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Self-organization and pandemic

# **Epidemics, working-class self-organization and socialism**

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**The COVID-19 pandemic and the attendant economic crisis raise big-picture questions of great importance to socialists. Disasters, natural, human-made or a combination of both, such as wars, famines, economic depressions and epidemics, often trigger great political and social crises affecting all areas of life. This brief article offers reflections on the ways that crises have raised the question of the relationship between self-organization and socialism.**

Sudden crises lay bare the great contradictions of class society and create both the necessity and the opportunity for the self-organization of daily life. More rarely, they lay the groundwork for revolutionary situations in which the question of Who rules society? is posed. As Lenin explained,

*It is only when the "lower classes" do not want to live in the old way and the "upper classes" cannot carry on in the old way that the revolution can triumph. This truth can be expressed in other words: revolution is impossible without a nation-wide crisis (affecting both the exploited and the exploiters). [1]*

It is often some dramatic event like a sharp increase in food prices, as was the case in France in 1789, military defeat and the possibility of occupation, as in Paris in 1871, or the combined effects of the ravages of war and famine, as in Russia in 1917, that sparks political crises that lead to revolutionary situations. The state as a provider of basic services evaporates in more and more corners of social life, although certainly not as a repressive force.

During times of crisis, ordinary people often step up and provide the essential services that the state no longer provides. They draw on their creativity, occupational skills, work and community ties, and their unions and other organizations to create social structures of a profoundly democratic nature.

In revolutionary situations, popular councils, such as the soviets that arose in Russia in 1917, compete with the "official" government for power. This "dual power" is highly unstable and is resolved quickly in favor of one side or the other. Revolutions succeed when the insurgency represented by the new organs of popular power prevails. When the old regime prevails, counter-revolution ensues.

## Workers Self-Organization

It doesn't take a full-blown revolutionary situation, however, to unleash the capacity of ordinary working people to self-organize. During mass and general strikes entailing the suspension of daily social services, workers themselves organize to assure the functioning of essential social services.

During the Seattle general strike of 1919, for example, workers organized the functioning of daily life. They formed a general strike committee that labor historian Jeremy Brecher called "a virtual counter government for the city." Food distribution was established, dairy drivers organized milk distribution, and recently demobilized soldiers who had fought in World War I organized a "Labor War Veteran's Guard" to assure public safety. [2]

During the mass strikes that took place in Oakland in 1946, in the context of the mass strike wave that occurred in the US after World War II, social services evaporated. Strikers and workers took control of the city and organized basic services. The following account gives a glimpse of both the ways workers organized daily life in the city for the

duration of the strike and the atmosphere of joyful liberation that permeated the city.

*By nightfall on the 3rd the strikers had instructed all stores except pharmacies and food markets to shut down, Bars were allowed to stay open, but they could serve only beer and had to put their juke boxes out on the sidewalk to play at full volume and no charge. 'Pistol Packin' Mama, Lay That Pistol Down', the number one hit, echoed off all the buildings. That first 24-hour period of the 54-hour strike had a carnival spirit. A mass of couples danced in the streets. The participants were making history, knew it, and were having fun. By Tuesday morning they had cordoned off the central city and were directing traffic. Anyone could leave, but only those with passports (union cards) could get in.*

*The comment made by a prominent national network newscaster, that 'Oakland is a ghost town tonight,' was a contribution to ignorance. Never before or since had Oakland been so alive and happy for the majority of the population. It was a town of law and order. In that city of over a quarter million, strangers passed each other on the street and did not have fear, but the opposite.*

Experienced labor and socialist organizers play outsized roles in these situations, providing leadership and promoting broad and democratic decision-making in mass forums.

It is unlikely that the current coronavirus crisis could lead to a total breakdown of public services, utilities and food distribution in the U.S. But disruptions of daily life and the very real possibility of outbreaks that temporarily overwhelm hospitals and health services, at least locally, could stimulate forms of popular self-organization, such as child care, food banks, transportation and clinics, as well as forums where public issues are discussed, debated and voted on. We are already seeing the beginning of this in the form of mutual aid efforts like those formed to organize shopping for elderly people and those with compromised immune systems.

The experience of ordinary working people stepping to the fore and running society can leave an indelible mark on mass consciousness. The powerful logic of collective solutions to social problems will challenge the deeply ingrained notions of bourgeois individualism, the bedrock of capital's cultural hegemony.

Ideas like nationalizations that seemed impossibly radical one day appear reasonable, possible, even essential the next. Trotsky noted that during the period of breakdown and revolution in Russia in 1917, mass working-class consciousness made huge leaps and bounds in a revolutionary direction in a remarkably short period.

As capitalist governments display their inability to handle deep crises in the interests of all, and workers organize to fill the breach, the genie gets out of the bottle. The "fantasy" of socialism based on truly popular democracy becomes an obvious possibility and even necessity to millions of people.

In the current situation, the contradictions and absurdities of a healthcare system only for some, and an economy that only works for the 1%, will become more evident in the eyes of larger and larger sections of the population. As sick people are denied healthcare, employers resist paying laid-off workers, and landlords demand rents, anti-capitalist measures such as forcing recalcitrant employers to pay wages, converting rental properties to housing coops, canceling debt, and nationalizing airlines, banks and other industries under worker and consumer control will find a broad echo.

Socially communicable epidemics like the coronavirus by nature pose a special challenge to mass democratic action. Mass action involving close physical contact, such as public demonstrations and picket lines, are of course out of the question for the moment. But the same global processes and technological that accelerate pandemics also provide means for virtual interaction, which can provide safe and highly democratic forums for debate and organization. As the pandemic recedes, traditional forms of self-organization will become available again.

## Epidemics, working-class self-organization and socialism

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The history of popular struggles is that of the creativity of the producers and the oppressed. As working people organize in the face of disaster, collective experiences like those we are beginning to see give glimpses of what socialism could be and the way to get there. In this way, a new and better world is being born within this rotten old one.

Source: 23 March 2020 [Solidarity](#).

PS:

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[1] V.I. Lenin Marxists.org ["Left-Wing" Communism: an Infantile Disorder](#).

[2] See *Strike!*, Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014.