

Bosses bet on profits over workers' lives

written by Greg Butterfield
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Striking migrant workers at Yakima Valley fruit processing plant.

[Fruit processing workers](#) are on strike at 13 plants in Washington state's Yakima

Valley. “Hoppers” — [sanitation workers](#) who do the dirtiest, most dangerous jobs — are on strike in New Orleans. Retail workers and baristas at Starbucks and other coffee chains are organizing against efforts to [force them back to work](#) in dangerous conditions. The [Minnesota Nurses Association](#) plans to march on the state capitol in St. Paul on May 20 to protest the continued lack of masks and other personal protective equipment (PPE).

Members of the [Oglala Lakota Indigenous nation](#) have set up checkpoints to protect residents from infection since South Dakota’s governor refuses to take public health measures. [Armed Black and Latinx activists](#) escorted a Black woman lawmaker, Sarah Anthony, safely to the Michigan Capitol after threats from gun-toting, pandemic-denying white supremacists. And at several other state capitols, health care workers in masks and scrubs have stood defiantly against similar fascist mobs.

This is a small sample of the heroic, defensive actions by workers and oppressed communities happening in cities, towns and rural areas as the reactionary, unscientific and profoundly dangerous “back to work” pressure grows. All of these struggles deserve whatever solidarity we can give.

Across the U.S., from the highest levels of power on Wall Street and the White House to the franchisee on the corner, bosses made a decisive shift in the first half of May toward forcing the reopening of the economy amidst the still-raging COVID-19 pandemic.

No conspiracy theories are required. This is the logic of capitalist exploitation, built into the system — bosses’ profits come from workers’ labor power; capital must expand or die.



City Waste Union members protest in New Orleans. Photo: New Orleans Hospitality Workers Alliance

'Not a crime at which it will scruple'

In his book "Capital," Karl Marx quoted economist T.J. Dunning: "Capital eschews no profit, or very small profit, just as Nature was formerly said to abhor a vacuum. With adequate profit, capital is very bold. A certain 10 percent will ensure its employment anywhere; 20 percent certain will produce eagerness; 50 percent, positive audacity; 100 percent will make it ready to trample on all human laws; 300 percent, and there is not a crime at which it will scruple, nor a risk it will not run, even to the chance of its owner being hanged."

It was true in the 1800s, and it's true now.

In mid-March, panic over looming mass deaths and what that could mean for the fate of the profit system caused the bosses and their flunkies in Washington and

statehouses to institute partial, inadequate shutdown measures. This coincided with the long-impending crisis of capitalist overproduction, resulting in mass layoffs — [now officially at 33 million](#), but believed to be much higher, given the deficiencies of state unemployment agencies.

The halting measures to slow the coronavirus exposed the utter inability of the system to provide even the basics of public health and security for the masses of people.

But once the shock passed and mass rebellion didn't immediately materialize, the illogic of the profit system quickly overrode the logic of protecting the lives of people. Almost immediately the bosses — egged on by Trump — clamored for an end to the safety measures.

Many bosses and state governments never shut down at all, claiming that forcing super exploited service workers to toil without proper PPE for low wages was “essential.” Trump ordered meat processing plants to stay open as COVID-19 ravaged the mostly Black and Brown meatpackers — many of them the same migrants that Trump demonizes and terrorizes with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement gestapo.

Almost every day brings reports of [mass infection outbreaks](#) among food processing workers, like this incident reported by the [Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#) on May 16, where Eastern Virginia “district officials said they were able to test 1,380 people over two days on May 8 and 9. That testing was extended to workers at Perdue Farms in Accomac and Tyson Foods in Temperanceville, which revealed a count of about 510 [infected workers] combined between the two companies. ... Only 85 of the 510 cases have been included in the Virginia Department of Health's data so far.”

By mid-May, most states had eased or eliminated stay-at-home orders and other

measures meant to limit the virus's spread — even in states where the rate of infection is escalating, and as reports grow of a co-morbid toxic shock condition among children who've been exposed to the virus.

“Texas sets record for most coronavirus fatalities in state as reopening gets underway,” [Newsweek](#) reported May 15. “Record number of COVID-19 cases reported Saturday in Wisconsin, with 502 infections,” said the [Appleton Post-Crescent](#) on May 16, days after the state's Supreme Court struck down the governor's extension of a stay-at-home order. The following day, the [Minneapolis Star-Tribune](#) headlined: “Minnesota logs 699 new COVID-19 cases day before state relaxes stay-home rules. Minnesota to allow more businesses to open Monday.”

Celebrity capitalist [Elon Musk defied](#) California's public health measures, ordering workers to report to work at his Tesla auto plant in Alameda County and daring officials to arrest him. They didn't, of course; Tesla was reclassified as “essential” and its workers may now pay the price. [Amazon boss Jeff Bezos](#), on track to become the world's first trillionaire thanks to the boost that the pandemic has given his profits, ordered all warehouse workers to report after May 1 or lose their benefits, and will end \$2 per hour hazard pay at the end of the month.



Checkpoint on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, May 10, 2020. Photo: Anna Halverson

Rampant racism

New York and California, two epicenters of the pandemic, are moving to reopen. Even prior to the May 15 expiration of the statewide PAUSE order in New York, and long before New York City has met the state's criteria to reopen, many "non-essential" businesses have reopened, without consequences.

At the same time, the New York Police Department's enforcement of social distancing guidelines has been used almost exclusively against Black and Brown communities, including a Black mother and child who were [attacked by cops in the subway](#) for allegedly wearing their face masks "improperly."

Despite posturing as the responsible alternative to Trump, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo [effectively ended the state eviction ban](#) while claiming to extend it through August. Cuomo refused to even consider a rent freeze, leaving people who lost jobs and income on the hook for months of exorbitant rent.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, meanwhile, prohibited protests, siccing the cops on a social-distancing observant press conference by the [Reclaim Pride Coalition](#), which opposed the city's cosy relationship with anti-LGBTQ2S "charity" Samaritan's Purse. Both officials have ganged up on the homeless, driving people out of the subways while refusing to open up the city's multitude of empty apartments and hotel rooms to those in need of shelter.

The wealthiest capitalist country on earth could easily provide an income for the entire population, including health care, housing and food, for the duration of the pandemic crisis. It could ensure measures are implemented to protect front-line workers and for a safe return to work by everyone afterward, as China and other countries are doing. All it would require is a fraction of the money lavished on the Pentagon war machine and bailouts for Big Banks, Big Oil and Big Business generally.

Instead, COVID-19 is being allowed to run rampant, causing veritable genocide [on](#)

[Navajo land](#). Black and Brown communities across the country, with the least access to health care and the most workers on the front lines, are being devastated, while people continue to be killed and brutalized by police and other white supremacists. The tide of racist attacks on Asian people is unstemmed as both Trump and presumptive Democratic nominee Joe Biden ramp up the war-mongering campaign against China.

Vast numbers of infections and deaths are still projected by federal agencies, as revealed in a report by the [New York Times on May 4](#), still on the scale that first caused the capitalist establishment to panic two months ago. Now the numbers may get worse due to the premature reopening, especially among the most vulnerable sections of the working class: seniors, the disabled, those with pre-existing health conditions, and communities plagued by poverty and racist discrimination.

Trump and Senate leaders have dismissed the warnings of their own health experts, including the congressional testimony of [Dr. Anthony Fauci](#) and [whistleblower Rick Bright](#), warning of a resurgence of the virus and the urgent need to prepare for a second wave of the pandemic, which could come as early as autumn.

A question of power

Make no mistake: The bosses are willing to sacrifice as many workers as it takes for them to keep turning a profit. Is it too late to turn the situation around?

It's a question of power. Which class has it?

Right now the capitalists, the boss class, feel themselves firmly in the saddle. The bosses will only take the safety of the workers and oppressed into account when they feel that their rule, and their profit-driven system, is threatened or could be challenged.

What's needed is a countervailing movement that challenges the bosses' ability to

resume “business as usual” for fear of losing it all.

For that to happen, the workers — the class that makes the economy run, whose labor produces profits — have to expand their struggle. And the most conscious elements of the working class need to fight for a perspective that goes beyond defensive battles — to fight for socialism.

A political struggle is needed to complement and elevate the many heroic local and industrywide battles being waged piecemeal across the country. Demands must be made on the federal government and the capitalist system as a whole, not just individual companies or localities. A return to “business as usual” will mean an end to unemployment compensation, rent freezes and other survival measures for the millions left jobless by the capitalist crisis.

Fight for guaranteed income, health care, housing and food for all — for as long as it takes to defeat the pandemic! Free, accessible vaccinations for all once a vaccine is available! End war and sanctions against other countries! Cooperate in the global fight against COVID-19!

Empty the prisons and detention camps! Community control of the police and pandemic emergency measures! Enforcement of social distancing and face coverings should be based on education and community engagement, not repression — and should not be thrown on the backs of low-paid retail workers [who now face violent attacks](#) for trying to enforce safety measures.

We can raise the demand for expropriation and workers’ control of businesses that do not take necessary safety measures. If the bosses complain they can’t afford it — then they should not be in business. The workers should take over the factories, stores, restaurants, delivery services and hospitals, and run them themselves. The bosses’ bottom line must not be an excuse for profit-driven murder!

