uses.

PRODUCTION OVER PEOPLE’S LIVES

Meanwhile, existing institutions—nursing homes, homeless shelters, jails, prisons, concentration camps for immigrants—became centers of contagion, just by maintaining the same exploitative conditions as before. Many private nursing homes are perennially understaffed and poorly run, pleading poverty to justify poverty wages, while raking in profits

that are siphoned off by owners and their crony contractors. Prisons, jails and concentration camps deprive inmates of healthcare to be punitive and to boost profits.⁵ Two of the biggest centers of COVID-19 spreading are Cook County Jail in Chicago and Rikers Island in New York City—jails being places where many of the people have not been convicted but are punished anyway.

Throughout the crisis, Trump—like other leaders around the world from China’s Xi Jinping to Iran’s Ali Khamenei to Mexico’s Andrés Manuel López Obrador—has focused more on keeping production and the economy going, getting workers back to work, than on remedying the shortage of medical supplies and staff and implementing public health imperatives such as social distancing and shutting nonessential businesses. He incited far-right billionaire-funded mobs to protest lockdowns in states whose governors he has a beef with, praising as “very responsible” even those who blocked an ambulance in Lansing, Mich.

When it came to the Defense Production Act, which his administration has used for hundreds of thousands of orders for military equipment and armoring the Border Patrol, somehow Trump held back from using it to make companies furnish the lacking medical supplies. He finally got around to ordering GM to supply ventilators, but only after GM had already begun the process.

⁵ See “[Prisons=death](#)” by Urszula Wislanka, 2020 May-June *N&L*.

II. The true pandemic war

A. The capitalists' class war

Officials pontificating about a wartime situation did not mention the raging class war, as rulers exploit the emergency to impose reactionary agendas and grab more power and money for themselves, and working and unemployed people fight back with strikes and other actions.

The \$2 trillion March 27 coronavirus stimulus bill hardly contained enough relief for workers to maintain them as a workforce to be exploited, let alone continue living as before. Republican senators unsuccessfully objected to granting a measly extra \$600 a week in unemployment benefits, fearing that such riches would make people too lazy to come back to work. Meanwhile, Congress devoted nearly \$1 trillion to bailouts and loans for businesses, not counting tax breaks. Much of that will go to industries like the airlines, which recently raked in profits by cutting staff, piling up work on those left, crowding and gouging passengers to create hellish conditions for flight attendants—and yet instead of using that money to prepare for a rainy day or invest in more humane conditions, they lavished more than \$45 billion on stockholders and executives since 2015.

While few demands will be made of companies getting bailouts, such as making the airlines commit to keeping their promises to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the administration is still making working-class people jump through hoops to get a few food stamps or other benefits.

Capitalists have tried to stretch the classification of “essential” businesses to keep exploiting labor for profit, from fashion factories to gun shops. Hobby Lobby defied orders to close in several states, endangering their employees and customers. That’s the company run by a right-wing religious activist who got the Supreme Court’s blessing to deny his workers access to birth control because of his supposed devotion to life. Similarly, Jerry Falwell Jr.’s

reactionary Liberty University defied state orders by reopening and exposing students to the spread of the virus—all to resist the ultimate evil of having to refund room and board to students.

COVID-19: EXCUSE TO POLLUTE & OPPRESS

Coal mining companies, now ruled essential, called for Congress to prop them up by [cutting the tax used to support miners with black lung disease](#)—one of the conditions that make people much more vulnerable to COVID-19—as well as funding for cleaning up abandoned mines. The [oil and gas industry](#) has been [more successful](#) in winning deregulation and blocking climate measures and aid to renewable energy. The Environmental Protection Agency has effectively given industries a pass on pollution during the pandemic, as has the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration.

Authoritarians like Trump quickly used emergency powers to [push through top items](#) on their wish lists, suppress dissent as did India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in [forcing news media to parrot](#) the government line, and even [close down Parliaments](#) as did Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Hungary passed a law enabling tyrannical Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to [rule by decree](#).

Violating international law, Trump used emergency powers to turn away asylum seekers at the border, and tried to ban all immigration, an ideological action that has nothing to do with protecting anyone. He pushed a rule to weaken federal employees' unions and to shield his coronavirus task force from having to testify to Congress. He used the pandemic as cover to [fire Michael Atkinson](#) as Inspector General of the

Intelligence Community, for bringing to light the whistleblower complaint that exposed Trump’s extortion of Ukraine.⁶

Smaller state dictators launched their own abuses, such as the governors of seven states banning abortions,⁷ spouting the lie that they are “nonessential” medical procedures, and complaining that abortion clinics use masks and gloves. They had no complaint about ICE soliciting 45,000 N95 surgical masks on March 20 and [using N95 masks to conduct raids](#) on immigrant communities at a time when frontline medical personnel can’t get enough.

Wisconsin Republicans used their state’s primary as a [dress rehearsal](#) for using the emergency to [deter voters](#), especially African American, especially in November’s national elections. They were supported by a ladder of partisan courts all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled absurdly that allowing a few extra days for mail-in voting was a greater threat to democracy than forcing voters to expose themselves to the virus by voting in person, especially in cities with large Black populations, where the number of polling places was drastically reduced.

Trump and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell are blocking proposals to protect voting this year from disruptions caused by quarantines. [Trump told Fox News](#) that with voter protections, “you’d never have a Republican elected in this country again.”

Several states are using this opportunity to [pass laws criminalizing protests](#) against fossil fuel infrastructure, a trend that began after water protectors in South Dakota sparked worldwide opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline.

⁶ That extends the pattern demonstrated in “[Trump after Impeachment](#),” March-April 2020 *N&L*.

⁷ See “[The torture of abortion bans](#)” by Terry Moon, May-June 2020 *N&L*.

It is not only China that ramped up its already pervasive surveillance. Countries from South Korea to Israel took [steps in that totalitarian direction](#), which is being pushed in the U.S. too, adding to the already massive apparatus erected after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.⁸ Beyond surveillance, Trump’s loyalist Attorney General William Barr [secretly asked Congress to allow suspension of some constitutional rights](#), including indefinite detention without trial, with the pandemic as excuse.

The lack of preparation, the authoritarian and regressive measures, the favoritism for a few, the impoverishment and oppression of the vast majority, are a taste of how capitalism will deal with future disasters sparked by the climate and extinction crisis. It does not have to be this way, but in order to respond to the ecological and social breakdowns in a human way, we need to establish a truly human society, and abolish the current anti-human social structure. That is implicit in all the struggles from below.

B. Subjects of revolution fight back

And to Mr. Bezos...You think you're powerful? We're the ones that have the power. Without us working, what are you going to do?

—Chris Smalls, Amazon worker [fired for leading a walkout](#)

In country after country, it took concerted pressure from below to push leaders into taking more than token action or coverups, [beginning with China](#). That movement from below was revealed dramatically when [spontaneous strikes](#) swept the [whole country](#) of Italy, [along with](#)

⁸ See “[Rampant U.S. surveillance slouches toward totalitarianism](#)” by Franklin Dmitryev, Jan.-Feb. 2014 *N&L*, which warned during the Obama administration, “The machinery of counter-revolution grows in reaction to the specter of revolution, forming the apparatus ready-made for a new, high-tech fascism.”

[mass absenteeism](#) and protests. The strikers demanded adequate health and safety conditions and not to be forced to work in nonessential industries. They protested years of [cuts in medical staff and resources](#). The Italian government—which initially ordered a lockdown except that every factory worker was classified as “essential” and had to keep working in unsafe conditions—was forced to make concessions. In Italy and around the world, [prisoners have held strikes and protests](#).

Refusing to sacrifice their lives on the altar of the economy, workers are looking out for each other and demanding the workplace be made safe for them, that the economy be reorganized around the needs of human beings, not capital. If the business is nonessential, why not produce goods or services that meet vital needs? In Spain, workers at Mercedes and Airbus struck, pointing out that producing cars and airplanes is not essential. [Airbus workers volunteered to convert their factory](#) to make desperately needed ventilators. [GE workers protested](#) in Boston and Lynn, Mass., to demand conversion of their idled jet engine factories to make ventilators.

Infection of McDonald’s workers in Los Angeles sparked a walkout on March 5 that by April 9 spread to more than 30 fast-food chain restaurants throughout the area and San Jose. Workers demanded what the companies should have provided: masks, gloves, soap, hazard pay, and paid sick leave. Across the U.S., more than 700 fast food workers went on strike during that period.

[Hospital workers were already organizing](#) before the pandemic broke out in the U.S., demanding better working conditions and higher wages, so that they can afford the healthcare they provide to others. On Jan. 28, 8,000 hospital workers in the Swedish Medical Center chain in Seattle walked out on a three-day strike over staffing and other issues. The chain had over 900 vacancies. At scores of hospitals and clinics, staff are organizing to demand

equipment and safer conditions. [Nurses have](#) long engaged in [struggles](#) against hospitals that do not [hire enough nurses](#) and force those on the job to [look after more patients](#) than they can [safely handle](#). That planned shortage of nurses and [other medical staff](#) is one factor undermining the healthcare system's capacity to deal with the pandemic. The deadly consequences of overwhelmed hospitals are unfolding now in Italy and Spain, and are beginning in the U.S.⁹ At press time, more strikes are breaking out and will continue to do so in the U.S. and internationally.

Other struggles persist despite governments exploiting the crisis to block protests, moving more quickly to impose lockdowns than to find needed medical supplies.

The movement of youth worldwide centering on climate strikes, which has grown too powerful to ignore, temporarily moved to mainly online protests. In addition to three days of online events April 22-24 for the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, there will be social-distanced protests across the U.S. on April 23, designated Stop the Money Pipeline Day of Action. In places like Chicago, they will target the biggest financial backer of fossil fuels projects, JPMorgan & Chase, demanding an end to all such funding.

In Canada in February, repression of First Nations resistance camps by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, with sniper rifles and other weapons, sparked blockades and protests from Victoria to Halifax that shut down offices and train lines. (See "[Canada on trial](#)," May-June *N&L*) The Unist'ot'en camp under attack was set up in 2010 to block the construction of pipelines that would carry climate-busting tar sands oil and fracked gas to the coast for export.

Even after the pandemic was declared and large gatherings were cancelled, pipeline companies went ahead with construction, risking devastation of First Nations

⁹ For more on these and other labor struggles, see articles on page 3 of this issue, and "[Pandemic as Battlefield](#)" by Franklin Dmitryev, newsandletters.org, March 30, 2020.

communities. They run “man camps,” large temporary trailer parks or dormitories, long linked with surges in sexual violence against Indigenous women. Their structure makes them prone to become centers of pandemic contagion, in areas that already lack healthcare. “It’s like bringing smallpox blankets in,” said Faith Spotted Eagle of man camps planned for the Keystone XL Pipeline construction, which has been stopped for now by a court order.

As the pandemic was brewing, [International Women’s Day \(IWD\) this year](#) still saw larger marches, greater militancy of women participants, events in new places, and attacks against them that escalated significantly from previous years. IWD demonstrations followed the Women’s Marches gathering hundreds of thousands in the U.S. and worldwide, [drawing in new women](#) three years after they began. As the vast majority of teachers, healthcare workers, cashiers and fast food counter workers, women have been at the forefront of many of the strikes of the past two years, as well as the organizing for a living wage. These are disproportionately women of color.

While 2019’s uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East gave rise to the label Second Arab Spring, the spark of the first Arab Spring has not been extinguished in Syria. The pandemic worsened the humanitarian crisis of Syrians, 11.7 million of whom need humanitarian aid. One million of them have been pushed into Idlib province in crowded tent camps under harsh conditions and scarce supplies of medicine, food, water, even soap. Deadly attacks on Idlib province by Russia, Iran and the Bashar al-Assad regime are not just a matter of the regime trying to reclaim lost territory. They are an effort to silence the idea of freedom as if it too could be murdered. For years those Russian and Syrian forces have destroyed hospitals and clinics in the Free areas. In Idlib, with the province under daily fire,

demonstrations continue, raising slogans like, “The revolution is an idea and you can’t kill an idea.”

C. Pandemic class war reveals the social structure

Our labor has been considered essential. Our health has been considered negotiable and our lives are considered expendable.

—**Seth Rosenberg, New York subway operator**

What comes into view is the actual structure of labor, production and class divisions that characterizes globalized capitalism. Contrary to trendy illusions that industrial capitalism has been superseded by an information economy or the centrality of immaterial labor, the indispensability of not only healthcare and child care but manual labor comes to the fore: in factories, farms, construction, cleaning, transportation, delivery and logistics. In addition to doctors and nurses, these are the workers the capitalists have been most determined to keep on the job.

THE ECONOMY RUNS ON SWEATED LABOR

The economy runs on the back of the lower and deeper sections of the working class. The majority of these essential workers are paid less than a living wage, have skimpy benefits if any and therefore poor healthcare, little job security and often don’t know if they will get enough hours to get by. A great many are left out of the sick leave provisions of the new CARES act. As in normal times, they are treated as disposable: called in to work in unsafe conditions and having to fight for proper protection. From [Walmart and Target](#) to [cleaners of empty WeWork buildings](#), from [California farmworkers](#) to New York transit workers, [at least 68 of whom had died](#) as of April 21, going to work becomes a life and death question.

Who these essential/disposable workers are reveals another structural aspect of our class society: Black, Latinx, undocumented and women workers are pushed into these precarious jobs of hard labor. The work of social reproduction, paid or unpaid, is largely done by women. When paid a pittance, it is usually done by women of color or immigrants. Consequently, women, Black and Latinx people, and immigrants are at the forefront of labor struggles, including Fight for \$15.

This skewed hierarchy is reflected in the racialized class nature of the punitive institutions that warehouse people in homeless shelters, prisons and migrant concentration camps. Mass incarceration has become an integral part of the political and economic system, and serves as part of the disciplinary and scapegoating machinery and as centers of concentration and spreading of disease. Its hateful, punitive nature is seen in how even people who have not been convicted of anything are denied healthcare, such as when [doctors were blocked from giving free flu vaccinations](#) to child detainees in San Ysidro, Calif.

The same groups of people are the ones least likely to be able to stay away from work and public transit or to stay away from other people in crowded institutions. They are the ones most likely to have suffered water or power shutoffs and to be on the wrong side of the digital divide. Homeless and incarcerated people may not even have access to soap.

The structure extends globally, as most countries depend on the world's 244 million migrant workers, poorly paid and often with no effective legal rights, and now at great risk of infection. In the two most populous countries, India and China, the migrants are mainly from within the same country but oppressed just the same.

China pioneered the “get back to work” demands with its drive to reopen factories, highlighting the fact that production did not disappear just because capitalists in North

America and Europe moved most manufacturing to low-wage “developing” countries. What that global redivision of labor means is sharply revealed by the very real threat of starvation faced by millions of people in poor and “middle-income” countries as the capitalists in imperialist countries, who are the ones who call the shots, suddenly cut off orders for their production—abandoning garment workers in Bangladesh and migrant workers in India and Thailand.

III. Pandemic sets in motion the latent economic collapse

The economy’s fragility, inequality and illusions are not caused by the virus but are highlighted and heightened or exposed by it. The Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis projected a possible 52 million unemployed in the U.S. for an [unemployment rate of 32%](#) for April to June, higher than in the Great Depression of the 1930s. They neglected to mention that the Black unemployment rate is still nearly twice that of whites, and the Latinx rate is somewhere in between. For the same quarter, [JP Morgan projects an immense drop of 40%](#) in the Gross Domestic Product. Hunger stalks the land, food banks are besieged and running out of food, while the irrationality of capitalism leads farmers to dump milk and leave food to rot. Hunger was already advancing; on a world scale, another [world food crisis](#) was brewing and is now virtually certain to appear soon. All this is a great intensification of a catastrophe already underway. Last year’s low unemployment statistics barely hid the growing number of people working sporadic or long hours in precarious jobs, piling up consumer debt even higher than the record set in 2008 on the eve of the crash.

Overloaded healthcare systems are turning away patients, whether with COVID-19 or unrelated illnesses, and at the same time laying off doctors and nurses. Layoffs at family practices are expected to balloon to 800,000 by June. Pay has been cut for thousands more

medical workers. Rural hospitals were already failing before this. Ethicists are debating how to ration healthcare, but it was already rationed, by high charges. The increasingly consolidated healthcare system was already shot through with planned shortages. Profits—even at non-profits where executives and cronies rake in the loot—were shored up by keeping staff, empty rooms, basic equipment and supplies at a minimum, except those used in more profitable elective procedures like plastic surgery. Now that house of cards is crashing down in the drastically changed environment of a long-predicted pandemic.

FALLING RATE OF PROFIT

All this is characteristic not only of capitalism but of this stage of it. The pre-existing weakness of the “recovery” is linked to the rate of profit remaining low since 2007. In fact, state-capitalism as a world stage hit a wall with the mid-1970s global economic crisis, the deepest recession since the 1930s Depression. A revolutionary response meant more than pointing out Marx’s analysis of the falling rate of profit as cause. We can learn from Raya Dunayevskaya’s philosophic comprehension of Marx’s law, which was never narrowly economic.¹⁰

What Marx showed to be capitalism’s law of motion, or the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation, centers on the basic relationship of capital and labor. The preponderance of constant capital over variable capital, that is, dead labor (past labor, materialized in things) over living labor, is seen starkly in workplaces as domination of machines over human workers. It is seen one way in the accumulation of wealth at one pole of society and misery, unemployment and revolt at the other. The growth of capital

¹⁰ See “Today’s Epigones Who Try to Truncate Marx’s *Capital*,” chapter 6 of *Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution in Permanence for Our Day: Selected Writings by Raya Dunayevskaya* (Haymarket Books, 2019), as well as chapter 9, “Capitalist Production/Alienated Labor.”

over labor is seen another way in the falling rate of profit, since profit comes only from surplus value and the only source of value is living labor.

Political crises and ideological offensives give expression to the absolute general law. Dunayevskaya had to remind Marxist economists of the 1970s and 1980s that the law of motion, with its army of unemployed, has to be seen in strict relationship to workers' revolt—it is capitalism's own internal contradictions that will bring it down. Its dialectical inversion does not end with the object (dead labor) dominating the Subject (living labor), but impels the “live, concrete, revolutionary subject—the proletariat” to reach “to uproot the old society and create totally new, truly human relations as *freely* associated” people.¹¹ This is necessary to stress, in opposition to Marxists like Ernest Mandel who tied Marx's *Capital* to acceptance of Russian state-capitalism and separated Marx's theory from workers as Subjects and the goal of freely associated labor.

The crisis in profitability in the 1970s led to the restructuring called neoliberalism. It is political, ideological, and economic, deeply rooted in the objective crisis of capitalism. Part of it is expanding trade and expanding capital mobility and flow to the whole world. Globalization is also about shoring up profit by pursuing the lowest short-term costs for capital: outsourcing production to low-wage countries like China (which, with strikes against owners and the regime, is not as low-wage as it used to be) and Bangladesh, and creating global supply chains and using just-in-time production methods, whose fragility is manifested in the current crisis.

The intensified exploitation did shore up the rate of profit for a while, but by 2007 that subsided, and an even deeper economic crisis set in. The weak recovery since 2009 has been sustained by extremely low interest rates. The combination of low rate of profit and low

¹¹ “[Today's Epigones](#),” p. 74.

interest rates led to low productive investment and high diversion of profits into dividends, stock buybacks, and purchases of fictitious capital like stocks and bonds, inflating their prices.

In the past few years, consumer, corporate, and government debt have all reached record levels. Top monopoly companies have built up huge cash hoards but thousands of companies are in danger of bankruptcy. Many are “zombie” companies, that is, their income barely covers expenses, or doesn’t, so they keep borrowing to get by, putting them in mortal danger under the sudden economic standstill.

VAST INEQUALITY COMES TO THE FORE

Liberals see a vast rise in inequality, with eight billionaires owning as much as half of humanity, and stop there. It is really Marx’s absolute general law working overtime. Key to the new gilded age is the centralization of capital Marx wrote about—in other words, growth of monopolies and sweeping consolidation of many sectors of the economy: hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, agribusiness, retail, media, Facebook, Google, and Apple. Their monopoly power helps them raise prices, keep down wages and bust unions. The tidal wave of business failures to come will step up that consolidation.

The new colossus is Amazon, whose revenues exceed the national economies of three quarters of the world’s countries. The current situation is helping Amazon decimate retail businesses. That does nothing for the warehouse workers who are striking for safer working conditions.

The aftermath of the 2007-09 Great Recession intensified the above-mentioned trends but also the revolt and, because of that, the counter-revolutionary trends that led to the Tea Party, Trumpism, and their analogues internationally. That this is more than a flirtation is seen in the new crop of leaders, from Trump to Bolsonaro, Modi to Orban,

steeped in the totalitarian elevation of ideology over truth and science. The media and social media help propagate the deception and manipulation in which these demagogues thrive, and are helping turn societies toward fascism.

Swelling nationalism intensifies the pulling apart of the world that is fueled by the low rate of profit and the consequent zero-sum scramble for profits, from the European Union's internal tensions to the oil price war to the Trumpian trade war of all against all, now seen in countries restricting exports of medical supplies needed to handle the pandemic. With several actual shooting wars already underway, the global capitalist crisis raises the threat of war turning global.

IV. What to do in the face of compounding crises—medical, economic, political, and the philosophic void

It is my desire that this history of Philosophy should contain for you a summons to grasp the spirit of the time which is present in us by nature.

—G.W.F. Hegel¹²

Marx's philosophy is no abstraction and because that philosophy is concrete, it expresses the methodology needed for both analyzing serious crises and acting to uproot the system that created them....Marx never departed from the Hegelian negativity as "the creative principle." That's how, after the defeat of revolutions as in victory, Marx called for "revolution in permanence."

—Raya Dunayevskaya¹³

¹² [Lectures on the History of Philosophy](#), Vol. 3, p. 553.

¹³ "What to Do Facing the Depth of Recession and the Myriad Global Political Crises as Well as the Philosophic Void," [Perspectives Report to the News and Letters Convention](#), Sept. 4, 1982, pp. 19, 20.

The pandemic has intensified what many young people have been voicing in recent years: disgust with capitalism. The popularity of candidates who label themselves socialist, such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders, reflects the groundswell of opposition to capitalism and the search for an alternative.

The urgency of the dire situation must not be downplayed. Yet at the same time it generates a temptation to focus on the first negation, opposition to what is. Abolishing this sick society and founding a new one on truly human foundations requires that the positive in the negative, the negation of that first negation, be brought to the fore. Yet another half measure would only leave us exposed to the next crisis, from pandemics, climate chaos, economic crash, world war or bloodthirsty fascism.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WHAT WE ARE FOR

Some are talking about what they are for, but the bulk of what is being projected, even by the “revolutionary” Left, is reforms or at best vague or unexamined concepts of socialism. Often capitalism is equated to neoliberalism, as if a fine solution would be a return to the kinds of state-capitalism that predominated in the period before and after World War II. That, however, led us to where we are today, and a raft of “democratic” reforms would not abolish the anti-human momentum of capitalism.

Totally missing is the self-activity of masses in motion, which is socialism. Self-movement is the inner core of the dialectic, without which there is no true negation of the negation but only shortcuts to halfway solutions.

Workers’ actions have gone far beyond appeals to the power of the state that are central to most of the socialist manifestos issued in the face of the pandemic. Even in defensive actions, workers are trying to shape their own conditions of labor. [Nurses](#) and [doctors](#) have

even been fired for demanding N95 masks and other personal protective equipment. Just as in natural disasters, there is a tremendous amount of self-organization in solidarity from below, especially in the most marginalized communities.¹⁴ But as the Uruguayan revolutionary [Raúl Zibechi pointed out](#), “The mainstream media that are determined to instill fear hide the immense solidarity among the people from below. Surely because they fear it, because another world dwells there.”

In the future, we will be living on a planet damaged by capitalism, but the possible kinds of life we can have are poles apart, depending on whether we succeed in fundamentally transforming society. In the absolute opposite of today’s society, one based on freely associated labor instead of slavery to capital’s production for production’s sake, we can leave behind pervasive misery, precarity and antagonism, and self-development and cooperation can flourish, as can a rational relationship to nature. To get there, we need the clear direction that can only come from a philosophy of revolution.

¹⁴ See the poignant report by Raúl Zibechi, “[Los Movimientos en la Pandemia](#),” *desInformémonos*, April 2, 2020.

THE POSITIVE IN THE NEGATIVE

We must be attuned to the positive in the negative, the reach for the future in present and historical resistance and revolt. For only revolution can break us out of capitalism's suicidal spiral that threatens to bounce from one disaster to another—not one after another but overlapping and compounding. We cannot wait for the day of revolution to begin projecting the positive in the negative in the fullness of the body of ideas of Marxist-Humanism. Marx, at the inception of an organization that would be labeled "Marxist," criticized its self-limiting program, and insisted on projecting as ground for organization his concept of the positive in the total uprooting of this society:

After the enslaving subordination of the individual under the division of labor, and with it also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor, from a mere means of life, has itself become the prime necessity of life; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be fully left behind and society inscribe on its banners: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.¹⁵

History shows we cannot afford to stop with the abstractions that pass for socialism. The transformation into opposite of the socialist movement at the time of World War I and the counter-revolution that emerged from within the socialist Russian Revolution show the need to be rooted in objective history and in a dialectical philosophy of revolution that can anticipate and comprehend such transformations. We are confronted with the questions of what kind of socialism, what kind of revolution, and what happens after the overthrow to make revolution in permanence both a method, a goal, and the reality?

¹⁵ Karl Marx, [*Critique of the Gotha Program, Part I.*](#)

Marxist-Humanism from the beginning has centered the need to abolish alienated labor and the division between mental and manual labor, and base society instead on self-activity, which begins before the revolution and must continue during and after it.

For the reach to socialism to amount to anything, we must confront the ideological pollution within the Left itself. That is most blatantly seen in those ready to excuse Bashar al-Assad's genocidal attacks against the Syrian people's nine-year revolution and in the way apologists for genocide have been accepted as legitimate in coalitions against Trump. As we wrote in our Perspectives Thesis three years ago:

Nothing more starkly reveals how deeply today's ideological retrogression has polluted the Left than the influence of those who defend Assad as 'anti-imperialist' and deny the existence of revolution in Syria. It reveals a Left that refuses to surrender to capitalism but surrenders anyway by implicitly abandoning revolution as a realistic goal. It perceives no positive in the negative because it assumes the masses to be backward as a given. It sinks into pure negativity—the mirror image of Trump—defining itself entirely by its opposition to U.S. imperialism.¹⁶

This flows from the history of normalization of state-capitalism and its administrative mentality's pseudo-revolutionary ideology ever since Stalin's counter-revolution passed itself off as revolution. Left analyses of the pandemic seldom touch the Syrian revolution and counter-revolution. There is a pull to state-capitalist solutions: we are told that what we need is state planning (christened "democratic"), nationalization, regulatory apparatus—and that the state is the only power strong enough to confront the pandemic and the capitalists who get in the way of stopping it. Missing is the confidence in the masses, confidence in social revolution, with the latter being substituted by "political revolution" or a "revolution of

¹⁶ "[Philosophy and revolt confront Trump's drive to fascism](#)," Marxist-Humanist Perspectives, 2017-18.

values.” That lack of confidence is inherent in the administrative mentality of the state-capitalist era and its origins in Stalin’s counter-revolution that perverted Marxism into totalitarian Communism.

OBJECTIVITY OF MARXIST-HUMANISM

The shock of that transformation propelled the origin of Marxist-Humanism. It compelled Raya Dunayevskaya to rethink what had been the predominant assumptions about Marxism, which held that the organized economy, planned and subordinated to the state, was virtually the essence of socialism. That rethinking led to Marx’s 1844 philosophic moment, his concept of alienated labor and the self-activity of the worker as key, and his opposition to “vulgar communism.”¹⁷

The total contradiction of counter-revolution coming from within the revolution spurred her to question what had become of Marxist thought. This resulted in recognizing Marx’s work as a philosophy of revolution in permanence and disentangling it from what post-Marx Marxism has made of it. Even the greatest of Marxist revolutionaries who did not grasp Marx’s original recreation of the dialectic and development of it into a whole philosophy of revolution, instead separating parts of it from the integral philosophical whole.

Without that direction, generations of Marxists were left unprepared for the transformations into opposite within the Marxist movement and within revolutions. The field was left open to those who channeled capitalism’s objective impulses like Stalin, or like

¹⁷ See chapter 9 of *Russia: From Proletarian Revolution to State-Capitalist Counter-Revolution: Selected Writings by Raya Dunayevskaya* (Haymarket Books, 2018).

today's mediocrities who align with the counter-revolutions of Assad, Putin, Iran's clerics, or even Trump-adjacent rightists.

THE LEFT'S IDEOLOGICAL POLLUTION

Looking back from this vantage point at the last decade of revolt, the revolutions of the Arab Spring undermined confidence in the existing order, propelling the reach for a new society. False alternatives including fascism proliferated at a time when the ideological pollution of the Left intensified to an incredibly deep disorientation, not excluding lining up with genocide and far right figures and propaganda.

While the ramifications and “intellectual sediment” from the upsurges of the 2010s are not finished, all this massive revolt has not led us out of the deepening dangers of disintegrating capitalist society. We cannot explain it away only because of the strength of the counter-revolution, both within each country and from without, which is real enough. The question is where does the elemental revolt lead when it is lacking a philosophy of revolution that would give these revolutionary struggles a direction?

Post-Marx Marxism did not rise to this challenge. It has proven to be a force in the world that often helped block revolution or transform it into opposite—from the aborted 1968 French revolution to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, attracting some to its counter-revolutionary anti-imperialism, to the counter-revolution from within Grenada's revolution that opened the door for Ronald Reagan's 1983 invasion—and eased the rise of the Right by discrediting the Left from within.

It should be clear, but is evaded by the Left in general, that to avoid the failure of revolution and the success of the counter-revolution that drives us onward to barbarism and

pandemic/climate/extinction chaos, what is needed above all is the unity of philosophy with revolution, of philosophy of revolution in permanence with the subjects of revolution.

This is not brought about by an elitist party taking command. It is about leadership, not by an individual or a supposedly vanguard organization, but theory of revolution as leadership—in other words, “philosophy, not philosopher.” It depends on the body of ideas of the revolution in permanence, which demands projecting. As Hegel pointed out, the Idea of freedom is not so feeble as to have a right or obligation to exist without actually existing. That does not mean that we can leave the Idea floating on its own. It needs, it demands, an organizational home.

Out of Dunayevskaya’s work on Marx’s last decade, she made a category of revolution in permanence as the needed ground for organization. As she wrote in “Not by Practice Alone”:

We...have used precisely Marx’s theory of the philosophy of revolution in permanence, not as an abstraction but as the actual concrete needed in order both to be armed against being pulled into the world market of the whirlpool of capitalism, state as well as private, *and* as requiring a decentralized organization whose ground is that continuing ‘revolution in permanence.’...

Philosophy of ‘revolution in permanence’ cannot possibly be only ground, or even content, substance; it is Subject, and that both objectively and subjectively. The unchained dialectic—both as dialectics of liberation and dialectics of thought, dialectics of self-development—that self-development is both Individual and Universal. The achievement of that can only come with sharp awareness of the absolute contradictions in the nuclear world state-capitalist reality; to project Marx’s philosophy of revolution *concretely*, its Absolutes as concrete Universals, not abstractions, becomes imperative. This lays ground for daily practical work and not just books or essay writing. That is our organizational task.¹⁸

¹⁸ Raya Dunayevskaya, [*The Power of Negativity: Selected Writings on the Dialectic in Hegel and Marx*](#) (Lexington Books, 2002), pp. 276, 288.

ORGANIZATION AND THE BODY OF IDEAS

That is the spirit we bring to working out our perspectives and tasks this year. Our projected new publications—on Syria, on Women’s Liberation, on What Is Socialism, and on the climate movement—are about comprehending the current stage of capitalism and this society, the disorientation on the Left as well as everywhere else, the meaning of the movement from practice, and philosophy and revolution reaching out to each other.

Aiding us in this projection are the two new books of selected writings by Raya Dunayevskaya, [Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution in Permanence for Our Day](#) and [Russia, from Proletarian Revolution to State-Capitalist Counter-Revolution](#). These bring to the fore the Marxist-Humanist comprehension of Marx’s philosophy of revolution in permanence and the Russian Revolution, as well as the dialectics of counter-revolution coming from within the revolution, and the cruciality yet ambivalence of Lenin’s philosophical reorganization with his return to Hegel. These books bring out the centrality of the Marxist-Humanist trilogy of revolution, as incorporated right in our organization’s Constitution:

[Marxism and Freedom, from 1776 until Today](#), “with its dialectical form of presentation of history and theory as emanating from the movement from practice, [laid] the foundation for the articulation of the unity of philosophy and revolution” as developed in [Philosophy and Revolution](#). The latter reflected “the need of integrality also of philosophy and organization. As against ‘the party to lead’ concept, such integrality of dialectics and organization reflects the revolutionary maturity of the age and its passion for a philosophy of liberation.” [Rosa Luxemburg, Women’s Liberation, and Marx’s Philosophy of Revolution](#) concentrated on the “new moments” of Marx’s last decade as the trail to our age, as seen in the Man/Woman relationship and in the relationship of the less technologically developed lands to the

capitalistically technologically advanced countries. As a consequence, we “see the absolute challenge to our age as the need to concretize Marx’s ‘revolution in permanence’ not alone as the determinant for theory and practice, but as ground for organization in place of ‘the party to lead,’ in order to achieve the total uprooting of this exploitative, racist, sexist society and the creation of truly new human relations.” Our Constitution goes on to single out *American Civilization on Trial: Black Masses as Vanguard*, which “concretized [the trilogy of revolution] on the American scene and for the Black dimension,” as another fundamental Marxist-Humanist work and contribution to the theoretical preparation for revolution.

Nor can these be separated from what it means to have a Marxist-Humanist newspaper—and there are two, [*News & Letters*](#) in the U.S. and [*Praxis en América Latina*](#) in Mexico, which cooperate closely. News and Letters Committees is responsible for *News & Letters* and we aim to strengthen both its theoretical development and voices from below. There are no others like these, practicing as best we can the new relationship between theory and practice that is at the heart of Marxist-Humanism, and projecting Marxist-Humanist Archives as living. During the pandemic crisis, we will continue publishing *News & Letters* online, although circumstances prevent us from mailing out a printed newspaper.

All of these tasks point to the tremendous need for active, concrete, critical projection of Marxist-Humanism as participants in ongoing movements, *and* for organizational growth, which needs to become more concrete. Because what it is all about is revolution in permanence, getting rid of this rotten society and establishing one with totally new human relations.

—The Resident Editorial Board of

News and Letters Committees, April 22, 2020