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Fourth International European declaration

Faced with the Covid-19 pandemic, our lives are worth more than their profits

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In Europe, and especially in the European Union - i.e. the world's second largest economic bloc, it is being proven day after day that the public policies pursued over the last twenty years have undermined the public health structures that could have coped with a pandemic such as Covid-19. In March, this area was at the heart of the pandemic. Now, it's the turn of USA, and tomorrow Africa, Latin America and Asia with more and more risks for millions of people in countries with poor health structures.

In 20 years, hospitals, doctors' and nurses' posts and tens of thousands of intensive care and resuscitation beds have been cut in order to comply with the rules of austerity budgets and the logic of liberal capitalism: to reduce the share of social protection in GDP. Apart from Austria, Belgium, Germany and Luxembourg, the other countries have only 4 to 11 intensive care beds per 100 000 inhabitants, with Portugal and Greece having the lowest figures. In these two countries, like in the Spanish state, France and the United Kingdom, the last decade has seen successive plans to abolish hospital beds. These policies, regularly denounced by health workers in recent years, have created a catastrophic shortage of resources to deal with the pandemic. Italy and France have already reached or exceeded their maximum capacity in intensive care units. Other countries will face the same situation in the coming weeks. Everywhere, governments have been slow to take steps to address this shortage with the necessary supply of protective materials (masks, gels, etc), essential equipment (beds, respirators) and emergency recruitment of hospital staff. Even in Germany, hundreds of thousand beds have been cancelled during the last two decades and the ratio of nurses for patient shows a lack of at least 110000 nurses.

At the same time, the primary obsession of governments and employers in Europe has been the spectre of recession and maintaining maximum production. When emergency measures to protect the population were imposed, several governments proceeded, and are still proceeding, with contradictory injunctions. Forced in several countries to decide on the containment of the entire population in order to slow down and reduce the spread of the virus, they have continued to push for the maintenance of maximum economic activity, at the risk of workers' health, even in sectors such as automobile production, construction, the military industry or shipyards. Moreover, workers in the vital sectors (food production and distribution, roads, public transport, medical and nursing home staff) do not have enough individual protection equipment, and even the EU guidelines for safety -and health- legislation are widely ignored.

Some countries have issued decrees banning "non-essential activities", but always with the desire to maintain most economic production. France and Italy have banned certain redundancies, but these measures are limited in scope. In the Spanish state, workers affected by shutdowns will have to make up for hours not worked after the reopening of companies; although already in the last few weeks there have been 1.5 million redundancies, 500,000 of them in Catalonia. In Italy, pressure was strong from the bosses' organization Confindustria to continue business as usual in most economic sectors, but workers and combative trade unions have forced the government to partially reduce the number of sectors authorized to keep running. As of now however, even in hardest hit areas, a simple declaration to local police authorities allows many plants and factories to continue their activities. Workers' resistance is holding up too. In France it is often because of a lack of parts or immediate outlets that production has stopped. PSA and Renault are now trying to resume maximum activity. The French labour minister herself has exerted maximum pressure for the building and public works sector to resume its activity.

Millions of workers have been directly dismissed or placed on partial unemployment with loss of wages. Precarious, temporary contracts have not been renewed. Millions of self-employed who did not have the status of employees have also found themselves without activity and without income. But for everyone, all expenses and loan repayments are arriving and have to be paid. All workers, regardless of their status (salaried, self-employed, unemployed,

temporary, seasonal, etc.) must have their income guaranteed at 100%, with a minimum guaranteed for all based on the cost of living in the country. Profits and dividends should be used to finance this.

Workers living in precarious conditions, the homeless, and women are the first to be affected by the spread of Covid-19 and its containment. Precarious housing, cramped and unhealthy dwellings create one confinement for the rich and another for the poor. In Italy and France, the better-off have left the most exposed areas to isolate themselves in less exposed areas.

The Russian authorities have turned to repressive measures, imposing high fines for quarantine violations and strengthening the infrastructure of video surveillance and police control. At the same time, they have effectively refused any support for millions of workers in small and medium-sized businesses who have lost their income or jobs. However, three million labour migrants from Central Asia who cannot return home and many of whom have lost their jobs have found themselves in the most vulnerable position. The spread of the infection is threatening to result in large numbers of casualties, largely due to the brutal neoliberal hospital "optimization" programme that the Russian government has implemented in previous years.

Similarly, domestic violence and feminicides are increasing everywhere in this situation.

In prisons, in many countries, prison populations and staff are also in overcrowded conditions without protective equipment.

Migrants, especially those stranded between Greece and Turkey, but also those crammed into camps, are at even greater risk because of their precarious physical condition. In most countries they were left without state or even NGO support, without food aid and crammed into centres where protection measures were inapplicable. Portugal has decided to regularize temporarily refugees present on its soil, but this concerns only those having already a regularization request confirmed by authorities.

Even more than other people, migrants are confronted with an unprecedented crisis in income, jobs, housing and hunger, and the "social support" sectors are collapsing for huge and diverse disadvantaged sectors of the population, national or non-national, migrants and refugees included.

At the same time migrants and those of migrant descent are very largely represented in the workforce of the essential sectors: health and care, public transport, food production and distribution, cleaning, just as these are also very largely feminized sectors.

The pandemic exacerbates class discrimination, and the popular classes, the most precarious, are those who are paying and will pay the heaviest price, especially in terms of deaths, for this pandemic.

At the same time, several governments, led by Italy and France, have tried to mask their negligence by a warlike posture, a recourse to the whole apparatus of nationalism: putting forward the army, the national anthem, the call for the Sacred Union, while class discrimination has never been so strong as it has been since the beginning of this pandemic. Similarly, several governments have declared a state of emergency (Italy, France, Portugal, Spain), with the temptation to use this situation to limit social and democratic rights. Thus, in Germany, the Covid-19 crisis is being used to question or cancel different achievements of worker's movement: for example, in Bavaria, the Workers' Hours Act and in the whole of Germany, the Personnel Ratio Act in the nursing care sector. In France, a government decree has authorized companies to derogate from the rules on working hours and holiday entitlement, in the Spanish state and Portugal from the provisions prohibiting the right to strike in health and essential production or allowing bosses to break the strike. The Hungarian Parliament gave Orban full powers, shortcutting all democratic

control.

This pandemic comes as no surprise, for many scientists and others. The massive growth of corporate agriculture with meat industry and deforestation, together with growing slums in megacities and global production chains, has created a ticking bomb of cultivation and global proliferation of new and unknown strains of viruses.

The European Union has made a sorry showing in the face of this crisis. The current situation is the result of many years of austerity policy: for instance, in the last decade, no less than 63 times, EU has demanded cutdowns on public health expenses in different countries. Far from setting up health coordination, pooling resources to combat the pandemic, governments started by closing national borders with “infected countries” and refused the help asked for by Italy, and took contradictory measures in a disorderly fashion. For weeks, Italy has received more help from China, Russia and even Cuba than from European countries. The lack of masks, tests and intensive care beds made a serious lockdown unavoidable in most countries, but even today there is no cooperation at European level to catch up. The only concerns of the European summits held in recent weeks have been to temporarily suspend budgetary rules and the ECB's granting of quantitative easing to save itself from the stock market and financial crisis. Meanwhile, confronted to this demand, EU refused to loan coronabonds, directly guaranteed at European level, in order not to give low interest rate loans to Italy for instance. Cynically, the only proposal was to use the ESM, whose help is conditional on the austerity measures which have created the current catastrophic situation. At no time was cooperation in terms of health care, industrial resources and medical personnel envisaged and each State is pursuing its own safeguarding policy.

Emergency measures

The organizations and activists of the Fourth International in Europe are in favour of a programme of emergency measures:

- the injection of sufficient means for the mass availability of screening kits, the multiplication of resuscitation beds and respirators. Generalization to the entire population of suitable protective masks and biologic tests is the condition for confinement lifting. Immediate support for democratically controlled production of these means and for non-commercial research for medicines and vaccines against Covid-19.
- the cessation of all economic activities that are not essential to the daily life and health protection of the population,
- the 100% assumption of responsibility by enterprises and/or the State for the wages of workers who have suspended their activity, including precarious workers, temporary workers, domestic workers, self-employed workers and seasonal workers, without any obligation to take days off or to subsequently recuperate the hours not worked. Obligation for the state to pay the wages of employees whose employers refuse to pay them during the crisis. The government must then recover the cost of this intervention by fining the company guilty of not paying wages. For workers in the informal sector, for the unpaid unemployed, for students, for everyone who needs it, the state must provide a guaranteed minimum income which must be sufficient to live decently.
- the prohibition of all dismissals and the reinstatement of employees dismissed since the beginning of the pandemic,
- refusal of any authoritarian and exceptional measures to suspend social rights, including the right to strike,
- provision of protective means (masks, gels, goggles, gloves) for all employees continuing an activity, allowing their

protection and the immediate exercise of the right of withdrawal if the safety conditions are not respected.

– the halt of all evictions of tenants, the suspension of rents, personal loans and water and energy bills, the provision of proper housing for all those living in precarious or without accommodation, the requisition of empty dwellings.

– provision of adequate social care for the disabled, the elderly and all those socially isolated by lockdown,

– the establishment, particularly in countries where confinement has been decided, of immediate emergency protection measures for women and children who are victims of violence, with rapid decisions to remove violent spouses or provide alternative housing for the victims,

– the guaranteeing of timely access to contraception and abortion as vital medical procedures,

– immediate regularization of all undocumented migrants and refugees with immediate access to all social protection systems, an end to all expulsions. With coronavirus having already entered migrant camps, the immediate closure of the vastly overcrowded migrant and refugee camps, especially Moria in Lesbos, is imperative, along with the requisition of necessary hotels and apartments with basic hygienic and confinement conditions. The borders of Europe must be opened for the safe admission of refugees.

The situation also requires that the interests of the popular classes be put at the forefront in a series of emergency decisions:

– the public reorganization of the health sector, integrating the whole private sector, with the immediate hiring of all the care workers needed to run the services within the reopening of beds, services and hospitals closed in recent years, opening of all necessary health structures and the increase in the salaries of care workers,

– the transfer into the public domain of the pharmaceutical industry and the production of the necessary medicines independently of patent rights.

– the transfer into public ownership of the main social media platforms. Facebook, WhatsApp, Amazon and Zoom which are benefitting massively from the lockdown, and will be gathering data which will generate huge future profits. They should be taken over (without compensation, they have already raked in too much), and run as not-for-profit, transparent, public services.

– in every country, transfer to public ownership of funeral services. Private companies should not be allowed to profit from death and attempt to manipulate people's grief in an attempt to maximize their takings.

– for a sustainable agriculture and global food justice.

– immediate conversion of suitable industries (cars, aircrafts, weapons, ...) to productions helping society to handle the health crisis: ventilators, monitoring, intensive beds, protective equipment. Workers could investigate their own workplaces and take measures for conversion in cooperation with health authorities.

– expropriation of private banks without compensation to the major shareholders and the socialization of the financial system under citizen control, the suspension of all bank charges on private accounts and the provision to the working classes of zero-interest loans to meet their immediate needs.

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– immediate suspension of the payment of public debts must make it possible to mobilize sufficient funds to meet popular needs during the pandemic. The suspension of debt payments must be combined with an audit with citizen participation in order to identify the illegitimate part and cancel it.

Sadly, this pandemic and the worldwide crisis ensuing are the beginnings of repeated crises produced by globalization and climate changes. Capitalism has created a world which destabilizes, despoils human societies and exacerbates risks of climate or health disasters. We have to bring an end to the old world of profits, pandemics, climate change, and halt the destruction of our planet.

More than ever, our lives are worth more than their profits.

8 April 2020

- Austria: Sozialistische Alternative (SOAL)
- Belgium: SAP - Gauche anticapitaliste
- Britain: Socialist Resistance
- Denmark: Socialistisk Arbejderpolitik (SAP)
- France: SFQI - Fourth Internationalists in France
- Germany: Internationale Sozialistische Organisation (ISO)
- Greece: OKDE-Spartakos
- Greece: TPT (Fourth International Programmatic Tendency)
- Ireland: Socialist Democracy
- Italy: Communia Network
- Italy: Sinistra Anticapitalista
- Netherlands: SAP - Grenzeloos
- Poland: Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski
- Portugal: SPQI - collective of FI militants
- Portugal: Toupeira Vermelha
- Russia: Russian Socialist Movement (RSD)
- Spanish state: Anticapitalistas
- Sweden: Socialistisk Politik
- Switzerland: Bewegung für den Sozialismus/Mouvement pour le Socialisme (BFS/MPS)
- Switzerland: SolidaritéS
- Turkey: Sosyalist Demokrasi için Yeniyol

PS:

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