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# What's Worth Dying for?

Confronting the Return to Business as Usual

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Some things are worth risking death for. Perpetuating capitalism is not one of them. Going back to work—at risk of spreading COVID-19 or dying from it—so that the rich can continue accruing profits is not worth dying for.

If the problem is that people are suffering from the economy being shut down, the solution is clear. People were already suffering as a consequence of the economy running. The inequalities it created are one of the reasons some people are so desperate to go back to work—but in a profit-driven economy, the more we do business, the greater the inequalities become.

Practically all the resources people need exist already or could be produced by voluntary labor on a much safer basis, rather than forcing the poorest and most vulnerable to work for peanuts at great risk of spreading the virus. Rather than going back to business as usual, we need to abolish capitalism once and for all.

## **Why Do Some People Want to Let COVID-19 Spread?**

Supporters of Donald Trump are calling for the economy to resume immediately at any cost: they are gambling that, like Rand Paul and Boris Johnson, they won't be the ones to die.

It's easy to understand why the beneficiaries of capitalism would welcome a pandemic that could kill off a part of the unruly population. The distinction between "essential" and "inessential" workers has laid this bare for all to see: a large part of the population is no longer essential to industrial production and

the logistics of international distribution. In a volatile world, increasingly affordable automation has reduced the angry and precarious to a mere liability for those who hold power.

We are not yet desensitized enough to this notion that those who govern us can speak openly about it, but there have been attempts on Fox News to shift to a discourse that takes millions of additional deaths in stride as a worthwhile price to pay to keep the economy functioning. Aren't we already desensitized to workplace accidents, air pollution, global climate change, and the like?

“If they would rather die,” said Scrooge, “they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.”

—*A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens

But why would *workers* call for the reopening of the economy?

If the logical result of a large part of the population being superfluous to capitalism is a greater willingness among the ruling class to sacrifice our lives, it is not surprising that workers who cannot imagine anything other than capitalism would also be more willing to see other workers die.

Discussing the economic impact of the bubonic plague in *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici argues that “the scarcity of labor which the epidemic caused shifted the power relation to the advantage of the lower classes.” Federici meant to call attention to the powerful labor movements at the end of the Middle Ages, but today we can derive grim implications from this analysis. In the same way that bigots wrongly imagine that shutting down immigration will secure high-paying jobs for white cit-

continue—even as it impoverishes and kills us in greater and greater numbers. They won't revolt against Trump's ban on immigration any more than Trump will object to the surveillance measures they aim to introduce. Supporting either party means accepting the arrival of a totalitarianism in which it will be taken for granted that workers will risk death simply for the privilege of letting capitalists earn a profit off their labor.

To protect our lives and the lives of our neighbors, to gain access to resources, to attain freedom—there is only one way to accomplish all of these things. We have to revolt.

## Capitalism Is a Death Cult

Nothing matters to the market but profit. Forests only have value as timber or toilet paper; animals only have value as hot dogs or hamburgers. The precious, unrepeatable moments of your life only have value as labor hours determined by the imperatives of commerce. The market rewards landlords for evicting families, bosses for exploiting employees, engineers for inventing death machines. It separates mothers from their children, drives species into extinction, shuts down hospitals to open up privatized prisons. It reduces entire ecosystems to ash, spewing out smog and stock options. Left to itself, it will turn the whole world into a graveyard.

Some things are worth risking our lives for. Perpetuating capitalism is not one of them. If we have to risk our lives, let's risk them for something worthwhile, like creating a world in which no one has to risk death for a paycheck. **Life for the market means death for us.**

izens, they might conclude that the smaller the working class, the better the deal for the survivors.

This is the same segment of the working class that has always welcomed wars and championed unthinking obedience to authority—the ones who accepted white privilege as a bribe not to show solidarity with other workers. Lacking longstanding bonds or a deep-rooted tradition of collective resistance, workers in the United States have always been especially willing to play the lottery when it comes to questions of survival and economic advancement. Many conservative whites seem to have given up entirely on realizing the dream of economic security that their parents sought, settling instead for seeing others suffer even worse than them. As we argued early in the Trump era, Trump did not promise to redistribute wealth in the United States, but rather to redistribute *violence*.

This willingness to risk death in hopes of seeing other (likely less privileged) workers die might be disguised as conspiracy theories about the virus, or even as outright denial of its existence—but at base it is *schadenfreude* of the worst kind.

## Defending Liberty?

Yet there is something else going on here, as well. To some extent, those who have protested the lockdown over the past few days have understood themselves as defending their “rights” as citizens—though, senselessly, they are serving as shields for the reigning authoritarian government of the United States to intensify the control via which it will go on exposing

them to risk. Their slogan might as well be “Kill all the immigrants and prisoners—set yourself up as dictator in the name of freedom—just let me die of COVID-19 in the comfort of my boss’s workplace!”

In this regard, in a confused way, the protests against the lockdown are part of a worldwide pushback against state authority in response to lockdown measures during the pandemic.

In Russia, demonstrations in response to the quarantine conditions have led to open confrontations, something rare indeed in Putin’s totalitarian regime. In France, riots have broken out in several cities and suburbs, such as in Villeneuve-la-Garenne, in response to the police taking advantage of the lockdown to murder five people and injure many more, the latest victim being a motorcyclist ; during the ongoing repression, officers shot a 5-year-old girl with a LBD40 rubber bullet, fracturing her skull. In Peru, police have attacked crowds of impoverished refugees attempting to flee the capital to their home villages, having run out of resources during the lockdown.

All of these examples show how poorly capitalist governments founded on coercive violence are equipped to maintain the sort of quarantines that can prevent a pandemic from spreading. In a society in which almost all wealth is concentrated in a few hands, in which state edicts are enforced by violence, a large part of the population lacks the resources to ride out a disaster like this in isolation. Most people who have maintained social distancing have done so out of concern for all humanity, at great cost to themselves, not because of the force employed against them by the state. State enforcement

of the quarantine has been uneven, to say the least, with the governor of Florida declaring professional wrestling an essential function and police around the world turning a blind eye to conservatives who flout the shutdown.

In the absence of a powerful movement against rising authoritarianism, people who are concerned about the power grabs of the state may join “protests” like the ones encouraging Trump to lift the lockdown. This is one of the hallmarks of an authoritarian society: that people have no options to choose from other than to support one of the factions of the government, all of whom are pursuing totalitarian visions.<sup>1</sup> Rather than choosing between subjugation under a technocratic state and risking death to continue our economic subjugation, we have to pose another option: a grassroots struggle against capitalism and authoritarianism of all kinds.

To some extent, the protests in favor of reopening the economy are an astroturf phenomenon, aimed at expanding the Overton window in order to make it easier for Trump to restart the economy at whatever cost. Both Trump and his Democratic rivals share the same fundamental program. They only disagree about the details.

There was never any plan to protect us all from COVID-19. The Democrats just wanted to pace the impact of the virus on healthcare infrastructure for the sake of maintaining public order. They, too, take for granted that the capitalist market must

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<sup>1</sup> Proponents of rival authoritarianism seek to trap us in such binary choices: for example, if we turn a blind eye to Facebook censoring the pro-Trump “protests,” we can be sure that such censorship will be used against our own demonstrations in the future.