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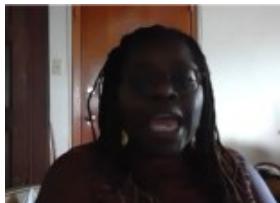
# Webinar unites groups to fight capitalism's coronavirus crisis

written by Daniel G. Cardwell and Greg Butterfield

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Frank Chapman



Fernando  
Figueroa



Ron Gochez



Sharon Black



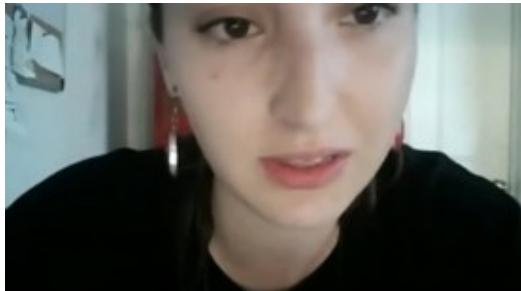
John Parker



Lucy Pagoada



Berta Joubert-Ceci



Meg Malloney



Bernadette Ellorin



Mahtowin Munro



At the national webinar “Defending People During the Coronavirus Crisis” on March 28, organizers from across the U.S. spoke about their struggle on the front lines of a humanitarian catastrophe magnified by the capitalist response to Covid-19.

Health care workers, delivery drivers, Amazon workers, housing representatives and advocates in defense of prisoners and migrants joined activists fighting against racism and repression to discuss steps to defend their communities and build unity.

The event was initiated by the Baltimore Peoples Power Assembly and the Harriet Tubman Center for Social Justice in Los Angeles. More than a hundred people

attended, representing diverse communities and sectors of the working class across the U.S.

Besides sharing experiences and perspectives, organizers aimed to begin building a national people's defense network to support the struggles that are sure to emerge in the weeks and months ahead. People have begun taking action in response to the lack of adequate health care and job safety, and an economic crisis that has already thrown millions out of work.

**Mahtowin Munro** of United American Indians of New England opened the webinar with a land acknowledgement, urging attendees to remember that we live on stolen Indigenous lands. Government officials are "exploiting the land, and they're handing out lands and contracts as favors to all their capitalist corporate allies."

Munro reported that the Trump regime's Interior Department had just informed the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe that their reservation land would be "taken back from them in the middle of this unprecedented pandemic."

This crisis "has completely washed the makeup off of the decayed face of capitalism," she said. "It is clear to thousands more every day that capitalism considers all of our communities utterly expendable and wants to kill us, just as it has been clear to Indigenous people for centuries that settler colonialism considers us expendable."

**Frank Chapman** of the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression spoke of "the crisis before the crisis." He said, "The pandemic crisis did not create the crisis we have in the health system. It was there when it came. We already had over 140 million people living in poverty. We already had 500,000 people who are homeless, including children.

"The prisons are going to be turned into death camps for our people unless we unite

and organize a very intense struggle to get people out,” Chapman explained. “This should be a period in which we demand and insist on the depopulation of the prison population. We must demand that everybody be let out, not based on what their criteria is, but based on our criteria.”

He concluded: “The coronavirus has no prejudice. It has no class outlook. It has no race. It has no nationality. It infects and kills human beings. But those who make policies in our country — they do have prejudices, and they do have a class interest.”

### **New challenges for worker organizers**

Speakers acknowledged the challenges of organizing in the new conditions created by the pandemic. In many places it is now impossible to organize protests or mass meetings. Much of the work must be educational and preparatory in character, to get ready for the day when it is possible for the people to take to the streets again. In the meantime, maximum creativity is needed to find other ways to struggle.

**Meg Maloney** of the New Orleans Hospitality Workers Alliance said, “The closures are necessary to stop the spread of the virus, but we can’t leave workers in the dust.” She explained that her group is building a coalition of workers and organizations around a series of popular demands to local government, such as the expansion of unemployment benefits to migrant workers and gig workers.

“All workers, whether in health care or in food delivery, need PPE [personal protective equipment]. Whatever solutions are going to come forth are going to come from the people, from the workers.”

**Rasika Ruwanpathirana**, an Amazon warehouse worker in Baltimore, drew on his own experience as an immigrant, explaining that his family in Sri Lanka is under quarantine, meaning people are not even allowed to leave their houses. He has no choice but to keep working here to support them.

Baltimore and Maryland Amazon workers have drawn up a [list of five demands](#) and launched a [petition campaign](#), he reported. Some of those demands were won during the first week of April as Amazon and Whole Foods workers from Staten Island, N.Y., to Detroit staged protests and walkouts.

**Fernando Figueroa**, a UPS Teamster in Jacksonville, Fla., explained, “People are getting sick at various UPS facilities around the country. Believe it or not, we have no personal protective equipment available for workers even though we’re handling thousands of boxes every day, and hundreds of drivers are driving all over the city.

“There are four main demands that we’re pushing,” Figueroa said. “We think that all nonessential businesses should be closed immediately. We think that no workers should lose income as a result of this crisis. We think that every worker who has to work needs to be kept as safe as possible. We also think that every person should get hazard pay if you’re still being forced to work through this crisis.

“The only people that are going to liberate us, who’re going to improve our lives, are ourselves, banding together. And we’re really trying to push that message.”

### **Mutual aid and political pressure**

**The Rev. Annie Chambers** of the Peoples Power Assembly, and tenant representative at the Baltimore Douglas Homes public housing development, explained that “I have been distributing food and asking organizations to help me. We have got no relief from the city or the state.” Providing food and water, milk and baby formula for the residents of public housing is a constant fight, she said, and caregivers and family members are prevented from visiting elders who live in highrise buildings.

“Residents are having trouble even trying to get their medications,” Rev. Chambers said, “because they don’t have their copayment or because they are not even

allowing us into the hospital now. They've got the National Guard guarding the hospitals, so if you don't go in by ambulance you don't get in. And they're picking and choosing who they take, and if they don't pick you, you don't get health care."

**Ron Gochez** of *Unión del Barrio* said: "About a year and a half ago or so, the mayor in Oakland, [Calif.,] warned the people when they found out that ICE raids were going to happen. So that's something we want the mayor here in Los Angeles to do. If there's any kind of confirmed ICE activity within the city boundaries, then the city itself should alert the residents. That's something we can put pressure on officials all over the country to do as well."

Gochez said his group was producing informational videos to counter misinformation. "We want to inform the community not only with the attacks of coronavirus, but also the attacks of capitalism on our communities," he concluded.

**Nana Gyamfi** of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration spoke about the importance of freeing migrants in detention centers, pointing out that 20 percent of those in detention are Black people, many hailing from the Caribbean. "Nothing will move unless we make it move," she said.

**Pam Africa** of MOVE and International Concerned Family & Friends of Mumia Abu-Jamal spoke about RAPP (Release Aging People in Prison), which has been successful in getting prisoners released — including political prisoners — based on health issues of older people. "That's a strategy we can use," she said.

**Terri Kay** of the People's Alliance reported on an array of actions in the Bay Area, including a victorious struggle in Oakland for a moratorium on evictions. "People have very understandable concerns about the deployment of the National Guard across the country and the possibility of martial law, as well as abuse of voting rights."

**Irving McQueen** of Pan African Community Action in Washington, D.C., drew attention to the plight of Black and Brown workers in the capital: “Public transit is shut down. People are unable to move around the city for groceries or to seek medical care.” He explained that there are survival programs in the Parkland Heights area to help distribute resources and necessities, but that it is crucial that these efforts be accompanied by education to explain to our communities that the capitalist class can’t meet our needs. “Only we can, through socialism.”

### **Crisis of imperialism and neoliberalism**

**Bernadette Ellorin** of BAYAN USA said capitalist governments around the world are using the pandemic “as an opportunity to advance a fascist agenda.” In the Philippines, U.S.-backed President Rodrigo Duterte imposed a mandatory quarantine and curfew. To suppress the mass movement, Duterte is charging government critics with curfew violations and other trumped-up charges, “taking a militarist approach rather than a medical approach.”

“Disease and illness are a fact of life, but imperialism and neoliberalism — those are the real crises,” said Ellorin.

**Berta Joubert-Ceci** of the Puerto Rico Tribunal and Struggle-La Lucha newspaper was on the line from Puerto Rico: “We have had two natural disasters, with two unnatural, terrible responses from the government,” she said. Puerto Rico, a U.S. colony, has yet to recover from Washington’s negligent response after hurricanes and earthquakes ravaged the country’s people and infrastructure.

“Like the Philippines and all over the world, more skilled workers and professionals migrate out of the country to escape the despondent living conditions created by imperialism, leaving behind few skilled workers to complete the work of recovery. Skilled workers like nurses are an ‘export,’” Joubert-Ceci explained. Test kits and treatments from nearby Cuba are blocked in Puerto Rico, as they are in the U.S.

**Lucy Pagoada** of Departamento 19, North American chapter of the Popular National Liberation Front (FNRN) of Honduras, and a public school teacher, described Honduras as a “narco colony” of Washington, where the head of state, illegally installed through U.S. intervention, is a drug trafficker whose brother is being tried in New York for smuggling. Bringing attention to the bogus drug charges that Trump has levelled against Venezuelan officials, including President Nicolás Maduro, Pagoada charged: “The U.S. sets up its own narco states, then projects its crimes onto anti-imperialist countries to justify intervention.”

The webinar was co-chaired by **John Parker** of the Harriet Tubman Center and **Sharon Black** of the PPA. Participants agreed to continue sharing information, support each others’ local efforts and build events together, starting with a national webinar and press conference on April 4, the 52nd anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. The focus will be on fighting racism during the coronavirus crisis, from attacks on Asian Americans to repression of Black and Brown communities.

Pam Africa summed up the success of the webinar. She exclaimed, “This is really a great call! I’ve been taking notes and got a lot of great ideas. It came to my head that I need to organize my block. We have to get to know people and get them involved in the movement. I want to be a person who can direct them to different things.”



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