

# Questioni



Questions.Questionò.Pregunta.Frage.Vraag.Erotimata.Ερωτήματα

Erotimata.Ερωτήματα.Questão.Pytanie.Fro.Mistoqsija.Fråga.Ceist.Kysymys.

**CHANGING  
THE WORLD  
IN COVID TIMES**

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LEONE  
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**Magazine of the European Left**

 **EuropeanLEFT**



**Magazine of the European Left**

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Dear reader,

What you are reading is the first of two test issues of Quistioni, the quarterly magazine in three languages of the Party of European Left. Our purpose is to create a public space for discussion and debate between those who want to build the alternative. For this reason the articles have been and will be required of all the member parties of the European Left, of intellectuals and exponents of the movement.

The magazine is titled Quistioni, referring to the way in which Antonio Gramsci indicated the issues, the problems. Because in each monographic issue of the magazine we want to tackle an issue and contribute, in this way, to building a comparison and a common alternative project at European level.

We are very interested to know what you think of this test issue and of the magazine in general, if you find it useful and what your criticisms and suggestions are. Write to us at [magazinepge@libero.it](mailto:magazinepge@libero.it)

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# Index

## Editorials

- Heinz Bierbaum - *The Future of Europe is at stake* X
- Paolo Ferrero - *Changing the world in Covid time* X

## Interventions

- Walter Baier - *Fifty Shades of Brown. Remarks on the fight against the neo-fascist Right* X
- Marc Botenga - *Let's put an end to the multinationals' grip on our health* X
- Vincent Boulet - *In order to change the world at the time of the Covid: establishing popular social and political majorities* X
- Eva Brenner - *Culture, Corona & its Discontents. A critical view of the role of culture in pandemic times* X
- François D'Agostino - *Self-criticism and clear socialist option as a response to the Coronavirus crisis* X
- Ángel de la Cruz - *Fear or confidence: the battle of the bottom line for the working classes in crisis* X
- Felicity Dowling - *A cruel and crooked government* X
- Bernard Duterme - *The four North-South dilemmas of the ecological crisis* X
- Esquerra Unida i Alternativa - *Changing the world in times of Covid* X
- Tolly Kulczycki - *We shall no longer walk alone* X
- Birgit Mahnkopf - *Europe's path to digital capitalism - leveled by the Covid 19 crisis* X
- Amelia Martínez-Lobo and Andrea Peniche - *The Pandemic Crisis and Its Impact on Women's Lives* X

Catarina Martins - <i>Beyond fear</i>	x
Mirko Messner - <i>Some highlights of the situation in Austria in February 2021</i>	x
Judit Morva - <i>Competition by low wages within Europe: Viktor Orbán's Hungary</i>	x
Riccardo Petrella - <i>The 'worldwide' vaccination against the Covid-19 pandemic. From hypocrisy about the right to life ("no one will be left behind") to the unscrupulous disappearance of the sovereignty of the people</i>	x
Vijay Prashad - <i>Why the World After COVID Will Look Like the World Before COVID</i>	x
Enrique Santiago - <i>A new framework for global relations</i>	x
Liisa Taskinen - <i>Changing the world in Covid times</i>	x
Marilisa Xenogiannakopoulou - <i>Changing the world in the time of Covid</i>	x
Gheorghiță Zbăganu - <i>The coronavirus pandemic in neoliberal times. Romanian case</i>	x

## **Contributions**

European Left - <i>The corona crisis and the consequences for European politics</i>	x
Adoración Guamán, Guillermo Murcia López, and José Miguel Sánchez Ocaña - <i>Coronavirus, Workers and Precariousness: Challenges for an Exit Based on Strengthening Labour</i>	x

# The Future of Europe is at stake

*Heinz Bierbaum*

Europe is still in the shock of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic largely determines our working and living conditions. The economic and social effects of the crisis caused by the coronavirus are dramatic, affecting in particular the poor and the people working and living under precarious conditions. The statistics don't show the real dimension of the problems, because emergency measures like short-time work dampen the effects of the pandemic. Unemployment will increase considerably and poverty as well. And in this situation social inequalities are increasing. According to a recent study of Oxfam there is a huge gap between the poor and the rich.

The rich are becoming even more rich and the poor poorer. The European Left early developed a platform about the issue "how to get out of the crisis socially". Comprehensive activities in five areas have been requested: protection of the population, economic reconstruction and social-ecological transformation, defense of democracy, peace and disarmament, international solidarity. ("The corona crisis and the consequences for European politics")

In the current situation with a Europe-wide lockdown, first and foremost everything has to be done to protect the people. The EL strongly supports the European Citizens Initiative "Right2Cure", for free and universal access to vaccines and for making the vaccine a common good. The operational capacity of healthcare systems has to be improved. As EL we demand the creation of a European Health Fund funded by the Ecb. And we launched a campaign under the slogan "Protect the people, not the system". The population must be protected, socially and economically. We need a rescue plan for workers and their families. In case of income losses, financial compensation is needed.

We need a fundamental change in European politics. In the crisis it became evident, that the predominant neoliberal policy is not able to address the crisis in a proper way. Therefore, some essential elements of the European austerity policy must be abandoned. The Growth and Stability Pact must be suspended. The Recovery Fund "Next Generation", adopted by the European Commission and the Governments after a long and controversial negotiation, represents a remarkable change of the European financial policy giving for the first-time money as grants and not only as credits to the states. But it's quite clear that the European Commission and the majority of European governments want to return to the previous neoliberal austerity policy when the crisis is over. It's the task of the Left to make the changes permanent that have been made in order to combat the crisis. These changes should be taken as a starting point for a radical change of European politics. The Growth and Stability Pact has to be abolished and not only suspended. And it has to be prevented that the Recovery Fund is linked to the European Semester and the financial means for the different countries are bound by restrictive conditions. The effect of the Recovery Fund depends on how it will be implemented. There are controversial discussions as we can see it for example in Italy. The goal of that Fund is not only to address the social needs but also to be used at the same time to support the ecological transformation and digitalization.

A core element of the future European policy is the Green New Deal. The European Commission is campaigning for a "European Green Deal". The objective is to have the EU climate neutral in 2050. Main elements are investments in environmentally friendly technologies, the

decarbonizing of the energy sector, energy efficiency for buildings, cleaner and healthier private and public transport. The question, however, is whether the European Green Deal, as proposed by the European Commission, adheres to the neoliberal dogma, which is to be feared. And the concept of the Commission is certainly insufficient in terms of objective and scope, but nonetheless worth dealing with. The EL is involved in the debate about a Green New Deal and wants to play major role coming up with an own comprehensive concept oriented on welfare.

We need public investments in infrastructure, social services like healthcare, social housing, education and culture. A green transition of industry is necessary. But we also need to protect the workers and employees affected by this process. For the Left the connection between ecological requirements and social needs is crucial. “Just Transition”, promoted by Ituc, is a concept to combine ecological transition with social protection. A left concept of a Green New Deal must go hand in hand with the expansion of workers’ rights. But not only the workers’ rights should be strengthened, the workers themselves should be directly included in a new industrial policy. A left Green New Deal has to be combined with economic democracy.

A “Conference on the Future of Europe” is currently prepared. The conference aims to bring together politicians, civil society and citizens to rethink the integration process and to examine how the EU should be reshaped in the light of the ongoing crisis and the immense challenges like the climate change. The start of the Conference, initially envisaged for May 2020, was postponed due the pandemic, and it’s now foreseen for May 2021. It should start with a Joint Declaration, on which the European institutions and the Council of the EU are working. This conference should be taken as an opportunity also by the EL to present their vision of the future of Europe. It’s an opportunity to discuss which consequences have to be drawn from the crisis.

It’s of great importance how the conference will be organized. It should be a broad and open conference involving in particular the representatives of the civil society like the Ngo and the trade unions. We agree with the European Trade Union Confederation (Etuc) that “Social Europe” should be at the centre of the conference. It’s necessary that the Pillar of Social Rights, adopted by the European Commission, will be transformed in binding social rights in form of a “Social Protocol” as a part of the European Treaties. And, of course, the Treaties themselves and how they have to be changed to achieve another Europe have to be a subject of the debate.

There is no doubt, a broad and intensive debate on the future of Europe is necessary. The EL is engaged in this debate. The European Forum, organized by the EL together with other progressive and ecological forces, is a platform for such a Europe-wide debate. This was also this year the case with many interesting panels addressing very important themes like the combat against growing social inequality, social-ecological transformation or a human migration policy, including also assemblies of women, trade unionists and the youth.

We want to intensify our political discussions. We are in a deep social upheaval which contains threats but also opportunities for another European policy. For a more social, more democratic, more ecological and more peaceful European policy which have to be taken by the Left. The magazine *Quistioni* is intended as a platform for the necessary political debate, not being limited to the EL itself, but involving other progressive politicians and intellectuals.

*Heinz Bierbaum is President of the Party of the European Left. He is a sociologist and economist*

# Changing the world in Covid time

*Paolo Ferrero*

This first issue of the magazine *Quistioni* discusses politics at the time of the Coronavirus. We believe that this epidemic has a periodic character, as an historical turn. There is a before and an after, and we therefore suggest considering 2020 as the year that represents a watershed between two eras.

Of course, any period is always debatable and elements of continuity overlap with those of rupture. Using the pandemic as a watershed in the history of modernity is therefore a political choice. A choice that we make and that we propose to make deliberately, lucidly.

We make this proposal because the coronavirus is not only a disaster in itself but, in the words of Walter Benjamin, a “fire alarm”. The coronavirus crisis has made it clear, on a global scale, that barbarism is inherent in capitalist social relations and in the relationship they have established between humanity and nature. What has emerged with the pandemic in this 2020 is the blatant falsification of all the grand narratives that have characterised the post-World War II era.

a. The grand narrative of neoliberal globalisation has been completely debunked. All the things that have been magnified in the last 30 years have not worked: from the free market to privatisation, freedom of enterprise and global production networks, they have served no purpose. On the other hand, all the aspects that have been criticised and attacked over the last few decades have created the only barrier against the epidemic: public health, public employees, public schools, community solidarity networks. The state and the free relations of solidarity have held up where the free market and competition have failed. Even

on a global level, NATO friendly nations have stolen face masks from each other while the small and vilified Cuba has excelled in a great operation of internationalist solidarity.

b. Developmentalist progressivism has been debunked. It is in fact quite clear that the progressive destruction of the natural habitat is at the origin of Covid-19, as of other pandemics that have emerged in recent years (Avian flu, Ebola, etc.). This public enemy number one is therefore not an alien product but - like slower global warming - is the ripe fruit of human action. It is capitalist developmentism that has set the conditions for the existence of COVID, its deadly effectiveness and its pervasive speed. The idea that we can stay healthy while destroying the natural habitat has fully shown its fallacy. Not only the idea of development but that of progressivism is being put out of business by this pandemic.

c. The concept of humanism that was formed in the immediate post-war period as a reaction to the horror of Nazism and the holocaust has been buried. The idea of the intangibility of human life, in its physical and relational dimensions, was radically challenged. In various countries medical protocols were produced which, selecting patients, gave different indications according to life expectancy and the possibility of overcoming the crisis. It will be said that the scarcity of resources meant that nothing else could be done. But the scarcity of resources was a deliberate choice made over decades of systematic destruction of public health. In official speeches, the only limit to the fight for life is the development of scientific knowledge and technology. Here, on the contrary, we see

how concrete policies have decided to increase the risks of death in exchange for the creation of private profits. The category of “banality of evil” proposed by Hannah Arendt comes to mind.

### The crisis of the western grand narrative

The great narrative of the capitalist West of recent decades is therefore incapable of providing an answer to the future of humanity: the Coronavirus has highlighted the regressive nature of today’s capitalism.

In response to these failures, there have been important reactions both from civil society and from the political and trade union left. From the platform “protect our future” launched by the Party of the European Left to the action of the trade union movement against redundancies, from the strong push in every country for the strengthening of public health to the “No profit on pandemic” campaign on vaccines as a common good.

However, these reactions have not turned into an alternative proposal, a real and viable “another world is possible”. This absence of alternatives also has a retroactive effect on the perception of reality, and this is why the failure of liberalism and real capitalism, which we have witnessed live, has not become an acquisition in mass common sense. It did not immediately become “true” for billions of people. The crisis has opened some glimpses of reflection and action, but in itself the crisis not only does not solve the problem, it does not necessarily help to focus it correctly. Just think of the nationalist, negationist and racist interpretations of the coronavirus...

Vaccine research itself highlights the crossroads facing humanity. On the one hand there is public research and an emerging open community of scientists committed to discovering the vaccine as humanity’s common good. On the other, the race between the large multinational drug companies, which have patented the vaccine and are now blackmailing states by selling

vaccines to the highest bidder. This alternative, which is both moral and political, underlines the centrality of the relationship between scientific research and power, which ranges from seed banks to genetic engineering, all the way to the issue of the patentability of life. Research as a common good, its “decommodification”, or, on the contrary, its real subsumption by capital, is a decisive point in the current political confrontation.

Incidentally, the “No profit on pandemic” campaign on vaccines is also important for this. This campaign, which is officially promoted under EU rules, will force the European Commission to submit a proposal to the European Parliament and the European Council to radically change the rules on the application of patents on medicines in the EU. One million signatures must be collected across Europe in order to achieve this result, as stipulated in the Ice (European Citizens’ Initiative) regulation. On the website: <https://noprofitonpandemic.eu/> you can sign and get all the explanations about the campaign. The Party of the European Left has joined the campaign and we are therefore committed to collecting signatures in every country by November of this year.

### Acting on the political space opened up by the crisis

The Coronavirus has thus highlighted a failure and opened a breach that allows us to raise the issue of the alternative. In order to be effective, this cannot be a repetition of what we said yesterday, but must take into account the novelty and the dramatic nature of reality.

This is why we want to direct this magazine towards identifying the paths through which to build an alternative to liberalism and capitalism. An alternative to the present state of affairs as a necessary and desirable solution for the majority of men and women. This is a European magazine, but the research is worldwide, because such is the challenge: in globalised capitalism, the crisis of the coronavirus has placed all humanity in front of the same enemy.

We want to start from this global challenge by indicating some initial research points.

1. In the anthropocene era, in which mankind is able to alter the course of nature, the issue of respect for nature takes on fundamental importance. The struggle to build a harmonious and non-destructive relationship between humanity and nature is therefore a decisive point in our political struggle. As Marx pointed out, the sources of wealth are labour and nature, both of which are exploited by capital and both of which must be liberated from the domination of profit. There is therefore no liberation of labour without respect for nature. Just as there is no liberation of productive labour without liberating reproductive labour and overcoming its sexist nature. Liberating productive work as well as reproductive work, reducing working hours for the same wage and thus redistributing productive work as well as reproductive work. Various sides of the same coin in which overcoming class divisions is linked to overcoming social roles and hierarchies defined on the basis of gender.

2. The Covid showed with all clarity the interdependence that binds all men and women, human frailty and the centrality of care, of reproduction. The opposite of what we are told with the exaltation of the animal spirits of capitalism, from unbridled competition to the idea that we can save ourselves. The theme of cooperation and care therefore takes on a very strong centrality, and social transformation today must be rethought around these concepts. This is not just a political argument, but a cultural and anthropological one, because the new humanity that cooperates internally and has a harmonious relationship with nature can only be formed by new women and new men.

3. Contrary to what we have been told for decades, there is no shortage of goods or money. On the contrary, we are in a crisis of overproduction and the central banks are flooding the markets with cheap money. It is therefore a question today of finding a way through which this immense quantity of money

is not aimed at reproducing the mechanisms of capitalist accumulation but, on the contrary, is aimed at developing the public sphere, common goods, welfare and the reduction of working hours. The wealth exists and it is enormous, it is a question of opening a fundamental discussion on its use.

4. The current phase is characterised by a gigantic process of concentration of companies, of construction of world monopolies with enormous powers. This poses a problem relating to the model of development and democracy, which must be addressed by posing the problem of the socialisation of the means of production, public ownership and democratic, participatory control of major economic and social choices. It is necessary to build a public space that enhances the dimension of the state, self-management and community. The democratisation of society and production, the issue of the environmental and social reconversion of the economy brings up once again the relationship between state intervention and social self-management, and raises the issue of workers' control, common goods, the relationship with the territory, and community growth.

5. Neoliberal globalisation has radically changed the framework within which class conflict had taken place in Europe after World War II. The relationship between conflict, negotiations and legislative changes has been challenged by the unwillingness of companies to really negotiate. The social balance of power was reversed in favour of the ruling classes. All too often the action of the Unions and the left have been restricted to a meritorious and sometimes heroic action of resistance: rarely have we identified new paths capable of building social hegemony. More generally, the historical forms of popular aggregation have disappeared without new ones being produced. It is a question of going further and investigating the new paths of aggregation, resistance and struggle in order to grasp the new forms of construction of antagonist subjectivity. In the awareness that each generation of workers expresses itself socially, culturally and politically in different forms from previous

generations.

6. The crisis of democracy and the crisis of the forms of politics born after the Second World War is evident in many European countries. The institutions of representative democracy, emptied of power from above and therefore perceived as ineffective from below, are experiencing a structural crisis. In this area too, our action has been characterised by a meritorious defensive action, which is, however, insufficient to reverse the trend. The search for ways to broaden democracy and paths of political participation that allow for the expression of popular protagonism will therefore be a central point of the magazine's research.

7. In the crisis of democracy and the social disintegration, produced by neoliberal policies, ideologies and political groups of the extreme right are growing in Europe. For the most part, these are not nostalgic phenomena but reactionary responses to a social and existential crisis that has no positive outcomes. We want to devote a great deal of attention to analysing and understanding these phenomena, to identifying the most effective ways of drying up the swamp in which the right is growing.

8. The Coronavirus affair gave a heavy boost to the crisis - already underway - of neoliberal globalisation. It is a structural element, which will indicate the next phase. It seems to us that far from representing a "return to the past", a

pure return to the Nation State, the trend that emerges is that of the strengthening of regional macro-areas. The US, China and Russia have been working in this direction for some time, and the new European governance is also moving in this direction. Understanding the characteristics of post-Covid-19 capitalism, analysing the new trends of European governance, is a decisive point to reopen the game of the alternative. We have understood some aspects of globalisation, but we have not been able to make a significant impact. Twenty years ago a great world movement was starting to take its first steps from Porto Alegre and for this reason it was attacked in Genoa in 2001 with a furious and uncivil repression. Today it is a question of grasping the novelties of this phase, in order to try to understand the changes in capitalism, to identify its contradictions and to think about the possible paths to the alternative. Even here, we will try to make our contribution to this as well, knowing that the political level of the struggles must always be measured against the level of capitalism... Because we want to overcome it.

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# Interventions

# Fifty Shades of Brown. Remarks on the fight against the neo-fascist Right

*Walter Baier*

Europe consists of about 50 states, 27 of which are members of the European Union. So, what we see on the far Right are 50 shades of brown', so to speak.

It is doubtful that one and the same notion can be applied to such a wide range of phenomena. However, even more doubtful appears the notion of 'right-wing populism', which immediately provokes the question whether such a thing as 'left-wing populism' exists.

Mainstream political science summarizes under 'right-wing populism' political parties of a new breed, which successfully challenge the liberal hegemony. If this observation is correct, and I think it is, then this kind of a new Right expresses a rivalry among different fractions of the capitalist elites, which wrestle over how to govern in circumstances of a deepening political and economic crisis. It is true, no less the success of popular left parties is the consequence of the crisis of liberal hegemony. Yet, the solution of the crisis, which they endeavor, is empowering the people to bring about true social and ecological progress. This is exactly the opposite of what so-called right-wing populists are aiming at.

Obviously, the underlying definition of populism as a style of politics, being available for both the Right and the Left misses the essential difference between Right and Left due to its purely formal character.

## So, what is it?

On the far Right, we have parties like Fidesz of Hungary or the Law-and-Justice Party (PiS) of Poland, which have efficiently exploited the painful transformation of the Soviet-style

system into brutal neoliberalism, a process, which ironically has taken place under the leadership of post-communist parties, which have turned into neoliberal social democrats. We find neo-fascist mass parties in France (Rassemblement National) or in Italy (Lega) benefiting from the disenchantment with social democracy while in some of the rich countries of the EU (Scandinavia, Germany, Austria) right-wing parties tap on the fears of middle classes which rightfully are afraid of social decline.

We should use the term fascism very cautiously, both in general and in these particular cases. First, because it would be an expression of despair to write off 20 % of a country's electorate as 'fascist'. Fascism is a historic term. It cannot be detached from the Shoah, the war and all the ferocious crimes, which fascists have committed wherever they came to power. Yet, there is another side of the coin. If you read the classical texts from the 1920ies and 1930ies, e.g., those by Arthur Rosenberg, Otto Bauer, Walter Benjamin, Käthe Leichter, Leon Trotsky and others, you are stunned by how much the fascist movements before coming to power resemble the phenomenon which today's political science calls right-wing populism.

Indeed, historic fascism was the product of an unprecedented crisis of capitalism. Disturbing parallels to today's situation in Europe suggest themselves in this respect. Europe finds itself in a process of transformation for which it is neither economically nor politically nor mentally prepared. The crisis affects the entire society, because it also erodes the basis of the welfare states on which the class compromise rests, which the social democrats were part of.

In this particular juncture, two political options crystallize among the elites: One is the attempt to muddle through by gradual adaptations

and a careful balancing of national interests with the necessity of an enhanced European governance. The other is the authoritarian exit from the crisis, the strengthening of the nation states, which necessarily yields nationalism and anti-Europeanism, risking the re-emergence of the old imperialist cleavages among European states. Which of these concepts will prevail in the end is still a pending question.

This has nothing to do with conspiracies among the ruling classes but rather with a competition between different bourgeois parties, among them the far-right ones, to secure the financial and media support of the elites. As I said, speaking of fascism is politically not helpful but the analytical notion of fascism is relevant, since it clarifies that the independent variable in the equation which determines the fortunes of the Far Right is the relative weight of the interests and alliances of particular fractions within the ruling class.

The distinction here resides in the relation to the state. Any movement, which is fascist in its essence, aims at changing the character and structure of the state apparatus. This can occur in a 'revolutionary way' as in Germany in 1933 or by gradual institutional change, something we might nowadays be witnessing in Poland and Hungary. The goal, in any event is to cripple the rule of law, and to narrow and abolish the space for organized political and cultural opposition in order to shield the power of the group of capitalist kleptocrats around the "national leader".

## What about the working class?

The role of the working class is a big, ideologically controversial issue, particularly in France. Since the rise of the Far Right (Rassemblement National, initially Front National) and the decline of the Communist Party, took place simultaneously one is tempted to conclude that it were the former Communist voters who are responsible for the strength of the RN.

However, this is a misinterpretation of a statistic correlation. Even the notion "working class" is deceptive, since in electoral behaviour there exist considerable differences between the so-called working class voters due to gender, regions, educational levels, industrial sectors, and the quality of job security.

There exists empirical research with remarkable findings. First, the allegedly direct exchange of votes between the Far Right and the Communist Party is a negligible exception. The typical case is that the voters of the Left, disappointed by the governments formed by the PS and the PC, abstained while the Rassemblement Nationale collected right-wing votes of the working class, which had always existed.

When you fine-tune the analysis, you find clear-cut political and ideological distinctions between workers who are prone to vote for the RN and those who vote for the Left. The left did not become right and the right did not become left.

In a survey conducted by Espaces Marx on the day of the first round of the presidential elections of 2016, in which Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Marine Le Pen almost equally scored 20% a clear right-left-cleavage surfaced. While Le Pen's voters declared "security" and "immigration" to be their decisive electoral motives, concerns about "health care", "the environment" and "social security" were the main triggers of J.-L. Mélenchon's voters.

In the national scope, Luc Mélenchon outperformed Marine Le Pen among females, voters with a migratory background and precariously employed people.

However, interestingly in the north of France, which is particularly affected by the crisis, three structural parameters seem to distinguish their electorates. 1. Educational levels, the higher educated the workers were, the more they voted for Mélenchon; 2. the stability of the work contract, the more stable the work contracts the stronger was the inclination to vote left; and finally, the more an industrial region or branch was exposed to global markets the greater was the inclination of workers to vote for Le Pen. In one word, the allegation that the French working class has whole-sale become far right

is a gross oversimplification and does not stand up to empirical scrutiny.

## Responses by the Left

The way in which the Left responds to the challenge by the Far Right differs, according to the political currents and national traditions.

Typically, one can distinguish three kinds of practices. A sort of spontaneous, anarchistic antifascism arises from the confrontation with militant fascist fringe groups. The declared goal here is to deny them access to the public space and even to confront them physically when they try to enter it. Neo-fascism here is often understood as part and parcel of the bourgeois state, which itself could be struck by fighting its spearhead, fascism. Antifascism and anti-capitalism tend to be regarded as synonymous which why broader political alliances are refuted.

The mirror-inversion of this position is the one the moderate left-liberal opposition against the Far Right. It perceives it as a social pathology, generated by irresponsible populist leaders who appeal to the baser human instincts of the allegedly uneducated underclasses. Yet no connection to capitalism and neoliberal politics is made, which is why the ultima ratio is seen in the strengthening of the political centre parties as the 'lesser evil', i.e., parties which, unfortunately, are sliding more and more to the Right, thus increasing the evil themselves.

The question that arises objectively is that of the relationship between socio-economic issues of class and the struggles for human rights, solidarity with refugees, democracy, gender equality and the ecological transformation of our civilization.

I think it is wrong to summarize and devalue the latter under the term "identity politics",

because the struggle for human dignity for all is a struggle which is in the objective interests of the working class. The sometimes evoked contrast between class and alliance politics is fatally reminiscent of the opposition" in the 1930s between the strategies of "class against class" and "popular front".

There is no point in neglecting one of these aspects, but rather in finding a right combination between modern class politics and the readiness to enter into the broadest possible political alliances, embracing feminism, solidarity with the refugees, as well as the ecological movements which address the essential question of our civilization.

There exists no reason to suggest that uniting, on the basis of humanist values, could hamper class consciousness. On the contrary, it could even help in understanding that today's working class is multinational, multi-ethnic, female, unemployed, self-employed, living in precarious conditions, working in the care sector, in private sector as well as in public services.

Let's remember, that antifascism always had been a cultural movement too. It ought to be today all the more, as neoliberalism has been continuously eroding social solidarity and humanistic values, thus paving the way for all kinds of nationalism and fascism. Culture – understood in a broad sense – represents a huge resource of humanism and unity since it can explore the germs of a new solidaristic way of living.

*Walter Baier is the former coordinator of Transform! Europe. From 1994 to 2006 he was Federal President of the KPÖ (Kommunistische Partei Österreichs). He is the author of numerous books and essays.*

# Let's put an end to the multinationals' grip on our health

*Marc Botenga*

“Pharmaceutical companies have a monopoly on the market and we are totally dependent on them”. After almost a year into the pandemic, the avowal of the Belgian health minister, Frank Vandenbroucke, was as disconcerting as it was indisputable. The omnipotence of Pfizer and others was particularly evident when in December Pfizer told Belgium that it could only deliver about half of the 600,000 doses planned for January, while deliveries to Israel were running at full capacity. The fact that Israel was paying double the price, and would also have shared certain medical data, was no doubt not unrelated to this fact.

This omnipotence was reaffirmed in early January, when Pfizer unilaterally decided to reduce the quantity of vials to be delivered to the European Union. The reason? From a single vial, not five, but six doses of the vaccine could be taken. In a normal world, this would be very good news that would increase the rate of vaccination, and it would also mean great savings for budgets. The dominance of the pharmaceutical sector by the logic of the market and profit, on the other hand, was pushing in another direction. Pfizer pointed out that the purchase contracts were negotiated in doses and not in vials. Therefore, since the production price per vial remained the same, by reducing the number of vials to be delivered, the US multinational saw the opportunity to earn an additional 20% profit margin. The European Commission proposed what was to appear to be a win-win compromise. Pfizer would still deliver the number of vials originally planned, but would be paid for the additional doses. More than an agreement, this proposal looked more like a capitulation to blackmail from the multinational.

The word capitulation sounds strong, but has

an undeniable advantage. Surrender implies a choice. The impotence of public authorities in the face of the pharmaceutical multinationals is by no means inevitable. The European Commission had been mandated to negotiate on behalf of 27 member states. The reasoning made sense. Collective bargaining should allow a minimum of equity in the intra-European distribution of vaccines. By negotiating together, the states, representing a market of 450 million citizens, should also obtain more favorable conditions than by negotiating separately.

In reality, therefore, this was not the case. Since the beginning of the negotiations with the pharmaceutical industry, the European Commission has been particularly open to the demands of the pharmaceutical sector. For example, it gave in to the industry's request to transfer the financial risk in case of collateral effects due to hidden defects to the Member States, which is exceptional in the European Union. The first published contract, in a version redacted by the European Commission, also showed that all intellectual property, the patents, would remain in the company's hands. In contrast to the US deal for Moderna's vaccine, the European Commission thus assigned all rights to the vaccine to the private sector, although the community had, in addition to the purchase price, financed research and development, expansion of production capacity, and even the financial risk in case of hidden defects. This means that, ultimately, the company decides on prices and quantities, considering, first and foremost, its profit margin. A confidentiality clause guaranteed that even MEPs would not have access to the contracts. Moreover, leaks indicate that EU member states are paying more or less the price set unilaterally by the industry, so it is objectively difficult to

# Interventions

talk about anything other than capitulation.

When Belgian Minister Vandenbroucke attacks the omnipotence of the pharmaceutical multinationals, he readily forgets that he can do something about it. In April 2020, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel all called for vaccines to become a public good. This would have meant denying a monopoly patent on the vaccine and would have meant a series of benefits, if only in terms of production. Because, let's be clear, not making the vaccine a public good costs lives. Oxfam noted that respecting the traditional patent model meant denying seventy countries access to mass vaccination by 2021. By sharing technology, we could have more or less rapidly increased the number of production sites and thus the amount of vaccine available. This would mean giving priority to life, not to the profits of a few shareholders.

The technical tools exist. The European Union could, upstream, have attached conditions to public funds for research and development or negotiated the issue of patents in pre-purchase agreements. It did not do so, and no national government insisted that it do so. Another tool available to national governments is binding licenses. This involves requiring the company holding the patent to offer other companies a license to produce the vaccine. Breaking the monopoly helps to expand production to the scale needed at an affordable cost. Such binding licenses are the responsibility of member states, but the European Commission can facilitate this by relaxing European rules on data exclusivity. The technology exchange platform set up by the World Health Organization (Who) remained voluntary. However, the European Union could have imposed technology sharing on the pharmaceutical industry through this mechanism. As a result, by January 2021, the platform had not received a single contribution. India and South Africa are also fighting, at the head of a coalition of about 100 countries, for a suspension of patents on Covid-19 vaccines, but at the World Trade Organization, the European Union is fiercely opposed to it. The contrast with countries like Cuba and China, which

promise to offer their vaccine to the world, is truly colossal.

Even in a situation as exceptional as a pandemic, the European Union therefore persists in defending the patents and private profits of the big pharmaceutical multinationals. Do we blame the lobbies? The European Commission and the European Parliament are undeniably porous to all kinds of corporate lobbies. The choice of Richard Bergström, former director of the European pharmaceutical lobby EFPIA, as negotiator for European contracts with the pharmaceutical industry will only have comforted this fact. Faced with the power of the lobbies, the citizen mobilization #Noprofitonpandemic, which wants to force the European Commission to make the vaccine a public good, therefore deserves full support.

However, the obstinacy of the European Union has much deeper roots. We know this from the reports of the powerful lobby of the European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT) outlining the way forward for the Maastricht Treaty. The primary mission of European construction is to support the global competitiveness of large European companies. European CEOs openly described this in their 1991 report *Reshaping Europe*. A powerful instrument was needed to shape the world, since “no single European country can decisively influence the shape of the world on its own”. Without a larger market, a single currency and a European state apparatus, European multinationals would not be able to compete globally. With this objective in mind, the European economic and industrial logic has been articulated around the competitiveness of large companies. This also applies to the climate transition. On paper, climate transition is at the heart of the Union's objectives. In reality, we can see that it is above all a question of helping European multinationals to become “champions” in the field of green technologies. Public money will be used to subsidize large European companies to enable them to be the most competitive on the international scene. As Peter Mertens writes: “Neoliberalism is not based on the relationship between the market and the state, but on the total enslavement of the state to capital”<sup>1</sup>.

This same logic, which defends the monopoly of the pharmaceutical multinationals in the name of their competitiveness, acts today through patent protection as a brake on rapid and broad access to a vaccine. On the other hand, suppose that a public consortium has prepared the vaccination strategy. It would probably decide to develop not one vaccine but several, so as not to put all its eggs in one basket. The different vaccines could be tested around the world and compared with each other. Once vaccines were developed, a decision could be made to apply them to priority target groups while continuing trials with other candidate vaccines. Anyone who had the opportunity could produce the vaccine anywhere in the world. And if, in the future, better vaccines were developed, new directions could be taken. This would ensure that the entire population is protected in the safest, most effective, and least expensive way possible.

It's time to get the vaccine off the hands of the multinational pharmaceutical companies. And to think of a European public pharmaceutical

cluster for essential medicines. This has an additional advantage. Scepticism about vaccines is not so much a lack of trust in science or in the treating physician as a mistrust of a pharmaceutical industry that values profit over health. When it comes to vaccinating millions of people, trust is paramount. Putting the vaccine under public control and making it clear that no one will benefit from it can help build trust.

*1. Peter Mertens, They Forgot Us, Antwerp, EPO, 2020.*

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# In order to change the world at the time of the Covid: establishing popular social and political majorities

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*Vincent Boulet*

There is no longer any point in going back over the extent of the crisis that is much alive around the Covid-19 pandemic. It reveals and accelerates the crisis of capitalist globalization, as much in its economic dimension, with the questioning of the entire value chain, as in its dimension of inter-imperialist relations of force, as in the neoliberal ideological model associated with it. The magnitude and conjunction of the social and political crises, as well as the state crises that we are seeing in several European countries, combined with the feelings of downgrading and powerlessness that the population may feel in the face of the incapacity of governments to emerge from the crisis, can provoke political movements of very serious regression.

The global economy is expected to suffer a cumulative loss of \$12.5 trillion over 2020 and 2021. The OECD estimates that 30 million jobs will be destroyed in 2020 for its 37 member countries. This is indeed a crisis of civilization whose political consequences may result in a worsening of authoritarian currents, legitimized by the permanent state of emergency, and xenophobic currents, legitimized by the sine die closure of borders and the wrongful assimilation of foreigners to a potential health threat.

However, 2020 will also have shown that so-called “frontline” workers are the pillars of a nation. Their leading role will have been amply emphasized as the forty years of liberal policies have everywhere and consistently sought to make them invisible, have greatly weakened their rights, their wages, their pensions, and crushed their social mobilizations. A year

ago, who would have thought that it would be possible to set out on a daily mission to applaud them? Who would have thought that the question of making the vaccine a common good of humanity would be so important today? Who would have thought that the functioning of the pharmaceutical industry, a genuine precursor of capitalism, would be so much in the spotlight? But saying this does not mean that we are on the eve of a socialist revolution. Nor does it mean that capitalism itself is being put in the dock. In fact, we are very far from it. The crisis is so acute at a time when the great popular movements are in retreat. The great mobilizations against austerity in the first half of 2010 have been marking time for several years. Saying this does not mean that struggles are now warded to the background, such as, for example, those opposing relocations. In order for the left to rise to the occasion, in order for it to be an actor that can change the world, it is important to ask ourselves several questions, starting from popular concerns: what kind of change in the world? On what balance of power? And how can the latter be brought to evolve?

The left faces the challenge of working on a political formula to restore confidence in the labour world. This formula must combine the social question, the ecological question and the question of the democratic sovereignty of the peoples, starting from the real level of class consciousness and trying to push it a little further. In other words, it is a question of co-constructing “transitional demands”, to use this expression which belongs to the history of the workers’ movement, that is, political and social

battle axes which correspond to the real state of the peoples, which are realistic and widely understandable tools on a mass scale and which offer real prospects of opening up breaches in capitalist domination in order to question the system.

These demands must therefore, in their content, ultimately pose the question of power. As the 3rd congress of the Communist International (1921) put it: “In the place of the minimum program [...], the Communist International puts the struggle for the concrete needs of the proletariat, for a system of demands which as a whole demolish the power of the bourgeoisie, [...] each of which particularly expresses a requirement of the broad masses [...]”. The formulas are those of the context of the time, but the general orientation is quite current.

Here are some examples of what the left could throw into the debate, which can be grouped into three main battles:

- First and foremost, the class battle. The European bourgeoisies are not going to abandon the capital they have concentrated, thanks to the policies of successive governments in Europe, nor their tools of domination so easily. They are going to work to get out of the crisis by traditional means, namely by making the peoples pay for the crisis. Declarations on the need to repay sovereign debts, and those contracted by the European Union, on the part of the ECB or the IMF are reminiscent of the worst hours of the austere authoritarianism that crushed the peoples of Europe. But it is not certain that the European ruling classes really have the necessary balance of power to act in this way.

- In the second place, the democratic battle, that is the confrontation with the logics of capitalist globalization, in other words, with globalization. This means reducing the inhabitants of the planet to an all-powerful market and turning the states into tools of the market. The need to guarantee the democratic sovereignty of the peoples therefore implies, among other things, securing every moment of people's lives,

rebuilding and democratizing public services that meet the most essential needs of citizens, appropriating strategic sectors of the economy, taking power over the banks in order to redirect money towards social and environmental investments, relocating production and carrying out a true industrial reconquest that finds its new dynamic in the ecological conversion of the productive tool.

It is a question of debating the move towards economic and social democracy, which truly mobilizes society, reorienting industry and its sectors according to needs, for a great movement of production planning, intervening on the power of banks, calling on the expertise of workers on a daily basis. This battle is not a battle of withdrawal. It is a condition for setting up solidarity-based cooperation in Europe, taking into account the interdependence of nations. Nor is it a battle disconnected from the real popular demands. The struggles over the question of industrial sovereignty bear witness to this.

- Thirdly, the battle for another world order, which calls for a break with the liberal rules of European construction, which have shown their total inability to respond to the demands of the peoples because they are intrinsically linked to the logic of capitalist globalization. The demand for a vaccine and a treatment that is a common good of humanity highlights the fact that the laws of capitalism of free and undistorted competition and those of profit are not a solution, and that it is necessary to have a break with such logics. This question is not only a European question. It is an international question, posed from Brazil to South Africa, and put forward by the WHO and China.

To sum up, such proposals make it possible to apprehend a concept that has come back to the forefront, that of “sovereignty”. Brexit has shown how its use can be misused by xenophobic and ethnicist forces. Contrary to these nauseating tendencies, we are not talking about the sovereignty of a group asserting itself in front of others, but about the democratic sovereignty of peoples and nations as a

# Interventions

whole. And the way in which these sovereign peoples and nations come together to respond to the challenges they share. In other words, the sovereignty of peoples and nations has a real transformative, economic, social and democratic content.

To pose such a content to change the world implies addressing the question of the social base, the class base, the class alliance, necessary to make these ruptures effective and that such proposals could bring together. In other words, who are we addressing? The crisis clearly shows that the wage-labour, the workers, are the propelling force of this bloc that extends from the independent workers, the precarious workers, to sectors of small employers sensitive to the question of the reconstruction of productive capital. They are the majority of society and represent the basis for social and political majorities. There is no need here to fantasize about an essentialized and reified

“People”, ignoring the contradictions that cross it; on the contrary, it is a question of working from the real balance of power. For it is indeed the question of a popular front of the 21st century that is being asked here. It is a union in action, the axes that it will put forward, starting from the struggles of resistance and conquest at the local or sectoral level, seeking to make them converge into a political counteroffensive in favor of another model of development, socially just and ecologically sustainable.

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# Culture, Corona & its Discontents.

## A critical view of the role of culture in pandemic times

*Eva Brenner*

*“All art forms are in the service of the greatest of all art: the art of living”*

- Bertolt Brecht

### 1. No future without culture

The New Year’s Concert 2021 offered a unique sight: for the first time in its long history since World War II, Maestro Riccardo Muti conducted the “Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra“ in front of empty seats in the famed gilded hall of Vienna’s Musikverein. It truly was one of the saddest cultural spectacles since the outbreak of the Corona pandemic in 2020, encapsulating the dimension of the current cultural crisis. While sending messages of “Happy New Year” to millions of viewers in over 90 countries worldwide he used the occasion to add some personal-political words, stressing the vital role of culture as important for a society’s mental health: “Music is not mere entertainment, it also carries the mission to improve society, to bring peace, hope and love to the world.” This peculiar event comes at a time when artists across the world are not allowed to work and largely left without income and prospects for the future.

Within a larger context, democratic societies urgently need a radical reappraisal of art and culture if we are to progress as artists - whether we work in the bourgeois milieu of isolated studios, or within networks of progressive left movements and parties. We must re-evaluate

the achievements and failures of the existing cultural policies and politics in our respective countries, and develop new socially grounded concepts for an artistic/cultural scene reaching more people than the traditional 1-2 percent. This would include policy guidelines for cultural funding structures, distribution, and media as well as scholarly work – all of which in Austria have, for decades, largely benefitted classical or “high” culture, orchestrated by the dominant Social Democratic strategies.

### 2. Neoliberal culture in times of pandemic

*“The neon signs which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death”*

- Theodor W. Adorno

From my standpoint as an Austrian “freelance” artist, we must look at the changes within the cultural-political setting influencing the left progressive (left), avant-garde, feminist, multicultural, as well as amateur community art and culture industry for the past thirty years. We must ask why and how large sections of progressive/political artists surrendered step by step to neoliberal concepts of individualism, competition, and consumerism - instead of cooperative - imperatives.

In Vienna, for example, all artistic projects and

# Interventions

institutions - with the exception of a handful of private enterprises - are *de facto* controlled by Social Democratic cultural politics. While post-1968 artistic progressivism in art has been successfully co-opted by the cultural industry of the neo-liberalized socio-economic systems, funding increasingly flows towards privileged classical art for the privileged benefit of the capitalist economy and tourism while a shrinking number of “free”/alternative artists and institutions find themselves in the throes of precarious work. Hardly able to make a living, they are forced into non-artistic jobs to complement irregular engagements, often without unemployment benefits. Working with limited resources - and getting the crumbs from the table of the rich - they are condemned to work overtime, suffer near poverty in a rich “cultural nation”, and receiving scant media interest and minimal public funding. Their marginalized social position has been aggravated by austerity measures taking root at about the year 2000 as part of a sweeping neoliberal restructuring of the work force - policies exacerbated under the regime of a pandemic.

Neoliberal ideology was launched after the Second World War, determining policies in most Western countries to varying degrees during the 1970s; economically and socially the effects are well researched. This does not hold true for the cultural arena where concepts such as the idealized “flexible men” (Richard Sennett) began rapidly to change the face of the artistic world. Cultural remnants of the 68-rebellion were integrated into the new neoliberal framework, no longer carried by class-conscious collectives but individualistic, intellectual, and pedagogic principles- Left progressive groups were successively defunded, delegitimized and replaced by post-modernist, “anything goes”, hybrid conceptions of art, leaving the vast majority of cultural workers without rooting in any left/progressive base. All the while neoliberal capitalism disguised the new agenda by huge transfers of funds from bottom to top. The problem is that the international left did not sufficiently resist this aggressive move. The culture of past centuries - from classical painting and music, theater and

dance - became once again the domain of the rich, which all artists should provide with a shrinking workforce while popular culture had to follow consumerist formats and University curricula propagated the postmodernist focus on underprivileged identity-politics of “othering”, amongst them women, gays, people of color and other blacks as new agents of social change. As left-liberal artists and intellectuals joined ranks within existing institutions to build carriers and the rising internationalist right-wing movements turned popular culture nationalist, the left collapsed into the ideology of cultural “otherness” or withdrew from cultural endeavours. This is the contemporary cultural landscape left artists find themselves in - defunded, expropriated, and dismembered. This tragic turn of the tables within cultural class-struggle determines a loss of left cultural traditions no longer passed on to the younger generations and benefits rising anti-democratic, illiberal, racist right-wing forces throughout Europe - a political and also cultural defeat.

The current pandemic is not the principle cause of cultural deficiencies; it exposes existing problems of late Western capitalist society. Any serious analysis of predominant (social-) democratic culture must point to the lack or absence of left intellectual debate in the field of culture. From a leftist point of view (independent, social-democratic, communist) the failure to lead a continuous, sustainable, and multi-levelled cultural discourse grounded in critical theory, as well as the insufficient interest, attention, and programming on the part of left European parties in terms of progressive culture leaves individuals and groups without leadership; particularly younger artists lack socialist thought to guide their practice. An expanded notion of a “living culture” cannot be sustained in orthodox institutions; it needs the construction of community with new models of a contemporary socialist culture practiced in independent institutions which exclude no one and nothing - from language, to performance, from dress codes to eating habits, from housing to mobility and social rituals.

### 3. Roads to overcome an annus horribilis

*“Before I ask: what is a work’s position vis-à-vis the production relations of its time, I should like to ask: what is its position within them? This question concerns the function of a work within the literary production relations of its time. In other words, it is directly concerned with literary technique”*

- Walter Benjamin

The crisis has exacerbated the problems of an art world which has experienced sharp shifts to individualism, de-solidarization and de-democratization. In Austria, 50-60% of all artists working as freelancers are faced with decreasing optimism, the fear of total financial loss, and no prospect for a reopening of their studios, theaters, cinemas, and galleries in the near future. Lockdowns have come and gone, during light lockdowns hardware stores stayed open and skiing was allowed while cultural events remained prohibited - measures which clearly testify to political priorities which put hardware stores above theatres. At the outset of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, protests demanding similar support measures as were given in trillions to businesses erupted - ballet cries which conspicuously subsided with increased pessimism as it became clear that politician’s lip service did not result in sufficient support for art and culture. Using up savings and belt-tightening was accompanied by balcony concerts, streamlined art events, and webinar discussions - all of which cannot substitute for the live event. Mainstream media gave sparse coverage to the plight of artists, busying itself with calls for discipline and law and order; a recent headline read: “Culture in a state of emergency”...

We are thus in need of a radical change of perspectives which challenge outdated capitalist as well as post socialist-realist approaches to art and culture, and the formulation of a socialist cultural-political vision which has learned from failures of the past and transforms

the left cultural heritage of the last 200 years into strategies and tactics for the 21st century. Any new order of socialist cultural production embraces interactive, progressive, collectivist cultural practices in which processes supersede the manufacturing (reviewing, analysing, discussing) of cultural products. This would follow the principle of Joseph Beuys’ vision that “everyone(is) an artist”. It must build on historical models such as Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theater, the revolutionary theatre of Soviet Russia, or Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed and the experiments of The Living Theatre. Pressing issues to address include the fight for democracy, freedom, equality, and internationalism, the struggle against racism, sexism, and fascism. While strategic institutional focus needs to be on re-building old progressive networks based on class consciousness within rooted, in the current post-democratic societies, in the under-privileged and unorganized within widely differing European traditions.

#### *Literature:*

Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (1947)  
 Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double*, 1958  
 Walter Benjamin, *The Author as Producer*, 1934  
 Joseph Beuys, *Jeder Mensch ein Künstler*, 1975  
 Augusto Boal, *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, 1974  
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 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 1984  
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 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 1964  
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 Richard Schechner, *Environmental Theater*, 1973  
 Richard Sennett, *Der flexible Mensch (The Corrosion of Character)*, 1998  
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# Self-criticism and clear socialist option as a response to the Coronavirus crisis

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*François D'Agostino*

The current pandemic has proven to be a powerful indicator of a major crisis, perhaps organic<sup>1</sup> of what Gramsci described as a historical bloc<sup>2</sup>. It seems to us that the analysis of this crisis is the first prerequisite for the definition of progressive alternatives at the regional, national and international levels.

Let us first return to the concepts of historical bloc and organic crisis. It is “the dialectical unity - the point of indistinction - between the structure [i.e. the economic base] and the superstructure at a given moment of capitalist development”<sup>3</sup>. In the tenth notebook<sup>4</sup> the Sardinian communist says that in the historical bloc, “the economic-social content and the ethico-political form are concretely identified. The historical bloc must, in this conception, be able to face crises, defined as the moment when, according to the now famous quote, “(...) the old dies and (...) the new cannot be born”<sup>5</sup>. Gramsci defines, however, another type of crisis, a general one. This is the “organic” crisis which the historical bloc is unable to resist durably. It is during crises of this type that revolutionary changes (progressive or not, by mass movement or from above) become possible.

Is the current crisis of this kind? In “Western” societies, the COVID 19 crisis has dramatically exposed the ravages caused by forty years of neoliberalism: advanced destruction of solidarity mechanisms and public services, particularly in the health sector, massive deindustrialization, are just some of the manifestations, already known on the left, but which have taken on unknown proportions here, and have had even more dramatic consequences, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of people. Within the European states, the pandemic revealed internal social disparities with the greatest cruelty<sup>6</sup>. In

Belgium, this became very clear with regard to disparities between regions in terms of mortality. While population density is higher in Flanders, Wallonia has a higher mortality rate related to COVID19. On closer inspection, the effects of greater poverty and less access to health care are at their fullest. These devastating effects of poverty were also evident in Brussels. At the political level, the cacophony was also great, the absence of a fully-fledged government at the beginning of the pandemic, the competing logics between the different federated entities and the lack of clarity in decision-making will certainly not have improved the situation, nor will it have strengthened the adhesion of the population to the institutions. Finally, we will point out the effects of deindustrialization on the lack of capacity to produce personal protective equipment, particularly for health services .

Another worrying aspect for the forces of progress is the revelation of harmful trends that go beyond the simple framework of right-wing and extreme right-wing political forces: mistrust of science and the scientific method, greater visibility of various obscurantist and reactionary currents, mistrust of politics (and political and collective action), individualistic tendencies, and, in general, an internalization of the dominant ideology. In the face of this, the political leaders of the imperialist centers have the advantage of blaming their failings on the individual behavior of the populations, which they have helped to “ educate “ in this neoliberal ethos. We are therefore witnessing a contradictory phenomenon where the objective conditions for a radical change of course in our societies are met, where the power of the capitalists and their representatives is shaken, but where, on the left, in Europe, a majority

of forces are atomized, without prospects, sometimes tetanized and thus reduced to relative impotence or protest, unable to rush into the breach and into a long struggle for the transition to a socialist society.

If we look at countries that have fought for national independence and socialism, such as the People's Republic of China, Cuba or Vietnam, what do we see? There, and despite the internal difficulties or those imposed by imperialism (the criminal blockade imposed on Cuba by the United States), it is clear that these countries and societies have been much better able to withstand the shock caused by COVID-19. The explanatory factors are multiple: the role of public authorities and services, the leading role of political organizations oriented towards the satisfaction of popular needs, the confidence and means invested in science, and the internationalist orientations affirmed in cooperation<sup>7</sup>.

Without overly idealizing these countries, it is clear from the results obtained that we have much to learn from them. In this regard, it would be important, within the left of the imperialist centers, to get rid of a condescending attitude towards the socialist and progressive countries, which is still too present and reflects the influence of the dominant ideology even in our ranks, and instead try to understand, study and learn concrete lessons to advance our struggles. Based on these observations, what can we propose as general orientations? Before moving on to general policy proposals, it seems important to us to take a self-critical look at our own organizations. It is certainly time to reflect and act, both in our respective national frameworks and at the European level, on the best way to spread a progressive, supportive, and critical culture that honors the rationalist struggle that has been waged by the Left for transformation since the 19th century. It is also time to get rid of the condescending Eurocentric attitude that the socialist experiences of the "Global South" have nothing to teach us and bring us other than an outdated "exoticism", a relic of

the revolutions of the twentieth century: China, Vietnam and Cuba are not piles of revolutionary clichés, they are socialist countries with many contradictions and facing great challenges, but with a vision for the future.

For the rest, the coronavirus crisis and the responses of the socialist countries give us clear general orientations, to be adapted according to our particular context: strengthening public services, strengthening the role of the State in the economy at the service of the population and not of Capital, international cooperation, financing of research and development of technical and industrial capacities, among others, are central points of the struggle to be led, far from a simple reformist will to alleviate the evils of capitalism, but for a radical break, alone, in an uninterrupted revolutionary process in stages to emerge in a progressive way from the current crisis but also to face the environmental disaster that is looming if the infernal machine of capitalism is not brought to an end.

1. D'Agostino (F.), *La crise sociale en Belgique à la lumière de Gramsci*, December 2014, available here: <http://archive.acjj.be/publications/nos-analyses/la-crise-sociale-en-belgique-a-la>, consulted on 13/01/2021

2. *Ibid.*

3. Durand (C.) and Keucheyan (R.), *Un césarisme bureaucratique*, in Durand (C.), sous la dir. de, *En finir avec l'Europe*, La Fabrique, Paris, 2013, p.97.

4. Gramsci (A.), *Guerre de mouvement et guerre de position*, Texts selected and presented by Razmig Keucheyan, La Fabrique, Paris, 2011, p.64.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 38

6. For the case of Belgium, see, a.o., Dupret (X.), *Coronavirus and Class Views. From Asia to Belgium*, April 2020, available online here: <https://www.acjj.be/coronavirus-et-points-de-vue-de-classe-de-lasie-a-la-belgique/>, consulted on 13/01/2021.

7. See, among others, Collectif, *CoronaShock and Socialism*, July 2020, available online: <https://www.thetricontinental.org/studies-3-coronashock-and-socialism/>

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# Fear or confidence: the battle of the bottom line for the working classes in crisis

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*Ángel de la Cruz*

There is no doubt that an event on the historic scale of COVID-19 will have profound and lasting consequences for our societies and, by implication, for our citizens. We don't know if we will really come out *better*, as the most optimistic people in the first weeks were saying, or we'll come out *worse*. What we do know is that, to some extent, we will be *different*. Whether we get out of this crisis by opting for solidarity-based protection or for the umpteenth version of the *individual lookout* is precisely what is at stake and what, in no case, is given to us by supposedly *objective* or *obvious* facts. The right wing understood this from the outset and acted accordingly in a disciplined manner, sowing hatred, tension and mistrust.

The left must frame this crisis in a fight that goes far beyond institutional management and its possible electoral consequences. Ultimately, what is at stake is the *configuration* of the people as a political subject and their relationship with politics - in the broad sense - and the state.

The right exploits the tensions to mould a nativist populace, merciless towards the poorest, such as immigrants, but benevolent in practice towards the most powerful. At the same time, they have nurtured distrust of the institutions as a whole because they need to dynamite any element of the liberal-social democratic consensus that would put a brake on their reactionary attempts. The ultimate goal: to consolidate an authoritarian protectionism aimed at this nativist populace in constant confrontation with broad sectors of the popular classes and collectives. To this end,

to reduce - even further! - the state to a set of coercive apparatuses.

Authors such as Davies and Lordon point to the importance of emotions and affect in politics. The growth of reactionary populism could not be understood without a successful manipulation of emotions such as nostalgia, resentment, fear and anger, all of which are humanly understandable in a decaying world that is leaving behind large sectors of society. There is no need to dwell on the rhetorical devices of any reactionary phenomenon to understand that ultimately they need a state of conspiracy and collective distrust in order for their authoritarian protectionism to take hold.

Adorno already pointed out in the 1960s the relation of the new right-wing radicalism to *fatalism*. They feed on fantasies about the collapse of the world and the coming apocalypse; something similar, by the way, to what some Marxists did in the last century. Hall analysed it more comprehensively two decades later with the conspiratorial obsession typical of Thatcherism: the old way of life was already in danger fifty years ago! Thus, any crisis appears as a conspiracy: Soros, globalism, China and the government of the day concocting a sophisticated "plandemy" to consolidate the dictatorship of political correctness. Distrust leads to conspiracy and conspiracy leads to panic. When this happens, the logical response is authoritarianism: a ceding of democracy in exchange for protection related to the law and order framework.

For the sake of accuracy, we reproduce two passages from an article by the aforementioned Hall written jointly with Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts. Although it logically analyses the British reality, it draws lessons that would soon prove to be general to the wide range of experiences of the radical right. It was written in 1978, a year before Margaret Thatcher came to power. The working class stopped Hall but not the movement at its core.

*“British society became almost obsessed with a conspiracy against the British way of life. The collective psychological displacements that shape this obsession are perhaps too obvious to need analysis. To put it quickly, conspiracy is the necessary and required way in which a society hypnotised by consensus represents dissent, opposition and conflict.*

(...)

*Demons now proliferate, but the most threatening thing is that they belong to the same subversive family. They are blood brothers, parts of the same thing. On the surface it appears to be a collection of more concrete fears, because here social anxiety can identify a specific enemy, it can name names. But in reality, this identification of culprits is misleading. For the enemy is everywhere. He (or, increasingly, she) is behind everything. This is the moment when the crisis appears in its most abstract form: as a general conspiracy. It is the crisis, but in its disguise as Armageddon.”*

A crisis is always an ideal moment for the growth of reactionary populism. What a mistake of the leftists who are incapable of ridding themselves of the harmful remnants of economistic determinism. The deterioration of the living conditions of the working classes never leads mechanically to a process of consciousness-raising in an emancipatory direction. On the contrary, without social organisation - in the broad sense of the term - it leads to a deterioration of social bonds, community ties and an identarian, corporatist

or, directly, individualistic withdrawal.

After this crisis, we will value the instruments of protection more highly, from public health care to the network of family and community care, but we will also come out of it with more fear. The dispute between the left and the right is basically a dispute over the concept of protection. The right activates the punitive frameworks to filter it towards an authoritarian proposal of social rigorism and the left activates the frameworks of social protection, fraternity and solidarity. Fear versus trust. Fear leads to anger and anger to confrontation. To paraphrase Dostoyevsky’s famous phrase, if the future does not exist, “everything is permitted”. Trust leads to hope and hope to cooperation.

Thus, the basic task of the left is to rebuild collective trust, the trust of the people with the people and the trust of the people with politics and, ultimately, with the state. It sounds neither epic nor bombastic, especially the latter, but we would be wrong if we did not see in the strongholds of the anti-fascist consensus of the last century one of the few obstacles for reactionaries, wherever they can, to implement their programme more rigorously.

The case of Spain is paradigmatic: the “regime of ‘78” incubated within itself the eggs of the snake (among other reasons because it was not born of a democratic-anti-fascist rupture) which today, from above and from the right, aspires to overcome it definitively in an oligarchic direction. We, the transforming left, maintain our firm commitment to overcoming it, but in a popular-democratic direction. What are the modest objectives of the coalition government today, in this particular context? To put the institutions at the service of the popular classes and to use them as a buffer against the offensive of the right wing. Today, anti-politics has only one reactionary way out.

Cultural battles are not fought in ethereal spaces far removed from material reality. The Trumpist strategy, imported into different European

# Interventions

realities such as Spain, not only by Vox but also by the President of the Community of Madrid, will triumph to the extent that it manages to interweave with the existing social, cultural and material bases. The left always plays at a disadvantage. When it is in opposition it has no power and when it is in government it has little power, but there is no point in complaining. The left must combine good management of the crisis without leaving anyone behind where it governs and, at the same time, put in place structural elements of debate that will ultimately strengthen its social protection framework. Nor will it be an eminently discursive or narrowly cultural issue.

The main success of neoliberalism is not the transfer of power, money and resources from the popular classes to a privileged minority, but the construction of a particular way of life in which, increasingly isolated, we become clients instead of citizens and everything we achieve is done through our resources. As much as you have, so much you are worth. This inevitably leads to the *secession* of those who have the most from society as a whole. If we live our daily lives in a conservative way, when we go to the polls, we only need to translate that daily life into a ballot paper that is consistent with it. The reactionaries are connected to this process of social decomposition. To build, from below and patiently, a more united, cooperative and fraternal way of life is ultimately one of the great objectives of the left.

If we remain locked in institutional management, the reactionaries will win. If we are able to raise the debate to place our model of a more democratic, fairer and more egalitarian society, where social rights are guaranteed and everything that is saving us today is protected by law, we can make progress in our positions. Since Machiavelli's time, we have known that when it comes to political action, what matters least to us is the past, even if the management of a crisis as important as the current one is at stake. Let us build, from the politics of "the little things", the outline of an alternative society.

After this crisis, we will value the instruments of protection more highly, from public health care to the network of family and community care, but also with more fear. In this context of total uncertainty, the concept of protection plays a central role. The reactionaries stand for individual survival for the working classes and nativist protectionism, the left for a society in which the life and rights of the citizens are not subordinated to the private profits of the few. For a society in which we care for each other instead of trampling and humiliating each other.

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# A cruel and crooked government

*Felicity Dowling*

Left Unity UK send deep condolences to all European Left Party comrades who have lost loved ones in the pandemic. We send solidarity and thanks to all the health and care workers in Europe.

Our tasks are to raise the ideas of socialism, solidarity, mutual aid, internationalism and the idea that a better world is possible. We work with our fellow trade union members, with neighbours and campaigners, with socialists, both in and out of the Labour Party.

The United Kingdom is far from United. The situation in the North of Ireland is grim, Scotland increasingly seeing a real distinction from the Westminster based Government with 58% of decided voters saying they wanted to see independence. Wales too sees anger against the Westminster government.

Here, a cruel and crooked government presides over a country in interlocking crises. This government hides behind an image of bumbling incompetence yet manages to be highly effective in the distribution of great wealth to their cronies, and in presiding over widespread avoidable poverty. No crisis is left unexploited. Neo-liberal policies of austerity, of attacks on worker's rights, of whole scale privatisation, of globalisation and deindustrialisation, have left the country very badly placed to fight the pandemic.

Johnson's government came into power by deploying false promises of an "oven ready" Brexit, and critiques of Labour's policies which were simply untrue. The press and media weighed in against Labour and especially against Corbyn. So, the UK ended up with a Trump-lite government. "The Prime Minister and the US president are both unprincipled demagogues who have subverted democratic norms".

Johnson's willingness to break international law in the Brexit arrangements sums the man up.

Their ideology is that of the hedge funds, the asset strippers and the con men, casually cruel and racist. Huge errors are ignored, and regulations change overnight. They aim their propaganda against the poor.

## The Pandemic

On 10<sup>th</sup> February 2021, the UK recorded more than 1,000 daily deaths. Total deaths stand at 121,674. The vaccine numbers are impressive but there are problems with new variants of the virus. So many of these deaths could have been avoided had the Government followed WHO guidelines. Instead, they have paid out billions to private companies who have failed to deliver. The pandemic rages across the globe, most rampantly in the neoliberal centres, USA, UK, Brazil and South Africa.

Public trust in the government's policies and practices, and in their scientific advisers, is so low that a group of respected scientists have set up Independent Sage (Scientific Advisory Group). Indie Sage said in October "It is the strong and unanimous view of Independent Sage that implementation of a functional and effective Find, Test, Trace and Isolate and Support system is an essential component of the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and now a matter of extreme urgency. Following a period of intense public health measures incorporating strict social distancing measures to rapidly reduce the current high level of infections, this will ensure that further new infections are minimised, the economy can open up, and give us the best

# Interventions

chance of reducing the need for future severe restrictions or full lockdowns.” (see <https://www.independentsage.org/statement-on-the-management-of-nhs-test-and-trace/>).

The vaccines are being rolled out at some speed, but without the certainty that this will stop transmission. Nevertheless, so we are indeed grateful to the scientists who have worked on this. Hopefully, it will, over time, reduce the death toll.

EU countries too are suffering from this deadly pandemic and we need to share the lessons.

We urgently need a plan to eliminate the virus and “Covid Zero” is becoming a campaign slogan. The Government seem to be planning to tolerate Covid-19 as an endemic disease, mainly of the poor. The outrage is enormous. We need to see a public health based Find, Test, Track, Trace and (fully) Support system put in place, for this and future pandemics. The Government’s refusal to use the public sector has wasted billions.

The poorest communities have suffered most from the illness yet in some areas people decline testing as they know they cannot afford to isolate. People in large families cannot effectively isolate at home so multiple deaths are occurring in families. Our demand is for the government to open hotels for self-isolation. Many people, especially from the poorest areas, apply for financial help and are refused. Three million people are unsupported.

Black, Asian and ethnic minority communities have suffered worst from Corona Virus, for social, housing, and economic reasons. The full report on this from Independent Sage (see <https://www.independentsage.org/covid-19-racialised-stigma-and-inequalities-recommendations-for-promoting-social-cohesion-briefing-note-from-independent-sage/>).

Black and Asian doctors, nurses, and health workers have suffered grievously in this pandemic. Promises to ensure all migrant charges and visa problems would be lifted have failed to materialise.

## The other crisis is the climate

The pandemic is global and linked to global issues of deforestation, industrial farming methods and the destruction of habitats. Before the pandemic there were many demonstrations and thousands of people are committed to the struggle against climate catastrophe.

The Right have been able to use Covid-denial as a rallying call, organising marches and even entering hospitals to protest. This has quietened of late, but through social media they continue to collect followers and isolate them from the wider consensus. The extent of denial is shocking, even amongst some who profess that they are Left.

## Poverty

Meanwhile, our children go hungry, Unicef has had to feed children in the UK for the first time in seventy years. There are more foodbanks than McDonald’s branches in the UK. “There are approximately 1.300 McDonald’s restaurants in the UK, according to the company. A recent report by the House of Commons Library found that there are at least 2.000 food banks in the UK” (see <https://fullfact.org/>)

The rule of the rich goes unhindered in the UK. The UK has vast inequalities in wealth and in income. The levels of poverty are scandalous.

Yet there are plans to cut 20 pounds per week from Universal Credit which affects 5.6 million people. This is the main welfare payment that millions of workers rely on to raise their wages to near a living wage. “Millions of people in the UK are struggling to get by, leading insecure and precarious lives, held back from improving their living standards. Around 56% of people in poverty are in a working family”.

Marcus Rashford, footballer, from Manchester United FC has waged a huge campaign to get food to the poorest children. He grew up in poverty, experienced hunger and has been far more effective than our supposed leader of

the opposition. The government paid a private company, Chartwells, 30 pounds per child in the poorest families to provide a week's meals, the children received food worth 5 pounds. There was outrage, again headed by Marcus Rashford, rather than the Opposition.

## Women

Women, they say hold up half the sky, but they hold up far more of the health service and social care, at least half of all “key” workers in this pandemic “Education and childcare employed the highest proportion of women key workers, at 81%. Nearly three-fifths of all key workers were women (58%) and 42% were men.”

The additional burden of childcare and elder care has fallen heavily on women, but they continue to be less well paid, more subject to humiliating scrutiny if they apply for welfare, and more likely to work in the frontline of the pandemic.

## NHS

The health service was understaffed and under-funded before the pandemic struck. Policy decisions resulted in reduced beds and inadequate ICU (Intensive Care Unit), closed hospitals and thousands of unfilled vacancies. A 2016 simulation of a pandemic took place and the outcomes, identifying necessary actions, were ignored.

Even during the pandemic, the higher echelons of the NHS and their government masters have been pushing through a full-scale reorganisation of the NHS on US lines, without public scrutiny or a legal structure. When the Hospitals should have been preparing for the second wave and particularly working to prevent in-hospital transmission, they chose to focus on the privatising agenda. Many fears that Labour's front bench have some sympathies with this agenda.

The form of privatisation we are seeing is the diversion of funds from patient care to the big

health corporations who remodel the NHS on US lines with “population health management”, rationing and restrictions of treatment.

The Campaigns to save the NHS are widespread and deep in the communities. The Government is paying their cronies, advisers from big business, up to £7,000 per day, while Nurses wages start at £18,000 per year, with some more experienced nurses earning up to £30,000. These “advisers” thereby earning enough in 5 days to outstrip a senior nurse's annual salary.

We want the renationalisation of the NHS using the original Bevan model. This means that it should be:

1. Free at the point of need
2. Funded by the Government.
3. Open to all, a universal service.
4. Providing the best available treatment
5. Provided as a national service to share the risk.

## Brexit

The agreement reached last Christmas was better than a no deal scenario. Johnson retreated on fisheries, and on the situation in the North of Ireland. Little of the rest is commonly understood and has been hidden by the crisis around the pandemic. Financial services, a major UK sector, was mentioned fewer times than fish, yet financial services exports 40% of its services to the EU.

The situation for EU citizens seems so far to be reasonably stable and the pandemic seems to have deflected the expected wave of abuse. However, the Hostile Environment for migrants and the scandalous treatment of the Windrush generation of migrants from the West Indies who came here as British citizens and have been woefully treated, leaves deep cause for concern for all migrants and refugees. Priti Patel, Home office Minister has dreadful policies and attitudes.

Brexit is not really completed. The Fisheries minister did not even bother to read the agreement, she was too busy with Christmas. Already some in the Government are calling for the removal of EU regulations on working

# Interventions

time, especially the 48-hour working limit, not including overtime in calculating holiday pay, and rest breaks at work (*Financial Times* January 14<sup>th</sup> 2021).

## Economy

The UK economy was in trouble before the pandemic and before Brexit. The *New Statesman* wrote “As the health emergency abates the deeper the present economic crisis will become, and there is no equivalent of a vaccine to reverse it”.

Unemployment is high, at least 4.9%, employment insecure, retail on the high street is in crisis. Quantitative Easing made the richer much richer and allowed the housing market to soar. We advocate a significant government investment in housing, education, the health service and the necessary infra-structure to combat climate change, the Green New Deal. The ownership of wealth, services, and industry remains in the hands of a handful of extraordinarily rich international corporations and oligarchs.

## Climate

Left Unity has reaffirmed itself as an eco-socialist party. Climate crisis remains the deepest and most fundamental crisis facing humanity. Johnson still poses as being supportive of measures to alleviate the climate crisis but has already, despite his ten-point Green Plan, allowed a coal mine to open in the North of England. Left Unity, with allies, are organising towards COP26 in Glasgow later this year and hope EL parties will join us in this. Left Unity therefore calls for a radical Green New Deal with full support for working people. We support the “One Million Climate Jobs” campaign, which will allow new ways of working to emerge, using the skills of working people. We support calls for low-impact and sustainable agriculture, significant reductions in the global meat and dairy industries, and for

more localised systems of food production and consumption.

The lockdown has shown people that life can change. The first lockdown was in glorious weather and the birds seemed to sing louder, and people rediscovered the joy of walking and cycling...

## Housing

The UK housing system is broken. Social housing is not being built. Young people find it difficult if not impossible to buy homes and private tenants have high rents and no security of tenure. One of the fastest and most radical organisations growing in the UK is Acorn, the union for tenants and the community. Left Unity calls for a million new council homes, for a massive expansion of the publicly owned and democratically controlled housing sector, and for social housing to be allocated according to need.

## Labour and Corbyn

Labour’s advanced and progressive manifesto was defeated in the election in December 2020. Then issue after issue has been seen to be necessary in this pandemic. The work was sabotaged by the machinery of the party. The Left have also lost control of the Labour Party. Kier Starmer promised to continue the work done under Corbyn but has moved rapidly to the right. Jeremy was unjustly expelled from Labour after he spoke out following a report on accusations of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. He was reinstated following a meeting of the National Executive of the party, but Starmer removed the whip, stopping him acting as a Labour MP. There was considerable disquiet, and many left the party. Others were suspended from membership.

The gloom of these pandemic short days was lightened somewhat by the Peace and Justice campaign, set up by Corbyn in his first major public appearance since the election, pulling

together tens of thousands of people. With nearly half a million seeing some part of the event. “You don’t have to take what you’re given. You don’t have to live without power and without hope. Things can, and they will change.” Having tens of thousands of people together, marks the end of the retreat of the Left. The pandemic still seriously restricts our ability to campaign in the streets but an end to the mood of defeat will really help.

All though, is not lost. The working class Movement continues. Black Lives Matter has reignited resistance to racism. Mutual aid sprang up in response to the hunger caused by lockdown and unemployment. Rolls Royce workers have conducted a traditional strike and won a future for their factory. Gas workers are on a strike. The Teacher Unions have been

renewed and reinvigorated, holding some of the largest ever union meetings on Zoom. University staff have also grown the union organisation. Students have begun to organise and have forced Universities to waive their rents in the pandemic.

The pent-up fury at this governments fatal policies will in time have a huge political effect. A better world is indeed possible and necessary, internationally.

*Felicity Dowling is National Secretary of Left Unity UK. She is interested in women’s rights, in housing issues, the health service, children’s rights and working class action.*

# The four North-South dilemmas of the ecological crisis

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*Bernard Duterme*

The coronavirus pandemic made a striking appearance overshadowing and revealing so much at the same time. It has both masked and unmasked this ecological crisis that precedes it, overtakes it and follows it. Masked, in the sense that it first took it off the agenda, set it aside from “emergencies”, outlawed “intensive care”, and then favored a “deconfinement” synonymous with a “return to normancy”, or even a productivist and consumerist “revenge”. Unmasked, in that by deepening inequalities and revealing, both upstream and downstream of the health drama, the close links that our ways of living on Earth establish between health and the environment, it has remobilized the energies of those who wish to revive the machine on other bases, socially fairer and ecologically more sustainable. We must change the mode of production of large industries and the level of consumption of the richest populations, otherwise we risk mortgaging the fate of future generations. That’s where we stand. For half a century. But four dilemmas still bridle transformative energies.

## Is the ecological crisis central or marginal?

The scale of the ecological disaster is staggering. And yet, important sectors continue to neglect the disaster, worse still, to refute it. Sectors of power - transnational industrialists, business circles, conservative politicians, liberal economists... - who refuse to reconsider the logic of their model of accumulation in view of its dead ends.

The denial of the ecological crisis, the dismantling of welfare states and the aggravation of disparities since the 1980s are all part of the same strategy, according to the philosopher Bruno Latour. “The elites were so convinced that there would be no future life for everyone,” he writes, “that they decided to get rid of the burdens of solidarity - that’s deregulation; that a golden fortress had to be built for the few percent who could get by - it’s the explosion of inequalities; and that in order to conceal the filthy egoism of such a flight from the common world, the threat behind it had to be rejected - it’s the denial of climate change”. (*Où atterrir ?*, 2017).

This rationale is particularly based on the episode of the ExxonMobil company which, in the early 1990s, “in full knowledge of the facts” (it published quality articles on the perils of climate change), decided to invest in unbridled oil extraction and in a campaign to prove the non-existence of the environmental threat. Other cases where the most prominent multinationals are taking the lead are also in the news. Or they hide it, just like the software used by Volkswagen and others to reduce polluting emissions during the homologation tests of new engines.

## Is the South concerned or indifferent?

The multiple indices that measure the ecological crisis attest to this. First of all, it hits the most vulnerable social groups and affects the regions

of the South more than those of the North. The burned is not the burner. Those who benefit the least from productivism and consumerism are those who suffer the most. For all that, are the people most concerned the ones at fault? Are the most exposed populations the most concerned about “the future of the planet”? Obviously not. The observation refers both to the old Marxist debate on the “consciousness” that subordinates may have of their “objective interests”, and to the secondary character of (seemingly) “post-materialist” considerations when the “material” is not assured.

How can one be moved by “the end of the world” when “the end of the month” requires all your energies? “Focusing on the climate is the privilege of groups liberated from vital emergencies,” explains François Polet. And Thierry Amougou agrees: “The environmental emergency is that of the privileged and not of its first victims. Hungry bellies have no ears for ecology” (Cetri, *L’urgence écologique vue du Sud*, 2020). In other words, the taste for the “voluntary simplicity” of the haves with a post-materialist fiber has no reason to impose itself on the need to escape the “involuntary simplicity” of the poor... with a materialist fiber. This being said, the observation should not mask another facet of the realities faced by the South. That of socio-environmental struggles, certainly a minority but nonetheless effective, which oppose local communities and transnational capitalism, affected populations and “mega-projects” of external investors. Whether mining, agro-industrial, energy..., the “extractivist” push has, since the beginning of the century, updated the “resource-providing” destiny of many peripheral countries without added value. It has even placed several of them in a situation of “reprimarization”. And reinforcing the subordination of these economies to those of the great powers, including emerging ones. The socio-environmental movements are made up of the inhabitants of the “new frontiers” of this predatory model. A model of “accumulation” not only through the exploitation of labor and nature, but also

through “dispossession”, through the private appropriation of land and subsoil, resources, genetic material, biodiversity... The mobilized populations are the unwilling victims. The mobilized populations are the non-consenting victims. They are therefore doubly concerned.

## Are the responsibilities common or differentiated?

The question of “responsibilities for the ecological crisis” conceals the recognition of the problem, the acceptance of its causes and the designation of the culprits. This is no small thing, so much so that the relativization of the problem (“stop catastrophism”), the denial of its origins (“scientists lie to us”) and the dilution of responsibilities (“all in the same boat”) still occupy center stage. Yet it has been 30 years since the international community reached this revolutionary principle in Rio in 1992: “Given the diversity of roles in environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. Developed countries acknowledge their responsibility, given the pressures they exert on the environment, the techniques and the financial resources at their disposal”.

Poor countries had to fight hard to cast this principle in the bronze of international law. And thus manage to add to the idea of common responsibility for degradation, the one that one part of humanity bears more than the other and is therefore accountable to the latter for its high level of development. In other words, the ecological debt of the rich (countries) towards the poor (countries), accumulated since the industrial revolution, is to be asserted *hic et nunc*. But the states of the North are struggling to take action. Or, like Trump’s United States, they are resisting, despite the fact that emerging countries believe they have taken their share, up to the level of their emissions, thus dissociating themselves from developing countries whose responsibilities in climate change remain

negligible.

In reality, according to the principle of the polluter-pays, two fault lines divide the criticisms that come from the South. One separates the emerging powers from the countries that are still... immersed. The former, draped in their defense of sovereignty, favor - like the United States - the national path of voluntary commitments against the ecological crisis. The latter, supported by the European Union in the best of cases, plead in favor of binding supranational mechanisms.

The other dissension at work in the South tends to oppose official and anti-systemic arguments. According to the former, the transition of “developing countries” will only take place if the developed countries do not use the ecological imperative to protect their markets and at the same time further penetrate those of the South. According to the latter, the South’s only denunciation of Western green protectionism - a reverse copy of the North’s plea for “more liberalization at home and less at home” - is more supportive than it questions the fundamentals of the export-led free trade model.

## Should capitalism be green or abolished?

To date, in the face of the ecological crisis, two options have captured most of the energy. The productivist and consumerist headlong rush on the one hand; the pretense of sustainable development on the other. “Grey capitalism” versus “green capitalism”. The “business as usual” of the former is well known. It is the main cause of the current disaster. But what about the grand design of sustainable development, green growth or the Green Deal? Is it breaking with the logic of the *mainstream* model, which saws off the branch it is sitting on?

Promoted for three decades, the project has shown neither a reversal of logic nor a reversal of trends. Although there are variants, in all

cases it is the result of a reconciliation, in the minds of its promoters, between the possibility of making profits and the preservation of natural resources. For the president of the European Council, the Green Deal of the Van der Leyen Commission “converts an existential necessity for the planet into economic opportunities” (Le Soir, 27 May 2020).

For its detractors in the South, on the other hand, green capitalism proceeds to “a colonization of ecology by the accumulation logic of the liberal economy” ([www.ibon.org](http://www.ibon.org)). By putting natural capital on the market, valuing ecosystem services, privatizing resources, patenting life... and the supposedly efficient management induced, the approach intends to regulate our relationship with the environment, by stimulating growth that creates jobs, thus ensuring a viable future for capitalism. Reshaping the zones of influence of rich countries and securing supplies in the name of saving the planet. Or how to address the fundamentals of a model at the origin of imbalances (Cetri, *Green Economy*, 2013).

In the wake of the pandemic, at a time of reflection on the “next world”, an extraordinary number of actors from the South and the North have (re) advanced their alternative proposals. Not all of them coincide, but they all share a strong social and ecological family resemblance, at a distance from globalized capitalism. They plead for a paradigm shift, prioritizing the sharing of commons over private accumulation. They go through a re-elaboration of our relationship with nature, as well as a questioning of rationalities, social relationships and political practices linked to the economic model to be replaced. They (re-) speak of demarketisation, deglobalisation and democratisation. And they aim at commercial, fiscal, social, environmental, migratory justice..., that is to say, legal devices that limit the rights of some (states, transnationals, large fortunes...) where they encroach on the rights of others.

In total, overcoming the four dilemmas of the ecological crisis implies urgently considering

it as a central issue; accepting that the most vulnerable populations are not necessarily those who prioritize it; asserting the ecological debt of the rich towards the poor; and preferring a reversal of logic to “business as usual”, even “greened” business.

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# Changing the world in times of Covid

*Esquerra Unida i Alternativa*

The COVID-19 crisis, its immediate health alarm dimension, and the subsequent economic and social crisis it is provoking, accelerates the perceptions and evidence that the stage of neoliberal globalisation that capitalism is developing has entered into contradiction with the very existence of human life on the planet.

There have been warning signs before, indeed, this is not the first health crisis to occur. On Asia and Africa, there have been worrying episodes derived from surprising mutations of viruses that have passed from animals to humans, as a result of changes in ecosystems that in previous decades had maintained precarious balances, but which in recent times due to climate change and the various alterations it has destabilised them in definitive ways. The difference is that it seems that COVID-19 has made the reverse journey, from Asia to Europe and America.

Western governments maintain a strategic preparedness to deal with bacteriological attacks but not with mutations of the characteristics of COVID-19, in fact in the same National Security documents of 2018-19 of Spain, it is stated textually that a possible crisis or viral pandemic can only occur in remote geographical scenarios, which is why we had provisions to deal with the spread of smallpox but we had no idea of COVID-19.

Climate change is altering the balance of life on the planet and will do so even more radically in the coming years, and within this life there is Homo sapiens. In fact, the rise in temperature and sea level (to name but two of the alterations underway) will cause severe economic impacts, accelerating processes of desertification, flooding and other radical climatic phenomena, reinforcing the already increasing migration of hundreds of millions of people.

The crisis in which we find ourselves - health,

economic and social - has not been a matter of bad luck, an inevitability that justifies cuts and loss of rights. The economic and social crisis had been incipient for some time, with many echoes of the 2008 crisis. Crises are inherent to capitalism, they are cyclical, and they need to be read carefully in order to make the right political choices.

We are moving towards a more unstable world, with a new rebalancing between emerging countries and the main capitalist powers. From the “unipolar” world of after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the Ussr, we have moved on to a “multipolar” reality. In 1995, the economies of the emerging countries, the E7, accounted for half the Gdp of the traditional capitalist powers, the G7. In 2015 their economic weight was comparable, by 2040 they may double it. As a counterpoint, there is a severe crisis in the governance of multilateral international institutions, Wto, Paris Climate Agreement, Who, UN Security Council, etc.

Emerging countries, in line with their economic weight, aspire to political and military leadership and this includes a prominent role in all international organisations and on all major decisions.

Everything points to the fact that the struggle will be expressed not so much in an increase in nuclear arsenal and conventional armies (which is also the case) but in new scenarios of commercial warfare and above all in the control of cyberspace and cultural confrontation, where social networks and the mass media play a decisive role in influencing public opinion (psychological warfare for the narrative or new expressions of hegemony).

We are not facing a terminal crisis of capitalism, but one more of its own cyclical crises. A crisis that capitalism overcomes, among other ways,

by discarding the economic sectors that are no longer functional, and this translates into hundreds of thousands of families condemned to misery. And even if the crisis does not end up being resolved in favour of the working class, we have to fight to advance our ideas, because other crises will follow.

Today we must build the conditions for us to be able to fight the battle of ideas in better conditions. We must set a horizon of transformation at all levels: transformation of the relations of production, transformation of human relations and transformation of the relationship with nature. And in the same way, we must make it clear that there is a transition period before we get there. And in this transition, concrete proposals must be put forward, both to improve the living conditions of the working class and our relationship with nature (and to gain time), and to advance in the cultural battle. Some of these measures include establishing a Universal Basic Income, strengthening the social and solidarity economy, creating a public bank, breaking with the EU's austerity doctrine (allowing the financing of public debt) or the nationalisation of strategic sectors or companies that need to be rescued, but not to sell them to friends later at a bargain price. All these measures should be the beginning of the economic reorganisation towards a sustainable model, which is not based, as in Spain, on unsustainable monocultures such as tourism or construction, moving from export-led growth to an economy based on domestic demand, self-centred and planned. We must also bear in mind that this cultural battle does not take place in the air, and that it is essential to mobilise to demand these proposals from our streets, neighbourhoods and workplaces. That is to say, to articulate the social conflict wherever it occurs.

This is therefore the central task of the European left. As has been shown, the pandemic and confinement may have apparently stopped society and the economy, but it has not stopped the class struggle, rather it has sharpened its contradictions. Consequently, imperialism has also continued to work against the peoples of the world, we have very recent examples

with the imperialist destabilisation attempt in Belarus, or with the resurgence of the war in the South Caucasus.

This pandemic has also demonstrated aspects that the left has been pointing out for a long time, firstly that the working class plays the role of a real pillar of our societies. In the hardest moments of the confinement and the pandemic, it has been the cleaners, the supermarket stockers, the nurses and doctors who have carried out the fundamental and essential tasks of life, not the bourgeoisie or the liberal professionals, but the working class. It should also be noted that the majority of these absolutely fundamental professionals have been women. Demonstrating that at particularly crucial moments it is the working woman who steps forward.

Second, the importance of public health systems and a public service system. Throughout the pandemic, the big private health employers have been hiding. It also demonstrates the need for a strong, worker-controlled state. Countries such as Cuba, Vietnam and the People's Republic of China are to be commended for their efforts to tackle the coronavirus.

In Catalonia and Spain after COVID-19 we cannot return to the same old normality, we must seize the moment to make profound changes given the exceptional nature of the moment. As we have said, neoliberal thesis are not in vogue now, nor is it possible to maintain them, since they have strayed from the common sense of the majority of citizens who demand left-wing policies to ensure their own survival (Minimum Vital Income to open the can of Basic Income, strategic control of essential parts of the economy, investment in Public Services starting with health, but also education or care for the elderly...).

A left-wing government will be one that manages the day-to-day with social and environmental sensitivity and prepares qualitative changes in the medium and long term. It will not be left-wing if it wants to go back to the way things used to be, but now with the coronavirus we will make "some exceptions" but as soon as possible, we will return to the European framework of the rules of the "Stability and Growth Pact", the main axiom of the neoliberal

# Interventions

policies pushed and forced on the EU.

It is therefore imperative to break the lock of the “Regime of 78”, the legal-institutional framework that structures it, with the Bourbon Felipe VI at the head, and to give freedom to the people to decide their political future.

This can only be done on the basis of a strong ideological project and a very broad and frank debate on our methodology of synthesis, which will allow us to manage the enormous difficulties that will come, not to stop, not to feel defeated, not to lose sight of the horizon.

We must work for a different society, built on principles that put life at the centre.

In moments of great crisis, history accelerates and it is possible to move forward on the path of

social transformation. These are the moments in which a great cultural battle takes place, in which in a very short time it is possible to advance ideas that in normal circumstances would take many years.

It is in this arduous task that Esquerra Unida i Alternativa, as well as the Party of the European Left, we must be up to the task.

*Esquerra Unida i Alternativa is a political party in Catalonia of socialist and communist inspiration. Today is part of the Party of the European Left along with Izquierda Unida and the Communist Party of Spain.*

# We shall no longer walk alone

*Tolly Kulczycki*

It's 8:17 PM on a Monday evening. The calm autumn sky has long grown dark, however the lights of stopped traffic illuminate the intersection between two of the busiest streets in Warsaw - Marszałkowska and Świętokrzyska. In the middle of the square are around 30 dancing teenagers in full protest gear. They are dancing the traditional high-school belgijka (the dance based on 't Smidje). They're laughing, sweating, having the time of their lives and - perhaps most importantly - protesting a savage law banning abortion in almost all cases. At this point they had been standing there and blocking the road for over 2 and a half hours. They've repelled three police cars heading into the city centre, where a giant protest is being held. Another one comes by and they drop the music and run up to stop it. Three men take heavy electric scooters for rent and barricade the road. A row of people starts t-posing, establishing a clear message - we dominate this city today. That was the first Monday Blockade. What led to it and what happened to the protesting kids? A long standing ideological dispute between reproductive rights and oppression has reached another level when the new Constitutional Tribunal of the Republic of Poland ruled the reproductive rights compromise (which had enabled abortion in the case of a danger to the birth-giver's life, a damaged fetus and a pregnancy caused by an illegal act, usually rape) unconstitutional on the 22nd of October. They deemed the "damaged fetus" exemption in contradiction with the right to live, thereby opposing multiple Supreme Court and previous Constitutional Tribunal rulings. The current Constitutional Tribunal is led by Julia Przyłębska, a known anti-choice advocate, and filled with partisan judges alike her. The decision came as a surprise to the public,

since the motion to deem the reproductive rights act has been sitting in the Tribunal for a long time, only to be used now in midst of a world-wide pandemic. We, however, didn't bat an eye before coming out and protesting. Armed with skiing goggles, medical supplies and high hopes, thousands of Poles marched out onto the streets, both in small, medium and big cities. The biggest demonstrations since 1989 shook the country to the core. The Women's Strike quickly established itself as the main organisation organising the protests, sharing information and helping the repressed. The manifestations came with a huge reaction from anti-choice, alt-right activists who established the National Guard, a quasi-fascist organisation dedicated to the defense of church property. The group regularly cooperates with the police force to assault the protestors.

The first protests were a bit all over the place, but we managed to organise ourselves quite quickly. Most cities established local anti-repression groups, dedicated to keeping track of the arrested and providing legal help. We had regular protests, blockades every Monday, and solidarity protests with the arrested. The police were even more organised however, using every dirty trick in the book to keep us inside. The arrested were moved from city to city to disorganise anti-repression efforts. The police refused to give out information about the arrested to their lawyers, some were even refused legal help and necessary medicine. The detainees were treated horribly, emotionally manipulated, psychologically and sexually abused. Those who weren't in police custody didn't have it peachy either. The police often used unproportional levels of physical force to shut down protests, often resorting to pepper spray and steel batons. They practiced the age-

# Interventions

old strategy of encircling the marching people with a brutal force - luckily, many people lent their fences, letting many demonstrators escape. It was terrifying, especially given the teens and elderly, who comprised the great majority of the demonstrators.

The media most certainly didn't help. The state-run TVP regularly ran programs to slander the protestors with everything they had. We've been accused of disregarding the pandemic and regulations, called "left-wing fascists trying to destroy Poland". Funny, considering the police were beating us hand in hand with literal fascists and hardcore nationalists. The private media, on the other hand, only captured a small part of the protests, refusing to show people in the middle - organisers, instigators, medics and anti-repression specialists making it all happen. Their support was limited to moderate and liberal phrases, not the real social issues at hand and the essential demand - on-demand abortion, was silenced.

This is where we come to the biggest problem - the liberal overtaking of the platform left-wing, radical activists created. The issue originates in the protests of capitalists and anti-science agitators who were protesting since march and saw the Women's Strike as the perfect opportunity to garner attention. They quickly sought a coalition with the feminist demonstrations in many ways. One was universalisation - the entrepreneurs and antimaskers changed their rhetoric from right-wing to a more general anti-government platform. This resulted in muddling of the messages of all protesting groups, culminating in many people coming not to fight for human rights, but just because they dislike the current government. While generally that wouldn't be a problem in and of itself, which caused the silencing of pro-abortion shouts. Not all outside solidarity was negative, however. Groups such as taxi drivers who were striking for higher wages and farmers striking for more investments in farming genuinely helped the cause with actions such as driving cars and tractors onto city streets and blocking police cars.

The liberal threat was both inside and outside, as it turns out. As I've mentioned, the main

responsibility for the demonstrations was taken by the Women's Strike - an organisation formed during Black Friday protests in September 2016 by a prominent figures of the aforementioned demonstrations - Marta Lempart and Klementyna Suchanow. While in the beginning they seemed to just help organise the protesting people it quickly became evident that there might be an ulterior motive to their actions. The first big act of protest organisation was the opening of the Coordination Council - an organ of selected activists, who were responsible for the formation of consolidated demands for the protests. The public response was quick and to the point - the Council is undemocratic and pointless. It didn't help that despite the appearance of union activists and pro-workers rights advocates, a bunch of liberal partisan politicians, stemming from the centre-right Civic Platform, appeared on the Council's member list, while many revered activists with leanings and connections to the Left Party were notably not invited. The Strike quickly came out with a solution - crowd-sourced demands which turned out to be a horrible, horrible mistake. Pretty much everyday there was another scandal about an inclusion of some outrageous demand such as limiting the definition of rape or the notable absence of pro-LGBTQ+ demands. The latter is a real deal-breaker considering that many of the protests were supported or even organised by queer anarchist collectives and pro-LGBTQ+ NGOs. It got even worse when allegations against Suchanow sprung up, calling her a Feminist-Appropriating Radical Transphobe.

The All-Poland Women's Strike also came at the Left Party, often accusing the Left's MEPs of trying to steal the credit for the protests. The heroic states-people of the Left Party however disregarded those allegations and helped the protestors regardless, often saving people from police custody by running 24/7 investigations and interventions on-site in police stations all over the country. The biggest conflict was between a notable instigator of the Women's Black Friday protests - Mep Agnieszka Dziemianowicz-Bąk and chairperson of the Women's Strike - Marta Lempart, who disputed

Mep Dziemianowicz-Bąk's claim to fame.

Despite all the issues we may have with the All-Poland Women's Strike, it is beyond doubt that the protests that are still going on are in no small part here thanks to their influence, for better or for worse. These days however, the protests look much different than they used to. The Monday Blockades slowed down, before finally being shut down in November (such a shame, I used to love them). The last big demonstration we've had was on the 28th of January, a day after the publication of the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling on reproductive rights. Are the protests over then? No, far from it.

You remember the kids who danced in the middle of Warsaw streets, who I mentioned in the beginning of this article? They run the show now. Congregated into small collectives such as Resistance or Brawl (Bachelors' Regional Antifascist Warsaw League) who take care of solidarity protests, and into bigger partisan organisations such as the Social-democratic Youth Federation, Youth Together. The Young Left or the Red Youth who are collecting signatures for a bill that would legalise abortion on-demand.

International solidarity is also a sacred gift to us. Since last autumn we've been invited to

conferences all around the world to enable us to spread the word about the horrible situation in Poland. And this, dear reader, is the place where I ask You for help. Spread the word, let the world know - we are bleeding. Police are still patrolling the streets looking for people who promote human rights. Many people are still on trial for protesting the inhumane policies of the Law and Justice Party. We need Your solidarity. Send info wherever You can. If You are able to, donate to international organisations who help people get abortions such as Abortion Without Borders, a polish organisation helping hundreds get a choice in their lives. You can find info on donations on their website - <https://abortion.eu/> . That's the best way to show us that we no longer have to walk alone.'

*Tolly Kulczycki is a nonbinary 18 year old Polish left-wing activist. Tolly is the Secretary of International Affairs of the Social-democratic Youth Federation and helped to organise in Poland the Youth Climate Strike and several anti-repression groups during the recent protests.*

# Europe's path to digital capitalism - leveled by the Covid 19 crisis

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*Birgit Mahnkopf*

Even before the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic, digital automation was regarded in Europe as elsewhere as a technological development that was as inevitable as it was beneficial, and that no one could, nor should, escape. Together with the viral disease, this view became ubiquitous.

It promised enormous productivity gains, a 'green' economy with lower resource consumption, increased efficiency in all areas of society, even a more peaceful world through cross-border cooperation, unlimited knowledge exchange and a revitalization of the commons. The epidemiologically enforced shutdown of normal social life during the Corona pandemic has given digital technologies a previously unimaginable boost. This makes a sober discussion of the dangers associated with the latest wave of technological advances more urgent.

## 1. What does the new wave of automation promise?

Until the outbreak of the epidemic in the first quarter of 2020 and the global economic crisis that followed it, economists, international organizations, corporate think tanks, government and, in some cases, employee representatives in unison proclaimed one central message: "Through the gigantic increase in data collection and linking of all processes in research, production, distribution, administration, consumption and communication, as well as through the use of PCs, robots, scanners, voice and facial recognition software and their control

by algorithms and artificial neural networks, it would be possible to record, monitor and control the entire economy on a national and global scale". This could facilitate, improve, accelerate and ultimately cheapen all processes. It was also expected that by making countless products and services cheaper, it would be possible to trigger a new wave of mass consumption and accelerate economic growth again. A new golden age of capitalism seemed to have come within reach, based not on oil, as in the past, but on data as its "new lifeblood".

A huge productivity boost was and still is expected, especially for the manufacturing industry. In this sector of the economy, which is equally central to profit, labour and tax income, the indicators for digitization can be named quite clearly. They are the production, sale and use of robots that function on the basis of algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) and, with somewhat less economic significance, also the production, sale and use of 3D printers and the use of "smart platforms" and digital end products. Far-reaching changes are also expected in logistics and in subsectors of the chemical industry, retail, financial institutions, and the health care sector. However, the production of sophisticated machinery is concentrated in a comparatively small group of countries in Southeast Asia, in the USA and in Europe. Within Europe, this primarily concerns Germany and Italy; smaller European countries cannot keep up in quantitative terms. It is no wonder that the digitization hype is particularly strong in Germany.

## 2. The big losers of the digital automation wave

One of the effects of globalization, as we know it and have sufficiently criticized it, was that many companies in the Global South and millions of workers, especially in Southeast Asia, were integrated into the world market. However, this happened in a subordinated and extremely vulnerable position at the lowest end of global value chains of the dominant companies from the developed industrialized countries. Reports of violations of international labour standards in these factories and even of basic human rights are legion. Nevertheless, these extremely exploitative working conditions were and are the prerequisite for millions of people, among them especially many women, to free themselves and their families from great poverty and to escape the patriarchal dominance in their village communities. In networks of solidarity, many of them learned to fight for their rights.

In the near future, however, it is likely that sewing robots, 3D printers and body scanners produced by digital champions in a few industrialized countries in the West and in China will cause up to 70 percent of these jobs to be lost in East Asian countries. This is because, for the first time, it will also be possible to convert textile mass production to a flexible, customer-oriented, individualized production method thanks to sophisticated automation. This can be done either in closer proximity to the most important sales markets or at the location of previous production - for example, by operating fully automated knitting machines from German production in Bangladesh, where more sweatshirts are already produced around the clock for H&M or Zara than were previously produced by hundreds of workers in a 10-hour day. What applies to the clothing and textile industry also applies in a modified form to the mass production of other consumer goods. Many countries in the South are threatened by deindustrialization as a result of digitalization - long before they can cross the threshold from a "low" to a "middle-income country" via the path of partial and extremely dependent

industrialization.

However, European or U.S. workers will not be among the winners of the deglobalization of the world economy initiated by disruptive technologies. After all, in the production of mass goods, the use of digital technologies is of interest primarily because it enables significantly greater flexibility and leads to considerable savings in freight costs. But only if these advantages are complemented by further declining starvation wages within the advanced industrial countries human beings could outcompete tireless, non-striking robots that can be deployed around the clock - and are little affected even by a pandemic.

Millions of workers will lose their job opportunities, both in the Global South and in the old industrialized countries, as a result of digital automation in industry or the use of automated systems in logistics, retail, the insurance industry or banking. Admittedly, they could join the army of "click-crowd or micro-workers" who offer their services "on demand", from all countries of this world, without a fixed company connection and social security, for a few cents and with little chance of being able to organize collectively. But even if their number will continue to grow, it is already foreseeable today that many of the services offered by these new, globally dispersed mass workers will sooner or later be taken care of using an algorithm.

Therefore, in the "perfect storm" (Nouriel Rubini) that is currently brewing in the world, the growing inequality of income and wealth can be expected to further fan the flames of populism, nationalism and xenophobia.

## 3. Technological sovereignty and the EU's digital strategy

Throughout Europe the installation of fibre optic cables, standardized interfaces for application programs, a common data language and the integration of largely autonomous systems - in other words, the technological prerequisites for truly intelligent or smart factories and

offices - are still lacking. Furthermore, only a few tech companies have enough control over large amounts of data and are therefore able to develop algorithms that dictate how certain previously defined problems should be solved. This important aspect is referred to as “AI competence”.

A country’s technological sovereignty will determine whether its industrial companies are among the losers or winners of digitization. “Sovereign” in the sense of modern digital technology, however, is only a country - or, in the case of the EU, a group of countries - that has a closed value chain, i.e., if there are companies that can produce chips, computers and batteries independently, but which also control the software, including in particular the valuable algorithms, through state-protected intellectual property rights. Of course, achieving “technological sovereignty” also requires the ability to secure access to the many indispensable strategic raw materials through foreign policy means, if necessary, with the aid of economic sanctions and, in an emergency, with the threat of military force.

No country in the Global South meets the requirements for such technological sovereignty. Today, the digital race is primarily between the Usa and China. But the EU is determined to keep up. With the EU Commission’s announcement of its long-term intention to create a single market for data, the EU is positioning itself as a player in the race between the Usa and China for a leading role in the new “tech geopolitics”. So far, Us and Chinese tech corporations are holding the data that is the “lifeblood” of digital capitalism. The global power game between the emerging and the retreating global leader is about dominance in disruptive technologies, because their development not only has considerable economic and social effects, but also, and above all, security policy and military consequences. Digital technologies, especially robotics and the use of AI, are dual-use technologies par excellence. This is because the same components are needed for AI weapon systems as for autonomous driving, for example. Sensors, image and voice recognition, software for autopilots, large data centres, powerful

computers, a fast network and more and more satellites in space. The new geopolitical setting is therefore: “whoever controls the data controls the world”. This is especially true because it is data and algorithms that will enable the coming wars with automated weapons systems. The key technology for global power, whether civilian or military, is the development and application of AI. This forms the technical basis for all surveillance and control technologies and all autonomous control systems.

## 4. The Covid 19 crisis as a fire accelerator of digitization

By spring 2020, it was still possible to discern a minimally critical view of the digitization trend among the EU institutions. In view of the surge in digitization during the Corona pandemic, which has taken hold of almost all areas of society at breath-taking speed and is being carried by a euphoria for network substitutes for real life that transcends all party and national boundaries, anyone who raises critical objections to the digitization hype is almost making a fool of themselves.

The epidemic acts like a fountain of youth for digital capitalism. On the one hand, a lot of capital, for which no profitable investment could be found even before the outbreak of the pandemic, is destroyed. At the same time, however, the digitization of everything is providing the tech corporations with capital on a scale that, properly placed, makes the dystopian prospects of the “Brave New World” once imagined by Aldous Huxley seem comparatively harmless.

Defending freedom of expression as the core of European democracy and complaining about data abuse, threats to privacy, manipulation of public opinion, and a growing digital divide within and between societies will not prevent the intended and incidental consequences of digital capitalism. It would probably take a Europe-wide movement that critically and offensively advocates a strategy of emancipatory limitation

of digitalization. This is not only supported by considerations of labour market, social and educational policy, but also by peace policy arguments. A critique of digitization, however, is necessary above all from an ecological point of view. For digital capitalism requires huge amounts of additional energy and large quantities of so-called “critical” - because geopolitically contested - metals for the gigantic data memories and the training of the algorithms, for the networks, the production of ICT technologies and for a growing number of often superfluous end products with little additional benefit.

Whoever wants to work for a future worth living

in Europe and in the larger “rest of the world” must face a multitude of conflicting goals for which there are no “win-win” solutions but presumably only the conflict-ridden perspective of a “system change”.

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# The Pandemic Crisis and Its Impact on Women's Lives<sup>1</sup>

*Amelia Martínez-Lobo and Andrea Peniche*

## Introduction

The impact of crises is never neutral, and the Covid crisis is no exception. Despite the lack of official data on its impact, daily life is exhibiting a growth in inequality as never before. Women are disproportionately affected, with inequality already a deep stigma on our/their lives. The crisis aggravated this, so that we must consider both the pre-pandemic situation and also the visible difficulties we are going through now.

In terms of the pandemic crisis, a distinction should be drawn between being infected and being affected. If the virus itself has no gender bias, the gender difference in the effects of the crisis are quite clear. The pandemic reinforces pre-existing inequalities and exposes the vulnerabilities of the social, political, and economic systems, which are too fragile to enable the requisite solutions.

It is known that throughout the world women, in comparison to men, are paid less, have less capacity to save, have more precarious work, fill the majority of jobs in the service sector and areas considered non-essential (hairdressers, restaurants, aesthetic centres, clothing stores), and represent the majority of the informal economic sector in which labour typically lacks the rights and protection afforded by contracts. This makes them particularly vulnerable, at risk of losing their income and social protection, with concrete implications in their ability to resist the economic, social, and mental impact of the pandemic crisis.

The official discourse, which is also responsible for the construction of public opinion, described lockdown as a factor in the stopping

of the economy. But, we have to ask, what is the economy that has stopped? A part of the economy never did stop and, what is more, never does: the economy of the home and care work. However, because this involves women's work, it remains invisible and unskilled, as if it were not part of the economy. During the crisis women did not stop, the care workers did not stop, the unprotected and precarious labour sectors did not stop, and the large majority of these workers are women.

This crisis revealed the fragility of social protection systems, which year after year have been eaten away by neoliberal policies. But however that may be, the current crisis requires a strong response from the social protection systems, one that needs to look at the specificities of all the impacts. We were never all together in one boat and, consequently, if the solutions are not to fail they should not be planned as if this were the case.

## The front line is feminine

Throughout the European Union, women make up the majority of healthcare workers. However, in the front line of workers most exposed to infection are not only healthcare professionals but also supermarket workers, hospital cleaning staff, public transportation workers, those preparing and delivering food, etc., as well as all the workers in community services such as those taking care of the elderly, the poor, the homeless, and the disabled, etc., and the majority of them are women.

The global formal care sector is very important in the economy and society: it corresponds to

about 12% of global jobs and includes some 381 million workers. In the EU, 83% of these jobs are held by women. For them, social distancing and remote work were never an option, as many depend on their work to survive. If we add informal and non-paid work in care to that of the formal sector, the world figure reaches 2 billion people, and in Europe the estimate of the number of people involved in some sort of informal care is 125 million. The non-paid reproductive work, performed essentially by women, has been calculated at about 9% of world GDP. In Portugal, its corresponding value has been estimated at four billion euros each year, and the number of people performing some type of non-paid care work at between 800 thousand and one million. Four out of five of these workers are women, or 80%. Nevertheless, with the temporary shutdown or bankruptcy of social institutions during the pandemic crisis, this figure has gone up. According to a survey by ANCI (Associação Nacional de Cuidadores Informais, Portugal's national association of informal health care), the increase is about 10%.

## Crisis in the sector of social reproduction

The period of lockdown and distance learning highlighted the inequalities in house and care work: separated from their paid workplace and imprisoned in remote work, many women performed a disproportionate part of family chores. Taking care of the kids and following their school homework, preparing all the meals, cleaning house and clothes, helping sick relatives, and simultaneously fulfilling the duties of their own work schedule demonstrated how exploitation occurs: serving the family, the company, and the country.

According to a survey carried out by Sussex University inequality in the sharing of parental responsibilities increased during lockdown, and British society regressed to a 1950s way of life: the proportion of mothers who were totally or almost totally responsible (between 90% to 100%) for childcare increased from 27% to

45%, and 70% of all women declared they were the sole person responsible for all tasks related to school activities. This superimposition of labour and care tasks implies a greater lack of free time and an enormous physical and mental overburden that limits women's autonomy and economic opportunities. Moreover, most mono-parental families are feminine (85% in Portugal), meaning that for many women there was never any possibility of sharing these tasks. Several firms declined to hire women during the pandemic, fearing they might need to spend time at home with their children during what would have been school hours.

Therefore, the long-term effects of the pandemic crisis need to be considered – namely that, in terms of women's economic independence, we are at risk of regressing to the epoch of our grandmothers.

## Crisis of reproductive health and rights

By March, Unesco estimated that the pandemic had prevented 1.52 billion children from attending school. In many parts of the world, schools are the safest place for vulnerable girls. As a result, setbacks may occur, specifically in terms of genital mutilation and forced marriage. Away from school, many girls have ceased having access to hygienic products, such as menstrual products, which in turn, has a significant impact on their sexual and reproductive health.

Confinement and fear of contracting the disease has prevented many women from using health services. Marie Stopes International, an NGO that provides safe contraception and abortion services in several countries, estimates that the crisis may be preventing some 9.5 million women and girls from accessing their services. Maternal health is vulnerable and thus the prediction is that the rate of worldwide maternal mortality will increase. Difficult access to contraception, family planning support, or to abortion services and pre- and post-delivery help are the direct results of the reduction of

rights and of reproductive health.

## The right to life at risk

The United Nations estimates that 249 million women and girls have suffered some form of sexual and physical abuse from a partner in the last 12 months, and the number increased during lockdown. The state of emergency isolated many women with their aggressors, which aggravated pre-existing violent relationships. In France, one week after mandatory lockdown, reports of domestic violence increased by 30%; in Argentina, requests for help went up by 25%; in Brazil from 40% to 50%; in Cyprus and Singapore, the phone lines helping women registered a 30% and 33% increase of calls respectively; in the United Kingdom, in only one day the NGO Refuge received 700% more calls to its victim support line than the previous average; in Spain, complaints increased by 18% and in the US by 35%. The same increase of divorce and violence was noticed in Wuhan, China, where the pandemic was first recorded. In Portugal, of the ca. 16 thousand calls to the national network helping victims, 1167 came from persons older than 66. Violence against elderly women is frequently committed by close relatives, which makes complaint very difficult. As NGOs were responsible for most victim response and the pandemic exacerbated their activities, victims remained particularly unprotected and vulnerable. In addition, with Covid's overburdening of health professionals, the police weighed down by enforcing the safety rules, the judiciary under pressure, and with female unemployment, the stage has been set for this additional pandemic of violence against women.

## Crisis of the invisible

With their work coming to halt, sex workers were financially unprotected. And, as their activity is not recognised as work in most of the legal systems in Europe and the rest of the

world, they are not accorded the same labour-law protections given to other workers. Their situations and that of their families became impossible. Without the benefit of social protection policies, they depend on solidarity to survive.

The urgent need to address the social and political conditions of sex work became patent. In the face of their complete invisibility and lack of social protection, the prohibitionist solution has clearly failed; it is based on a divisive moral discourse and ignores the needs of concrete people who are asking for social justice. Reducing these persons to sub-humans in the name of a moral dystopia leads to predictable results, but the pandemic crisis revealed this with concrete immediacy: a social sector with neither protection nor rights, depending exclusively on solidarity to survive the crisis, but whose workers, given their stigmatisation, have no social space in which to communicate their difficulties and demand help.

## The crisis of democracy and instrumentalisation of the pandemic and of women's rights

The Covid-19 crisis has been, and continues to be used, as a new weapon by the extreme right. On the one hand, far-right governments have launched necropolitics<sup>2</sup>, using people's lives, and using power, to decide who can live and who should die. In other territories, where neo-fascisms are not in positions of governmental and institutional power, the extreme right has been able to mobilise its followers in social networks and in the streets; they have flirted with denialism; and they have managed to get their messages onto the public agenda. In other words, this global health crisis has served as a pretext and impetus for an ideological rearmament by the extreme right. At the centre of their war of ideas, one sees the deployment of communication strategies structured by fake news and fuelled by hatred. They have various common features, but racism and misogynistic

ideology stand out – and the attempt to curb the conquest of women’s rights. This far-right consensus is clearly homophobic, Islamophobic, ultra-conservative, and anti-immigrant. It is well to remember the central role that anti-feminism has occupied in the agenda of the extreme right. ‘The gender war is the main space for the coordination of the worldwide right-wing’, Nuria Alabao<sup>3</sup>, journalist and anthropologist, has stated on numerous occasions.

This Covid-19 crisis has shown, still more clearly, that the “internationalisation of this gender war is the main forum for coordinating worldwide rights”. This battle against “gender ideology” adopts different expressions, depending on location, in order to adapt and be acceptable to particular idiosyncrasies, as Alabao explains.

The goal of the extreme right, she points out, is “to stir the ranks with radical rhetoric”. And, she adds, “They are playing to create their political and cultural base, but they don’t necessarily want to win; they just want to agitate through the war on values”. In fact, some of their mantras, hatred of the LGBTBIQ population and anti-abortion, are in decline throughout the world: “They do not aim at the bulk of voters, they only agitate, they seek to shake the established consensus”.

There is no doubt that there is a misogynistic reactionary international tendency and that gender wars occupy a central place in this crusade against women’s rights, with the extreme right renewing its discourses, proposals, and strategies along these lines. But in turn, we also see that the extreme right’s rhetoric is not uniform. Moreover, we find a reactionary, ultra-Catholic, and conservative position, whose ideology is to relegate women to their traditional role, making them responsible for providing care and looking after the family.

## The great replacement and rise of femonationalism

According to the Austrian researcher Judith Goetz, the theory of the ‘great replacement’ is

based on a so-called “demographic problem” involving the lower birth rate of the “native population”. “In their narrative of demographic change they use a racist discourse to affirm that the indigenous population will be replaced by the Muslim population, which wants to Islamise Europe”, explains Goetz. To counter this, the role of women is to have more children, that is, there needs to be a return to traditional values and to a subordinate role for women, destined to carry out the work of social reproduction invisibly and gratis, a crucial condition of the capitalist system. The idea of the “great replacement” refers, in a purportedly apolitical way, to “nature” and to “normal families” or to “demography” and “openly invokes nature to legitimise racist, colonial, or class structures”.

Alongside this idea of women’s insecurity in the face of foreign male rapists is the second great approach of the extreme right to a supposed defence of women’s rights. They single out and stigmatise foreign men as rapists and set themselves up as defenders of the safety and rights of women. Under that mantra, they do nothing but hide their Islamophobic agenda and instrumentalise women’s rights to the benefit of their racist agenda. As Alabao points out, the main novelty of the extreme right parties, “which began to resurface in response to May ‘68, is to present immigrants as sex offenders”. There are many examples of these unfounded accusations, but perhaps the most significant was the one deployed on New Year’s Eve 2015 in Cologne. The objective of this discourse is to connect economic hardships to the idea of insecurity. “They say that the material problems of society are due to a crisis of values, not to neoliberalism. And they link their idea of insecurity to the return to traditionalism, to the traditional hetero-normative family that cares for people”. She observes that labour precarity has benefited the extreme right, noting that although racist policies have been operating for a long time, “racist rhetoric used to have no place, which it does today”.

While all these ideas appear to involve only what we know as a culture war or a battle for ideas, all gender issues are first and foremost material. The fight for the right to have an

abortion is a fight for the material: it is a matter of control over the bodies of women and the who decides it. The idea that women should occupy their traditional position is not just an idea; it is the material and economic foundation of the capitalist system, based on a system of care and gratis social reproduction of life. Denying sexist violence results in the dismantling of public policies, and the budgets to carry them out, designed to combat the scourge of the purely misogynistically motivated murders of women perpetrated by men.

## What feminism do we need?

A collective feminist conscience is more necessary now than ever, one that is capable of creating and setting its own agenda. Feminism cannot settle for lobbying or for the game of institutions.

Feminism has given concrete and material answers to common problems: the right to abortion, with the recent example of Polish women;<sup>4</sup> Recently in Mexico<sup>5</sup>, feminism has attempted to make visible and fight against sexual assault and femicides, as well as for rights such as equal pay, for which there is still a long road to travel<sup>6</sup>; and the list continues.

Feminism is, moreover, a bastion against the extreme right. Wherever the ultra-right governs, it is feminist organisations that lead the mobilisations against the racist, misogynistic policies of the ultra-right, such as the EleNã movement in Brazil.<sup>7</sup>

Feminism is counter-power and as such it has to be shaped and built. It is thus urgent to continue giving collective, peaceful, anti-conservative, and anti-puritan feminist responses, for the rights of sex workers, the LGTBIQ and non-binary community, with a feminism that puts life at the centre, demanding rights and demanding a conception of work that includes the life of women in all its dimensions: those who take care of people and perform domestic tasks who are paid hourly wages, those who care and are not paid, those who carry out their activity in the informal sector of the economy, without contract rights – the migrants, the invisible

ones.

Therefore, a plural, anti-fascist, anti-capitalist feminism capable of mainstreaming both anti-fascism and anti-capitalism as pre-conditions for building a truly democratic society, like the one proposed by Rosa Luxemburg: a society where we are socially equal, humanly different, and totally free.

1. *This article was first published in the Transform yearbook, (Walter Baier, Eric Canepa, Haris Golemis, Ed.), Merlin, 2021.*

2. *Necropolitics is a concept that refers to the use of social and political power to dictate how some people can live and how some must die. It is also related to so-called 'thanatopolitics', which has been used as its synonym. Achille Mbembe, author of On the Postcolony, was the first scholar to explore the term in depth, in the article of the same name. Necropolitics is often discussed in connection with biopolitics, Foucault's term for the use of social and political power to control people's lives. Mbembe clearly saw that necropolitics goes beyond the right to kill (Foucault's droit de glaive), but also gives the right to expose other people (including the citizens of one's own country) to death. His vision of necropolitics also includes the right to impose social or civil death, the right to enslave others, and other forms of political violence. Necropolitics is a theory of the living dead, that is, a way of analysing how 'contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death' force some bodies to remain in different states of being situated between life and death'. Mbembe uses the examples of slavery, apartheid, the colonisation of Palestine, and the figure of the suicide bomber to show how different forms of necro-power over the body (statist, racialised, states of exception, urgency, martyrdom) make people have to turn to precarious living conditions.*

3. <https://nurialabao.blog/2020/04/12/contra-la-ultraderecha-luchar-en-tiempos-de-las-identidades-oscuras/>.

4. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/poland-crackdown-on-womens-strike-protests-continues-unabated/>.

5. <https://elpais.com/mexico/2020-11-21/la-onu-pide-al-gobierno-de-mexico-que-proteja-a-las-mujeres-y-no-ataque-a-las-que-se-manifiestan-contra-la-violencia.html>.

6. [https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/equal-pay/gender-pay-gap-situation-eu\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/equal-pay/gender-pay-gap-situation-eu_en).

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## Beyond fear

*Catarina Martins*

In this already long pandemic year, the European left has attempted to articulate intervention and share information. We are experiencing the crisis in different ways, with diverse instruments and amid different political frameworks. Some of the parties that constitute the Party of the European Left have governmental responsibilities, others are in opposition to centre and right-wing governments or even oppose governments supported by extreme right-wing forces. The strength with which the pandemic plagues our countries is different in its various waves, both in its health and socioeconomic impact, as well as in its public policy priorities. Some countries have opted for more prolonged or more severe confinement measures, whilst others have tried to maintain normality as possible; in almost all of them, there is a combination of confinement and openness in the wake of pandemic waves. The instruments at the disposal of governments to respond to the pandemic are also different: the universality or not of health services, the levels of social and labour protection, articulation between public services, the ability of States to impose rules on the economy, the existence or not of various decision levels (state, regional, local). But with all these differences, there are transversal realities that can be the core of a common intervention.

### Essential workers without essential rights?

Women are the majority in care tasks. They are the majority of workers in the health and care sectors and their wages are below average, working hours are unusually long, and precarious labour relationships are common. They are also the majority in sectors such as

cleaning, where low wages and precariousness are the norm. In addition to the (poorly) paid work in care and cleaning, they also accumulate unpaid care and cleaning work in the realm of their own family. They thus accumulate a double burden in confinement: it is essential workers who cannot stop, and it is family caregivers who are left behind when social facilities are closed (schools, services dedicated to people with disabilities or the elderly). In addition to this double burden there is a third one: sexist violence, which is hidden inside home.

The essential sectors, which can never cease to function, reveal another inequality: the disproportionate prevalence of migrant workers and racialised minorities. It is so with care and cleaning tasks, in agriculture or in distribution. Low-paid workers, very precarious labour relationships and very often without access to social protection. Without the capacity to assert their rights, they are subjected to housing, transport and work conditions that endanger their health. Once sick, they do not even have access to social benefits that support them when losing their wages.

The central struggle of the left continues to be directed towards the rights of those who work. The pandemic crisis reveals in all its rawness the violence of the liberalised “labour market”; precarious people have no social protection and are abandoned in illness as well as in unemployment. And, as shown by the inequalities that the pandemic has only worsened, the left is obliged to a feminist and anti-racist perspective in this struggle. Any compromise or forgetfulness in this field will create more social division and put at risk any advance.

## The strength and fragility of public services under the crisis pressure

Whilst private hospitals accounted for the price of each day of COVID-19 hospitalisation and private insurances informed the world that their policies do not cover pandemics, public health services were already receiving patients and reorganising their services. Public health services were able to provide a comprehensive response from the very beginning. They could not wait to find out more about the disease to start responding to the population and the culture of their workers allowed for very rapid adaptations in exceedingly difficult contexts.

The same happened with schools and universities and research centres. Public services were the first to respond to the pandemic, to adapt their intervention. Tasks as diverse as accompanying students at a distance or making reagents for COVID-19 tests were implemented in a few days. Public services geared to responding to the population were and are the key in responding to the pandemic.

After years of liberal orthodoxy, European Union countries are faced with the fragility of their public services. As the crisis proved, the market did not create virtuous alternatives to meet the needs of the population. On the contrary, it awaits the collapse of public services under the pressure of the pandemic, and already weakened by years of underfunding and staff cuts, to impose the privatisation and financialization of what remains of the European Welfare State.

In a scenario of prolonged crisis, such as the one we are experiencing, the bankruptcy of public services is a real danger and one that drags its own popular delegitimation; in this scenario, the same public services that are the support of the population in crisis, can be seen as guilty in the absence of this support. The protection and reconstruction of public services is the immediate great collective task in the defence of democracy.

## European treaties undermine European cooperation

In the European discourse, there seems to be a consensus on the response to the crisis: investment in health and social protection, cooperation between countries, supporting the economy to guarantee employment and facilitate recovery, placing new environmental demands on public investment. This discourse comes up against inconsistencies, deadlocks, and even setbacks in the decisions that are being made.

If cooperation on vaccination has certainly been an essential step, it is no less certain that the contracts made have placed the European Union in the hands of pharmaceutical companies. The same ones that received millions of public investment, and whose advances have also depended on research financed by the States for decades, are now bargaining for the vaccines they promised. We shall see how the next few days unfold and if the sad competition that we saw in the early days of the pandemic (at the time, for ventilators and personal protective equipment) does not come back. The vaccine must be treated as a common good; public control of its distribution and payment at cost price (focused on guaranteeing its production and not on the profit of pharmaceutical companies) are essential for universalising access to the vaccine. It would be interesting, but absolutely unlikely in the current political framework, to have an articulation that allowed States to overcome patents and rapidly increase vaccine production.

In the field of economic policy, the contradictions and difficulties are even greater. At the outset, it is not yet certain how the Recovery Facility will work. But it is already certain that, in order to respond to the crisis, suspending the treaties was a necessary step. For the second time, the European Union recognises that its treaties are a problem and not a solution. In fact, the question is as simple as this: European treaties criminalise public investment and aggravate any crisis.

# Interventions

The central problem is to know whether it is enough to suspend treaties and experience has proved, even to those who are most optimistic, that this is not possible. First and foremost, because the decision to bring back the treaty rules is always determined by the strongest economies. It was like that in the financial crisis, and it is already stated that it will also be like that with the pandemic crisis. As soon as the German economy allows it, barriers to public spending will return. By then, countries on the periphery of the euro will be even further away from any recovery than they were when the troika was created. Temporarily suspending the treaties is a trap and a soon-to-be condemnation for the peoples of those countries, but also for the European Union itself, whose breakdown will continue to take place.

Above all, the European treaties deny the proclaimed new great European plan: combating climate change. Without investment and the capacity for public intervention in the energy transition and decarbonisation of the economy, there will be no answer to the climate crisis. And if we have no reason to believe the European

Commission's conviction in this fight (after all, who else would remember to hire BlackRock, an investment fund with interests in fossil fuels, for conducting environmental impact studies?), this is the struggle of our lives.

The left must assert that the response to the climate crisis, as well as the response to the pandemic crisis, requires European and international collaboration. What is clear is that the European treaties are the first obstacle to such cooperation. Proposing the replacement of unviable treaties is not giving up European cooperation; it is, on the contrary, a fundamental step in its construction.

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# Some highlights of the situation in Austria in February 2021

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*Mirko Messner*

1. The clearer the health crisis's social dimension becomes, the more frantically social and political contradictions are articulated in Austria. The seemingly confused manoeuvring of the federal government provides ample room for this. In turn, this confusion is due, on the one hand, to the general, Europe-wide uncertainty in dealing with a situation unfamiliar since World War II. On the other hand, the past months have not been used to involve the population groups affected differently, those working in the health sector or civil society organizations, in decisions about epidemic-related measures.

Instead, political party games are played out between local, state, and federal levels, between state governors and government politicians, against the backdrop of a transparent - and Europe-wide negative sensation - effort to keep the tourism industry in particular in the loop, infection clusters or not. Which in turn further undermines the general approval of the epidemic-related restrictions.

2. How Covid-related issues are included in party-political calculations can be illustrated by an example. Many progressive trade unionists of the Austrian Teachers' Initiative (ÖLI-UG) have demanded comprehensive measures in the school sector since the beginning of the Corona crisis. Among them, one demand among many was an allowance for home office work, i.e., for distance learning that teachers do. The ÖVP (Österreichische Volkspartei) dominated union leadership is now, very belatedly, making this a demand.

The calculation behind it: on the one hand, it is intended to show its clientele in a populist manner that "we are doing something for

you anyway," but, on the other hand, it is intended to distract from the failure of the ÖVP Ministry of Education. The debate on whether schools in general or now the lower grades and kindergartens should remain open or be closed (again) (at the time of writing, they are being reopened) is truncated. It would not have to take place in this way at all if there had been sufficient measures, preparation, and financial resources already before and in particular during the Corona period for education. The question would have to be answered as to what has been done in the eight months since the first wave to protect everyone in the school, i.e., teaching staff and students. For example, where are the air filters and other technical measures? Where are more financial resources for more rooms, staff, and equipment for a thinned-out school and classroom? But where are also, for example, the FFP2 masks for all teachers, and in sufficient quantity?

3. Right-wing extremist groups, parties, and conspiracy addicts have discovered the Covid crisis as a field of maneuver for themselves. They see the opportunity to draw in the insecure or desperate, including precariously, living people whose lives have become even more precarious in recent months. The FPÖ (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs), which has been weakened since the Ibiza scandal, is trying to take on the role of spokesperson on this field of maneuver and is confronting exponents of its former coalition partner in its usual boorish manner.

The latter, in turn, is reacting to the feared loss of image among the right-wing and extreme right-wing electorate, currently, for example, with the deportation of a schoolgirl born in Austria who,

according to the current legal situation decided or accepted by the former and current governing parties, is allegedly not allowed to live in the state in which she was born. A chess game, inhumane, hostile to asylum and human rights - the Green coalition partners are involved in this game and are prepared, with a sour face to be sure, but to go along with everything in the interest of retaining power, which is increasingly proving to be impotence and which is causing the basic human rights orientation for which they were elected to perish in a commission to study the legal situation.

4. While at the beginning of the Covid crisis there was still a relatively broad social consensus on the restrictive and lockdown measures, this is now increasingly crumbling in the face of announcements that are not being kept, or only to some extent - e.g., rapid and unbureaucratic financial assistance for sole proprietors - as well as because of aerial projects such as the Corona traffic light, miserable waiting loops in telephone hotlines, closed bookstores but open gun stores, closed museums (which may be reopened at the moment) but operating ski lifts, miserable waiting for FFP2 masks, uncoordinated or poorly coordinated vaccination management through one's fault or the fault of others, and so on, all this annoys people. But above all: despite all the transparency, it is evident that economic interest groups primarily tap the aid programs. The service providers, who are praised as "preserving the system," are given polite applause, and that's all there is to it; no increase even in unemployment benefits for the unemployed, no delegation stop or payment remission for those in arrears which can no longer pay their rents, their energy, and other operating costs. From the point of view of the non-wealthy, the single parents, the precariously living, the Covid regulations on the lockdown so far are above all one thing: bungle.

5. There is no positive orientation of the government in the field of the psychosocial care system. In this regard, the KPÖ already stated in March of last year that it is not only urgently necessary to increase the staff in public hospitals,

to improve the remuneration of the employees there noticeably, and to increase the number of beds but also to establish decentralized regional, publicly financed health centres or district social centres. According to the KPÖ, these must be pandemic-proof and ensure psychosocial care at the smallest possible level in the regions or districts.

This will become increasingly urgent as the pandemic progresses and cannot be accommodated in any way by the current system. Such centres can also preventively and proactively identify opportunities for infection and take specific measures to prevent them. The "Community Nurses in 500 Communities" included in the government program (chapter on nursing), recently recalled by the Green Minister of Health, could also find their base here. However, there is nothing to suggest that concrete work is being done in this direction.

6. It has recently become apparent that psychiatric and psychotherapeutic services, outpatient clinics, and hospitals are unable to cope with the massive increase in the need for care of desperate young people during the crisis; even before the crisis, there were fantastic, unacceptable waiting times for mental health care, which could only be shortened by paying cash. Now, this is growing to crisis proportions, with dire consequences for those affected and their families.

Ignorance of health policy in this area has not led to any rethinking or strengthening of the care structure in recent months. This also applies to the health care system in general. Everyone knew that this pandemic would last longer and that vaccinations would not be over any time soon. Nevertheless, the government has done nothing to prepare our healthcare system for the foreseeable threatening situation and make it pandemic-proof.

7. While a return to "normality" is being invoked, it is clear to all concerned that it is not only urgently necessary to increase the number of staff in public hospitals and to train them in intensive care, to improve the remuneration of those employed there noticeably and to adapt

the number of beds and the machinery to the second or impending third wave, but also to develop the neglected medical research broadly and to get rid of the dependence on the pharmaceutical companies through their state production, since the last few months have impressively demonstrated the market failure.

The current regulations to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, which are justified by the threat of a system collapse in the hospitals, are also an expression of fundamental health and sociopolitical failures on the part of the government and the virus-specific dynamics of the epidemic.

Restrictions in public life remain a short-term botch-up without accompanying massive investments in the structure and without expansion and qualification of health care personnel when experts are now already predicting the next wave of the epidemic or increased risk of infection through mutations - which can also bring worse courses of disease - for the spring.

8. Environmental, climate, and migration crises have been knocking on the door of European states for years. Young people have noticed this, but the political personnel, entire governments, turn a deaf ear. The Corona crisis has forced them to act because it affects all people, the poor in the Global South, and those at the centre's levers of economic and political power. Hopes are high, but no one can say today whether the effect of vaccination will be faster than the development of mutations of the virus, whether the pandemic will continue to spread when it subsides, and to what extent its measures containment will exacerbate the general social crisis.

One thing, however, is already becoming more apparent to large segments of the population: the global overexploitation of nature and the environment, caused both by the economy driven by the need to maximize profits and by

the imperial way of life in the Global North, has brought the virus closer to humans. The necessity of a radical, eco-social transformation of our way of production and life is inevitable, as well as the protection, preservation, and expansion of the social systems already attacked by the neoliberals where they have been fought for, or their social enforcement in those regions of the world where they do not yet exist at all or only in rudiments.

9. A "return to normality" after the crisis may be understood as a dangerous threat because that would mean: payment of the burdens of the crisis through the revenues from wage and mass taxes instead of through the introduction of wealth and inheritance taxes, through further redistribution of socially earned values from the bottom to the top, where the one percent at the top already owns 500 billion in Austria alone - and that in the face of half a million unemployed.

This is the challenge facing the generally weak Austrian left and the parties, social and trade union movements of the European left: to secure the livelihood of the wage-earning and unemployed, precariously living population dependent on their work and creativity in the coming struggles over the question of who should bear the costs of the crisis, and at the same time to bring the necessity of a fundamental transformation of social property and distribution relations into the field of vision and into the field of action.

*Mirko Messner is the current federal spokesperson for the KPÖ (Kommunistische Partei Österreichs). From 2009 to 2016 he was editor-in-chief of the party newspaper Volksstimme.*

# Competition by low wages within Europe: Viktor Orbán's Hungary

*Judit Morva*

The Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, is a well-known politician throughout Europe. His political determination and boldness are remarkable: as the representative of a country with a population of 10 million, he has risen to the top of high politics and is riding the populist wave that is sweeping across Europe. These right-wing nationalist movements, which have gained ascendancy in a growing number of European countries, appeared in the mid-1990s, first in Italy (with Forza Italia, founded by Silvio Berlusconi) and then in Austria (with Jörg Haider).

## Return of capitalism and the structural problem of the country

In 1989-1990, with the restoration of capitalism in Hungary, the country, like other former socialist countries, lost its industrial and agricultural bases built 40 years earlier, as well as part of its even older industry. The transformation took place with such brutality and speed that Naomi Klein has called it “shock therapy”<sup>1</sup>. It aimed at excluding competitors and gaining market share for Western products. It also destroyed several important mines and factories, for directly political purposes. Agricultural cooperatives, which were extremely prosperous, were asphyxiated for the same reason: to block all forms of political organizations and possible resistance to the return of capitalism.

The country's economy thus became dependent on Western Europe, mainly on large German groups. On the whole, the Eastern countries, including Hungary, became a reservoir of cheap labor.

Out of a population of less than 10 million, it is estimated - although exact figures are not published - that between 500,000 and 700,000 Hungarians have migrated to Western Europe. At the same time, factories are being set up in the country, mainly in the automotive sector, taking advantage of cheap labor, paid at one-third the rate of Western salaries.

The promised and desired convergence of wages and other incomes between east and west is certainly not on the agenda.

Hungary has permanently established itself as a “semi-peripheral” country - a satellite country - in Germany's backyard. For the great winner of these changes is, of course, the German economic system, which has succeeded in rebuilding the region's economic dependence on it and even making it even more effective than in the interwar period.

Low wages and the resulting vulnerability embody not only the present, but also the future of Hungary, as well as other Eastern European countries. The majority of the population is well aware of this. Hence the disillusionment and widespread nostalgia for János Kádár's socialist system. For the vast majority of people, Hungary's socialist period brought social upliftment and real well-being.

The restoration of capitalism hit Hungary hard, and its economic situation deteriorated: the country even lost some 10 per cent of its population. In many respects, Hungary has returned to the situation that prevailed in the

inter-war period: considerable misery in some regions and a significant part of the population concentrated in Budapest. The very large amount of land ownership in the countryside, financed by the Common Agricultural Policy (Cap), has been re-established.

## The policy defined by Viktor Orbán

This process of transformation/destruction, “properly incredible”<sup>2</sup>, is, at the beginning, led with an iron fist by foreign actors. For Hungary many programmes have been developed<sup>3</sup>. The Soros Foundation, like the foundations of the German political parties and so many others, has been very active during this crucial period. Several tens of thousands of people were trained - and groomed- for more or less long periods by these institutions. Orbán himself was selected, trained and put into orbit by the Soros Foundation, by far the most active and most visible of the foreign participants. Once the transition is completed and made practically irreversible, an indigenous political staff, “comprador” as it is usually called, has to deal with a barely manageable situation! Viktor Orbán is at the head of this team.

Viktor Orbán was born in 1963 into a family that was able to take advantage of the promotion of the socialist era to climb into the middle class. He has a law degree, but he will always be a politician. He is a founding member of the Association of Young Democrats (Fidesz), created in 1988. He made himself known on a national scale during the summer of 1989: during a huge political demonstration, he publicly demanded the withdrawal of the Red Army from the country. The media celebrated this event as a heroic act and cited Orbán’s personal courage as an example. In fact, the withdrawal of the Red Army began in April 1989, regardless, of course, of Viktor Orbán’s demands.

In 1989-1990, he studied at Oxford, where he received a scholarship from the Soros Foundation. Like his political party, he

advocates liberal principles. As vice-president of the Liberal International, he worked closely with the Liberal Party (Szdsz), which has since disappeared from the political scene in the country, but which was then at the helm of the transition period. Viktor Orbán’s shift to the right dates back to 1992.

His political skill is unquestionable. For more than a quarter of a century, it has distinguished him from his competitors. This is perhaps one of the reasons why, although he and his family have become one of the richest people in the country, exasperation with corruption has hardly diminished his popularity.

On July 26, 2014, in Transylvania, Orbán gave a speech at Tusnádfürdő in which he summarized his current political vision: “The evolution that is taking place in the world today is of the same importance as the change of system in our region (...) Societies built according to the principles of liberal democracy will be unable to maintain their competitiveness in the decades to come (...) We want to organize a society based on work that openly declares that it is not liberal. The new state we are building in Hungary is an illiberal state, not a liberal state”<sup>4</sup>.

With regard to the EU, the regime is developing a double talk. On the one hand, when it addresses the Hungarian population, it accuses the EU of being responsible for all the difficulties the country is experiencing. On the other hand, there is no question of leaving the EU. And for good reason: European funds finance the bulk of investments and everything that enriches the wealthy classes. In addition, the leaders of the multinationals based in Hungary are quite satisfied with the economic policy of the government and are pushing their governments to support it - which strengthens Viktor Orbán’s position.

Orbán appears to be a pragmatic politician, ready to adapt to all kinds of situations, to get around contradictions and to take advantage of them. He is always ready to assume a scandalous and provocative role. This was the case in the summer of 2015, during the migrant crisis. The migrants did not want to settle in Hungary at all, so it was superfluous to erect a barrier to supposedly “defend the country” against

them. But this cynical and inhumane position increased Orbán's popularity, and he emerged in the country as a courageous politician who knows how to defend the interests of the nation.

## And now?

During the recent pandemic, Orbán did not fail to live up to his reputation. For the first wave, he declared a state of emergency, placed several private companies under guardianship and appointed military personnel to head hospitals. In the spring, the country was relatively spared. All precautionary measures were then lifted to allow the tourist sector to benefit from the summer season. With the 2nd wave, Hungary is one of the hardest hit countries. In spite of this, neither large companies nor schools were closed.

With the approval of the EU's multiannual financial framework for the period 2021-2027, Orbán once again played the role of the enfant terrible and exasperated the European public opinion. By harmonizing his position with that of Poland, both countries threatened to veto it at the beginning of November. The disagreement erupted after the European Parliament adopted a mechanism for making the payment of funds conditional on respect for the rule of law. After a few tense weeks, a compromise was reached with Chancellor Angela Merkel. Germany has drafted an "interpretative declaration" and the implementation of the mechanism will follow later and be more restricted. This means that

Viktor Orbán will have to compete again for the 2022 legislative elections with generous funding from the Union. In addition, and although it is rarely mentioned in the press, the rule of law also applies to labor law and trade union rights, which are particularly lax in Hungary. Orbán has been working on this register for a long time in close cooperation with the German economic partners. Thus, the conflict lasted only a few weeks, Orbán got what he was looking for, while the Hungarian opposition had to disappoint again.

Afterwards, Orbán with his outspokenness will bring another piece of news, and not only for Hungary. He will say out loud and in advance what is only in preparation. At a Skype conference with the prime ministers of Serbia and Slovenia, Orbán announced the end of the welfare state, which, according to him, "is a structure that no longer works". Instead of a system of national solidarity, he wants a "workfare state" in the future. He will therefore offer "workfare state" jobs to everyone - but without mentioning that the wage will be a third or half of the minimum wage...

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# The ‘worldwide’ vaccination against the Covid-19 pandemic. From hypocrisy about the right to life (“no one will be left behind”) to the unscrupulous disappearance of the sovereignty of the people

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*Riccardo Petrella*

For the umpteenth time, since last May when South Africa and India made the proposal to temporarily suspend the WTO (World Trade Organization) rules on patents on vaccines (TRIPs Treaty), on 4 February the rich (and powerful) countries of the “Western” world (USA, EU, UK, Norway, Switzerland, Canada, Australia...) have rejected it in no uncertain terms, except to propose (on the initiative of the EU) some small practical arrangements in the logistics of vaccination.

## Imperial injustice

The Western front remained united, even at the level of parliamentary representative institutions, on the dogmatic defence of the right to private property in the field of living organisms. Once again, the pharmaceutical industries, through “their” states in the WTO, have defended their rejection on the basis of specious arguments that have no basis other than their own power.

See <https://wsimag.com/it/economia-e-politica/64793-la-vaccinazione-mondiale>. Typical “imperial” situation so defined because “the emperor alone can impose his will against

the will of all other subjects, but all other subjects cannot impose anything on the emperor against his will”.

The above is to say that one of the most critical and devastating aspects of the inequalities highlighted by the “government” of the Covid-19 pandemic is the denial of the “sovereignty of the people”.

The current “global” policy of combating the Covid-19 pandemic is in complete contradiction to the much-vaunted goal proclaimed by strong social groups in the world’s powerful countries “*no one will be left behind*”. In the name of national health security (*vaccine nationalism* has been a convenient alibi), the dominant groups have taken measures that are openly contrary to the principle of equality of all with respect to the universal right to health, particularly vaccines. Even before the marketing of vaccines, on which the competent medical authorities have granted the exclusive right of ownership and use for 20 years to private profit-making companies, the public authorities admitted that by the end of 2021 between 70 and 80% of the world’s population will remain unvaccinated. The UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, confirmed this 17 February that 75% of all available vaccines have only been used by 10 countries and 130 countries have not received

# Interventions

a single dose of vaccine to date. If all goes well, which is not guaranteed, we will have to wait until the end of 2024 to hope that the world's population will reach a state of safe collective immunity. In the meantime, a) tens of millions of human beings will have prematurely disappeared from circulation with the blessing of the world's shareholders who will have seen their pandemic dividends rise considerably, b) a few hundred million more people will have gone to swell the army of the impoverished and the working poor, and c) the world's top twenty billionaires will have seen their wealth rise by tens of billions<sup>1</sup>.

It is said that "justice is equal for all" (which is not true), but we know for sure that "the pandemic is not equal for all" (this is true).

## The sovereignty of the people in all this?

There is little to laugh about and much to cry about. For decades, we have witnessed the entire structure called 'democracy' or the representative democratic system being battered.

Since the 1970s-80s, among the most significant movements in the picketing of democracy we can include, in addition to the traditional and with the systemic opposition to democracy of the conservative and reactionary political and social forces of the right and the extreme right:

- the anti-communist *anti-statism* of important wings of progressive movements;
- the interest in "*the costs of politics*". In the name of efficiency and the reduction of direct taxes, every form of political choice has been reduced to a question of optimal management of the limited resources available and a reduction in public spending (with the exception of, inter alia, military spending);
- *the promotion of the "third way"*, in the name of "beyond the state and the market". This turned out to be what it actually was, namely "much

less state" "and "much more market". The "third way" has been the Trojan horse through which the elected political class (let us say, to simplify, Western social democracy) to promote and defend universal rights, social justice, the most exploited and marginalised social classes, freedom from the abuses of the powerful, peace...) has literally abdicated by submitting to the imperatives of economic globalisation which is efficient, extractive and devastating of nature and society. People like Blair and so many other leaders like him in Europe and elsewhere (not to mention the US "progressives" who preach the cult of transition...) bear a great historical responsibility for what has happened over the last 40 years.

I refer specifically to

- *the "global waves" of liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation* of all forms of economic activity and in particular of all goods and services that were previously common and public. So we have witnessed the replacement of the government of the rule of law, social and democratic with a so-called system of "*world economic governance*" based on competition/exclusion, exchanges/negotiations/conflicts between stakeholders (the famous and undemocratic "*stakeholder governance*"); on the marginalisation of human and social rights; on the commodification of every essential and irreplaceable good for life; on the privatization of political power, as demonstrated by the imperial power of the world's large private economic groups such as GAFAM, Big Pharma etc., by way of example...
- *the triumph of the scientification and technologisation of life* in complete independence from, or in contrast to, the values of democratic social political constitutionalism (I'm thinking of the Scandinavian model).

The domination of the utilitarian mystifying use by the dominant groups of the "reasons" of science and technology over the other "reasons" has played a preponderant role on the processes mentioned. In two key ways. On the one hand, by

allowing the overturning of temporal limits (“the instant economy”, nanotechnology, financing to the millionth of a second...) and spatial limits (biological frontiers between species have disappeared, the “borderless economy”). On the other hand, by pushing “local” (national) public authorities to transfer the power of ownership, use and control and therefore of regulation of life on earth to the producers of new systems and products with high technological intensity organized around the world.

## The evaporation of the sovereignty of the people

It is in this context that the decisive role of patents on living beings and artificial intelligence granted to private entities for profit emerges clearly. *Patents are the ultimate expression, along with stock market capitalisation of companies, of the primacy of the right of private interests to rule the world.*

Patents (industrial, commercial etc.) like copyrights have existed for a long time. But patents on living organisms (cells, molecules, genomes etc. of the plant, natural and human world) are recent. They date back to 1980, following a decision by the US Supreme Court which authorised, for the first time in history, the company General Electric to patent for profit a molecule they had “discovered” that could have a positive effect on the environment. For purely commercial and economic “reasons”, in 1998 the European Union adopted a directive on the patentability of living organisms, in line with the American directive, despite strong opposition from many scientific, political, cultural, social, human and religious circles. Since then, the river of patents (almost 60,000 on living organisms) has overflowed from all sides, encouraging a rapid and systematic private appropriation of the ownership and governance of life by patent holders (the vast majority of whom are “global” private companies).

The case of the patents on Covid19 vaccines is an unfortunately dramatic confirmation of the evaporation of the sovereignty of the people.

At three levels.

*The decision-making level.* It is rare for national parliamentary institutions to have taken a direct and significant part in decisions on the promotion and funding of research and the development of medicines, their production (by whom, where, how many doses, how to finance it etc.). Everything was decided by “technical” committees, often mixed (public and private), dominated by representatives of the pharmaceutical industry and the world of finance. In this context, scientists have acted as servants and governments as supporting notaries, deciding by force of government decrees, thus reducing the role of parliamentary institutions to little or nothing.

*The level of knowledge and information sharing.* Not only did the people not participate, they were systematically ignored and kept in ignorance. The European Parliament had to bang its fists on the table to obtain access to the contracts/agreements signed by the European public authorities, in the name of 650 million citizens, with a handful of global pharmaceutical companies. And when they got access to the contract with AstraZeneca (an Anglo-Swedish multinational), the text was concealed, made 90% unreadable. The European Parliament was ridiculed and the Commission was responsible for this ridicule. A scandal. The European Commission claimed the obligation of secrecy imposed by the companies and accepted by the public authorities. But how can representatives appointed by the people’s elected representatives grant the right to secrecy to companies and, on the other hand, deny the people access to information? What is even more serious is that neither the citizens of Europe nor the majority of MEPs have fought to defend the people’s sacrosanct right to information and democracy to the hilt.

We still do not know how many billions of euros have been granted to private companies by the public authorities. What we do know is that certainly no Western pharmaceutical company would have started developing and

producing vaccines if the public authorities had not financed them.

The refusal to share knowledge and give relevant information to the people via their representatives is an explicit act of violence done to the right to knowledge. How can the people, how can citizens act in full and free conscience if they are kept in ignorance? On what principle of legitimacy do governments continue to claim that they cannot give the relevant information to citizens?

In an increasingly scientific and technologised world, *the right to relevant knowledge is as fundamental as the right to get drinking water and air*. The choice made by our rulers, based on the assertion that governments decide on public health matters on the basis of what scientists say, is extremely serious, as if the only possible determining “reason” were the “reason” of a knowledge that is not shared and not shareable, incomprehensible to almost the entire world population, an impregnable monopoly of the great lords of dominant finance. In so doing, the rulers admit that the majority of human beings are ignorant and must remain so, and that just as, in the past, they had to essentially obey the will and the reasons of God, today they must obey the reasons of science and technology.

*The level of responsibility. The hoax.* According to private companies, the public authorities have accepted that companies should not be held responsible for any negative consequences of vaccines and unforeseeable “accidents”. States have decided to take responsibility! The peoples were not even warned. Otherwise, not only are the people not put in a position to take part in the decisions and assume their responsibilities accordingly, but they are also given serious responsibilities without their knowledge or recourse. The mockery of the sovereignty of the people made in the name of the current patent regime could not be more demeaning.

## Just one proposal. A farewell to sovereignty of the people? No.

The dominant social groups in the most powerful countries claim that their decisions are dictated on scientific grounds. Science, they say, and with it technology, dictates political choices. They say, undeterred, that the sovereignty of the people belongs to the people but is expressed through the scientist and technologist class, in practice through the class of their financiers and stakeholders. Ensuring the proper functioning and perpetuity of this system is the function of patents regulated by the WTO TRIPs Treaties. The power of science is not open, transparent, shareable. It is increasingly centralised and exclusionary.

We are facing a slaughter of democracy. Of course, vaccines and medicines are not conceived or made in parliamentary halls or ministerial offices. But the policy of science and health is. This is not and must not be done in the clubs of stakeholders at the World Economic Forum, in the Stock Exchanges and in the offices of the shareholders of the pharmaceutical companies and the life science industry, but in the “homes of the citizens”, in open public debates, in the commissions of the elected representatives of the people, in citizen and popular referendums, in the institutions of self-government.

Our proposal is as follows: the fight against the Covid19 pandemic and other syndemic diseases for the universal right to health, and in particular for the abolition of patents, must be part of a clear and coherent struggle, at all levels, to free humanity from the domination of the social groups that are dominant today. These are the financially powerful social groups whose domination is fed and reinforced by the processes of concentration of private appropriation of scientific and technological power in the hands of a small group of world oligarchies. Their claimed “legitimacy” to dominance is based on the private appropriation and control of science and technology (see patents). It is not a time for transition or resilience (resistance and survival to the terrible upheavals in progress) but for the

liberation of humanity from the “lords of life” and their new forms of colonisation of the world that are at the origin of the upheavals.

1. <https://europa.today.it/attualita/2020-anno-meraviglioso-uomini-ricchi.html> . Put together, the 20 richest people in the world earned around \$1.77 trillion, or €1,440 billion more than in 2019, and increased their wealth by 24% compared to the previous year. Only 13 countries in the world have a GDP greater than the personal wealth of the 20 richest billionaires. Unthinkable, intolerable. At the top of the list, Jeff Bezos, 56, the head of Amazon, boasts a personal net worth of \$193.7 billion in 2020, up 68.7% on 2019... Only 52 countries in the world (out of nearly 190) have a higher

*GDP ‘The current world economic system is nonsensical, to be demolished. The hardest costs are paid by the impoverished (some 3 billion human beings) and it is thanks to them that the richest get even richer. Economic growth? Technological progress? A great robbery of the wealth of billions of human beings by the richest.*

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# Why the World After COVID Will Look Like the World Before COVID

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*Vijay Prashad*

In the early months after the World Health Organization announced the coronavirus pandemic, the Indian novelist Arundhati Roy hoped that the ‘pandemic is a portal’; she hoped, in other words, that the world would recognise its grave problems, exacerbated by the pandemic, and that there would be an opening towards a reorganisation of the social structures. Nothing like that is possible unless the class character of the states in the majority of the world would be transformed. Mere recognition of the problem will not result in any epiphany in places such as the United States, Europe, and the larger states of the developing world such as Brazil and India. In fact, the evidence over the course of this past year has been the reverse: the dominant classes in these countries would like to use public money to bail out the crisis-ridden and anti-people capitalist system and not to transform the system to put the interests of the majority of the people before the profits for the minority.

A recent report from Oxfam shows us that the “world’s ten richest men have seen their combined wealth increase by half a trillion dollars since the pandemic began – more than enough to pay for a COVID-19 vaccine for everyone and to ensure no one is pushed into poverty by the pandemic”. Rather than use that money for the vaccine and for poverty eradication, the money goes into illicit tax havens and into inflated bank accounts while vaccine nationalism and increased starvation defines capitalist society.

Meanwhile, in China, the socialist project has resulted – during the pandemic – in the abolition of absolute poverty. In November 2020, the authorities in Guizhou Province, in China’s

Southwest, announced that nine of their poor counties were removed from the poverty list. In seven years, the policies in China allowed 80 million people – around the entire population of Germany – to depart from poverty; in total, around 800 million Chinese people have lifted themselves out of poverty in the decades since the 1949 Revolution. There have been three metrics for this transformation: first, that every Chinese family would no longer be below the rural poverty line; second, that the Communist project would end the ‘two worries’ of hunger and clothing; third, that the Chinese state would ensure the ‘three guarantees’ of education, health care, and housing. All of this occurred during the pandemic.

No question that the socialist project – developed largely in poor countries – is far superior to the capitalist project – which has remained crisis-ridden despite the wealth of these countries. To provide only one figure to illustrate that crisis-ridden system: the International Labour Organisation (ILO) calculates that total lost working-hours averaged 10.7% during the first three quarters of 2020, which represents \$3.5 trillion in lost labour income (about 5.5% of global output in 2019). What this means is that the working-class in the capitalist states have lost their ability to pay to take care of the two worries and the three guarantees, all of which are typically privatised.

Due to the weakness of the socialist states and to the global socialist movement, the advantages of that project are both denigrated in an intensified information war and its logic has not been able to drive a global policy orientation. Instead, the present moment is defined by three apartheid.

## Three Apartheids

### 1. *Money Apartheid.*

The external debt of developing countries is higher than \$11 trillion, with debt servicing payments to amount to near \$4 trillion by the end of this calendar year. Last year, sixty-four countries spent more to service their debt than on health care. There was modest talk about debt service suspension, with some small assistance from various multilateral agencies. This talk of debt suspension comes alongside the IMF injunction for states to borrow since interest rates are low; rather than borrow more, why not simply cancel the total external debt and – at the same time – incorporate the at least \$37 trillion that sits in illicit tax havens? The word that is often used to define the debt cancellation is forgiveness; there is, however, nothing to forgive, since this debt is a consequence of a long history of colonial theft and plunder. Richer countries are able to borrow at low to zero rates of interest, while the developing world is charged usurious rates and has the odious debt to pay off with precious funds that should go toward breaking the chain of the COVID-19 infection.

### 2. *Medical Apartheid.*

The WHO's Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said recently that the world is on the brink of a 'catastrophic moral failure'. He meant the vaccine nationalism and the vaccine hoarding that marks the capitalist project. States in the North Atlantic (Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and many European states) have shrugged aside the call from India and South Africa to suspend intellectual property rules regarding the vaccine; they have underfunded the COVAX project, which is at a high risk of failure, with expectations that the developing countries would not see a vaccine before 2024; and they have hoarded vaccines, with Canada building up reserves of five vaccines per Canadians, even drawing these vaccines from the COVAX stocks. There is a great divide between this kind of vaccine nationalism and the socialist internationalism

on display from Cuban and Chinese doctors (which is why it is very important to support the campaign for Cuba's Henry Reeve Medical Brigade to be given the Nobel Peace Prize for 2021).

### 3. *Food Apartheid.*

World hunger, which had declined from 2005 to 2014 began to rise since then (this was despite the fact that China had eradicated hunger in this period). World hunger is now at 2010 levels. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)'s 2020 report on food insecurity shows that the number of those who are hungry will exceed 840 million by 2030. But this number is low. The reduction of quantity and quality of food available to people has impacted two billion people – or 26% of global population; this large population has "experienced hunger" and has no "regular access to nutritious and sufficient food in 2019". This is important. The data is from 2019, *before the pandemic*. The situation only deteriorated since then. The UN's World Food Program projects that the number of those who are hungry could double before the pandemic is contained. These are mind-numbing numbers. As this hunger pandemic escalates, logic suggests that policies would bend to assist farmers and agricultural workers so that they can produce the kind of good quality food needed in the time of the pandemic; subsidy regimes should have been strengthened to enable food to be affordable. No sign from the IMF and the other multilateral agencies to give latitude to the developing countries for their subsidy and public food distribution systems. In India, the government of the extreme right had longed to breakdown the subsidy-price support system which it did – and provoked a long-running farmer's revolt; the outcome of the revolt threatens to open produce a new political reality in India. Behind the harsh policy to cut subsidies in places like India lies a great hypocrisy, the essence of food apartheid: the United States has spent \$1.7 trillion over the past twenty years to subsidise its farmers, mostly corporate firms, while the European Union spends \$65 billion per year to subsidise its farmers. What is good for the

# Interventions

North Atlantic goose is no good for the Global South gander.

These are the three apartheid systems that structure the world system outside countries that are committed to a socialist project, and face threats of military assault and that face hybrid war technologies (such as information war, economic war, and diplomatic war). The countries of the North Atlantic pursue a policy of confrontation rather than cooperation, driving a view of the world crafted around stigma rather than solidarity.

The neoliberal response is principally governed by fears that the Great Lockdown – as the IMF calls it – will result in a cardiac arrest for financial capital and capitalism in general. They are using all methods possible – within the barriers of national competition – to settle money on stock markets and transnational firms. The United States, with its immense resources, is in the lead here, putting trillions of dollars into its economy. The Europeans are divided by the failure to mutualise debt, namely for Germany and the Netherlands to recycle some of their surplus to the southern European countries. There is a general failure to handle the corona-induced debt of emerging and developing countries. They want to stabilise the world economy so that they continue to benefit, but they are unwilling to provide an equitable security net; this failure is going to create great feelings of betrayal in the emerging economies, who might turn to China and elsewhere for leadership in the decades to come. The failure of the neoliberal bloc to offer leadership in this period is evident; French President Emmanuel Macron's statement to the *Financial Times* that neoliberals like him need to 'think the unthinkable' is emblematic; what is the 'unthinkable' but certain socialist proposals. They do not want socialism; they are grasping for anything to protect the capitalist system. The pandemic could be a portal, but not because the outcome of the pandemic will automatically

open the eyes of the liberal bourgeoisie. They are funneling money towards shoring up banks and making sure demand does not flatten. That is their motivation. They are not going to cancel the debt, produce a people's vaccine, ensure that food systems are robust with farmers and agricultural workers in charge; they are not going to undo the apartheid structures by themselves.

The negative impact of the pandemic on the workers and peasants in the Global South – in particular – has a tendency to deepen wage deflation that strengthens the bargaining power of the multinational corporations; as incomes and wages deflate and as social wages lessen, firms are able to command lower wages from the workers. But this deterioration of living conditions that goes beyond the limits of endurance is met with ferocious resistance. The Indian agricultural workers and farmers revolt, the Kenyan and Peruvian health workers strike, the general protests of the poor in Tunisia, the struggles against the utter failure of the government to tackle the pandemic in Brazil, the mass demonstrations for the abortion law in Argentina: these are the contours of the uprisings of the people, what Hegel called 'the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative'. It is this 'labour of the negative', these struggles that are held up by organisations, these movements that are building the confidence and power of the working-class and peasantry that would be able to drive an agenda forward; they build the road by walking.

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# A new framework for global relations

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*Enrique Santiago*

The COVID 19 pandemic has placed the world before a new economic crisis, somewhat expected due to the ineffectiveness of the measures promoted by most neoliberal governments after the 2008 financial crisis and the inertia of capitalist logic. We are witnessing the possibility of a serious breakdown of social protection mechanisms, aggravated by the high economic and social impact of the uncontrolled spread of the virus.

In terms of global geopolitics, the evolution of the crisis may also significantly alter the position of the major powers in power relations. The Covid 19 epidemic shows the strengths and weaknesses of the world's different economic and political systems and the mechanisms available to each system to effectively ensure comprehensive human security. Let us not forget that China had to endure all kinds of criticism for its measures to control the mobility of the population adopted to contain the virus, although today it has almost completely eradicated the mortality associated with the disease. Undoubtedly, a state with the capacity to plan and manage the economy with the common good in mind is more likely to avoid the pernicious health, economic and social consequences of the pandemic.

On the other hand, the consequences of the pandemic will be very serious in regions with precarious health systems - the United States, India or many countries in Latin America or Africa - and also in countries suffering the consequences of wars or blockades. Thus, the crisis is highlighting the need for a profound revision of international relations and established alliances, especially those that are proving incapable of organising mutual aid

mechanisms.

The pandemic also warns about the impact of the capitalist system's aggressions on the environment, highlighting more critically the incompatibility of capitalism with human and other species' lives.

Humanity cannot continue to rely on a neoliberal globalisation in which all the resources of the economy are put at the service of maintaining high rates of profit for a minority that controls economic power. We need to move forward together, all the peoples of the planet, to combat emergency situations such as the one humanity is currently experiencing, sharing resources, developing instruments of global governance, on the basis of mutual benefit and the defence of a concept of shared, comprehensive and sustainable human security. We will only achieve this objective by putting an end to the warmongering policies inherited from the Cold War, by burying trade wars and by putting an end to the imperialist model of globalisation.

The global emergency makes it necessary to strengthen international cooperation, promoting multilateralism and the role of the UN in applying the values and principles set out in its Founding Charter, acting as a platform for mutual cooperation, establishing effective economic mechanisms to improve the quality of life of those who have been affected by the consequences of the social crisis accompanying the health crisis. The development of productive forces, technological advances and scientific breakthroughs would make it possible, with an adequate allocation of resources, to confront the current emergency situation and overcome the pandemic and its consequences. But this implies putting an end to neo-liberal policies

and moving forward to lay the foundations of a new economic system that guarantees the well-being and common interest of humanity.

## The need for a new Europe after the pandemic

In Europe, the aftermath of COVID 19 has served to highlight the serious consequences of the weakening of health and other public services as a result of the neoliberal policies implemented in recent decades. Countries such as Italy, Spain and France are particularly affected.

The Eurogroup initially opted to renounce a common European response, a clearly unsupportive attitude that led to a widespread feeling that the European Union was being called into question, forcing the Council of Europe to rectify its position in order to ensure funding for countries that implement shock plans.

The purchase of national bonds alone does not solve the financing needs. It is obvious that there is a need for a huge European aid plan to help the poorest and weakest sectors, a plan that avoids the multiplication of redundancies in companies and avoids allocating most of the public resources mobilised against the pandemic to financing companies and guaranteeing loans. The priority is to meet the needs of people, especially working people, who are the most vulnerable. In this sense, the European Union has decided to articulate a response to the crisis that is insufficient, as the measures that make economic resources available to governments, companies and financial institutions are not what the countries most affected by the epidemic need. The Esm funds are insufficient to deal with the pandemic, even if they are accompanied by the injection of funds from the European Investment Bank destined for companies, and the issuing of bonds to finance redundancy programmes amounting to at least 100 billion euros, at a time when Italy, France, Spain and other less populated countries have suspended the work of millions of people.

An ambitious European Reconstruction Plan is needed to face the immediate future, which is why the Reconstruction Programmes have been launched, with essential funds that for the first time include a significant percentage of non-returnable economic resources, but a Programme that is still insufficient to deploy and maintain the Social Shield needed by the European working classes hit by the pandemic. If the European Union fails to deploy and adequately fund an effective social and labour protection shield, it will be massively challenged for failing to address the social emergency and will be plunged into deadlock, decline and, most likely, an irreversible crisis that could lead to its disintegration as ineffective.

## A co-government in Spain marked by the pandemic

Nobody could have imagined a more difficult political, social and economic context than the current one for the first progressive coalition government of the last 80 years in Spain, in which Izquierda Unida and therefore also the Communist Party of Spain participates through Unidas Podemos. From the beginning of the emergency we have worked to ensure that all necessary measures are taken to prevent this health crisis, and the subsequent economic and social crisis, from being paid for by the working class.

Despite the fact that the correlation of forces in the coalition government is not as favourable as the alternative left would like, the joint work of Unidas Podemos with the trade unions and social collectives has made it possible to implement measures to protect the working class from this crisis. It has been noted that the working class has been the main guarantor of the functioning of the country, of course the health workers, but also the workers in highly precarious, poorly recognised and poorly paid sectors such as food, cleaning, transport, energy, public safety, care and so many others who really guarantee the daily functioning of society.

The real struggle currently being waged in

Spanish society - in the Council of Ministers, at the social dialogue tables between trade unions and employers, among the different political forces and social movements, and among the sectors that influence public opinion - is none other than the definition of Spain's economic and social model in the post-pandemic period. Spain is faced with the need to determine what the post-COVID 19 economic and social reconstruction model will be. The priority must be to guarantee rights and a dignified life for the lower social strata, which requires the adoption of both strategic political and economic measures in the medium term, and urgent measures to maintain maximum employment at this time.

The bloc against the presence of Unidas Podemos in the government is growing stronger and stronger by the day, especially now that the programme for the reconstruction of the whole country is in dispute. This bloc is made up of the right and the parliamentary ultra-right, the economic and financial oligarchy, a large part of the business sectors, the institutions and sectors of the administration that are not subject to democratic control, as well as the various political sectors that serve the interests of the institutions of the European Union. The reactionary forces need the expulsion of Unidas Podemos from the government in order to advance safely in this scenario of a great agreement for reconstruction.

Our task is to support the progressive coalition government, trying to generate contradictions that prevent the implementation of neoliberal measures, while at the same time we accumulate forces, through popular organisation and

mobilisation, in favour of a breakthrough solution to the crisis of the regime. If this government is not maintained, the necessary reconstruction process will be driven and led by the right wing without the left or the communists having any appreciable influence on this process.

The debate on this necessary process of economic and social reconstruction after the pandemic has already begun and may end up becoming a new constituent process. The only consensus is that this system - incapable of guaranteeing a dignified life for the social majorities - has shown an unacceptable fragility that is incompatible with human security. It has proved so fragile that for the first time in a long time we may have enough popular support to make hegemonic a clear proposal to rebuild from the vindication of the common as opposed to the individual, based on proposals that give guarantees and confidence to the majority.

For the transformative left, the way to be able to hegemonize the proposals on reconstruction is to transfer the debate to society and to the different productive sectors so that proposals emerge from them that reflect the true consensus revealed in this crisis, essentially the defence of the public, the common good.

*Enrique Santiago is Secretary General of the Communist Party of Spain (PCE). He is a member of the XIII Congress of Deputies representing Madrid.*

# Changing the world in Covid times

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*Liisa Taskinen*

On New Year's Eve 2020 we couldn't even imagine, that within a few months we have done something, that no one even considered after the Middle Ages. We declared exceptional circumstances, closed national borders and the whole society. Schools and working places deserted, and we even blocked traffic between the southern province around Helsinki area Uusimaa and the rest of the country. This is how research professor Mika Salminen, the director of Health Security Department of the National Health and Welfare Institute opened his article in a Finnish publication.

Not all working places were deserted. The pandemic made it visible very soon, that the society is run by ordinary working people, both in public and private sector, not by Chief Executive Officers or Boards of Directors of listed companies. We needed nurses and doctors, teachers and cleaners, bus and truck drivers and trade sellers to do their work. Many of these workers are underpaid, their work is invisible and underrated. Very often they are immigrants. They also fell ill statistically more often than the population on average. They use public transport, have bigger families, cramped housing. Many of them have deficient language skills and cannot completely understand all the recommendations. Therefore some immigrant communities have organised support and information for their less integrated members. Food production in farms was threatened during movement restrictions, not only in Finland. Fruit and vegetable production needs seasonal workers. To Finland they come mainly from Ukraine and Thailand. These workers are also depending on this work. Finally the government made exceptions, so that these workers could come. They had to live in quarantine. They couldn't do anything but just work and stay in

their very modest accommodation. Trade unions have been active to make sure that workers get at least the minimum wage, and that their working and living conditions are tolerable. My question is: is the food supply and food security in Europe on a sound basis, if it is depending so much on foreign seasonal workers, and are these workers paid enough and treated well?

We also learned, that a strong public health system is the best to handle the pandemic situation, and that it must not be privatised, and that it must have enough resources. Good social services are even more necessary in exceptional circumstances. People need not only income support, but also social and psychological support. When schools were closed and distance teaching came instead, the inequality of school children became more visible. Not all families could afford laptops and other tools, not all parents were able to help their children. Not all children could find a peaceful corner for lessons in their homes. Kids, who needed more support in learning were in danger to be left behind and drop out from teaching. This all was a challenge to schools and teachers, too. Even in normal life schools would need more resources to take care of each and every child. So when something happens, schools have few reserves for exceptional circumstances. This must be taken into account, as well as the needs of the health care and social sector, when the government subsidizes municipalities. Neoliberal economic policy threaten the development of the public sector, and we must fight against it.

The economy collapsed all over. Thousands of people lost their work in industry, trade, in tourism related business, in bars and restaurants, in cultural sector. Again those low-paid workers. Hundreds of millions of Euros have been paid to industry and business life to prevent an

economic recession, more severe than that of 1930-ies. In other words, to guarantee profits of the big money. Are those, whose work have created that profit remembered? Their income must be protected, not dividends of the shareholders. Subsidies from governments and EU must be used to save working places of the people. Also they must be used to improve technology and processes towards clean tech, energy efficiency, to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

There have been taken actions in all countries, which restrict human rights, like freedom of movement, freedom to pursue a trade or profession. It has been done to protect the most important human right – the right to life. Most people have accepted it. Decisions have been necessary. In Finland a readiness law was accepted in 2011. In March 2020 that law was used for the first time, for the lockdown, when a state of emergency had been established. The lockdown became quite popular!

There are many questions, when it comes to the constitutional rights of a private person, and the society, and the possible conflict between them. What are the criterias of a state of emergency? Pandemia is easily understood, as well as nature disasters. We must be aware, that social movements, like general strike could be considered as a state of emergency, and these "safe deposit box laws" be used to restrict freedom of speech, demonstration, to strike. This pandemic situation can also be seen as a test for that. In many EU member countries were created mobile applications to trace those, who might have been exposed to this coronavirus. Very soon these applications were made compatible, so that when one travels from one country to another, he or she still can get information about a possible contact with a contagious person. In pandemia it is useful and helps to limit the chains of infection. Applications are anonymous. They don't tell to anyone, who has been in in contact with whome and where. I just wonder, can these applications be modified less anonymous for other purposes. Current pandemia wasn't a surprise for scientists. The surprise was the virus SARS-CoV-2, Coronavirus, that caused it. About 20

years ago we made plans for bird flu pandemia, but got unexpectedly swine flu in 2009.

New harmful viruses come often from wild animals to domestic animals and then to humans. This route can give us even more dangerous viruses, like new forms of Ebola virus. This is a direct consequence of climate change and biodiversity loss on the one hand, and of meat and poultry mass production on the other hand. The more tropical forests are destroyed and used for farming, the closer is the contact between wild and production animals. Big farms, where thousands of animals live together, are like virus incubators. New mutations appear easily in such circumstances. Antibiotics are widely used in meat production plants. It has produced us multiresistant disease-causing bacterias. What are the other consequences we don't know yet?

Cilimate warming and ecological crisis affect everything, not only as a virus source of new epidemics. Extreme draught, extreme rains and floods, forest fires have already forced people to leave their homes in Global South and seek better places to live. This was also one of the factors in crisis in Syria. Signs of extreme meteorological phenomenons have been seen also in Europe. If we want to keep the whole planet habitable and cultivable, the climate warming must be stopped, within ten years. Therefore the European Parliament declared a climate emergency already on 27th of November 2019. Biodiversity is a value as itself, but even much more. Much of the biodiversity is invisible, in our soil. Still a little is known about it. Intensive cultivation of one species, like corn, with artificial fertilization has impoverished the soil and reduced its fertility. At least 20% of the soil and original nature must stay untouched. The loss of pollinating insects was an alerting signal. We are completely dependent on nature. It's balance is very complicated, and we know still very little of it. To harm it significantly is like to open Pandora's box. No one can predict or count cumulative effects and chain reactions. For humans they are irreversible. If we are not able to stop climate warming and ecological crisis, there won't be peace, equality, democracy, healthy living conditions. There

# Interventions

will be struggle for nature resources, habitable and cultivable land, food, clean water.

Can this pandemic be a watershed between two historical eras, a fire alarm? Then, what is the new era? Have we finally realised, that the climate and ecological crisis is the main question? That clean tech, electric cars, eating less meat, cycling is not enough? We overuse non-renewable nature resources. It must be stopped, in a democratic and fair way. The mankind has all the knowledge, skills and resources to solve the problem. The solution to the problem makes it clear that market economy mechanisms are not working. The new historical era must be the era, when most different forces join together to force decision makers to make real big decisions. It is the era, when the level of consumption must be reduced for those, who overuse, but for those, who live in deep poverty must be raised. It means better

housing, sanitation, clean water, food, health care, education for the poor in our countries and in the Global South. If this is not considered, we stay in an old era, where environmental politics is just environmental, kept separated, siloed from these other issues, and is unable to handle the whole complex of the solution.

We, the left, green and progressive parties and organisations need to be aware and listen to science, not argue about minor single issues. Is the European Left ready to rise to the next level in its policy?

*Liisa Taskinen, a doctor, is vice-president of the Communist Party of Finland, in which she has been active for 50 years.*

# Changing the world in the time of Covid

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*Marilisa Xenogiannakopoulou*

Despite neoliberal arguments, “History did not end in 1989”. The distinction between left and right, progress and conservatism remains dominant, as it emerges from economic and social conditions and inequalities. It always has meaning, as long as there are different economic and social interests, strong and weak, accumulation of wealth, exploitation and inequalities.

Today, two diametrically opposed perceptions and policies are at odds. The Covid-19 pandemic crisis has shaken the certainties of global capitalism, the narrative of neoliberalism has taken a heavy blow, and the dominant economic model has proven incapable to deal effectively with the pandemic and its consequences. The negative effects of the cuts and privatizations of public services, that have taken place in European countries over the past decades, have become evident. The importance of public policies and investments, of the public health system and the welfare state has again been proven.

The health crisis caused by the pandemic adds to the economic, climatic and migratory crisis and has a catalytic effect on working conditions and democracy. The world will definitely be different after the pandemic. Capitalism is transforming and the pandemic is seen by neoliberal forces and governments as an opportunity to restructure the economy, to the detriment of small producers and small and medium-sized enterprises, and to completely deregulate the labour market to the detriment of employees, their wages and their rights.

In the European Union, unlike the restrictive austerity policy that was imposed during the financial crisis, a different strategy for managing

the pandemic crisis and its consequences has prevailed, which led to the temporary suspension of the Stability Pact, the measures taken by the Central Bank, and the creation of the Recovery Fund. These positive developments are mainly due to the fact that the current health and economic crisis is not limited, as in 2010, to the countries of the South, but affects all European countries and the European economy as a whole.

These differentiations in the dominant neoliberal conception are forming a new field of action for the Left, the Greens, the socialist and progressive forces, the social movements and the working people in order to promote their program and proposals, to undertake political initiatives and to effectively put forward social claims. The new conditions raise critical questions and place us before our responsibilities, so that we can respond with our proposals and actions to the new dangers, needs and conditions that are emerging.

The crucial question is which perceptions will prevail in Europe the day after the pandemic. Today we have to fight for the change of the dominant economic model and to put an end to the austerity policies. We need to project a new European plan and an alternative architecture for the Eurozone, ensuring the implementation of public and social investment policies for economic recovery, jobs, fair wages, economic and social cohesion. There needs to be a comprehensive approach and response on the part of the Left and the progressive European forces to address the dangers that threaten democracy, individual freedoms and social rights. Over the past decades, the unprecedented concentration of wealth and power in the hands

of the few has led to the erosion of democracy. It is telling that in Europe 5% of the population owns almost 40% of private wealth.

All over the world, far-right forces are exploiting inequalities, fear, insecurity and social discontent to undermine democracy. We experienced it in Europe during the financial crisis and as a result of the austerity policies. We are still seeing far-right movements taking advantage of the effects of the pandemic and the health and economic crisis on society. We must fight with our positions and our actions, so that popular discontent and social anguish are expressed by calling for progressive democratic and social change.

Our world is changing rapidly due to digital and technological transformation and its economic and social consequences, climate change, geopolitical realignments and widening inequalities. The demand for a fair and democratic redistribution of wealth and power is growing dramatically around the world. The question is who will define and in what direction the changes taking place. Will they be dictated by extra-institutional economic interests in the absence of the people, or will they be the result of a democratic social transformation?

Our concrete and affirmed response is that the framework and the rules of organization of the economy and of society must be defined by the people's sovereignty, democratically expressed and the social movements guided by the interests of the social majority. An alternative different way is now both necessary and feasible in the face of neoliberalism, and in this direction we are struggling both in our countries and at European level. In this context we set priority goals.

Access to available treatments and vaccines must be guaranteed to all. It is of crucial importance the release of the patents for new vaccines and to guarantee the possibility of mass and rapid production, by more European pharmaceutical industries, of quantities necessary for the completion of the vaccination program in all European countries. We need to ensure vaccine equity, so as to guarantee equal access to vaccines, but also to check on the profiteering practice of multinational

pharmaceutical companies, which often do not respect their commitments, as recently by their failure to ensure massive delivery of vaccines to the European Union. This idea has been initially proposed by the President of Syriza Alexis Tsipras and is gaining ground. It is actually discussed in the European Parliament, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has adopted by a large majority an amendment of the Group of the United European Left, which calls on the states of Council of Europe to treat Covid-19 vaccine as a global public good, and the European Union authorities and states to overcome the barriers and restrictions arising from patents and intellectual property rights, in order to ensure the widespread production and distribution of vaccines in all countries and to all citizens.

Europe must strengthen the public sector; develop a new production model and a fairer and more progressive tax system allowing an increase in social spending. There is a need to ensure adequate resources for social policies, public health, education and strengthening social security systems.

A new debt crisis in the South of Europe is looming, as is the threat of a new round of austerity, fiscal adjustment and internal devaluations. We underline the call for a European adjustment and settlement of over-indebtedness, within the framework of a revision of the role and the mission of the European Central Bank.

Funds issued by the European Central Bank and European stimulus packages should take priority over funding public services, the public health and education system, employment and the welfare state as a whole in order to achieve a socially just transition.

Our main objective is to support workers and employees, their wages and their rights, to establish a fair minimum wage and to guarantee collective bargaining in the European Union to fight against growing inequalities and social dumping.

In recent months, for millions of employees in Europe distance work/telework has become compulsory, and in many countries as in Greece without any rules. The institutional framework

governing teleworking must be guaranteed and there must be a corresponding provision in collective agreements, regarding the respect of employment contracts and the necessary consent of the employees, the right to disconnect and respect for the working hours, provisions for the health and safety of employees and their operating costs.

The adoption in the European Parliament of an amendment for a three-year “freeze” of the “right to disconnect”, that is to say of rules at European level governing working hours and the right of distance employees to abstain from work and from electronic communication outside their working hours without consequences, was a particularly negative development. European employers’ organizations, including the Federation of Greek Industries, have lobbied strongly for this three-year suspension, which aims, on the one hand, to leave telework without European rules and regulations in a period of generalization of its implementation and, on the other hand, to consolidate facts on the labour market making regulation difficult in the future. Equally important is the demand for the introduction of uniform tax measures and rules for multinational corporations, the movement of short-term speculative capital and the facilitation of economic policies to strengthen the welfare state and reduce inequalities. In this regard, we must demand the imposition

of a European «Tobin tax» on short-term financial transactions, the taxation of digital and multinational companies where they ensure the highest profits, as well as the introduction of a common base for corporation tax, in order to prevent tax competition and the ability of multinationals to shift profits from one country, where they earn them, to another, to take advantage of lower tax rates.

The big challenge today for the Left and the progressive forces is to give a new meaning and impetus to the European plan on the basis of a progressive European social-environmental agreement, promoting a new productive, social and ecological model, fighting against social, regional and digital inequalities, defending and reinforcing democracy, economic-social cohesion and social rights, with a view to a common future of peace, social justice, solidarity and prosperity.

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# The coronavirus pandemic in neoliberal times. Romanian case

*Gheorghiță Zbăganu*

## A. World situation

More than a year after the official start of the pandemic (January 22, 2020) and almost a year after the start of Worldometer statistics (February 15, see [1] ) the number of registered cases of infected people has exceeded 110 million and the number of deaths has reached 2.5 million. Meaning a naïve mortality rate of 2.21%. On the continents, the most affected are North America (727,000 deaths per 32.7 million cases, 1,227 deaths per million inhabitants, mortality 2.27%)

South America (447,000 deaths per 17.2 million cases, 1,039 deaths per million inhabitants, mortality 2.61%)

Europe (780,000 deaths per 32.7 million cases, 1,043 deaths per million inhabitants, mortality 2.39%).

By comparison,

Asia (400,000 deaths per 24.5 million cases, 84 deaths per million inhabitants, mortality 1.63%) and Africa (100,000 deaths per 3.8 million cases, 75 deaths per million inhabitants, mortality 2.62%)

escaped almost unscathed.

Romania compared to other European countries, is not very bad.

With 20,000 deaths per 770,000 cases and 1,024 deaths per million inhabitants its place in the top would be: 11th at the number of cases, 10 at number of deaths and 17 at number of deaths per million inhabitants (letting aside the mini-states under one million inhabitants).

It could have been much worse. For comparison, some countries that six months ago seemed to perform very well – Slovenia, Czechia, Poland,

Hungary, Bulgaria, Slovakia have already more deaths at mil. Inhabitants than Romania.

Of course one must notice that all these numbers are only approximations. Nobody knows what the real number of cases is, all sorts of assumptions are made: for example, one unreported case (or two, three, depends on the analyst) per every one reported case. For this reason it is not possible to calculate the mortality of the virus accurately, the figures written above are based only on official data. Nor the famous  $R_0$  - how many people infect an average patient can be computed at this moment.

However, people agree that the most reliable indicator is the number of deaths reported to the population.

From this point of view, so far, the top ten countries affected would be Belgium, Slovenia, UK, Czechia, Italy, Portugal, Bosnia, Hungary, Macedonia, Spain. It is surprisingly bad in the countries of the former Yugoslavia (excluding Serbia), as well as in Bulgaria, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Six months ago, they were all among the leaders, especially the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Slovenia.

What are the leading states in Europe now? Norway, Finland, Belarus, Estonia, Denmark, Serbia - these are the states with less than 500 deaths/million inhabitants. Five Baltic states and one Balkan state, neighbouring us.

What will be the situation at the end of the pandemic, will the same order be maintained? We cannot predict, as even 6 months ago no one would have imagined how Slovenia, which was one of the most successful states, has now become an example of “bad example”, immediately after Belgium - the one that has always been the most affected.

When will the pandemic end?

Scientists do not dare to give an answer. If we make the analogy with the Spanish flu [2] it should pass this year or, at the latest in 2022. We are already approaching the end of the second wave - the one that was the deadliest one hundred years ago, during the Spanish flu. It's just that things are more complicated. There are shifts between continents, or even in the case of the same continent. In the case of Europe, if we arbitrarily establish the first wave in the period February, 15th – June, 1st, the calm between 01.06 - 01.10 and the second wave from 01.10 until now, the deaths in the three periods would be in the ratio 5-1-10. I expect the second wave to end in April. In the case of the Spanish flu, the third wave was weaker than the first - I think it will be the same now, if there is a third.

## B. The pandemic and the crisis of capitalism

Unlike the great crisis of 1929-1933 or that of 2008-2009, the current crisis was caused by a pandemic similar to that of 1918-1920. It is nature's fault - it can be said. But the damage would not have been so great if it had not been aggravated by the neoliberal capitalist system, namely by the privatizations in the field of health care, by the increase of socio-economic inequality and by the burden of state debts to private entities. It is understandable that states initially reacted chaotically to the new pandemic - such things happen once a century. On January 31, 2020, the US suspended flights to China, followed by other European countries. On February 5, the WHO announced that a pandemic was possible and on March 11, it had already declared a pandemic. Outside China, more than a thousand deaths had occurred. Governments panicked and began to apply total quarantine as they thought China did. Only that China has never applied the quarantine at the state level, but only at the provincial level. What seemed incredible happened: lockdown at the state level, starting with Italy. It was a world premiere: the WHO recommended it to 193

states. Not all states accepted quarantine, some did not even want to hear about the pandemic (Turkmenistan and North Korea; from there we do not have data).

Mass media and the internet contributed to the panic and mass hysteria that made the lockdown possible. And European solidarity turned out to be meaningless in the first months of the pandemic when Italy's EU neighbours - the first to be hit - refused to come to their aid. Only China, Cuba and Russia were up to the task.

In Western Europe - the hardest hit region - the first wave of the pandemic ended at late May - four months later.

A period of about four months of calm followed and the second wave came - just like during the Spanish flu.

The four months of calm could have been used to improve public health systems, to carry out joint research to find an effective treatment for the disease and to prepare for a second wave response. Free tests should have been made available to the population, intensive care departments in hospitals should have been prepared in such a way as to avoid overcrowding, and their requisitioning should have been done. In particular, drug factories should have been brought under control of states in such a way that when they were needed they would promptly respond. It was not so. Almost without exception the second wave was at least twice as deadly as the first. The calm months were not used to solve the problems of lack of medical staff, endowment of Intensive Care departments. On the contrary, the costs of public health systems have been exacerbated by underfunding and tickling of private, profit-seeking people. Private pharmaceutical companies have seen their profits rise and received billions of euros in aid from public funds.

Instead of cooperating for the public good they continued the competition to occupy the market - to the detriment of the sick. Instead of cooperating to find a treatment or vaccine as soon as possible, the giants of Big Pharma kept secrets, fight among themselves to corrupt the European Commission, praise their own vaccine, denigrate the others, and when their

services are accepted they delay with the delivery of vaccines and in the meantime people die. In the logic of capital, the pandemic was a good opportunity for enrichment. Sharks have become richer in e-commerce, taking advantage of lock down (see Amazon or Alibaba); smaller chickens from the sale of masks, detergent and RCA tests. The big sharks in Big Pharma have taken the big hit from vaccines paid for with public money. And they protected their vaccines by patents.

In a socialist world, the potential of science and technology should be at the service of society, not to make a profit for parasites. Because in socialism science and technology are committed to social profit - that is, the public good - and not the financial good. Examples could be China, which solved the pandemic problem (3 deaths/mil.inhab, donated medical supplies to many countries, produces its own vaccines), Vietnam (under one death per mil) and especially Cuba (22 deaths/mil.inhab, sent hundreds of doctors and nurses to the most affected areas of the world and produces its own vaccine). That is why I think that the Cuban medical team deserves the award of the Nobel Peace Prize.

## C. The pandemic in neoliberal Romania

In Romania the pandemic has hit a health system already tickled by the private sector and underfunded. The state had long since given dentistry, ophthalmology and dialysis to private clinics working for profit. Instead of patient the person in need was considered customer.

In addition, Romanian bad luck made the epidemic to occur during one of the most catastrophic governments since 1989: the Orban government. He found it appropriate to cut funds from health by 23%. Romania has the sad privilege of the dead burned in hospitals - there are already 28 people burned. During the pandemic there were deadly fires only in Italy, Turkey and Russia [9], [10].

Only one hospital has been built since the 1989 coup. Romania has the lowest percentage of

GDP for health, 5.2% cf [10].

In 2018, just before the cuts of the prime ministers Cîțu and Orban, Romania spent 584 Euros per person [11] on health - less than Bulgaria, poorer than us (600 Euros) and eight times less than Germany. PCR tests (searching Covid-19), which in other countries (Austria, Greece) are done for free, cost us 400 lei. The system is parasitized by private, profit-oriented clinics.

For private medicine, the patient is a customer, the ideal would be for everyone to be sick to sell their products.

For normal medicine, put at the service of the patient, the ideal would be, on the contrary, not to have patients. Except for the sick with the head, who get frustrated that they give money to doctors even though they are healthy...

And, in order to contribute even more to the underfunding of the public health system, the new prime minister, the unspeakable Cîțu, proposed a budget for 2021 with 11% smaller! Ignorance regarding the needs of the population is at its maximum. The priority of the new Minister of Health, a late graduate of economic studies whose only connection with medicine is the drug trade - namely Vlad Voiculescu - is not to improve the system, but to reform it. He has appointed among his counselors a person without connection with medicine to be patient navigator – meaning move the well connected patients from Romanian hospitals into other European country hospital. Who pays? The state.

In the last 30 years, we have known what reforms in capitalism mean: the destruction of what worked well before and the privatization of what can bring profit for capitalists. It is a matter of life and death for the Romanian society to resist Voiculescu's reforms and Cîțu's budget.

In the last seven years the Romanian spending on health care has decreased from 1,100 euro/inhabitant to 584 euro in 2018, during the social democrat govern. Meaning that the social democrats were not much better than the nowadays neoliberal hardliners, fans of Thatcher and Reagan.

## D. What is to be done from a socialist point of view?

Free health for all citizens. Where do the funds come from? In Romanian case: from progressive tax, taxation of large fortunes, taxation of the profit of large multinational companies, cuts in the military and services budget, capping of service pensions (some call them special), royalties and the transition to public management of utilities: water, gas, electric current. The subscriptions for water, energy, heating that citizens pay anyway should reach the public administration (state or town halls) and not the pockets of some parasites.

Waiver of drug patents. Industry and health research must be a public good for all mankind. The results of research in the pharmaceutical industry must be open access, so that any state can benefit from them. It would also be to the advantage of Big Pharma - Pfizer or AstraZeneca would get rid of the care to spy the competitors. They complained that their servers were being attacked – by North Korea! If all the results and research are open source they will not need to protect their research. Cooperation, not competition – that should be the rule in anything connected with public health.

Rapid vaccination of the population with vaccines produced by publicly owned companies, giving up corruption and politicization. Corruption occurs only at the public-private intersection. Protecting the disadvantaged masses in the first place, because they are the most affected by the pandemic. Free tests, free sanitary supplies for those in need.

Mobilize and resist. Health care is NOT a business! It is the right of any citizen!

1. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>
2. [https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grip%C4%83\\_spaniol%C4%83](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grip%C4%83_spaniol%C4%83)
3. <https://www.statista.com/chart/7495/germany-leads-europe-in-hospital-bed-capacity/> Hospital beds in Europe.
4. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Hospital\\_discharges\\_and\\_length\\_of\\_stay\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Hospital_discharges_and_length_of_stay_statistics)
5. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shortages\\_related\\_to\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_pandemic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shortages_related_to_the_COVID-19_pandemic)
6. <https://www.oecd.org/economic-outlook/> here is the pandemic impact on GDP in 20 countries. The decrease in GDP was 7.5% in Europe, 4.1% in the world and the only country that has increased its GDP is China.
7. <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/analysis?ID=8ACFB304-2B09-4BC4-A3B7-9946216BC150> On x-axis one sees the decreasing of GDP and on y-axis the number of deaths per million inhabitants. Data from September 2020
8. <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-health-economy> The same, but on y-axis there is the number of cases. Seems to be a positive correlation. Cuba is missing.
9. <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/10-patients-and-nurse-die-within-seconds-in-hospital-fire-1.121775>
10. <https://www.euronews.com/2021/02/05/why-has-romania-had-two-deadly-hospital-fires-in-a-matter-of-months>
11. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20201202-1> Spending for health care in Europe, 2018. Surprise: the last country is Luxembourg. Romania is before it.
12. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European\\_countries\\_by\\_health\\_expense\\_per\\_person](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_countries_by_health_expense_per_person). Older data about spending in health care - 2011 – 2014. Surprising: Romanian involution: from 1,100 Euro/inhabitant in 2014 to 584 euro in 2018. That was before the neoliberal governments.

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# **Contributions**

# The corona crisis and the consequences for European politics

*Party of the European Left*

## Preamble

The health crisis that the world is facing reveals a structural crisis that already existed and that the EL has consistently exposed. The EL took on the task of proposing an alternative model for this Europe following the explosion of Covid-19. For this, a platform has been created and we are working very actively to develop it as quickly and as best as possible, focusing not only on solutions for the actual crisis, but also, more in the long term, for a public, social and ecological transformation of the economy. It is important to rethink the role of European and global institutions, to ensure investments that go in the direction of a Social Green New Deal, to protect workers and for a tomorrow focused on human needs and not just on profit.

The situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is a shock for all humanity. Drastic measures have been taken in almost all countries to prevent people from contracting the disease and to contain the pandemic. While, indeed, every effort must be made to protect the population, these measures must be coordinated, but an effective European coordination by its institutions is still absent as well as a global response. In this way, the countries most affected are left on their own. The risk is therefore that the politics in general, with the the Stability Pact in particular, will limit solidarity among countries in coping with economic crisis by leading to the dichotomy privileged countries – countries already hit by austerity in the past.

The spread of the COVID-19 virus also has significant consequences for the economy: it is accelerating the crisis of neoliberal globalisation as a hegemonic model of society, accelerating

the restructuring process of capitalism.

The coronavirus pandemic clearly shows the failure of the prevailing neoliberal economic and social model. As a consequence of the neoliberal austerity policy of privatising public services, healthcare systems are not able to cope with the public needs in a pandemic.

The Party of the European Left (EL) demands immediate measures to combat the consequences of the crisis and a radical change of policy, opening a new path for the development of the society, placing the people at its core.

Some measures at national level to protect the most vulnerable people, like in Spain, are going in a good direction, but comprehensive activities concerning five poles are necessary. First and foremost, everything must be done to protect the people. A public, social, and ecological transformation of the economy is urgently needed. Democratic institutions and rights must not be questioned by the measures undertaken in order to combat the crisis: on the contrary, in difficult times like these, democracy and civil rights have to be defended and expanded. There is no other answer than international solidarity to the global dimension of the crisis: now it's the time for a new initiative for disarmament and a policy of détente.

## Protection of the population

Every effort must be made to improve the operational capacity of healthcare systems. We need extra resources for public health systems, as well as convergence of standards in all countries in terms of personnel, facilities and equipment in the public hospitals and prevention systems, and an increase in the capacity for production of

health protection tools. And it is also imperative to acquire, on a continent-wide scale, European public services, efficient and coordinated with the rest of the world. We call for the immediate creation of a European Health Fund funded by the ECB with 100-year securities that are not negotiable on the markets and the possibilities to obtain more public services by abolishing Growth and the Fiscal Compact.

The population must be protected, both socially and economically. Thousands of workers and employees are at risk of losing their jobs and their incomes, or already did. The virus hits the weakest hardest: those most affected are people working in poorly paid and precarious jobs, particularly cleaning staff and carers.

Although governments across Europe are asking employees to work from home, this does not apply to everyone and in too many cases it is a privilege. Workers in essential services or essential production lines, who have to be present in the workplace, need guaranteed protection against the spread of the virus.

We demand an economic rescue plan for workers and their families, including all precarious workers, the unemployed and non documented, migrants and refugees or similar. In case of income losses, financial compensation is needed. Rents and mortgages need to be suspended for those who cannot pay them because of their income loss. We oppose any attempt to worsen working conditions, such as the suspension of collective agreements and the reduction of workers' rights. The systems of social protection, salaries and pensions should be adapted to the highest level we have in Europe.

Women are the ones who sustained the most efforts to keep us all safe and the society running: their essential role must be recognised and honoured. No solidarity or mutual aid could exist without the crucial role of women. Despite that, they are mostly affected by precarious working conditions, in particular nurses, cashiers or cleaners. The situation of women migrants in the camps or also in the host countries is especially hard.

Women should not pay the highest price for this crisis: we need a concrete plan focusing on the

protection of all women (workers, unemployed, migrants), especially when victims of any form of violence (particularly domestic violence).

We strongly oppose the pressure by the economic and industrial world onto decision-makers to end the lockdown measures and reopen even non-essential productions without guaranteeing the basic conditions for workers' safety to avoid the increase of infections.

We need urgent actions not only for big companies, but in particular for small and medium-sized businesses and self-employed workers. Financial support for businesses must be aimed at maintaining employment levels, respecting wages, working hours and duties. In order to deal with the problems of production remodelling, the reduction of working hours for equal pay shall be encouraged.

The importance of cultural work has also been unrecognized for decades. But there will be no Europe without culture. Like air and water, like public services, culture is a common good which cannot be considered as a market value subject to the rules of profitability and profit. The importance of culture is that it brings together, it emancipates, it flourishes. It must imperatively be supported. For this, we consider these two demands as necessary:

- An artist status recognized throughout Europe;
- A European Fund to support the cultural policies of States and Regions.

## Economic recovery and ecological-social transformation

As an immediate measure, we need more investment in public services.

Firstly, we need to put an end to the austerity policies by completely abolishing the Stability and Growth Pact. Europe must leave this instrument behind, as it is used to impose austerity on public spending, thus undermining healthcare and other public services to the detriment of the population, who are now suffering the consequences of these policies in

# Contributions

the coronavirus crisis.

The European Central Bank (ECB) should be the instrument to guarantee the huge resources necessary to face the immense social, economic and medical emergency underway. The ECB's money should be used to help the people to emerge from the medical health emergency and to combat the consequences of the crisis, not to maintain the rate of return on capital. The ECB must assume its responsibility for economic development and must take all the measures necessary to avoid financial speculation. It is a precondition to ensure that national actions can be coordinated and that a strong solidarity-based system will be established to deal with the coronavirus crisis. Both the ECB and national banks should be used to increase spending on social services and protection of the population. Furthermore, the ECB must finance a European investment plan, capable of boosting employment and guaranteeing a change in the environmental and social model of production and the economy. We need a programme of productive reconstruction including the relocation of strategic industries. We demand a European Recovery Fund, financed through bonds issued by the Fund itself or by the European Investment Bank and acquired by the ECB. At the same time, the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), which represents an unnecessary and harmful way of intervening in the public budgets of the various European countries, should be abolished.

The German Constitutional Court questioned the competencies of both the ECB and the court of Luxemburg, and ignores the economic requirements we need for the European development. Its decision for us represents no more than the flip side of austerity and of the neoliberal project. It is functional to discourage and avoid solidarity actions, and to undermine the path to any project for a social Europe.

We propose a general moratorium of the public debts. Furthermore, we propose a European conference about the public debt and an open discussion about the criteria for the classification of debt.

This crisis of the COVID-19 shows that the

market does not take care of the needs of the citizens at all. It is not even able of ensuring the minimum necessary for life. We want a relaunch of the public role, lost during the period of privatization, in all sectors: the credit system, strategic productions, research system and services. We need an economic model focused on public welfare, and the immense accumulation of capital by the few must be stopped. For the many, not just for the few!

Financing the increase in social spending and in investing in the transformation of industry, requires a policy of fiscal justice: we demand a new tax collection model that taxes large sources of capital and wealth, based on tax progressivity criteria, and ends tax havens inside and outside the EU. A tax on GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft) and on NATU (Netflix, Airbnb, Tesla, Uber) is necessary.

The crisis provides sufficient reasons to question our socio-economic model and to radically change politics. A change is needed also because we face enormous ecological challenges such as climate change, which have a very wide-ranging social impact. For the Left, the connection between ecological requirements and social needs is crucial. We need a green transition in industry, but we must also protect the workers and employees affected by this process. A "Just transition", as promoted by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), aims at combining ecological transition with social protection. We need a new industrial policy with new concepts of energy and mobility. We need a plan for the environmental and social reconversion of the economy that ensures full and good employment and protects everyone's rights, starting from gender equality. From the point of view of the Left, a new industrial policy must include direct participation by the workers and, therefore, must be combined with economic democracy.

## Democracy

EL recognizes that COVID-19 crisis can threaten democracies and the risk that irresponsible

action lead to the emergence of extreme right and its complete unsolidarity rhetoric. Against the attempts to take advantage of the emergency situation in order to limit or suspend our rights, the EL defends democracy and its institutions. For example, the parliaments should remain in function and not suspended, as it was the case in Hungary.

We know that very stringent measures are needed to contain the pandemic. But we have to be vigilant and make sure that restrictions of freedom deemed necessary to stop the progress of the pandemic must remain exceptional measures.

The EL also firmly rejects any attempt to misuse the corona pandemic for xenophobic or nationalist demagoguery.

## Disarmament and peace

The unconditional commitment to peace and disarmament is one of the essential elements of the politics of the Left. Without peace there is no future for humankind.

The coronavirus emergency should be taken as an opportunity to put disarmament and peace back to the centre of policy making. Military spending must be reduced considerably in favour of healthcare and meeting social needs. It is time for an initiative for a new policy of détente.

The war manoeuvre “Defender” was stopped by the coronavirus outbreak but it has not been cancelled altogether. Therefore, we must continue and intensify our resistance against those dangerous military exercises. NATO is not an organization defending the interest of the Europeans. With its aggressive activities, it is a dangerous organisation. NATO has to be dissolved in favour of a new collective security system, which also includes Russia.

## European and international solidarity

We need a social way out of the crisis that

goes beyond the current model of European integration. Our goal is a social way out of the crisis. In order to do so, any proposal has to encompass several strands:

- Europe shall diversify its international relations with fair commercial relations based on mutual benefit, not competition for profit.
- The promotion of an all-European cooperation process including Russia.
- The development of a model of socially-advanced states characterized by a “horizontal” solidarity and cooperation and with a productive and sustainable programme of reconstruction targeting at achieving food sovereignty through greater support and innovation for agriculture.
- Support to the WHO, especially financially, to play a more effective role in such crises.
- Defense of the UN threatened by the US administration in the interest of multilateralism.
- This is not just a task for Europe but for the whole world: the countries in the Global South need financial support to protect their populations and to improve their healthcare systems.
- We need to assure that refugees and migrants are treated according to the international and European law, that their human and civic rights are definitely respected, their life in not jeopardized either by illegal detainment, push-backs, deportations hidden from the public eye, or by lack of healthcare, improper accommodation, unacceptable living conditions, racist and xenophobic reactions, exploitation, hate speech, acts of violence. We have to focus on their proper education, decent and equal working opportunities, personal thriving and social integration .
- A humanitarian response to the situation of millions of human beings all around the world who have to leave their homes to escape from misery, hunger, disease and war and who will now see their situation worsen.
- The world must remain united and the key to overcome the crisis is international solidarity. There is a particular need to increase solidarity with the peoples of the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America, who are in much greater danger of being severely affected by

# Contributions

the COVID-19 pandemic. The blockade against Cuba and the US sanctions against 53 countries, including Venezuela, should be lifted.

– We stress a new emphasis on the cultural

and value-led principles that allow the full development of the human being in an egalitarian and ecologically-protected society.

# Coronavirus, Workers and Precariousness: Challenges for an Exit Based on Strengthening Labour<sup>1</sup>

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## Work, precariousness and globalisation: the pre-corona reality

The International Labour Organization (ILO) celebrated its first century of life in 2019, commemorating it with the approval of the Declaration on the Future of Work<sup>2</sup>. The text highlighted the ‘radical transformation’ of the labour market caused by ‘technological innovations, demographic shifts, environmental and climate change, and globalization’. There was no shortage of criticism of this diagnosis that, while still being true for a part of the planet’s workers, was unable to grasp the main problems that the other part of the world workforce faces every day, engulfed by precariousness and poverty<sup>3</sup>.

In fact, the ILO recognised almost simultaneously, in its 2020 report on social and employment prospects in the world that poverty and inequality are continually expanding, with employment and labour regulation unable to solve them. Beyond the challenges posed by artificial intelligence and other future scenarios, the ILO admitted that for a good part of the 3.3 billion people who work in the world, having a job does not mean the end of poverty<sup>4</sup>.

That labour markets do not adequately distribute the benefits of economic growth is confirmed by these studies, raising the question of the dignity of the populations studied. Thus, the work-poverty link, which was broken for the social

majorities of the core economies in the golden decades of the social state, has returned under the guise of the word ‘precariousness’.

The now ubiquitous term ‘job insecurity’ has received so much use that it is often difficult to define, even for researchers and theorists specialising in the field<sup>5</sup>. It has been identified with uncertainty about the continuity or stability of a job<sup>6</sup>; a means for employers to transfer their entrepreneurial risks to workers<sup>7</sup>; or with a phenomenon in which workers accept risks but receive limited benefits<sup>8</sup>, among many other definitions. It is a term that Izabela Florczak has defined as ‘both known and unidentified’<sup>9</sup>, and Alberti, Bessa, Hardy, Trappmann and Umney have described as ‘nebulous’<sup>10</sup>.

However one understands it, it cannot be forgotten that the Great Recession of 2008 served as a way to sharpen policies based on internal devaluation, deepening accumulation by dispossession, rapidly transferring income from labour to capital, squandering decades of conquest of social rights and expansion of public services, and breaking the old capital-labour pact. The former ‘standard’ worker, with a permanent full-time contract, with full social security coverage and wages protecting him from poverty, became a rarity in the labour market, causing some to question whether at some point it was really a ‘standard’ fiction<sup>11</sup> (Van der Linden, 2017, pp. 197-200).

The extension of precariousness, which has become a contemporary hallmark of labour markets, has had a multi-causal origin, which

## Contributions

can be traced both at the supranational and state levels and from the point of view of institutional action and the relationship of forces between the subjects representing the interests of capital and labour. On the one hand, in essence, the different labour models set out in national standards have been greatly influenced by trade and investment policies, for it is still undeniable that the “labour policy” of the International Monetary Fund and other international financial institutions have penetrated the labour laws of many countries, subverting the labour regulatory sphere starting in the 1950s, with greater momentum since the 1980s, and through the different “Washington and Brussels Consensuses”<sup>12</sup>.

In addition, the trend is for increased infringement of labour rights in trade and investment treaties and the ongoing introduction of new mechanisms such as regulatory cooperation, which opens a huge floodgate for *Lex mercatoria* (‘law merchant’) in the field of social rights<sup>13</sup>.

On the other hand, the increase in the economic power of transnational corporations (TNCs) and the development of their large global value chains<sup>14</sup> have also contributed to this labour scenario. Practices of decentralisation and territorialisation have affected the international division of labour, forcing regulatory competition between states and triggering a race to the bottom, functional social dumping, opacity and impunity of the activities of TNCs, and negatively affecting the creation of decent employment by limiting the ability to monitor and control adherence to labour regulations, thus effecting a drop in labour standards<sup>15</sup>. The pre-Covid scenario of *Lex mercatoria*’s offensive against labour is still more complex when we additionally consider the findings of Oxfam’s analysis of inequality<sup>16</sup>, modern slavery rates<sup>17</sup>, or the unpunished crimes of various transnational companies against human and natural rights<sup>18</sup>. At the national level, the endless reforms were presented as solutions to a global economic crisis “caused” by the rights won by workers in the post-war social pact. The reality of impoverished workers in ‘atypical’ jobs, established itself, and work stopped being synonymous with emancipation and dignity,

becoming a condition devoid of rights. This already eroded reality of the working class was worsened by the permanent offensive – a hallmark of neoliberal policies since its birth in Chile – against the collective subject of work. Factors such as the ongoing discrediting in the media, the reforms of collective bargaining, the criminalisation of the right to strike or the reconfiguration of the international division of labour and the spread of global value chains has entailed an accelerated loss of the power of unions and therefore of their ability to negotiate and act as a counter-power, at a national and international level.

The ‘overcoming of the crisis’ of 2008 in the workplace was nothing more than a mirage, at least in qualitative terms and from a global perspective. It is true, as the ILO report *World employment and social outlook: trends 2020* pointed out, that before the appearance of Covid-19 the recovery in quantitative terms of employment at a global level post-Great Recession occurred in some developed countries, particularly in the British and American economies, which have experienced notable increases in their employment rates. However, this quantitative recovery did not result in a qualitative recovery, and, as noted above, the ILO itself pointed to the fact that having a job most often no longer guaranteed decent work conditions or an adequate income. One of the paradigmatic examples of this weak and tremendously unequal recovery from the effects of the Great Recession is the case of Spain, eternally suffering from structural deficiencies in its labour model, with the greater likelihood from 2006 to 2015 that the new jobs created would be characterised by temporary employment, night work, low wages and especially involuntary part-time work<sup>19</sup>.

In the so called “recovery”, those who had traditionally benefited from the moments of exiting an economic crisis (young people, workers with low incomes or a lower educational level) saw no improvement, turning them into hyper-vulnerable subjects on the scenario marked by Covid-19<sup>20</sup>. Before going into the specific impacts of the syndemic caused by the coronavirus, we should point

out that the labour landscape was taking a particularly interesting turn in some countries, such as Spain, precisely in the months before the virus began to spread. The formation of a coalition government in 2019, for the first time in Spain's post-dictatorship history, consisting of a traditional social democratic and a left-wing party (Unidas Podemos), signalled a gradual shift towards welfare policies and a manifest desire to rebuild the social pact with its guarantees of decent work. In fact, on labour issues, the government's objectives were clear: the repeal of the labour reform of 2012 – an icon of neoliberalism – something that began with the elimination of layoffs due to numerous sick leaves, and most importantly, the drafting of a Labour Statute that would respond to the needs of a new labour social model for the 21st century.

As we will show, the presence of Unidas Podemos in the government has been decisive for the adoption of the key neo-Keynesian measures approaching the social effects of this crisis in ways diametrically opposed to those carried out during the Great Recession.

The impact of the syndemic on the world of work: when it rains it pours

Thus Covid-19 appeared in a reality already marked by precariousness in certain sectors and with economies highly dependent on trade, foreign investment, and labour performed under miserable conditions.

Covid-19 also exposed how superficial the presumption had been of an ever decreasing need for human labour, with the consequent transformation of the workplace. One of the main measures used by the media to depict the severity of the health crisis during both the first and second wave of Covid-19 has been the number of hospital beds occupied. But what this metonymy conveys is not only a calculation of infrastructure use, including the physical beds themselves, but a concern about the under-supply of health workers and auxiliary workers in hospitals, who are absolutely necessary to face the pandemic and whose efforts and exposure were recognised with daily applause

from people's balconies during the lockdowns. Human labour and workers have, far from being obsolete or destined to disappear given the unstoppable rise of robotisation or an absolute transformation of the workforce, been reaffirmed during this health crisis as an absolutely essential centrepiece of social functioning.

It is not surprising that the coronavirus syndemic, which has cast its shadow over the year 2020 and the present year, is leaving behind a patently brutal balance sheet in the sphere of health but also in the economic/labour sphere, seriously affecting income and thus the capacities of citizens to live dignified lives. Current data on the tremendously affected workforce indicates a global and unprecedented impact on employment. According to the ILO's January 2021 analysis<sup>21</sup>, in the second quarter of 2020 a reduction in working hours of around 18.2 per cent (equivalent to 525 million full-time jobs) had been reached. These forecasts are greater for lower-middle-income countries, where the percentage of hours lost reached 23.3 percent (240 million full-time equivalent jobs) for the same quarter (as estimated in September 2020 but revised to 29.9 percent in the ILO's January 2021 estimates), the forecasts for the end of the year have worsened as the spread of the virus and its management have evolved.

By sectors, the most affected are food and accommodation services, manufacturing industries, wholesale and retail trade, real-estate activities, and administrative and commercial activities. These sectors employ 1.25 billion people worldwide, or almost 38% of the world's workforce. These are labour-intensive sectors with high rates of precarious employment/wages and informality. In other words, these are workers who cannot cope with a drastic drop in income without falling into existential hardship. In particular, people with informal labour relations, around 2 billion according to the ILO and most of them in emerging and developing countries, are in serious danger of having to choose between becoming infected or getting sustenance for their families.

Thus, the pre-corona scenario was already particularly serious for the world's most

## Contributions

vulnerable workers and the coronavirus crisis has especially impacted on them. This is due to several factors that are traditionally combined in peripheral economies but which have begun to spread to central economies: the existence of a larger informal sector and a smaller public sector, the difficulties in teleworking, and the scant resources (or provision) that governments allocate for revenue compensation measures.

The data for the central economies is equally alarming. Published studies point to a foreseeable increase in unemployment in the United States and the United Kingdom, which has already affected the most vulnerable groups such as young workers, workers with less education, and ethnic minorities<sup>22</sup>. In particular, the United Kingdom experienced a relatively low increase in the unemployment rate during the first wave, perhaps thanks to the launch of the Job Retention Scheme, a programme through which the British Government provided up to 80% of wages to workers unable to continue work activity due to the pandemic, as well as improved social benefits for the unemployed<sup>23</sup>. The lack of active workers was also noticeable, among other sectors, in health, supermarkets, and delivery services<sup>24</sup>.

Something similar could be observed in Australia, where the number of hours worked fell by 9.5% from April to May, with a 'rebound' effect from May to June of 3.6 percentage points, unlike previous recessions in which the decrease in hours had been more progressive; the rebound could be attributed to the Australian government's crisis response, and in particular to its JobKeeper subsidy programme for particularly affected companies in order to avoid layoffs<sup>25</sup>. In Canada, Covid-19 resulted in a 32% decline in weekly hours worked for workers between 20 and 64 years of age and a 15% decrease in the employment rate<sup>26</sup>.

In the case of Spain, Covid-19 has had a serious impact on labour, even despite instruments such as the Ruling on Temporary Employment Regulation (ERTEs<sup>27</sup>), which we will address below. As Llorente Heras argues<sup>28</sup>, the syndemic is having especially negative effects on vulnerable groups such as young people or new entrants in the unemployment rolls,

unemployed workers without the right to these benefits, or those who have them to a limited degree, and workers over 45 years of age. Other forecasts of the pandemic's economic impact have emphasised the unequal weight of industry in various autonomous communities<sup>29</sup>, anticipating a greater effect in sectors more dependent on the hotel and restaurant industry but also where vehicle manufacturing had significant weight due to the closure of production plants and the carry-over effect from other sectors<sup>30</sup>. A report from the UGT union that collected data up to the month of May confirmed that it was the recreational activities sectors as well as construction, hospitality, and administrative activities and auxiliary services that experienced the greatest negative variation in social security benefits between March and April, with a notable rebound effect from April to May in the construction sector and, to a significantly lower degree, in the hospitality sector<sup>31</sup>.

A study by Salas Nicás, Llorens Serrano, Navarro i Giné, and Moncada i Lluís is of special interest<sup>32</sup>. It is based on a survey carried out between April and May that allows us to focus on the effects of the pandemic, not only regarding level of employment but in terms of different variables and groups of workers. From the data provided by this study, we call attention to the following: 37.8% of the people surveyed went to their job as usual during the state of emergency, and 13.1% can be calculated to have done so with symptoms; furthermore, the proportion of those who went to work with symptoms is higher when their salary did not cover their basic needs (18.2%). Alongside the health sectors, most of the people affected worked at grocery stores or supermarkets, construction, sanitation, or home delivery companies.

In addition, the people who went to work without the necessary protective measures exceed 70% of those working and were located in the same sectors. Teleworking was only possible for 30.1% of the workers. Job loss among respondents reaches 5.7%, mainly due to lay-offs but also due to non-renewal of contract. Men were slightly more affected than

women, as were manual workers compared to non-manual workers, but the difference could be observed especially in how this destruction was felt among young workers, 17% of people under the age of 25 having lost their jobs. The ERTE mechanism was applied to more than one in four workers surveyed, both in suspension mode and in the reduction of working hours.

From the beginning of the syndemic, the ILO, with the analysis of the impact we have highlighted, and other international organisations warned that the severity of the social impact data would largely depend on policy decisions adopted by the different governments. The crisis approach adopted by the Spanish government, the Ministry of Labour, and other departments involved such as the Ministry of Social Security or the Second Vice Presidency of the Government<sup>33</sup>, is an example of public response with a social approach.

## Institutional reactions: from neoliberal adjustment to a socially oriented public response

Spain declared a state of emergency with the 463/2020 Royal-Decree of 14 March 2020<sup>34</sup>.

The first of the workplace measures were put into practice two days before the formal declaration of the state of emergency. RD Law 7/2020, of 12 March<sup>35</sup>, guaranteed temporary disability benefits due to work accidents for people subjected to periods of isolation, either due to infection or quarantine. Starting with the declaration of the state of emergency, the government adopted various measures to cushion the economic effects of the health crisis on salaried and self-employed people, companies, etc.

An avalanche of government regulations has enacted measures dealing with the suspension of employment contracts and reduction of working hours due to the ceasing of activity but also with many other areas, implemented beginning with the pioneering Royal Decree- Law 8/2020,

of 17 March<sup>36</sup> promulgating extraordinary and urgent measures to deal with the economic and social impact of Covid-19.

While these do not involve direct intervention by the state and public entities in the economy, there are some exceptions such as the regulation of protective-equipment prices. And rather than direct economic intervention, the measures arbitrate mechanisms of business flexibility and their counterpart in the form of social protection at work. Significantly, practically all of them have been negotiated and agreed upon within the framework of social agreement between the Ministry of Labour and the most representative trade unions and employer organisations.

Below we will briefly analyse the flexibility and social protection measures that have become more important for safeguarding jobs and employment levels, while articulating social benefits and protecting people's health.

First of all, the measures related to teleworking and flexibilisation of working time. The 17 March Law contained a series of measures aimed at maintaining work activity combined with health and sanitary measures. Given the need to prevent the movement of the population, it was adopted as the first option in terms of emergency measures, establishing the possibility of teleworking and the obligation to make working time more flexible along with the need to maintain co-responsibility in care.

The second set of measures is the Ruling on Temporary Employment Regulation<sup>37</sup>, which allows suspension of the employment contract or reduction of the working day. The 17 March law adapted an existing mechanism in the legal system, the ERTE, in order to "guarantee that business activity and work relationships are resumed normally after exceptional health situations".

Along with telework, this type of mechanism, which allows the suspension of work contracts and reductions in working hours, has become the main bulwark of job retention in a good number of countries of the European Union. After two months of lockdown, one in four salaried workers in the European Union was affected by an ERTE or a similar suspension measure. Both in absolute and in relative terms

## Contributions

this type of mechanism has been extended to the greatest number of people in France and in Italy. If the need for it is indisputable, the public indebtedness that this type of measures is entailing and the difficulties in effectively paying benefits must also be taken into account as was done in Spain and Italy. In fact, the debate over extending ERTes has continued, given the second wave of the pandemic and anticipation of further waves. These mechanisms are necessary, but what also seems clear is that they are neither sufficient nor the only solution to keep the business world afloat, which needs the implementation of other support, stimulus, and regeneration measures.

The adoption and coverage by mechanisms similar to ERTE in other countries vary considerably, and so we will briefly explain the Spanish reality so that it can be used as an example. One of the most characteristic features of this mechanism that allows the suspension of contracts or the temporary reduction of the working day is the “express” decision procedure that involves the labour authority, unions or worker representatives, and companies. This collective representation in the adoption of measures has been particularly characteristic in France and Italy<sup>38</sup>.

The ruling establishes the possibility of suspending or reducing working hours due to force majeure or for economic, technical, organisational, or production reasons related to the coronavirus. Although at first the distinction between ERTE due to force majeure and ERTE based on economic, technical, organisational, and productive causes, both derived from the health crisis, seemed important, the truth is that its consequences were borne more by the company than by workers. In addition, it must be kept in mind that around 90% of the rulings promulgated during the first state of emergency decreed on 14 March had a proven force majeure cause.

ERTes due to “force majeure” affect the company and its employees. In terms of the former, three characteristics are worth mentioning. In the first place, they allow the suspension or reduction of working hours while exempting companies from paying the

corporate Social Security contributions to the Treasury Department. Second, and precisely because of the economic advantage it brings, these ERTes include a corporate commitment to maintain employment for 6 months<sup>39</sup>. Lastly, the formalisation procedures of the ruling are made more flexible and streamlined, both by shortening the deadlines and by generally dispensing with control reports by the Labour Inspectorate.

On the side of workers, a mechanism was activated that will ensure they receive unemployment benefits, whether or not they meet the usual requirements for accessing them (for example, the contribution period) and without “consuming” their already contributed right<sup>40</sup>. It is important to focus on the part of the wage that salaried people lose in this situation caused by Covid-19, since the unemployment benefits only covers 70% of the regulatory base for which they were contributing. The truth is that this loss of income is a common feature in legal mechanisms present in comparative law, and that while countries like the Netherlands and Denmark provide benefits amounting to 100% of salary, countries like France, Spain, or Italy contemplate a reduction – in the best case, the provision sets the benefits at 80% of the base, as in Italy.

With the return to the workplace of workers with a suspended contract, governments such as Italy’s found it convenient to permit reductions in social security contributions, which resulted in a reduction of up to 30% in contributions between 1 October and 31 December 2020 for companies in southern Italy. This measure was intended to encourage job creation in the regions of the country with the highest levels of unemployment and lowest levels of industrialisation.

Apart from ERTes due to force majeure, those having economic, technical, organisational, or productive causes (ETOP), known as causes of an objective nature, appeared on the scene. These have constituted 10% of all ERTes declared.

The third group of measures is a guarantee against layoffs and termination of contracts. The Spanish government has tried to articulate

mechanisms to halt the termination of contracts. Among the most important is the employment safeguard clause<sup>41</sup>, the prohibition on firing<sup>42</sup>, the interruption of the duration of temporary contracts or the extension of some fixed-term contracts such as research contracts. The measures were introduced after two weeks of the state of emergency and, although their validity was intended to go to 30 June 2020, their effects will remain in place until 31 January 2021. Fourth, and extremely important, the government has approved a series of measures for the specific protection of people in situations of economic and social hardship<sup>43</sup>.

These include the following: suspension of eviction procedures, extension of rental leases, moratoriums on rents, supply guarantees, support for self-employed workers and small and medium-sized companies. The regulation contains two particularly important labour measures in the form of two extraordinary allowances for family household workers and for situations of temporary-contract terminations. Undoubtedly, the star provision within this fourth category was the Minimum Necessary Income measure approved by the government on 29 May, with the direct aim of ensuring a level of income for people in a situation of hardship for lack of sufficient economic resources to cover their basic needs. This minimum vital income is 5,538 euros per year, which is equivalent to 416.5 euros per month and is only guaranteed for as long as resources remain insufficient. It is thus not a Universal Basic Income, as many social groups demanded but was never the government's intention. On the other hand, this new benefit is not sufficient to satisfy human needs, being far lower than the minimum wage established at a monthly amount of 950 euros by Royal Decree 231/2020, of February 4.

## Conclusions

The uncertainty generated by the unexpected appearance and evolution of Covid-19 makes it impossible to predict with certainty its social and economic effects in the near future.

Nevertheless, the data examined so far shows how its worst effects have been borne by people who had already been in more unprotected situations and thus particularly vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic: young workers, those with less education and income, those with manual occupations and in the cleaning, retail and food, health, and home-delivery sectors. It is important to prioritise the groups of workers who have been more exposed to the pandemic due to poor and unprotected work conditions. Public measures ought to focus on these groups even though their cases are not publicised in the media; they are the ones most affected by the situation and who will probably continue to be so. Since they are so exposed, taking care of their health is tantamount to taking care of the rest of the population's health.

The urgent socioeconomic measures enacted by numerous EU governments, including Spain's, to deal with the pandemic-induced crisis have been of a clear social character. We will highlight three fundamental characteristics of these social policies. First, they consist of labour policies giving flexibility to companies, while creating mechanisms that legally ensure their proper use in order to prevent fraud and abuse and massive layoffs, safeguard employment, etc. All of this has helped contain job destruction, to a greater or lesser extent, although the very haste of government responses has been partly to the detriment of progress in labour-law protection for workers. Second, social benefits have been ambitiously deployed, providing a good degree of coverage but not enough to protect the people in certain specific situations of vulnerability. And third, the governments have opted, in general, for classic legal processes based on negotiating and establishing pacts between the government, the employers, and the union, which has meant that they have slighted more interventionist tools.

Future forecasts at this time are difficult, considering the variety of locally conditioned regulatory and labour policies carried out by governments and institutions. This will certainly have its effect on future social majorities in the short and medium term, but the consequences of this pandemic for labour must also be assessed

# Contributions

in relation to the social imagination and shifts in the 'common sense' in the perception of labour. In fact, it is already possible to say that in these months the concept of work broadly recuperated some of its former core value.

Thus, different realities have become particularly visible and palpable. For decades, attention had been called to them by social movements and unions alike: the importance of healthcare and of healthcare personnel, the importance of care and caregivers; the precariousness of salaried jobs in the care sector and the invisibility of unpaid care work; the lack of workers in sectors fundamental to life, such as agriculture when the entry of immigrants is blocked; the scant supply of basic consumer goods (such as medical supplies) as the links in global production chains are cut; the need for strong government intervention in the economy to sustain work and production structures, which has not meant a blank check to cancel business losses but, in general, has required companies to act responsibly; the awareness of the terrible situation of people whose lives are tied to the global production chains of transnational companies; the evidence of the climate crisis and the ecological emergency we face, generating more awareness of the direct link between these and daily production activities; and so on.

Regardless of the political orientation of the governments and their containment and management policies, the above-mentioned realities have made it possible to start emphasising labour reforms based on dignity, to reconstruct work as a right that is respectful of life, human dignity, and the rights of nature. And, more, earlier critiques of the shortcomings of the post-war social state must now be taken up again in proposing an alternative that does not repeat those shortcomings and is at the same time a viable option for the well-being of the social majority and our future generations. In this sense, it is essential to put certain principles on the table such as: the defence of recognition, dignity, and co-responsibility in care work, eliminating the sexual division of labour; respect for the rights of nature and combating socio-environmental extractivism, especially in the countries of the Global South; the importance

of social dialogue as a tool to forge consensus and the need to extend it to all links in global value chains; the urgent need to hold the TNCs directly responsible for the working conditions existing in all their links; the eradication of modern slavery, including the over-exploitation of agricultural labour by foreign labour in the central economies; and much more.

In the midst of this moment, the right to work, which was never revolutionary but essential, has regained the centrality that it lost during the years of the Brussels Consensus.

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3. *The Declaration was preceded by the report of the Global Commission on the Future of Work, Geneva: 2019, <[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---cabinet/documents/publication/wcms\\_662410.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---cabinet/documents/publication/wcms_662410.pdf)>..*

4. *The report highlights that more than 470 million people worldwide lack adequate access to paid work or are denied the opportunity to work their desired number of hours. ILO, World Employment and Social Outlook – Trends 2020, Geneva: 2020, <[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_734455.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_734455.pdf)>, p. 12.*

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15. Guamán, 'The Corporate Architecture of Impunity'; Report of the Committee on Decent Work in Global Supply Chains: Resolution and conclusions submitted for adoption by the Conference, Geneva, 2016, <[https://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/previous-sessions/105/reports/provisional-records/WCMS\\_489115/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/ilc/ILCSessions/previous-sessions/105/reports/provisional-records/WCMS_489115/lang--en/index.htm)>.

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## Contributions

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35. <<https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2020/03/13/pdfs/BOE-A-2020-3580.pdf>>.

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39. This exemption only reached 75% of the contribution when the company had less than 50 workers, according to art. 24 of RD ley 8/2020.

40. This is not something new. Zapatero attempted this when he still believed, in 2009, in an alternative management of the crisis with Royal Decree Law 2/2009. Its role was to maintain and create employment. The measure involved the replacement of the unemployment benefits already consumed (120- and 90-day limits) for those workers who had their employment contract suspended or working hours reduced with a subsequent termination of the employment contract; or if there were two suspensions of work contract and/or reduction of working hours; all this was processed under the appropriate ERES (mass layoff), ERTES, judicial adjudication of the dispute, or individual termination of the employment contract for objective reasons. But the measure was temporally limited to the immediate crisis, extending to 31 December 2011 in the case of administratively or judicially authorised terminations, and to 31 October 2009 in the case of approved suspension measures (with the same terms).

41. The RD Law 8/2020, in its sixth DA, known as the employment safeguard clause, provided for extraordinary workplace measures were tied to the company's commitment to maintain employment for a period of six months from the date of resumption of activity.

42. Despite the establishment of the ERTES, the unions began to denounce the adoption of layoffs from the beginning of the mobility restrictions and suspension of activities. To prevent companies from resorting to

terminations they allowed the ERTES as a mechanism for contractual suspension or reduction of working hours, as Art. 2 of RD Law 9/2020 approved on 27 March, prohibited the use of these causes to justify a contractual termination; However, the effects of this prohibition were visible from the coming into force of the RD Law and thus those who had been fired up to that date were outside its protection. This is a measure that the Italian government already adopted in mid-March, by prohibiting dismissals for objective reasons for 60 days, regardless of the number of workers in the company or those affected, now extending the measure until March 2021. In Spain, it has thus far also been extended.

43. Royal Decree-Law 11/2020, of 31 March. This rule provides that in order to establish the existence of economic vulnerability as a result of the emergency created by Covid-19, the rental tenant has to be simultaneously unemployed, or receiving ERTE, or have reduced working hours due to care-giving, and, if the person is an employer when he or she is in circumstances that similarly involve a substantial loss of income. And there is a second requirement – that the rental income, plus basic expenses and supplies – cost of heating, electricity, telephone and house ownership fees – must be greater than or equal to 35% of the net income received by all members of the family unit. These are conditionalities also applied, adapted to each circumstance, to mortgage moratoriums and non-mortgage financing credit, accreditation derived from credit contracts without mortgage guarantee (art. 16 RDL 11/2020).

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# Capitalism's Deadly Threat

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