

Last Exit to Socialism?

Seán Mitchell



Languishing in Berlin's *Barnimstrasse Women's Prison* in 1915, just as the heady jingoism of the previous year was ceding ground to the growing anti-war agitation for which she was incarcerated, Rosa Luxemburg wrote and then smuggled out her *Junius Pamphlet*—a thunderous destruction of the “hideous nakedness” of a capitalist system then “wading in blood and dripping with filth”, perhaps best remembered for its prophetic warning about the “crossroads” facing humanity: “either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism.”¹ Misattributed by Luxemburg to Friedrich Engels, possibly owing its origin instead to a quip by Karl Kautsky, the clarion call of “socialism or barbarism” encapsulated the potential for capitalist ‘progress’ to generate reaction, and the acute stakes at play in the revolutionary Marxist wager that the immiseration of class society, and the collective struggle against it, can result “either in the revolutionary reconstitution of society at large,” as the Communist Manifesto put it, “or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”²

Surveying the devastation wrought by the COVID-19 virus—including the grave economic consequences that will manifest in the months ahead—and the blundering responses of global elites who allowed the pandemic to take root despite an abundance of warnings, it is difficult not to be struck by the notion that we have again reached the crossroads illuminated above. That is not to say COVID-19 is exactly analogous to the imperialist conflict that gave rise to Luxemburg’s warning. For one, the crisis is presently experienced through the demobilisation of society rather than the colossal mobilisation that defined the mechanised slaughter of the First World War. And the scale of destruction, at least in the direct human cost, is not yet comparable. Still, echoes are clearly present. How else should we consider the British government’s dalliance with “herd immunity”, to take an example—

or the repeated insistence by governments the world over that workers should risk their lives for the sake of the market—as anything other than our own version of capitalism sending millions “over the top” to their doom? And when we witness an American president extol the benefits of injecting disinfectant or pondering the potential for fighting the virus by bringing “light inside the body”, are we not reminded of Trotsky’s indictment of the barbarism of the 1930s? A period where in “homes but also in city skyscrapers, there lives alongside of the twentieth century the tenth or the thirteenth”—a world where millions use “electricity and still believe in the magic power of signs and exorcisms.”³ Trump’s voodoo chicanery, therefore, and the wider anti-science that he is both a product of and an advocate for, are clearly signs that “capitalist society is puking up the undigested barbarism” once more, to borrow from Trotsky’s graphic appraisal of the 1930s collapse.

The precise scale of the crisis is hard to predict. Just as coronavirus tests the health of a human organism, so too does a pandemic bring to the fore the “underlying conditions” that were hitherto hidden within the political and economic system. In short, we are about to find out just how healthy capitalism is. Elite responses to this pandemic have largely been defined by too-little-too-late as the virus began to take hold, and more latterly by too-much-too-soon as pressure grew from the business class to reopen the economy. At the very least, at this point the following are almost certain: hundreds of thousands dead worldwide and millions more hospitalised; a sharp slump in the global economy leading to the collapse of tens of thousands of firms both big and small; a rapid increase in unemployment leading to massive expansion of those forced to face the depravity of our emaciated welfare systems; partial but perhaps more serious breakdowns in production lines either on account of labour shortages or companies going bust; an increase in geopolitical

tensions, most notably between China and the US, but also within an EU that is being tested to its limits.

With those features will come new forms of barbarism, as we have seen, but so too will there be new forms of resistance; with tentative signs of a revival in workplace militancy, even within persistently sluggish sections of the international labour movement, as workers seek to defend themselves in the context of a pandemic. These small steps have not always been matched by the entrenched conservatism amongst sections of trade union officialdom, with whom a reckoning will be necessary should a more generalised form of class combativeness be realised. But the explosive, global surge of militancy following the heinous murder of George Floyd by a white Minneapolis police officer suggests that even in the context of a pandemic—that naturally can have the effect of dampening the mass collectivity necessary for any protest movement—we can expect sustained and vigorous resistance, giving fresh hope that the threat of a renewed barbarism can be met by a reinvented socialism.

Luxemburg's rallying call, therefore, remains prescient. But there may be good reason to consider that even a statement as stark as "socialism or barbarism", may not adequately sum up the precarity of the present juncture. After all COVID-19 may be the most pressing example of society's current malaise, but it is far from the only "morbid symptom" afflicting late capitalism. It enters into popular consciousness, after all, just as we appeared to be on the cusp of a tipping point in relation to the threat of climate change. Even before the onset of COVID-19, overwhelming scientific consensus on rising sea-levels, receding icecaps, sweltering heat-waves and extreme weather patterns had combined with an explosion of environmental action, most notably in the school student strikes inspired by the appeals of Greta Thunberg.

Pandemic has had the effect of robbing that movement of its momentum, pressing the question to the backburner, but this can only be a temporary state of affairs. As the shock of COVID-19 settles, passing into more widespread inspection about its causality, millions will discover the symmetry between the conditions that created this pandemic and those that gave rise to climate change. As Mike Davis and others have long warned, new strains of animal-to-human viruses such as COVID-19

are inevitable, because the profit-driven system of ever greater mechanised slaughter, housing, and selling of animals has created new, unique and dangerous conditions for their incubation on a scale never before seen in human history. The profit-driven expansion that gives rise to COVID-19 is the very same process that gives rise to widespread ecological destruction—the great "irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism" long ago identified by Marx. Taken together, then, these features—combined with the ever-present nuclear threat lurking in bunkers throughout the imperialist world—pose the question of the very future of humanity itself. It does not suffice to say that there is a danger of reversion to barbarism as Luxemburg put it: we must be acutely aware that we live in a period that contains the *actuality of extinction*. That is to say, that *capitalism is not only pregnant with the germ of barbarism, but also the seeds of the destruction of humanity in general*.

If this desolate prognosis is correct, and I would argue that it is, then a few qualifications are necessary. To be sure, the *actuality of extinction* does not equate to the *imminence of extinction*. Even if Covid-19 was given a free license to infect the entire population without impediment, as some capitalist ideologues fantasise, the resulting toll on human life would still leave the vast majority of society unharmed, even if the wider impact would be colossal. And contrary to Hollywood dramatisation, climate catastrophe is unlikely to result in a sudden sequence of events that will bring humanity to a swift and cataclysmic demise. Nuclear devastation, too, is always a finger and a button away—either through catastrophic error or by conscious design—but it would be hyperbolic to think that we are on the cusp of atomic war.

The above qualification is necessary in order to avoid a catastrophism that invariably reduces the struggle for socialism to a kind of messianic sectarianism—where strategy and tactics are replaced by ever more bombastic warnings that the end is nigh and the revolution is around the corner—or to a voluntarism where socialists set out to speed up history by their own actions. This understanding, instead, requires the realisation that *the actuality of extinction* is predicated on the *persistence of capitalism* itself—recasting Luxemburg's dichotomy with a necessary urgency, but without losing sight of

the “crossroads” of choices that she brought into focus, and including the potential for socialism to emerge out of this crisis. If anything, the logical conclusion of this understanding should result in a complete rejection of catastrophism—requiring that revolutionary socialists focus on what we can do to build up our forces today, rather than expecting that ‘Old Mole’ will inevitably come to our rescue at some catastrophic point in the future. The *actuality of extinction*, therefore, forces us to again reconsider the importance of Lukács’ *actuality of revolution*: neither are inevitable or imminent, but the present situation holds the potential for both.

It would be remiss, of course, not to acknowledge that the peculiarities of this period poses strategic problems for Marxists—not least in the impact that social distancing has on collective action—but yearning for a return to normalcy is a peculiar posture for revolutionaries to adopt. Crises of the kind we are living through will rapidly expose “politics of a minor scale”, necessitating that Marxists apply the necessary “dialectic for the large scale”.⁴ This essay will argue that COVID-19 must be located within a wider disturbance of capitalist equilibrium, necessitating that Marxists seize on the crisis of bourgeois hegemony that has emerged as a result, before looking at some of the features of working class resistance that may form the basis of a socialist counter-hegemony in the future.

COVID-19 and capitalist equilibrium

COVID-19 has enormously disturbed the “normal” functioning of life and society. That much is obvious. Marxists, however, should have a deeper appreciation for what will come of this extended abeyance, and the far-reaching consequences of a pandemic that will leave hundreds of thousands dead, millions more jobless or destitute, and any number of other costly and tragic developments atop. In light of this, the following must be a cardinal principle for Marxists: COVID-19 is a class struggle. That may not have been obvious to everyone at the beginning of the crisis—especially amidst pervasive efforts to construct a national unity consensus around the maxim that “we are all in it together”—but it is becoming clearer by the day. The class dimension of this pandemic is evidenced by the way that it has disproportionately impacted poor, working class and oppressed groups. But the struggle for who gets a ventilator very quickly

makes way for a struggle for who is allowed to isolate and who is forced to work, which in turn becomes a struggle for who is bailed out by society’s resources and who is forced to fend for themselves. COVID-19—to appropriate James Connolly’s summation of centuries of struggle in a different context—will turn “in the last analysis into a fight for the mastery of the means of life, the sources of production.”⁵

The mainstream media is awash with warnings of a global downturn, with the press filled with new headlines every day that bear witness to the depths of economic crisis: Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell has warned the US “could become stuck in a painful multiyear recession”; the Bank of England suggests the UK economy is facing its worst slump in 300 years; the Eurozone is experiencing its worst recession since the Euro began; ‘Abenomics’ is facing an uncertain future in Japan as growth dramatically recedes; sub-Saharan Africa is facing its first recession in 25 years. Even the seemingly unstoppable juggernaut that is the Chinese economy shrank by 6.8% in the first quarter of 2020—with one consequence being a possible end to three decades of uninterrupted growth in Australia, which has relied heavily on exports to China. Conversely, in the long run the latter’s relative strength and effective handling of the crisis may accelerate its challenge to US hegemony in global politics. The World Bank has suggested that 60 million will be driven into extreme poverty, with its president David Malpass adding that “these estimates are likely to rise further.”⁶ Still, it’s not all doom-and-gloom within the ruling class. Many economists are predicting a short, sharp recession followed by a V-shaped recovery. The marginal decline in unemployment figures in the US in June was enough for Trump to declare the shape of the US recovery was “better than a V, This is a rocket ship.”⁷

It’s unlikely that Trump’s economic rocket ship will ever manage lift-off, with the overwhelming consensus being that global capitalism is facing into a prolonged period of instability. Marxists have a tendency to respond to such news with glee—not least because it reaffirms the validity of Marxist crisis theory and the potential for this instability to act as a catalyst for struggle—but we should avoid drawing the easy conclusion that class action will naturally rocket into the stratosphere itself. There is, after all, a gulf between “I told you so” and “What is to be done.” The “years of reaction” in Russia after the 1905

revolution, for example, coincided with a significant economic malaise. Or you could point to the decimation of the workers' movement in Belfast that preceded the establishment of the 'Orange State', which occurred against the backdrop of a sharp economic crisis at the time. And of course, anyone who was politically active in the period following the 2008 recession can attest that low profit rates do not always equal high socialist consciousness.

Having acknowledged this necessary qualification, I want to argue that there is very good reason to suggest that there is an enormous crisis facing our rulers, and that the class struggle of COVID-19 need not be as one-sided as the class struggle of previous decades. In making this case, however, it is necessary to do more than quote figures that show that the economy is in trouble or profit rates are low. Such things are not unimportant, and indeed should form the empirical basis of a much wider analysis, but they must be accompanied by an appreciation that economic crisis are mediated through historic specificity of each nation state, the particular form of capitalist hegemony we are facing, and the state of the labour movement and the Left more generally. We must assess the balance within what Trotsky called "capitalist equilibrium" and the state of bourgeois hegemony today. Writing in 1921 during the Third Congress of Communist International, Trotsky insisted that the normal operation of capitalism is not simply a question of profit rates (even if they are, in the final analysis, the key determining factor). He argued, instead, that there was an equilibrium within capitalism—built on an interrelationship between economic, political, and international factors—that was constantly in the process of being disturbed and remade:

“Capitalist equilibrium is an extremely complex phenomenon. Capitalism produces this equilibrium, disrupts it, restores it anew in order to disrupt it anew, concurrently extending the limits of its domination. In the economic sphere these constant disruptions and restorations of the equilibrium take the shape of crises and booms. In the sphere of inter-class relations the disruption of equilibrium assumes the form of strikes, lockouts, revolutionary struggle. In the sphere of inter-state relations the disruption of equilibrium means war or – in a weaker form – tariff war, economic war, or blockade. Capitalism thus possesses a dynamic equilibrium, one which is always

in the process of either disruption or restoration. But at the same time this equilibrium has a great power of resistance, the best proof of which is the fact that the capitalist world has not toppled to this day.”⁸

The maintenance of this “capitalist equilibrium”, including within all of the categories listed above, is necessary for the sustainability of both capital accumulation and bourgeois rule in general. If one element of it falters, then it may be necessary for the ruling class to emphasise another element to restore balance. That is what we are witnessing during this pandemic, as the severe crisis at the economic base of society forces the ruling class to use the power of the state to restore balance. Gramsci, writing a decade after Trotsky (but no doubt familiar with the concepts outlined in the Third Congress) took great pains to insist on the importance of equilibrium to bourgeois rule. Gramsci distinguished between a “balanced” hegemony and a hegemony in crisis, with the former built on a “compromise equilibrium”. This ideological compromise equilibrium, Gramsci insisted, was a crucial glue between the various classes and strata that form bourgeois rule. Importantly, however, this equilibrium is predicated on the ability of the ruling class to give something to its support base within these strata. As Gramsci says himself:

“[H]egemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed—in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind. But there is also no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the essential; for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity.”⁹

A crisis of “balanced hegemony” can be expected if the material basis for this equilibrium is undercut. This balance today will undoubtedly be shaken, with widespread consternation in society at large, discontent within large sections of an embattled petit-bourgeoisie, and even within some parts of the hardest-hit sections of the capitalist class, particularly within the services and tourism sectors. Can we speak, therefore, of the collapse of compromise equilibrium? Not yet. In the early stages

of the pandemic, polls suggested that many ruling parties were riding a wave of support. The precarious nature of capitalist equilibrium, however, means that this balance can be disturbed very quickly. In Britain, for example, the Tories were riding a wave of support in the early stages of COVID-19, but when it was revealed that *éminence grise* Dominic Cummings had broken lockdown regulations, all hell broke loose. It would be too much to suggest that the capitalist class is just a road trip away from crisis, but the reaction against the Tories does serve as an example that the disturbance of capitalist equilibrium today means that the situation can turn very quickly. The situation in the US illustrates this point even more dramatically, where Trump's momentary rise in the polls was suddenly punctuated by the murder of George Floyd and the massive rebellion that has taken place since.

It is true that struggle has often emerged quite suddenly and swiftly, but I would suggest that there is a pattern in the current period that derives from the disturbance of capitalist equilibrium which has now been accentuated by COVID-19. This is evidenced by the short list of examples above, but it was also a factor in the enormous wave of revolts that we witnessed in 2019, including the Yellow Vests in France, the Sudanese Revolution, the mass protests in Haiti, the “Revolution of Smiles” in Algeria, the ongoing revolt in Hong Kong, “Telegramgate” in Puerto Rico, and the Tishreen uprising in Iraq. The Black Lives Matter protests should, following this, be understood as a late comer in this list of uprisings. There are unique factors in all of these mobilisations, but as John Molyneux has argued, the “common thread linking all the revolts has been an uprising against poverty, inequality, rising living costs and corruption.”¹⁰

We should add to this the impact of decades of neoliberalism in hollowing out much of the ‘civil society’ that held bourgeois society together. As such, the paradox of the situation is that the weakness of organised institutions of oppositional politics—trade unions, mass-rooted left reformist organisations etc—is a key factor in the sudden explosion of struggle because of the absence of the mediating role that these forces normally fulfil. Seizing on these sporadic upsurges and on the instability of bourgeois hegemony more generally will necessitate that a contending socialist viewpoint is organised with roots among those at the bottom of society: otherwise these moments will inevitably peter out.

This disturbance of capitalist equilibrium, then, has resulted in these episodic upsurges in struggle. But there have also been efforts throughout the COVID-19 crisis to reassert capitalist hegemony. This has largely taken two forms during the pandemic: first, the bourgeois national/populist response, which insists we are “all in it together”; and secondly, the “strong man” response, emphasising a ratcheting up of law and order. The latter is most evident in the case of Hungary and India, where Orbán and Modi moved to exploit the crisis to tighten their grip on power and to weaken oppositional forces. The former is more prevalent in the larger “core” capitalist nations, most notably around the energetic efforts by Boris Johnson in Britain or Leo Varadkar in Ireland to construct a “national unity” consensus. In the US, we have seen a mix of both, with Trump's racist populist appeals against the “China Virus” making way for a militaristic effort to “dominate the streets” in response to the George Floyd rebellion. In both cases, however, ruling classes are emphasising one or other of the twin pillars of Gramsci's “integral state”—namely consent and coercion. If the larger core nations are at present more heavily weighted to consent, it is very obvious that coercion is not far behind. In Britain, for example, there was constant talk of the need for a greater role for the British Army. Long-stable capitalist countries may well rely more heavily on consent to rule, therefore, but the depths of this crisis has revealed that even here the state in the final analysis is one of “bodies of armed men.”

The total abandonment of consent is not something that these ruling classes will turn to lightly. As such, considerable effort is being made to reconfigure bourgeois hegemony to meet the demands of the period. Building on Marx's theory of the “prevailing ideas”, Gramsci argued that the maintenance of capitalist equilibrium required a hegemonic “principle” that could unite groups behind the ruling class: “Since the division between rulers and ruled exists even within [bourgeois hegemony]”, he wrote, “certain principles have to be fixed upon and strictly observed [by the ruling class].”¹¹ COVID-19 not only threatens the material basis of bourgeois hegemony but, following the above, also compels the ruling class to rearticulate its style of politics. We see this in the “We are all in it together” mantra and in efforts by various capitalist governments to opportunistically associate themselves with the new

solidarity in working class communities witnessed during this crisis. The hegemonic principle, as Gramsci reminds us, is in the final analysis a “class principle”, and it’s far from certain that these armies of volunteers will be simple conduits for a new ideology of national unity. It should suffice to say, however, that the “We are all in this together” schema is not simply the outworking of the peculiarities of this period, but rather a conscious effort by our rulers to create an ideological climate conducive to their rule.

That said, this process is not all one way. The Tory government, for example, has been very conscious of predicating its position on a hegemonic principle that can unite various strata behind its rule. In the early days of the crisis, this took the form of the largely successful motto “Stay at home, Protect the NHS, Save lives.” But as pressure from the business class grew against the notion of staying home, the Tories were forced to revert to a vaguer slogan of “Stay alert, Control the virus, Save lives.” The latter slogan has been widely panned. This is not only a reflection of a lack of thinking on the part of Tory mandarins, but also a signal that the efforts by the British government to create a hegemonic principle that can unite various strata is beginning to strain.

There are other problems in this “disarticulation-rearticulation” of bourgeois hegemony.¹² For one, ruling classes have been forced to adopt certain ideas from the Left. It’s notable, for instance, that notions of planning, coordination, and solidarity have all been absorbed into this new ideology, not to mention support for health workers and other front line staff. On one level this means that much of the language of the Left is being co-opted by the ruling class, and there is a danger that some of our politics can be subsumed into this “national mood”: today’s national solidarity can be tomorrow’s ideological justification for banning strikes. That said, there are also positive implications to this. Some aspects of the language of the Left have entered into the “common sense” of society once more, meaning that socialist arguments that appeared peripheral—state intervention in the economy, public control, the centrality of organised workers—are now part of the “national conversation”, and the ruling class is forced to articulate its politics (in a very general sense) relative to what’s in the interests of the common good. Varadkar’s and Johnson’s clapping of the health workers is hypocritical and superficial—and

the spectre of racism and ‘divide and rule’ will no doubt be resurrected with force sooner rather than later—but it may inadvertently reinforce a growing sense of class awareness if not a more combative class consciousness. I’m reminded here of the long running UK firefighters’ 2002 dispute over pay, which was partially driven by the events of 9-11 in the previous year: political leaders were falling over themselves to praise the bravery of frontline workers who risked their lives, who responded, rightly, “If you respect us so much then why do you pay us so little?” Even before the crisis, Mike Davis was suggesting that hospitals were “crucibles for militancy”, with nurses acting as a new vanguard in “twenty-first century unionism.”¹³ If nothing else, COVID-19 has sharpened this potential even further.

The end of neoliberalism?

There is a predictable sequence of events at the beginning of any financial crisis. First comes the shock: dramatic headlines, line graphs that show a steep decline in the markets, pictures of panicked stockbrokers with their heads in their hands. Then follows the collective *meaculpa*, as bourgeois economists and commentators climb over each other to promise that “life will never be the same again” whilst offering up a string of folksy life-lessons about how “humanity has grown too greedy” or “we have all become too arrogant”. As the talking heads solemnly vow to never again be led by their pockets, they discover too that the Left had a point after all: capitalism is not all its cracked up to be, they admit; it needs to be “tamed” or “mitigated”; some even concede, perhaps, that “Marx is back”. Soon enough, however, this humanistic reawakening makes way for a new “realism”—talk of the need to be kinder to one another gives way to chatter about “tough choices” and the need to “tighten our belts”. Any notion of systemic causality quickly evaporates, replaced by a renewed realisation that our problems were actually caused by insatiable workers and greedy welfare recipients who are asking too much of our “bloated” state.

The above should serve as a warning of taking the inevitable post-COVID-19 hand-wringing too seriously. But it remains the case that the scale of this crisis will force an ideological rethink on the part of the ruling class, albeit one that will always have the interests of capital at heart. One suggestion is that this crisis effectively marks the death of neo-liberalism, heralding a new era

of Keynesian intervention. Such a presumption is not totally unfounded, predicated as it is on what Adam Tooze called “the largest combined fiscal effort launched since World War II.”¹⁴ The scale of this state intervention in the face of pandemic is indeed staggering: in March the IMF advised member states to “spend whatever it takes to fight the Covid-19 pandemic,”¹⁵ estimating by April that around \$8 trillion had been pledged in loans, equity injections and guarantees, corresponding to a massive 7.5% of global GDP.¹⁶ In China alone, state intervention amounts to about 3.6 trillion yuan, equivalent to about \$500 billion USD. This unprecedented state intervention has provided the basis for the various furlough schemes, state subsidies and one-off payments, underpinning Spain’s plans to introduce a (very limited) Universal Basic Income and a range of other measures seemingly incompatible with neo-liberal ideology.

This massive state intervention brings with it a shift in ideological discourse. In one of a series of articles that suggested that “left ideas are winning” on account of the scale of government intervention into the economy, the *Financial Times* in March suggested that “the Sanders worldview wins even as Bernie loses”.¹⁷ In Ireland, liberal commentator David McWilliams insisted that a post-COVID-19 Irish economy would have “a much more social-democratic future,” where the idea that you can reward “hedge fund managers in multiples of how you reward nurses just won’t wash. Taxes will rise. Public services will be much better off as a result.”¹⁸ The Fianna Fáil leader, Micheál Martin, declared more recently that “Keynesian economics are back in fashion to a certain extent that this is the time that you use your welfare system and that you use your public services to drive on the economy.”¹⁹ In the US and Britain, talk of Keynesianism is not as forthcoming from Tories or Republicans, but even the former Brexit secretary David Davis has claimed “there is no appetite in the Conservative party for a repeat of Osborne’s austerity regime”, adding that he’d prefer a strategy that was “one part [Franklin] Roosevelt’s New Deal, one part Ronald Reagan’s deficit financing, and one part a new Bretton Woods.”²⁰

It would be too simplistic to chalk all of this up to cloak and daggers on the part of politicians. To invert a Foucauldian premise, the existence of the discourse suggests that something is happening at the base. Given the scale of the crisis, the real question is “how could

there not be?” However, it would be premature to write the obituary of neo-liberalism, or to presume that the days of austerity are over, or that we are reverting to the post-war Keynesian era. Firstly, much of the “spend as you please” mantra coming from the likes of the IMF is built on the presumption of a ‘V-shaped recovery’: elites insist that the current phase of state intervention will be short-lived, and will be balanced by a sharp recovery in the economy once the lockdown ends. Whilst there is no doubt that some growth will begin once the lockdown is fully lifted (going from nothing to something is not difficult), the scale of the damage done and the potential for a second wave will put pressure on governments to continue the COVID-19 state intervention beyond the short-term injection envisaged by some. Secondly, the ruling class’s “national unity” strategy requires that they sell their actions as being in the interest of everyone, and Keynes is a useful tool in that regard. But the Keynesian interventions that governments have initiated usually benefit the business class by a minimum of 4-to-1, according to the Marxist economist Michael Roberts, and when all government spending is accounted for (especially with regards to the quantitative easing and cheap credit towards banks) then the ratio will be far bigger.

Thirdly, though the prevailing mood within the ruling class is against reducing state debt as quickly as they did in 2008, it does not follow that there will be no austerity. One only has to look to Britain, for example—where the Tories are determined to enact a public sector pay freeze—or to Ireland—where a Fine Gael source in talks with Fianna Fáil warned against lifting public sector pay, as this would “lead to increased wages without a corresponding increase in productivity, resulting in uncompetitiveness”.²¹ It is likely, therefore, that talk of the much vaunted “fiscal space” will be replaced by discussion of the need to deal with the “fiscal hangover”, requiring that we all tighten our belts once more. Finally, though it is true that we have seen a rise in state intervention akin to the 1940s, it is not the case that there have been any serious moves towards public ownership. Public pressure will likely result in a rise in spending on things like health, but there is no evidence that any major capitalist power is considering a reversion to the state-controlled industries of the Keynesian era.

There is a limitation to any guise of Keynesianism

in so far as we consider it in relation to the interests of working people. David Harvey argues that capitalism of the Keynesian era was defined by a “class compromise between capital and labour”. In one sense this is true, with the period coinciding with strong union density and a combative labour movement. But it is also the case that Keynesianism tended to reach its zenith when it intersected with ruling class interest—during wars or natural disasters for example, or as means of social control: the huge Marshall plan intervention into western European economies after the war or Roosevelt’s effort to revive a sluggish economy through the New Deal.

Marxists must avoid being mesmerised by the scale of the state intervention, or into drawing the too one-sided conclusion that “left ideas are winning”. That said, these shifts in ruling class ideology—even if superficial—present an opportunity for socialists. After years of declaring that there is no magic money tree, suddenly we have a forest park full of them. We have to force this trend to its logical conclusion: if frontline workers are so wonderful, then where are their pay rises? If frontline workers are so vital, then why do so many of them exist on the minimum wage, not least in supermarkets, etc? If Keynes is back, why can we not now talk about public ownership? If public spending is the best way to encourage the economy, then why are our welfare provisions so minimal, and isn’t it time for an urgent increase? This means that the Left has to develop demands and slogans that continue to relate to the immediate interests of workers, but also that go beyond the logic of capital.

From social solidarity to workers’ power

One positive outworking of the Coronavirus horror has been the way that it has dramatically exposed the centrality of class. In one sense, this arises from the negative, as the rich retreat to their opulent villas and other assorted getaways and the rest of us get on with it in our more meagre surroundings, or in the way that deaths attributed to the virus increasingly show a divide between rich and poor. Other more positive expressions of class have arisen too: with elevated awareness of the role of health workers finding expression in the regular “clap for carers” nights, but also in the way that our understanding of “essential workers” is stretching to encompass those who work in places like supermarkets, more often than not surviving on the lowest of payscales.

Will this greater awareness of “class in itself” lead to the development of a “class for itself”? Or to greater levels of organisation and struggle within the working class in other words? Not automatically, certainly, but there is good reason to wager that it will.

Despite the regular string of lurid headlines about isolated incidents of selfishness, there has been a stark contrast between the inertia of the ruling class and the widespread acts of social solidarity amongst ordinary people witnessed during the pandemic. This is perhaps best typified with the rapid growth of organised networks—often comprised of furloughed workers sent home during the pandemic—who have been working to build solidarity in housing estates or with marginalised groups. In April, the *Guardian* reported on the “astonishing rise” of informal neighbourhood organisations in Britain—usually organised online or through WhatsApp—estimating that there were 4,300 such groups up and down the country,²² involving an estimated 4 million people at the time of writing.²³ Rebecca Solnit reports on examples that have emerged across the United States, where solidarity networks have developed around oppressed groups: “meal deliveries to the elderly in Paterson, New Jersey; the Twin Cities Queer and Trans Mutual Aid group in Minneapolis-Saint Paul; projects to aid the Hopi, Zuni and Navajo on reservations in the US southwest; a Washington state project to support the undocumented; sex workers organising to raise emergency funds.”²⁴ In Belfast, networks have been set up under the slogan “social distancing requires social solidarity”, where scores of volunteers have been collaborating to ensure food parcels get to those in isolation, covering hundreds of homes.

This wave of social solidarity offers a tremendous opportunity to strengthen working class organisation and agency. In the main, these initiatives have emerged organically, rather than at the instigation of the state. They are a reflection of what British Marxist EP Thompson identified in his classic *The Making of the English Working Class* and later essays as the “moral economy” of the working class: the “political culture”, “expectations” and “traditions” that create a sense of shared values and solidarity within those at the bottom of society, in contrast to the “political economy” of the free market.²⁵ The emergence of these networks, therefore, represent a latent desire amongst people to better their

lot by working together—a sort of instinctive, if limited, form of class consciousness. As such, Marxists must be alive to the possibilities contained within this mood of solidarity, even if we would like to see it progress to a more robust form of class action.

It would be sectarian in the extreme, therefore, to simply write off an organised movement of millions of people because of its obvious limitations. There is in fact a long history in the labour movement of such solidarity, whether in the collections for unemployed workers during the 1905 Soviet, the door-to-door collections for hungry relief workers during the communist-inspired agitation in Belfast in the 1930s, the solidarity committees formed during the 1984-85 Miner's Strike in Britain, or more recently in sustained efforts at gathering and delivering toys, clothes and medical supplies in an effort to 'break the siege' in Gaza or the convoys organised to Calais to bring needed supplies to migrants hemmed in at the French border.

Empty phraseology or radical sounding rhetoric has the appeal of providing socialists with a sense of ideological purity, but as the 19th century biologist Herbert Spencer observed, the perfection of an organism is in direct proportion to its conservatism.²⁶ The socialist movement, following this, will never be built in splendid isolation, but instead through the nitty gritty of collective action—warts and all. In their critique of utopian socialism in the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels acknowledged that such an ideology developed because of the "undeveloped state of the class struggle", but it also reflected "the first instinctive yearnings of that class for a general reconstruction of society." While the analogy with utopian socialism is not exact—the variety of current social solidarity and mutual aid initiatives being considerably larger than anything that Saint-Simon, Fourier or Owen could muster—Marxists must similarly see these developments as the "first instinctive yearnings" for a better life for working class people. Whilst being aware to their limitations, therefore, we must endeavour to seize on the opportunity they present to us to rebuild and renew working class organisation and consciousness.

As I have noted, many of the people involved in this wave of social solidarity are furloughed workers. We can expect then that the numbers involved in these networks will dip as people return to full-time employment. Indeed,

one recent article on social solidarity in Glasgow reported that a COVID-19 Mutual Aid group in Drumchapel—which involved up to 500 residents delivering food parcels, hot meals, and sanitary products to up to 6000 people—was forced to close when its organisers returned to work after being furloughed for a number of months.²⁷ These groups may well become reinvigorated in the event of a second wave of the virus, but we should not expect that the phenomenon will grow exponentially. Indeed, it is not only a return to work that will create limitations on this activism. As I have argued, this mood arises from the moral economy of the working class rather than from the actions of the state—or perhaps because of the *inaction* of the state—but that does not mean that it cannot be co-opted by the state, or that the wider question of state power is unimportant.

As Amardeep Singh Dhillon has pointed out, the notion of "mutual aid" has been touted by figures as diverse as the anarchist Left to the occasional Tory Party councillor.²⁸ Certainly we should distinguish between the approach of the former to the rank opportunism of the latter, but it is notable that both share something in common; a mutual antipathy to the notion of state control. Some on the Left—particularly those inspired by the horizontalism of Peter Kropotkin, whose work is undergoing something of a renaissance during this pandemic—see "mutual aid" as a kind of route to "changing the world without taking power", as John Holloway put it, by building up forms of collective collaboration separate from the state. But as the point above illustrates, there is a danger that such a strategy inadvertently intersects with a ruling class wedded to privatisation and a reduced role for the state. After all, the crux of David Cameron's notion of a "Big Society" was an attempt to reduce the role of the state by co-opting social solidarity and combining it with a free-market individualism. The horizontalist strategy may be predicated on a separation from the state, but even the most widespread growth of mutual aid will not deal with one basic fact: that the resources of society do not exist at the bottom of society, but at the top. Consequently, and contrary to the utopian expectations of horizontalists, the growth of social solidarity will either have to develop into a more robust political challenge that demands resources of the state, or it will become co-opted by the state through the various streams of government funding. The direct involvement of socialists in social solidarity can

assist in moving it towards political confrontation.

The failure to appreciate the centrality of the state is not unique to anarchism. Others on the Left—most notably around the Philly Socialists, the Marxist Centre and some sections of the DSA in the US—have advocated a strategy known as “base building”: a quasi-Maoist inspired orientation that conceives of the radical Left circumventing “activist cultures” of protests and demonstrations by building a base in working class communities through the creation of community groups, self-defence classes, night-schools and other assorted associations. There are positives to this trend, with much it arising from a desire to move the US radical Left beyond its decades-long isolation, breaking out of the student ghetto and into a sustained and long-term relationship with working class communities. Base-building, however, is not a strategy to build a counter-hegemony necessary to challenge the state, as much as it is a kind of *anti-hegemony*, where socialists try and build up their support gradually, regardless of the state of politics and the consciousness of the working class. By ignoring the primacy of politics, therefore, and naively presuming that “base-building” is akin to “dual power”, these forces are simply inverting the weakness of the US Left: replacing its lack of roots in the working class with a weakened capacity to intervene in the political world through protest and activism. At best, such an orientation apes the strategy of various bourgeois nationalist movements—whether that was the PLO and Sinn Féin in the 1980s, or Hamas or the Muslim Brotherhood in the 2000s—by attempting to construct a “state within a state”. Certainly, socialists should learn from the way these organisations were able to build up mass support, but we cannot forget the fact that in all these cases the “state within the state” led to their being subsumed into the capitalist state itself, not to the development of a dual power similar to that of the Russian Revolution, or Chile in the early 1970s.

Here the experience of the Irish Left is instructive, where a bold strategy of rooting socialist organisation in working class communities over many years was combined with a united front strategy around popular and national issues, and the building of a small but important presence in the national debate through the election of socialist parliamentarians. This strategy reached its peak during the water movement, when mobilising

for massive demonstrations of 100,000 or more was combined with locally organised street meetings in communities, backed up by the support of socialist TDs in the “national debate”. The radical Left in Ireland does not hold any great claim to have developed some perfect strategy—and we acknowledge that our gains are modest and that we have some way to go—but we would proffer this basic framework as a contribution to the discussion of how socialists should relate to social solidarity and the moral economy of the working class while avoiding “get-rich-quick schemes” that seek to build socialism by some clever circumvention of realpolitik.

If social solidarity poses the necessity of tactical flexibility in this period, it does not follow that there is no hierarchy of tactics within the class struggle in general, or during this pandemic in particular. For Marxists, the welcome emergence over the last decade or more of a culture of protests, Left electoral interventions, community struggles and much larger social movements has not eliminated the centrality of workplace action. The absence of action whose locus lies in the workplace invariably means that the corresponding consciousness that arises from these struggles tends to find its political concentration in a form of left-populism—most regularly expressed in amorphous anti-establishment notions of the “people” versus the government—in which a more distinctly class-rooted understanding of the lines of division in society is notably lacking, and particularly working-class aspects of struggle de-prioritised. Indeed it is notable that even a leading proponent of left populism, Chantal Mouffe, recently had to concede that “the situation now is the opposite of the one we criticised 30 years ago,” and “it is ‘working class’ demands that are now neglected”.²⁹

It is true that the anti-establishment quality of this populist consciousness is something that socialists can gain from, but it also means that a spasmodic common-sense can develop within these struggles, where a virulent rejection of party politics one day makes way the next for a left-reformist insistence that the whole movement must uncritically get behind a conventional political party in the electoral field. Or worse, the ambiguities of this left populism mean that it can easily slip into a resurgent right populism—as was evidenced in the 2018 Irish presidential election, when a significant portion of Sinn Féin voters shifted to the racist Peter Casey. Class

struggle is not reducible to strikes and trade unionism, and there are times when the vitality and political cultures of the labour movement can lag way behind struggles in the street, but it remains the case that workplace action is a necessary ingredient in the development of the kind of rounded class-consciousness that socialists strive to create. Strike action, therefore, is a great clarifier in politics.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers the opportunity for a revitalisation of workplace organisation. One recent report in *The Economist* declared that “Trade Unions Are Back”,³⁰ with the *Financial Times* suggesting that unions were benefiting from “a stream of new members since the start of the coronavirus lockdown” that “[reinforces] a recent stabilisation in trade union membership after decades of decline”. Membership of Unison, for example, was “18 per cent higher than the gain in the same period of 2019”, the National Education Union reported that “20,000 have joined since the start of the lockdown, compared with about 500 a week joining in May of last year”, and the British Medical Association doctors’ union said that recruitment was “50 per cent more than we would have expected at this point in the year.”³¹ Growth in trade union membership does not necessarily translate into an expansion of struggle, but there have been tentative signs of an increase in combativeness. In May, *The Guardian* suggested that the US was experiencing a small wave of “wildcat strikes, walkouts and protests over working conditions....as ‘essential’ workers [demand] better pay and safer working conditions.”³² In Ireland, there was a wave of unofficial walkouts in the food industry over safety concerns: in Portadown, up to a thousand workers left Moy Park’s chicken processing plant due to concerns about lack of social distancing; in Lurgan 80 workers walked off the job at ABP Meats over safety concerns; and in Dungannon at least 40 workers walked out at Linden Foods in protest at a “total absence of social distancing measures”.

It is significant, if not altogether surprising, that some of the actions mentioned above did not arise through official union channels. Any push towards greater trade union combativeness will inevitably come up against the entrenched conservatism of elements of the bureaucracy. But this does not mean that such a thing inevitably and always puts a block on workers’ resistance. Importantly, some of the most inspiring workers actions of recent years

have emerged in the US—most notably among teachers and nurses—where the labour movement is perhaps weakest and where the cultures of class collaboration amongst union leaders have deep roots. Socialists must grasp the potential that has emerged throughout this crisis for rebuilding workers’ organisation and resistance. The culture of creative organisation and energetic self-activity that is to be found in the various networks of social solidarity must be brought into the workplace—even into workplaces with previously weak or even non-existent union organisation.

Conclusion: the actuality of revolution

We live amidst a deep crisis, the likes of which few of us have ever experienced, whose final outworking is hard to determine. When this pandemic began it was experienced first in its novelty, but sooner or later the class contradictions are revealed. A class struggle has begun that has at its heart the very struggle of life over death. “They are not singing in Italy anymore”, as one recent headline put it.

Despite the depths of this crisis, we are not operating within what Marxists would understand as a “revolutionary situation.” We are far from that in fact, if not in time (which is impossible to predict) then at the least in the maturity of the situation and in the level of struggle and consciousness. But Marxists do not approach history passively: we see in the developments of the present the seeds for a myriad of different futures. We are not in a revolutionary situation, therefore, but it is necessary to approach politics from the point of view of what Lukács’ called the “actuality of revolution”—neither by “the task of either ‘making’ the revolution” nor by “sweeping the inactive masses along to confront them with a revolutionary fait accompli,” but instead through the construction of revolutionary organisation committed to socialist transformation.³³ This remains our central task.

Notes

- 1 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/>
- 2 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>
- 3 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1933/330610.htm>
- 4 Trotsky's *Notebooks, 1933-1935: Writings of Lenin, Dialectics and Evolutionism* (1998), Pg 95.
- 5 James Connolly, *Labour in Irish History*, Chapter 16.
- 6 <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/05/20/report-recession-job-losses-another-pandemic-and-protectionism-are-top-worries/>
- 7 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jun/05/us-unemployment-may-great-depression-job-loss>
- 8 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/ffj-ci-1/ch19.htm>
- 9 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks: The Modern Prince, Some Theoretical and Practical Aspects of "Economism"*
- 10 <http://www.rebelnews.ie/2019/11/06/a-new-mass-wave-of-global-revolt/>
- 11 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks: The Modern Prince, Elements of Politics*.
- 12 Chantal Mouffe's useful summation in an otherwise flawed interpretation of Gramsci's theory. See Chantal Mouffe, *Gramsci and Marxist Theory* (1979), Pg 197.
- 13 <http://www.rebelnews.ie/2018/09/04/mike-davis-on-trumps-america/>
- 14 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/09/unemployment-coronavirus-pandemic-normal-economy-is-never-coming-back/>
- 15 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/apr/15/spend-what-you-can-to-fight-covid-19-imf-tells-member-states>
- 16 <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/04/15/tro41520-transcript-of-the-april-2020-fiscal-monitor-press-briefing>
- 17 <https://www.ft.com/content/198135c8-6912-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>
- 18 <https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/restarting-ireland-when-and-how-will-we-get-back-to-normal-1.4219215>
- 19 <https://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/ireland/equal-split-of-cabinet-seats-for-fianna-fail-and-fine-gael-993502.html>
- 20 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/may/14/how-will-britain-dig-itself-out-of-a-300bn-coronavirus-hole>
- 21 <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/politics/martins-ff-social-partnership-plan-gets-cold-shoulder-39084600.html>
- 22 <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/13/a-million-volunteer-to-help-nhs-and-others-during-covid-19-lockdown>
- 23 https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/4agjwq/mutual-aid-groups-coronavirus-uk
- 24 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/14/mutual-aid-coronavirus-pandemic-rebecca-solnit>
- 25 See E. P. Thompson: *The Making of the English Working Class* (1961), *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century* (1971).
- 26 Tony Cliff, *Lenin: Building the Party* (1986), Pg 170.
- 27 <https://www.clydebankpost.co.uk/news/18475946.upset-due-support-group-closing-volunteers-return-work/>
- 28 <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/the-politics-of-covid-19-the-frictions-and-promises-of-mutual-aid/>
- 29 Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (2019).
- 30 <https://www.economist.com/britain/2020/05/16/trade-unions-are-back>
- 31 <https://www.ft.com/content/4613a279-e2ac-40fo-a515-0350003b9e31>
- 32 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/19/strikes-erupt-us-essential-workers-demand-better-protection-amid-pandemic>
- 33 Lukacs, *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of his Thought* (2009),Pg 26.