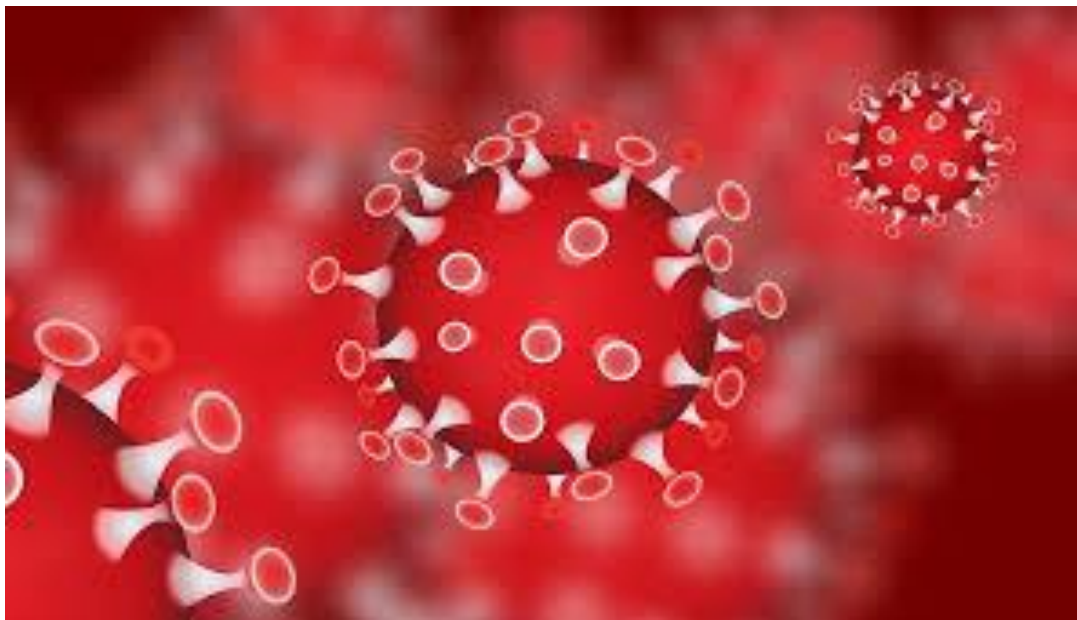

Left- Horizons

Workers should not pay for coronavirus



The new coronavirus, Covid-19, threatens to inflict major social and economic upheaval; its effects are only just beginning. As we have outlined in another article¹, there are already indications that it will have a serious affect on the world economy and the ramifications of global social and economic dislocation are increasing almost on a daily basis.

The worst-case scenarios are by no means the least likely and they point to the possibility of widespread infection across the whole global population in the next twelve months. Professor Mark Lipsitch, of the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health, has predicted (*Financial Times*, February 29) that between 40 per cent and 70 per cent of people world-wide are likely to be infected in the coming year. This translates, according to a leaked British government estimate last week, to somewhere between half a million and 800,000 deaths in the UK alone.

¹ <http://www.left-horizons.co.uk/index.php?section=4&page=709&archivesection=0>

Many countries, notably US and UK, have cut back on contingency planning and provision for disease monitoring and control. If the Covid-19 virus can spread rapidly and virtually uncontrollably in a relatively modern economy like Italy, it will have a devastating effect on countries where the health infrastructure is relatively weak, like significant parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It looks like it is not a matter of *if* but *when* we are faced with a global Covid-19 pandemic.

The problem of a new coronavirus may have its origins in a 'natural accident' – although even that is debateable, given the manner in which meat is processed, through industrial farming and the commodification of natural resources (See this article² by Michael Roberts, January 31) – but it is very much a *political* issue.

The Covid-19 crisis is a crisis of the capitalist system and the scale of social dislocation will be a measure of the inability of a system, built upon greed and profit, to maintain public health. Across the planet, trillions of dollars are spent every year on weapons of war. The US has spent over \$1tr on one jet fighter alone: the Lockheed Martin F-35. Yet one new virus sends policy-makers into a blind panic. This is not surprising, because right across the world, even in the richest states, government cut-backs have drastically limited the management of public health.

Here in the UK there are serious doubts about the capacity of the NHS to deal with the scale of the looming crisis. Only a few weeks ago, *The Guardian* revealed (January 25) the scale of the shortages in the NHS: "*hospitals are suffering a serious shortage of vital medical equipment such as ventilators, pumps to administer drugs, and oxygen cylinders during the NHS's ongoing winter crisis...The surge in numbers of people needing care has also led to some hospitals running out of beds for patients to sleep in, mattresses to lie on and trolleys to use while they wait for admission.*"

NHS will be overwhelmed

Britain has suffered a decade of grinding austerity that has already driven the NHS to breaking point. It has only been kept going by the hard work and dedication of its workers. The social care system for elderly people is also at breaking point, largely due to the massive cuts in local authority funding by the Tories since 2010. These two factors together have ensured that the NHS has a crippling shortage of beds. If the projected hospitalisations from Covid-19 are even remotely as bad as they have been forecast, the NHS is going to be overwhelmed. It will not be able to take more than a tiny fraction of the patients it needs to take and it will be the most vulnerable, particularly the elderly, who will suffer.

The Tory government has announced contingency plans but it is putting the entire onus on the shoulders of what is already a *skeleton staff* in the health service. The government is talking about up to a fifth of workers being absent at any one time, but we must be clear that the brunt of the health crisis must not be borne by workers. The Tories are making reassuring noises to businesses, about not paying taxes and other bills, but they are offering no guarantees on the health and safety or, just as importantly, the economic well-being of working class people.

Driven out of the NHS by low pay and over-work

The management in the NHS are talking about "working through" an absence rate of 30 per cent. This is completely unacceptable. The NHS is short of staff *now* and the government instead of adding more burdens to its staff, it should implement emergency measures to recruit nurses, doctors and ancillary staff immediately. There are many trained health staff who have left the profession over the years, driven out by low pay and massive over-work. We do not need a ramshackle army of 'volunteers', we

² <http://www.left-horizons.co.uk/index.php?section=4&page=679>

need an emergency plan to bring back paid and qualified staff into the NHS, with retraining where necessary. The government must commit to ordering adequate supplies of respirators, pumps, oxygen, masks and other equipment *now*, not later.

We have the same issue in schools, where the government is suggesting it might introduce legislation to allow class sizes of over 30, to cope with teacher illnesses. This is completely unacceptable and teaching unions should vigorously open this. It is the thin end of a very large wedge. It guarantees that those teachers who are 'healthy' will have their health ruined by over-work and stress.

Labour and TUC leadership must play a major role

We cannot trust anything that comes out of the mouth of Boris Johnson, who has made a political career out of lies. He is giving bland reassurances about "our wonderful NHS" which has been driven into a ditch by *his party* over the last ten years, and yet he is expecting us to "keep calm and carry on", all the while lying through his teeth about the state of the NHS. Johnson is taking the population of the country for fools, including all those who were conned into voting Tory last December.

We might be stuck with a Tory majority in the short-term, but the Labour Party and TUC leadership can play a leading role in directing the crisis by demanding that the outbreak is dealt with in a way that benefits the many and not the few. The Labour and trade union leaders should go on TV and in the press, shouting as loud as they possibly can, that the interests of workers must be protected.

Gig economy workers must be protected

The trade union leaders have to champion low-paid workers, who depend on their meagre wages on a hand to mouth basis. To miss a shift means missing a wage and not paying a bill or not buying food. Faced with a choice between going to work sick or imposing a self-quarantine and then being evicted for non-payment of rent, we know what most workers would do – what they are already forced to do.

What is worse, is that the lowest-paid and least secure workers include those with very high exposure to the public – in hospitality and catering. Without guarantees for their financial security, the gig-economy is a finished recipe for the coronavirus to spread like wildfire. Platitudes from this Tory government about supporting workers affected are completely useless, given the greed and unscrupulousness of so many employers and private landlords.

The Labour Party and the TUC must take a vigorous lead on this question and they must do it now. If this is a *national emergency*, then it must be treated as one and *emergency measures* must be put in place; not putting the police and army "on the streets" – which is an implied threat against any protest or political opposition – but by providing services and government support to the NHS and to communities. The Labour and trade union leaders must demand:

***The immediate restoration of local authority and NHS cuts so that there are adequate finances to manage a crisis.**

***All NHS contracts related to the coronavirus outbreak must be in-house contracts, as a preliminary to bringing *all* NHS services back in-house**

***All workers quarantined, including self-quarantined, must be guaranteed normal, full pay.**

***In the event of any lock-downs or quarantines, that rents, mortgage payments and utility bills must be *suspended* (not just postponed) for the duration**

***NHS, education and other workers must be protected from excessive workloads and the appropriate numbers of staff must be employed and trained to provide an adequate service.**

***Labour should use the crisis to campaign for the nationalisation of the whole of the health sector, including pharmaceuticals, so its work-force and technological resources can be managed for the benefit of public health and not for profit**

***All those on welfare benefits should have benefits maintained, irrespective of missed interviews or appointments. If the worst comes to the worst, the government should foot funeral bills for any Covid-19 victims who were on benefits.**

***There should be no redundancies in any field of work, arising from trading conditions during the coronavirus outbreak. Any companies threatening job losses should be nationalised and run democratically by its workforce for the benefit of society as a whole.**

***The organisations of improvised quarantines and emergency deployments of staff should be democratically managed by the workforce and by trades unions in the workplace.**

The coronavirus may be a serious political, economic and social crisis, one that even a few weeks ago could not have been anticipated. But it must be an issue that strengthens the resolve of labour activists everywhere to fight for the democratic public ownership and for the socialist planning of all national resources and infrastructure. The health of the entire population is too important to be left in the hands of profiteers and at the mercy of greedy landlords and company bosses.

Like climate change and other crises brought on by a chaotic and massively wasteful 'free-market' system, this crisis is just one more indication that working class people, the overwhelming majority of the population, need to be able to control and manage their own lives. And that means being able to control and manage the main levers of the economy, the state and society.

Socialism is not just a nice idea for Sunday speeches. It is an *essential pre-requisite* for human beings to be able to organise the planet's resources rationally to fight crises like this one.

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