

Gov't, bosses use pandemic emergency to escalate repression

written by Greg Butterfield
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Workers protest outside Amazon warehouse in Staten Island, N.Y., March 30.

Measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus are being used as a cover by officials of the U.S. capitalist government, from the federal to the state and local levels, to heighten their control and prepare to repress any protest or uprising of the workers and oppressed against the horrendous inadequacies of the for-profit health care system, the rapidly deepening crisis of unemployment and mass poverty, and threatened war moves by the Pentagon.

[In Albuquerque, N.M.](#), police shot and killed a 52-year-old Latinx man in his home after his employer asked them to do a welfare check. As is all-too-common, the cops claimed after the fact that their victim was responsible because he had a rap sheet. In Baltimore, National Guard units rolled through the city's streets and set up roadblocks, but did nothing to provide food to hungry residents of public housing like Douglas Houses. The [Baltimore Housing Authority](#) even tried to ban activist groups and food banks from distributing food there.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, while sparring with President Donald Trump and running a thinly veiled campaign for the White House, has called on the racist New York Police Department to [get "more aggressive"](#) in enforcing social distancing rules on youth. He also introduced legislation to [roll back bail reform](#) that went into effect Jan. 1, threatening to keep many more poor and oppressed people in the state's worst incubators of disease — the jails.

[California Gov. Gavin Newsome](#) floated the idea that martial law might be necessary. He backpedaled after an outcry, but the state and cities continue to tighten police measures. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) stormtroops have taken advantage of the situation to [escalate attacks on migrant workers](#) in that "sanctuary state."

The worker who led a walkout of Amazon warehouse workers in Staten Island, N.Y.,

demanding greater health and safety measures, was fired by billionaire boss Jeff Bezos, supposedly for violating social distancing. Across the country, health care workers have been threatened with retaliation for speaking out on their desperate need for personal protective equipment (PPE) and the public's need for mass testing for the virus.

The Trump administration's Bureau of Indian Affairs chose the very day that U.S. coronavirus cases topped 100,000 to announce it was planning to strip the [Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe](#) of Massachusetts and Rhode Island of its official standing. On March 21, the [Department of Justice under Attorney General William Barr](#) requested that Congress enact legislation granting it sweeping emergency powers that would allow police to hold suspects indefinitely without charge and suspend other constitutional rights.

State governments have taken advantage of the public focus on the coronavirus crisis to heighten anti-women [attacks on abortion rights](#) and enact [anti-transgender measures](#).

After tightening deadly sanctions against Iran, which is fighting a major attack of Covid-19, Trump [threatened that country](#) with military aggression. Then, on April 1, Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo used a media briefing on the coronavirus to announce they were [deploying Navy warships](#) to threaten Venezuela, another country struggling under U.S. sanctions.

There are many, many more examples.

Defend the right to protest

Working-class communities, their organizations and other progressive forces well understand the need for urgent measures to “flatten the curve” and try to slow the spread of the deadly disease, even though it is at great hardship to their lives and

livelihoods.

At the same time, more and more workers classified as “essential” — most of them low-paid, and disproportionately Black and Brown — are walking off the job and engaging in other forms of protest against their mistreatment by the bosses.

It’s clear to everyone forced to work in dangerous conditions without necessary safety measures and equipment, adequate health coverage, sick time or job protections, that their “essential” categorization is seen by their employers as nothing but an excuse for greater exploitation and greater profits — the health of the workers, their families and communities be damned!

One of the first restrictions to be put in place in many cities, like San Francisco, Seattle and Washington, D.C., were strict limits on gatherings. First gatherings of 100 or more were banned, then 50, then 10 or fewer. Now [any “non-essential gathering”](#) of any size is a no-no in New York. People are advised to social distance — put a minimum of six feet between them and another person — and stay in their homes as much as possible. (This advice is ludicrous, not to mention insulting, to the hundreds of thousands of homeless people.)

Physical distancing makes sense from the point of view of limiting the virus’s spread. At the same time, the Centers for Disease Control and other official bodies in the U.S. have resisted repeated advice from China and other countries that have successfully brought the pandemic under control to encourage people to wear protective masks when they leave their homes. Wearing masks has proved to be effective in limiting the spread of the virus, but the capitalist profit system was not able to produce the masks as needed, thus the policy to discourage use of masks, unlike socialist China, where masks were available for all.

Front-line workers have found creative ways to engage in protest while trying to respect the social-distancing guidelines. Nurses and food-processing workers have

staged actions outside their workplaces while holding signs, carefully spreading out at a six-foot distance from one another. Immigrant rights and prisoners' advocates have [held car rallies](#), with protesters driving in vehicle caravans to detention centers and prisons to demand the captives' release from dangerous conditions.

[The firing of Christian Smalls](#), the African American man who led the Amazon walkout in Staten Island, N.Y., shows how the bosses and the capitalist state can use the emergency measures to punish workers who stand up to them. "It was blatant retribution," Smalls said.

In Bolivia, the right-wing coup regime brought to power last year with U.S. help has issued arrest warrants for six transportation workers who joined a [mass protest by hungry workers and peasants](#) in Riberalta, reported [independent journalist Ollie Vargas](#). The protest was viciously attacked by government troops for defying the country's quarantine measures. Of course, measures to stop the spread of the virus mean little if people starve to death.

With National Guard troops [already activated in 27 states](#) — mostly by Democratic governors — and President Trump authorizing further mobilizations, it is not hard to imagine the possibility of similar scenes in the streets of U.S. cities in coming weeks and months as depression-level unemployment, and lack of adequate health care, potentially leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths, drive working-class communities to take mass action just to survive.

The deepening crisis and the repressive power-grab by capitalist politicians shows the urgency of initiatives like the national webinar sponsored by the Baltimore Peoples Power Assembly and Harriet Tubman Solidarity Center of Los Angeles on March 28, ["Defending People During the Coronavirus Crisis."](#) That online event brought together activists and organizations from across the U.S. to begin building a fightback network that can organize a united response to the crisis and mobilize to defend the workers and oppressed over the coming months.

