

Governments worldwide respond to COVID-19 by saving profits, not lives

Joseph Kishore—SEP candidate for US president
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The following speech was delivered by Joseph Kishore, National Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, to the 2020 International May Day Online Rally, held by the World Socialist Web Site and the International Committee of the Fourth International on May 2.

Comrades and Friends:

The speeches delivered today, by leaders and supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International, constitute an indictment of world governments, of the ruling class, and of the capitalist system.

At the same time, they outline a program and perspective for the international working class to fight back.

This May Day rally has presented a global perspective for a global audience.

Speakers here today have included those from New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom, Sri Lanka, France, Germany, Brazil, Turkey, the United States, Costa Rica and Canada.

Participants have included those from many other countries—India, Peru, Norway, East Timor, Mexico, the Philippines, Turkey, Nigeria, Japan, Italy, Thailand, Greece, states throughout the US, and many other countries.

In this, our May Day rally is absolutely unique.

The coronavirus is a natural phenomenon. However, it has emerged and developed within a definite social and economic structure. The massive and expanding death toll, the impoverishment of tens of millions of people, the campaign to return to work under unsafe conditions—these are products of society, not of nature.

At every point in this pandemic, as today's speeches have demonstrated, world governments have responded with measures that were not aimed at saving lives, but at saving profits.

It is this that has prevented a scientific, globally coordinated, rational and humane response to COVID-19.

Nowhere is this more true than in the United States, the centre of world capitalism.

The Trump administration responded to the pandemic first by downplaying its significance. However, his declaration that the virus would just “wash away” was only the most naked expression of indifference to the lives of millions and millions of people.

For decades, scientists and epidemiologists have warned of precisely such a pandemic. However, under both Democrats and Republicans, nothing was done to build up stockpiles of protective gear for health care workers or lifesaving medical equipment.

Instead, the corporate and financial elite has laid waste to social infrastructure, dismantling anything that hindered the accumulation of wealth by the rich and the exploitation of the working class.

At the same time, trillions were spent on unending and expanding war, which has laid waste to entire societies throughout the world, turning millions into refugees who are dangerously vulnerable to the coronavirus pandemic.

It was the Obama administration, moreover, that oversaw the bailout of Wall Street after the 2008 crash—which was the trial run for what is being done now.

For the past three and a half years, the Democrats have sought to focus all opposition to the Trump regime on the claim that the greatest threat to the American people was Vladimir Putin and Russia. All social opposition to the Trump regime was subordinated to the reactionary agenda of the military and intelligence agencies, including their persecution of Julian Assange.

The social interests that have produced these conditions are the same social interests that have dictated the response to the pandemic.

Even while downplaying the danger, the ruling class was preparing and implementing an operation of looting and plunder that is without precedent in history, far exceeding even what was done after the 2008 financial crisis.

The amounts that are being handed over to Wall Street are, to the ordinary person, incomprehensible. They have to be measured in trillions of dollars. The Federal Reserve is turning over to the rich \$80 billion *every day*.

To give a sense of this figure, it would take the average worker in the US, making \$31,000 a year, 2,580,000 years to earn this amount of money. Or, to put it another way, it would take 2,580,000 workers to make the amount of money that is being handed out to Wall Street, every day.

What could be more obscene than the fact that, under conditions of mass death and economic devastation, the billionaires are not only maintaining their wealth, but actually increasing it?

Having engorged itself, the financial oligarchy and its media puppets are demanding a “return to work,” a policy that will lead, and they know it will lead, to the death of tens if not hundreds of thousands more people.

Consider this fact: NBC News has reported that the Federal Emergency Management Agency “placed orders for well over 100,000 new body bags to hold victims of COVID-19” last month. Yet they're saying that it's somehow safe to return to work. It's a lie.

Their aim is to “normalize” death, to “normalize” the pandemic, that is, to acclimate the population to the fact that large numbers of people will die, that such death is to be considered just a fact of life.

Workers are to be treated as expendable. If they die, this is just a cost of doing business, with those who succumb replaced by others.

The ruling class intends to utilize the mass social desperation to force a return to work. Thirty million people are already unemployed in the US. In fact, this undercounts the reality by far. Millions are simply unable to get benefits.

One should be under no illusion. The denial of benefits to millions and millions is a deliberate policy.

Who can claim that it is difficult to get benefits to workers, when Wall Street has no trouble? No one is standing in food lines or applying online through overwhelmed systems to get their billions from the US Federal

Reserve.

Those who refuse to work under unsafe conditions will be denied benefits and cut off from all government assistance.

The line will be: either work or starve.

At the same time, the Trump administration and Congress are pushing to ensure that corporations are protected from legal liability for workers who die as a result of the coronavirus. That is, the state is telling corporate America: kill your employees, and you will face no consequences.

This is the reality of capitalism, of class rule, of the dictatorship of the financial oligarchy.

The Trump administration, in its backwardness, its indifference to human life, its naked corruption and criminality, embodies these class interests.

However, it is a fact that cannot be repeated enough, that the Great Wall Street Heist of 2020 was sanctioned by the unanimous vote of the US Congress. Every single Republican and Democrat in the Senate, including the so-called “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders, voted for it.

The passage of the “CARES Act,” far more than the holiday phrases and empty promises, expresses the real class interests that determine government policy.

What has become of Bernie Sanders? At the very point where reality is demonstrating the bankruptcy of capitalism, Sanders declared his “political revolution” over, and proclaimed his absolute and uncritical support for Biden, the personification of the Democratic Party as the party of Wall Street and the military.

He is doing what was always the purpose of his campaign: to do whatever he could to make sure that social and political anger does not escape the confines of the Democratic Party.

Well, that is easier said than done.

The United States is ripe, indeed, overripe, for socialism and for revolution.

Before the pandemic hit, as the Socialist Equality Party was initiating its election campaign, we drew attention to the fact that in a country where anti-communism has been a state religion, in the so-called “land of unlimited opportunity,” it turns out that millions and millions of people are opposed to capitalism.

Last year, workers in the US engaged in more work stoppages than in the past nearly two decades, waged in defiance of the corporatist instruments of management known as the trade unions.

Then came the pandemic, which is vastly accelerating the process of class conflict and political radicalization. There have been strikes and walkouts of autoworkers, transit workers, postal workers, sewage workers, construction workers, meatpacking workers, and many others.

It was, indeed, walkouts and wildcats carried out by auto workers and other workers that forced the closure of factories in the first place.

As the speeches today have made clear, this is part of a global process.

And it is only the beginning. The efforts of the ruling elite to enforce a return to work—and the attempt to engineer a massive restructuring of class relations to pay for the bailout of Wall Street—will encounter enormous opposition from the working class.

Great revolutionary struggles are again emerging, in the United States and throughout the world. The question, however, is: what perspective will guide these struggles?

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International insist that there is no solution to the crisis confronting humanity within the borders of any nation-state. All the great problems confronting mankind—the coronavirus pandemic, the danger of world war, the threat of climate change, social inequality and exploitation, the growth of the far right, the fight to free Julian Assange—are global problems, that require a global solution.

We insist that trillions must be allocated, not to bail out Wall Street, but to implement an emergency program to build up health care infrastructure

and provide protective equipment to all essential workers.

The student loans, mortgages and other mechanisms, through which the income of workers is earmarked for payments to the banks, must be immediately forgiven. All workers must continue to receive their full income for the duration of the pandemic, and all non-essential workplaces must remain closed. The highest quality health care must be available to all, free of charge and on a completely equal foundation.

Such actions and other emergency measures to secure the interests of the working class, in the United States and internationally, cannot, however, be secured within the framework of the existing state institutions.

They require a frontal assault on the capitalist system. The wealth of the financial oligarchs must be seized. Their stranglehold over the social and economic system must be broken, through the transformation of the gigantic banks and corporations into publicly-owned utilities.

The implementation of such measures, necessary to save lives, requires the revolutionary mobilization of the working class to take political power in its own hands through the establishment of a workers’ government—that is, a government of the workers, by the workers and for the workers—in the United States and around the world, that will implement the socialist policies required to save mankind from disaster.

To fight for this revolutionary perspective requires the building of a leadership in the working class.

Our movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, throughout its history has upheld the genuine traditions and perspective of Marxism, to combat the lies and treachery of the Stalinists, the Social Democrats, the reformists and trade union bureaucrats, and opportunists of every shape and size.

It is these great traditions that must now be brought forward today.

There will be no shortage of people determined to fight for socialism. As Comrade David stressed in beginning this meeting, the objective crisis is driving the working class toward socialist revolution. But this objective movement must be armed with a strategy that unifies the struggles of the working class in a worldwide movement for socialism.

That strategy has been the content of this meeting.

The essential conclusion that comes from all of these speeches is for all of you listening today to make the decision to join and build the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party.



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