

An Overview of the Situation in the U.S. in 2020 - A Year of Extremes

This text was written as background information for a broad discussion about the current situation, not as a programmatic document of Speak Out Now.

Jan. 28, 2021

To say that this past year has been like no other has become a cliché and certainly an understatement. This virus has exposed our world in a way that most of us have never experienced before. As a consequence, most were unprepared to deal with it, especially those in power, who went from one failure to another. The regime in China was unable to deal with a challenge to its control, suppressing information about a viral-type of infection in Wuhan. But reality prevailed over the fiction created by the government and the virus spread. This piece of self-replicating RNA, known as SARS-CoV-2, which causes the disease COVID-19, has exposed the true nature of the capitalist system that dominates the world. The total failure of this system to respond to basic human needs and the violence it perpetrates to maintain its control, opens the potential for massive global social upheavals.

In the U.S. we confronted the incapacity of those who control the richest nation on the planet to contend with this challenge. With Donald Trump, the narcissistic sociopath, in the presidency, there wasn't even a semblance of a coherent plan to respond to the outbreak. However, it is important to note that science had already been tossed out the window for "alternative facts" decades before Trump, as politicians dismissed scientists' warnings of another challenge to our existence - global warming and the massive climate disruption it creates.

As a consequence, there wasn't and still isn't a rational plan from this system to deal with the

reality of global warming and its causes, which are driven by the insatiable need for the production of capital. The well-being of the population is viewed only through the lens of our place in the productive process. In other words, to assure the functioning of this system means that those who head it are incapable of responding to the needs of human life and other life on the planet.

The year 2020 in the U.S. was one of turmoil under a political regime that denied the reality of the potential impact of this virus. As a consequence, it refused to recognize the need to use science guided approaches to minimize its impact.

Even the simplest of tools to mitigate the spread of the virus - the mask - has become a controversial symbol. Because of the failures of those in political power to ensure that masks would be available should such a predicted outbreak occur, they were unavailable to those who needed them the most - those working in healthcare. As a consequence, despite all knowledge to the contrary, the U.S. population was told that they didn't need masks, that they were only of use in medical settings. And thus it began. A president who continued to repeat this lie and the scientific community attempting to work around it. The best science being transmitted to the broader population was to children through Sesame Street, because for many adults a political statement took precedence over science. No mask meant true freedom and opposition to government control, and signaled one was a Trump follower. To wear a mask was a sign of subservience and weakness.

At the same time, many people took active part in the response to the pandemic. They supported healthcare workers who demanded PPE. They helped each other in the ways they could. And when the murder of George Floyd

was broadcast for all to see, the outrage of millions spilled into the streets across the U.S. in opposition to the wanton murder of Black people by the police.

So, here we are, in 2021. What a long strange trip it's been. Is there an end in sight to the crises we are facing?

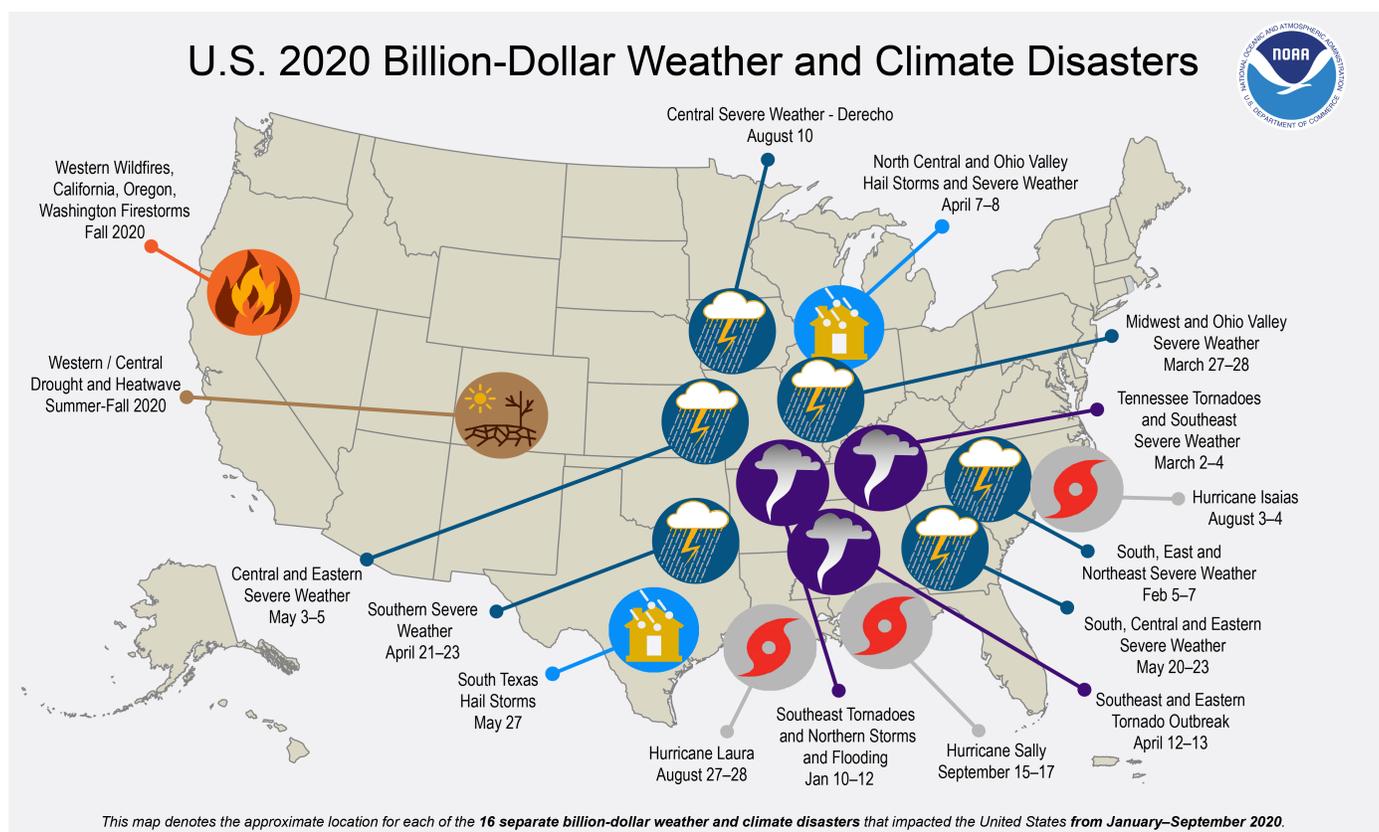
Climate Destruction

Although we know that global warming continues because of our reliance on burning ancient carbon (oil, gas, and coal) as a primary energy source - with our reliance on carbon-based products saturating our lives, from

was no exception - it tied with 2016 as the hottest year on record.

According to NOAA, (the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), 2020 was a year of extremes across the country.

"The year was unusually wet in the Southeast, where North Carolina had the second wettest year on record, and extremely dry in the Southwest, where Nevada and Utah ranked driest on record for the year. Ten states across the Southwest, Southeast and East Coast had the second warmest year on record."



plastics to pharmaceuticals, fertilizers and more - for many living in cities it could be easy to overlook its impact, being somewhat detached from nature.

But this is no longer the case with the increase in extreme weather events. Every year is a record-setter in terms of temperature, and 2020

There were the massive fires in the western states which burned a record-setting 10 million acres. And on the eastern seaboard and Gulf states it was a record-setting hurricane season.

"One of the most remarkable characteristics of the 2020 North Atlantic hurricane season was its extremely high level of activity. The

season saw 30 named storms (storms with winds of 39 mph or greater) develop, including 13 hurricanes (storms with winds of 74 mph or greater) and six major hurricanes (storms with winds of 111 mph or greater). This makes 2020 the most active season on record..." (National Centers For Environmental Information)

The Midwest wasn't spared either. In the midst of an extended drought, record floods in 2019 destroyed crops and drowned more than a million animals. The droughts continued in 2020 with more localized flooding and severe weather events.

A type of storm called a "derecho" with 100 mph winds ripped across Iowa, Nebraska, Illinois, and Indiana. In Iowa around 14 million acres of farmland - more than a third of the state's total farmland - were damaged. Hundreds of millions of bushels of commercial storage grain bins and tens of millions of bushels of on-farm storage grain bins were lost to the storm.

During 2020 there were 22 separate extreme weather events which caused property damage valued at a billion dollars or more, shattering the previous annual record of 16 events that occurred in 2011 and 2017. It is the sixth consecutive year (2015-2020) in which ten or more billion-dollar weather and climate disaster events have impacted the United States. The dollar value of the estimated damage was between 60 and 65 billion dollars. (NOAA)

Unlike other parts of the world where people rely more on locally produced food, the U.S. food distribution system kept food coming for most people. But for the farmers and those who depend on the food they grow, it was a disaster. And with farm subsidies going mainly to the large corporate farms and food subsidies cut

back for people in need, it was a bleak and terrifying year. What is ahead? With the mounting destruction of crops and fertile lands, combined with the unsustainable approach of industrialized farming, shortages and rising food prices won't be far behind.

And of course, Wall Street won't miss any opportunity created by a mounting crisis. Water has now been commodified even further with futures for water on the stock exchange, similar to gold, corn, animal products, and other things to be gambled on and controlled by wealthy speculators..

Some Snapshots of Our Situation

The Virus - Its Impact

The response to the virus in this country, as in most others, has been not just inadequate, but criminal.

We don't have to guess the motivations for the criminal lack of response. There was essentially no advance planning. Because public health programs and other public services have faced enormous cuts over the past decade, they were not prepared to respond with the sorts of programs that would have limited and contained the spread of the virus. Even something as simple as the production and distribution of masks has been impossible for those who should have been overseeing the response. An adequate infrastructure for mask distribution would have provided a network that could have been modified for the distribution and administration of the vaccine. This ineptitude and historic disregard for the health of the population has now fostered a deep suspicion of the vaccines and many healthcare workers and others are refusing to be inoculated. Meanwhile, as the infection rates across the country surged in January 2021, with

new strains appearing, most who wanted the vaccine were unable to obtain it.

Of course, the majority of the burden rests on the federal government and Trump's "response," if we can call it that. We don't have to discuss or describe his politicization of the spread of the virus and his distortions and lies, which undermined the response the various government agencies might have had. We lived it.

Trump's dictatorial ineptitude was on full display, day after day, as he made his nursery rhyme-like declarations about the virus. The Democratic politicians alternated between wringing their hands, decrying Trump's policies, and expressing gratitude when any federal aid came their way.

The public was confronted with shifting government edicts that often made little or no sense. The restrictions closing schools and businesses imposed on urban areas were often extended to rural areas. Public facilities were opened as the contagion began to subside, only to be closed again as the predictable surge returned. There was no systematic public education or coordinated effort to deal with the virus.

Frontline workers were celebrated and deemed essential as they became infected and then sick, with many dying. Nearly 3000 healthcare workers died from COVID-19 in 2020. Now, those in healthcare and other essential workers are treated as expendable, as more public services are cut and these workers are laid off, with many of those remaining taking leaves or quitting out of sheer exhaustion.

There has been no serious focus on the development of accurate tests. Every result is a "maybe." Nor is there a systematic and comprehensive program of testing that would allow us to understand the prevalence of the

virus and exposure levels in the population. The production of vaccines was left up to the pharmaceutical industry. And with their release, there is no systematic pre- and post-testing to monitor the efficacy of the vaccine, which would be especially useful with new strains of the virus appearing.

The priorities were made clear from the onset, and they remain the same today. The well-being of the capitalist class and its economy comes first, including the profits of the drug companies. Meanwhile, as of January 29, 2021, at least 25 million people in the U.S. have been infected, with more than 427,000 lives taken by the virus.

So What Happened with the Economy?

This is not aimed at providing a full analysis of the U.S. economy, but gives a snapshot of some of the economic projections by some of the economists who guide the profiteering of the capitalists.

The state of the economy before the COVID crisis was already fragile. Many economists had been predicting a serious downturn for some time, and 2020 looked like the year it could happen. But no one predicted that this little virus would be the catalyst.

For many in the working class and portions of the middle class, the impact of the economic crisis of 2008-2009 was still being felt. The massive foreclosures had devastated their primary wealth - the value of their homes. Many were unable to purchase a home again when faced with skyrocketing housing prices. And the rising stock market did little to benefit them, given 84% of stocks are owned by the wealthiest 10% of the population.

Debt has weighed down U.S. households. As the Aspen Institute and Wall Street Journal analyses have shown, (non-mortgage)

consumer debt has surged since 2010, the largest debt being student loans (\$1.7 trillion) and auto loans (\$1.2 trillion). Nearly one in five households now lives in or near a state of “net debt,” meaning they owe more than they own.

So what’s in store for us? Looking at 2021, J.P. Morgan Chase’s top economist, Michael Feroli, said that the continuation of the pandemic will result in more layoffs and the slowing of economic activity in the first three months of 2021. This would result in a \$50 billion decline in production, or a decrease of about 1% in the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) - the total value of products and services produced in the U.S.

Mark Zandi, chief economist of Moody’s Analytics, said he expects the economy to shrink at an annual rate of 1.5%, the equivalent of a \$25 billion drop in national income per month, in the first quarter of 2021.

These are the predictions of just a couple of the bourgeoisie’s top economists.

Another concern regarding the economy is the relation of debt to GDP. According to an August, 2020 article in Forbes magazine:

“One way to examine government debt is relative to a country’s GDP. This compares a country’s debt to the total value of what it produces in a year. On this score, U.S. debt was rising sharply even before the Covid-19 crisis. Debt to GDP rose to 50% by the start of the 1990s, hit 90% coming out of the 2008 recession and hasn’t stopped rising since. Before Covid-19 hit, U.S. debt was estimated at 109% of GDP. It’s much higher now, GDP has declined and stimulus measures are around \$3 trillion or so, with potentially more to come. That suggests debt to GDP could move over 130% in the U.S. by 2021 on Fitch’s estimates. That’s more than triple

where the U.S. was in the 1970s and 1980s when the metric was closer to 40%.” (*Fitch Ratings Inc. is an American credit rating agency and is one of the “Big Three credit rating agencies,” designated by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.*)

Some economists are not concerned about this level of debt, as they view debt as the quickest way to stimulate spending and get the economy going again.

Other economists look at the current situation in a more positive light. Watching the stock market (the Dow Jones Industrial Average) soaring over 31,000, they say this is “investor optimism.” Rather, it’s the result of cash-laden investors, who can borrow from the government at incredibly low interest rates, gamble in the stock market or buy up companies, and hang onto them or divide them up and sell them off. On March 15, 2020 the Federal Reserve announced it would cut its target interest rate to 0.25% to “support the economy.” Can we imagine a similar loan policy being offered to the working class instead of the capitalist class?

These enthusiastic economists point to 2020 as a year in which 45,000 deals were made, worth \$3.4 trillion. But this was from the buying, selling, or merging of companies. The seven largest deals in the U.S. were made by seven corporations buying seven other corporations in deals totaling \$211 billion. For instance, Slack was bought by Salesforce for \$27.7 billion!

With the soaring stock market and the gobbling up of other companies, the richest around the world and in the U.S. did well for themselves. Between March 18 and December 21, Elon Musk’s (Tesla & SpaceX) wealth increased 545% to \$187 billion! At the same time, Jeff Bezos’ (Amazon) wealth increased by close to \$74 billion.

These two weren't alone, as U.S. billionaires saw their wealth increase by a total of \$1 trillion. The economists may rejoice, but this doesn't amount to a single dollar in the pockets of the working or middle classes.

Not only has the capitalist class amassed an enormous amount of personal wealth during the pandemic, but those captains of finance and industry have been busily planning the restructuring of the economy. One sector, the retail shopping industry, has been shaken to its core with in-person shopping dropping drastically during the pandemic. Major chains are closing stores across the country with a number of them declaring bankruptcy to protect their investments.

Men's Wearhouse filed for bankruptcy and is closing 500 stores. (Who is wearing suits during the pandemic?) GNC also declared bankruptcy and is in the process of closing up to 1,200 stores. In June 2020 Walmart closed 154 locations in 26 states throughout the U.S., laying off close to 10,000 employees. In New York City over 1,000 chain stores, or a little less than one in seven stores, permanently or temporarily closed in 2020.

These closings are changing the retail industry for much of the country. More than 50% of the department stores anchoring America's malls are going to close permanently by the end of 2021. This process was already underway in 2019 when Credit Suisse predicted that one in four U.S. malls would shut down by 2022.

And it's not just the big chain stores. A recent study estimates that more than 100,000 small U.S. businesses, or 2% of the total, have permanently closed due to COVID-related lockdowns.

The National Restaurant Association reported in September 2020 that the pandemic forced 100,000 restaurant closures in the first six

months, or about one in six restaurants. According to the report, 40% of restaurant operators said it's unlikely they'll still be in business in six months. Two out of five black-owned small businesses were forced to close in April 2020. Among white-owned businesses one out of five closed. For them, the Biden bailout will come too late.

The loss of retail jobs and absence of these small businesses is going to change the landscape of cities and towns. Rural and semi-rural areas are going to become further marginalized. Over the past two decades Walmart or other big box stores moved to these areas and offered "one-stop" shopping at much cheaper prices than small stores could offer. As a result, many Main Streets in these towns were left full of empty store fronts. When these giants close, there won't be any place to shop for miles. To make matters worse, countless people in these areas don't have internet access to order online, and if they do, many will certainly be out of the delivery zones of Walmart, Amazon, Target, Costco, and other online organizations.

The shift to online shopping will have an enormous impact on patterns of consumption as well as production. Amazon had a record year in 2020 with annual revenue up 38% to \$386 billion, a yearly increase of over \$100 billion. Net profit for Amazon was up 84% for the year as compared to last year. Manufacturers and distribution centers are using this period to reorganize production, increase automation, and incorporate more robotization (AI, in addition to consolidating and relocating facilities to align more with current supply chains and distribution networks.

That's Them - How About Us?

In December 2020, government statistics put the real unemployment rate at 11.7%,

representing 19 million people. And as we know, they undercount. Two months before, in October, 26 million people were collecting expanded unemployment benefits and many more weren't eligible due to their legal status, not having filed taxes, or for other reasons.

This recession has hit the poorest sections of the working class the hardest. According to a September 30, 2020 study by the Washington Post, "the economic collapse sparked by the pandemic is triggering the most unequal recession in modern U.S. history, delivering a mild setback for those at or near the top and a depression-like blow for those at the bottom..." Low-wage jobs have been cut at about eight times the rate of high-wage ones. Employment for low-wage workers was still down more than 20% in August 2020 from the summer before, and down around 10% for middle-wage workers (paid \$14.18 to \$23.59 an hour).

Most recessions, including the Great Recession of 2008-09, have impacted manufacturing and construction jobs the most. In this recession nine of the ten hardest-hit industries are services. From 2010 until the beginning of 2020, there were 22.5 million jobs created - 18.9 million of them in the service sector. This is where the majority of laid off workers had gotten jobs. Now they are getting hit again. And it is expected that many of these low-wage jobs will not return, with many restaurants and entertainment venues going out of business.

In a Country Divided by Race and Ethnicity, Some Workers are Being Hit Harder than Others

As usual, the impact of the crisis is racialized, with Black and Latinx workers hit hard, and women of these races hit the hardest. Obviously, those in the "informal sector," including many undocumented workers, have been devastated. (See charts below)

Race is a major factor when it comes to access to wealth.

Statistics from Pew Research Center: Figures from 2019 (before the recession)				
	Asian	Black	Latinx	White
Household income	\$105k	\$57k	\$59k	\$91k
Poverty rate	7%	19%	16%	7%
Median Wealth (includes home value)	Not Available	\$24k	\$36k	\$189k
Home Ownership	61%	46%	50%	75%

Unemployment	Asian	Black	Latinx	White
Women %	16.7	17.2	19.5	11.9
Men	13.3	15.8	15.5	9.7

Unemployment in May 2020 - Pew Research Center in May 2020

Most workers in other sectors of the economy have not had wage increases that keep up with the rising cost of living. In addition, the cost of benefits and copays for health care have risen steadily. In some cities, housing costs have shot up, pushing people out and forcing them into long commutes to work - usually driving due to the lack of a public transit infrastructure.

Gig Work

A new assault on workers came in the form of California's 2020 ballot Proposition 22. Lyft, Uber, and other corporations waged a \$200 million dollar campaign to convince voters that "flexibility" of work was good for workers. Proposition 22 was passed by California voters, overturning a law that classified drivers at app-based transportation and delivery companies like Uber and Lyft as "employees." The proposition changed their status to "independent contractors," meaning employers don't have to provide mandated employee benefits. Soon after the proposition was passed, Albertsons, the country's second-largest grocery chain, replaced many of its unionized grocery delivery drivers with Door Dash couriers and other gig workers. This is going to be a continuing battleground for workers to fight to have guaranteed wages and benefits.

The Impact of the Crisis

Food Insecurity

Nearly one in eight households in the U.S. struggle to put food on the table. The long lines at food distribution centers have continued to grow and there has been an increase in food pantry requests by as much as 2,000% in some states.

Healthcare

The Kaiser Family Foundation has estimated that 27 million Americans have lost coverage during the pandemic. An estimated 16% of the adult population is now uninsured. In Texas, three out of every ten people are uninsured.

Housing

For the millions of people who are unemployed, working part time, or whose employment is precarious, the housing question is like a sword hanging over their heads. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, families were struggling to afford their housing costs. More than 18 million households - or one in six - were spending over half of their income on housing. Despite the rent moratoriums, landlords across the country, especially corporate landlords, filed eviction orders. People were evicted in thousands of cases because they couldn't pay any rent or didn't know their rights.

Six million people missed housing payments in September 2020. In December, Moody's Analytics found millions of people in the U.S. were, on average, nearly \$6,000 behind on rent payments. The Aspen Institute estimates that 30 to 40 million people could be at risk of eviction in the first months of 2021. According to the National Council of State Housing Agencies, by January 2021, there will be an estimated \$34 billion in back-owed rent. Where is that kind of money going to come from when people are unemployed or only partially employed?

This isn't a problem only faced by renters. As of September, 2020, according to the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey, 9% of the nation's 48 million homeowners with mortgages were behind on their payments. By late October, close to 6% of those with mortgages had agreements to temporarily pause or reduce their payments.

Housing is also a health problem, literally a matter of life and death. That is why the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) is in a position to mandate rent moratoriums. Of the 44 states that implemented eviction moratoriums since March, 27 states lifted them before September. According to a recent study, this resulted in an estimated 433,700 more COVID-19 cases and 10,700 deaths.

Of course, this crisis can prove to be another windfall for the millionaire housing vultures. During the last financial crisis, Trump's Secretary of the Treasury, Steven Mnuchin, bought a failed bank that held mortgages and then foreclosed on homeowners. When the homes recovered value, he made millions.

Houselessness

In 2019, the annual count identified 567,715 people as homeless, which included over 65,000 in Los Angeles County and more than 150,000 in all of California. That number is expected to have increased by 45% in 2020, but the annual January count was not conducted because of COVID-19.

Cuts to Social Services

The National League of Cities released new survey data that quantifies the pandemic's impact on U.S. cities, towns, and villages. On average, cities have seen revenues decline by 21% since the beginning of the pandemic, while additional expenditures – including PPE, remote work technology, and overtime pay for essential employees – have increased 17% over the same period. Meanwhile, 37% of cities indicated they've made cuts to their municipal workforce, including hiring and wage freezes, layoffs, furloughs, reduced hours, and forced early retirement of municipal employees.

The pandemic has cut the normal streams of revenue – income, gasoline, sales and

entertainment taxes, and parking tickets. Many states and cities are under enormous financial strain. The two federal stimulus bills have not provided enough to meet the budgets being planned for this year. Of course, this is a good excuse for those in charge to claim there isn't any money, allowing them to demand even deeper cuts from social programs while continuing their subsidies for big businesses.

As COVID-19 cases continue to rise and overwhelm local resources around the country, 71% of cities indicated their government's condition will worsen and 28% of cities indicated their government's condition will remain significantly impacted if Congress does not pass another stimulus package that aids them. The stimulus bill proposed by Biden and his treasury secretary Janet Yellen is just a temporary band-aid.

Without a concerted fight, we will be facing even more enormous cuts in social programs, including public education, medical coverage, housing programs, programs for the elderly and young, and more. Everything is under attack, including the wages and benefits of those who deliver these public services.

Other Social Consequences

Young People

With most schools closed, many young people are isolated and cut off from their friends. Sports, clubs, hang outs, and other activities have ended for most. This is taking a toll, with many anecdotal reports of an increase of serious mental problems, some resulting in suicides. The CDC reports that suicides and drug overdoses have surpassed the death rate for COVID-19 among high school students. (As the data has not been collected, it is possible that the CDC was pressured by Trump to exaggerate this as a way to support efforts to reopen the schools.) Nonetheless there is a real

concern over the mental well-being of many young people.

We are social animals and regardless of the impact of the digital world on this generation, this virus is having a serious impact - and not just on their education, but on their socialization and social well-being.

Class has a big impact on this situation and is accentuated because not everyone has a computer, internet access (especially high speed), or a quiet place where they can read or concentrate on online instruction.

When the pandemic began, 94,000 residents in Oakland, CA didn't have access to the internet. Obviously this didn't include the thousands who were homeless or without stable housing. Half of the 50,000 students didn't have internet access where they live. Donations for computers and internet connection has improved this somewhat, but the social divide persists. Nearly three-quarters of Oakland's students qualify for free and reduced lunch, which is only available to low-income households. With the schools closed, this puts one meal a day out of the reach of many young people.

According to a 2018 survey, of 96,000 households in Baltimore, 40.7% of these households did not have internet service, and some 75,000 Baltimore City households, or one in three, did not have either a desktop or laptop computer. That situation has improved somewhat with more access to laptop computers, as well as school support for direct internet access or hotspots for families with three or more children. But the digital divide weighs heavily because even with internet access, technical problems and frustrations often end up disrupting attempts to access what is being called education.

This is a serious problem in many rural areas where there is no access for many. In 2019, only

73% of adults had a home broadband connection and about 63% of people in rural areas had broadband internet access, and it is usually considerably slower than in urban areas. With schools closed, it means that children in rural areas, in addition to being extremely isolated, don't have access to ongoing organized education.

Prisons

The millions of people imprisoned in the U.S. are facing nothing short of cruel and unusual punishment, essentially amounting to torture and murder. Prisons and jails were responsible for over half a million reported COVID-19 infections - 566,804 to be exact - in May, June, and July of 2020. One in five prisoners in the U.S. has been reported to have had COVID-19. And that is likely a "vast undercount," according to Homer Venters, the former chief medical officer at New York's Rikers Island jail complex.

In 2020, the San Francisco Bay Area's San Quentin Prison was facing over-crowded conditions which created a dangerous situation for a COVID-19 outbreak. Unlike some other California prisons, at the end of May 2020, there were no reported cases of COVID-19 in San Quentin. The department in charge of prisons decided to deal with the COVID outbreak in the Chino, CA state prison by moving some people to other prisons. On May 30, prison officials had 121 prisoners moved from Chino to San Quentin. They were neither tested nor quarantined. And so the expected occurred. More than two thirds of the 3,300 inmates in San Quentin have now been infected. At the end of January 2021 there were close to 1000 active cases and 28 deaths. California no longer openly executes those in prison, but this is killing people. The overcrowded conditions and lack of systematic sanitation protocols will be made worse because the incarcerated are not

among the first scheduled to receive the vaccine.

As of January 28, 2021, prison officials reported that 184 people incarcerated in California prisons had died of COVID-19. At the end of 2020, at least 1,738 people had died from COVID-19 in U.S. prisons.

The Impact on Mental Health

According to the CDC, 40% of U.S. adults reported struggling with mental health or substance abuse during late June 2020,

Drug Abuse and Overdoses

Overdoses increased by 21.3% as of the middle of 2020. In San Francisco, 699 people died of overdoses in 2020, up from 441 in 2019. Cities across the country report similar rates.

Suicide

The current statistics on suicide are incomplete at this time. Information is compiled from reports from hospitals and local health agencies. Before the pandemic, suicide was the 10th leading cause of death with 123 Americans dying by suicide each day. Many of the conditions of isolation and desperation that have become common during the pandemic are major contributors to suicide.

Between March 15 and April 29, 2020 as many people committed suicide in Queens, New York as did between January 1 and April 29 in 2019. Dane County, Wisconsin, where the capital Madison is located, had experienced 57 suicides as of early October 2020, more than the total of 54 during 2019. Fifteen of the suicides were committed by people under the age of 25, nearly double the total in 2019 (eight). Suicide rates increased in two Florida counties - Escambia (13%) and Santa Rosa (20%), which some mental health experts say is a direct result of stresses related to the

pandemic, as well as isolation and economic fallout caused by the coronavirus. And reports from around the country reflect similar increases.

According to a survey conducted by the CDC in mid-June 2020, almost 11% of all respondents said they had "seriously considered" suicide in the past 30 days. For those ages 18 to 24, the number was one in four - more than twice as high.

Homicides

At the end of 2020, Chicago police reported more than 750 murders, a jump of more than 50% compared with 2019. By mid-December 2020, Los Angeles saw a 30% increase over 2019 with 322 homicides. There were 437 homicides in New York City by December 20, nearly 40% more than the previous year.

It was the same in many other cities and towns across the country. As of early October 2020, reports from 57 cities reported an increase in murders of 36.7%.

Burglaries and Petty Thefts

These were down. Quarantines kept people at home, which made breaking and entering more difficult. And when the shops are closed, there's no shoplifting.

Child Abuse and Spousal Abuse

Official reports of abuse in the U.S. are down, but in other parts of the world, where there are more systems of support for those suffering abuse, there has been a dramatic increase. The assumption is that in the U.S. there is less reporting because the isolation prevents others like friends, teachers, and social workers from witnessing signs of abuse, which usually leads to a lot of the reporting. And with the lack of these interventions and fewer support services, those who are suffering abuse find their choices

greatly narrowed. Furthermore, leaving home with no place to go may be more frightening than enduring the abuse.

The Current Political Situation

The 2020 election became known as the election that never ends. The campaigning began the day Trump won the election in November 2016. Clinton won the popular vote by nearly 2.9 million votes. But Trump won the Electoral College vote. From day one, Trump claimed that he had won the majority of votes and he was defrauded – a challenge he amplified in 2020. The next two years saw the Republicans controlling all three bodies of the federal government, blocking every political effort of the Democrats. The situation changed in the 2018 elections with the Democrats winning a majority in the House of Representatives, which reflected a decline of sorts in the population in support for Trump.

Trump's domination of the Republican Party left no question as to who the Republican presidential candidate would be. For the Democrats it was a different question. By June 27, 2019, when the official Democratic Party debates began, 29 candidates had announced their intention to run. By February 3, 2020, the date of the first primary in Iowa, 18 had ended their campaigns. Sanders was the popular choice and Biden was the pick of the Democratic Party apparatus. In the first three primary elections, Sanders won more delegates than Biden and the other candidates. The South Carolina primary, on February 29, which was a bellwether for the Black vote in the South, was the turning point. With the support of Jim Clyburn, the very influential Black Representative of South Carolina to the U.S. House of Representatives, Biden's success in the South Carolina primary clinched his presidential nomination. He gained essential Black votes in the South on March 3, Super Tuesday, where

primaries are held in 14 key states. Sanders continued his run, dropping out a month later.

This was a big disappointment to the millions of people who had supported Sanders and contributed money to his campaign, which received more contributions than any other candidate. His campaign, which discussed many of the realities confronting people and promoted a rhetoric of real change, compared to the other candidates, was inspiring to many. Thousands of people had been activated across the country, many of them for the first time, phone banking and, until the pandemic, campaigning in public places. The nomination of Biden discouraged many. And those who joined the Biden campaign most likely did so with little hope other than to oust Trump.

The 2020 election mobilized Democrats and Republicans across the country in the electoral fight to control the presidency and the Senate. According to official records, close to \$14 billion was spent, making it the most expensive campaign in U.S. history.

The election reflected the deep polarization of the population. The Republicans stepped up their efforts at voter suppression, using their control over the electoral system in various states to purge hundreds of thousands of voters from the voter rolls – primarily Black and Latinx voters. In spite of the pandemic, Trump challenged the right of states to use mail-in ballots. He and his Postmaster General also attempted to disrupt the functioning of the U.S. Postal Service's ability to process mail-in ballots. In some states controlled by the Republicans, many voting places were eliminated where there were concentrations of Black Democratic voters. Despite these and other attempts at voter suppression during the pandemic, there was a record turnout with 26.6 million more people voting than had voted in the 2016 presidential election, including an increase in

the number of Black and Latinx voters supporting Trump. Biden swept the election, winning the popular vote by seven million votes and the Electoral College vote by 306-232.

Trump refused to accept the results, claiming that the election was rigged and his victory was stolen. He used millions of dollars of his campaign funds to file 62 lawsuits in states where he had lost the popular vote by a somewhat small margin. All but one legal challenge failed. In addition, Trump bullied and threatened Republican election officials in some states where the vote was close, like Georgia, pressuring them to “find” the votes that would make him the winner in that state. All these strategies failed, but that hasn’t stopped Trump’s claims.

He turned to his supporters, sending out tweets and holding rallies accusing the Democrats of stealing the election. Despite his electoral defeat and the large amount of time he spent on the golf course, Trump stayed in the limelight, with the major media giving him coverage – both positive and negative. In the three weeks following the election, he raised \$207.5 million from people who wanted him to carry on his fight, much of it from small donors, but obviously including some very large donations as well.

On January 6, 2021 at Trump’s last and what has become his most publicized rally, about 10,000 supporters gathered in Washington D.C. to listen to his call to reclaim democracy. That was the day when the Senate and House of Representatives were holding a joint session to certify the votes of the Electoral College in order to officially declare Biden the winner.

At the end of the rally, Trump called on his supporters to march on the Capitol Building to prevent the “stolen election” from being certified, telling them he would join them (which of course he didn’t, preferring instead to return

to the White House to watch the outcome on television). A thousand or more marched to the Capitol Building. About 400, many connected to fascist and other extreme right groups, managed to get inside the building. They shut down Congress for a few hours, stopping the election from being certified, and trashed some Congressional offices. By the end of the day, five people had died in the melee. One was shot by a cop, one cop was killed, hit by a fire extinguisher thrown by a demonstrator, and three others died of medical emergencies.

The event gained a lot of attention, some claiming that it was an insurrection and an attempted coup. It was enough for 25,000 National Guard and who knows how many other armed forces of the state to be mobilized to protect the presidential inauguration on January 20 from the threat of disruption. Similar preparations were made with erected fences and a police presence to protect state capitols across the country. For the most part, the right-wing forces didn’t show, and it was a quiet day.

We had already seen a dry run of this sort of action at the end of April, with similar or some of the same groups storming the Michigan state capitol, weapons in hand, following Trump’s mid-April call to “liberate” Michigan, Minnesota, and Virginia. Trump had been waging Twitter attacks on those states’ governors for some time because of their opposition to his denial of the impact of the virus. The April action was followed by a supposed plot to kidnap the Michigan governor in October 2020.

The actions of these fascist and other extreme right groups revealed what we have known for some time. There is a growth of such groups in the U.S. At this point, most do not seem to do much more than attract media attention in order to recruit, as well as engage in skirmishes with antifa groupings. That doesn’t mean that they are incapable of inciting and carrying out

violent acts or that they don't have the potential to grow. Given their closely guarded organizational practices, it is difficult to estimate their size. The Oath Keepers, like some other groups that identify as part of the "patriot movement," don't espouse a political ideology other than "defenders of democracy," clearly defending the right wing. They claim more than 10,000 members across the country, among them current and former members of the military and law enforcement agencies.

These far-right groups don't represent most of the more than 74 million people who voted for Trump in the 2020 election. But they target Trump supporters and may be able to recruit by stoking people's fears of Biden's so-called socialism.

Trump's most solid base of support lies in rural and semi-rural areas. This is farming and ranching country with an economy based on extraction of raw materials - mining, oil, natural gas, and logging. The population is predominantly white and older and identifies as Christian, with many evangelicals who consider themselves to be "born again." This is 20% of the total population of the U.S. and extends into the small towns and cities as well. For many, their primary media source is right-wing media outlets - local newspapers, the radio, and television networks of Fox, One America News Network, the Sinclair Broadcast Group, and smaller networks. For those with access to the internet, there are seemingly endless sites to follow.

Another substantial part of Trump's base lies in the former manufacturing centers, in and around the urban areas that were devastated by the closing and relocation of manufacturing to other countries and to the southern U.S. They, along with the owners of many of the small businesses they patronized, have seen their cities and lives upended by this economic shift.

And Trump's promise to bring manufacturing back to the U.S., no matter how hollow, gave them hope as opposed to what they see as the Democrats' support for the policies that attack their values and contributed to the destruction of their livelihoods. These attitudes are also shared by many in the skilled trades who are still working, a group consisting of mostly white workers.

The 2020 election reached beyond Trump's base. According to the Guardian newspaper, Trump gained 4% more of the African American vote, 3% more of the Latinx, and 5% more of the Asian American vote compared to the 2016 election. A larger percentage of Black women and white women voted for Trump. And he lost 3% of white male votes to the Democrats compared to the 2016 vote.

The End of the Trump Presidency

The Republican Party is in a state of flux and disarray. Trump's absolute dominance of the party is now in question. Some Republican politicians who were among his loyal supporters, either because of political agreement or from fear of being attacked or bullied by Trump and losing his support, have distanced themselves from him. Some of them, including Vice President Pence, didn't go along with Trump's call to block the certification of the election and attended the inauguration. Mitch McConnell, the Republican Senate majority leader, said that Trump was responsible for the debacle at the Capitol on January 6 and extended a formal welcome to Biden and Harris after the inauguration. There still are diehard Trump followers in Congress who claim that Trump won the election, some of whom joined those who occupied the Capitol on January 6. But only five Senators voted with the Democrats to proceed with Trump's second impeachment trial. This doesn't necessarily reflect support for Trump as much as an attempt to pull Republican

forces together against the Democrats and to maintain a substantial part of Trump's base as a Republican voting bloc.

Trump can no longer use the presidency to dominate the media. But the Democrats' decision to impeach him may provide him with a platform instead of discrediting him among his supporters. He has been removed from Facebook indefinitely and his Twitter account(s) continue to be suspended. (He had 90 million followers, certainly not all supporters.) There are still many right-wing and extreme right conduits that support him on the internet and through established right-wing media channels.

Despite Biden's attempt to wipe some of Trump's slate clean with his executive orders, Trump's legacy remains. His three appointments to the Supreme Court have secured a conservative majority. He appointed 231 reactionary judges to federal courts around the country (nine of whom were rated as incompetent by the American Bar Association) and made 27 appointments to lesser known federal courts. More than a quarter of federal judges are now Trump appointees.

Trump's greatest impact over the past four years has been on the Republican Party, solidifying a base around him which, with the hundreds of millions of dollars he has raised, makes him a very important player in the future. He continues the claim of his 2016 campaign, that he is the champion of hard-working people. Many of his supporters look to him as their leader because he has reinforced key components of the Christian evangelical program. This embodies a conservative, fundamentalist Christian (born again), nativist 'America First,' anti-immigrant, anti-abortion, anti-elitist, and anti-big government platform. He doesn't need to articulate a program; for many it has become a cult of personality with blind faith in Trump to deliver. It is this perspective that has helped

foster the followers of the QAnon conspiracy to look to Trump to lead the fight to defeat what they claim is the Democratic cabal that is responsible for the current problems. This is obviously an extreme example, but one that serves to activate a certain number of people, including many Trump supporters on social media.

Whether Trump reemerges directly on the electoral scene or not, the presence of a certain number of far-right members of Congress should be taken seriously. They represent a substantial part of the population that the Republican Party leadership must take into consideration.

While Trump's anti-science stance, which denies the impact of the virus and the threat of global warming and climate disruption, won't continue to impact policy directly, it serves to maintain a political and social divide.

But for most people who despised him, the fact that Trump will no longer occupy the political center stage is a relief. He will no longer be able to use the presidency to give support to reactionary proto-fascist and racist groups or continue his right-wing diatribes against BLM, antifa, and others opposed to his reactionary stances.

It will mean not having to listen to his callous racist attacks on people crossing the border or the separation of children from their families, caged in horrific conditions. Trump's celebration of these barbaric policies, along with his demonization of immigrants, will no longer emanate from the White House.

After the recent incident at the Capitol some members of the bourgeoisie have changed their tune. Trump has become an embarrassment and they do not want to lose business because of their connection to him. The National Association of Manufacturers,

various large corporations, and the two main banks Trump uses for his business dealings have disassociated themselves from him. Of course they are not all “breaking” with him. Most said they are putting their funding streams on “pause.” (And wouldn’t they anyway after such an election?) They have done very well with Trump, whose executive orders tore up regulations that got in the way of their profiteering, and the generous tax breaks he supported mean they pay little or nothing on their profits.

Some of these corporate supporters are ready to go back to a version of “business as usual” before things get too far out of hand. They do need this pandemic to be addressed to get the economy restarted. And many want a more coherent international policy with the shifting economic and political relationships taking place between the world’s powers. And last but not least, they need to have friendly relations with those in control in Washington D.C. so they can keep our tax dollars flowing their way.

Biden & Harris Begin

The well-choreographed Biden-Harris inauguration, the post-inauguration celebration, and the days that followed were meant to reassure those who detest or fear Trump that things are going to change. Biden also made a point of extending a reassuring hand to those who are not deeply mired in Trump’s swamp or who are put off by his latest antics at the Capitol and are willing to consider what Biden can deliver. The inauguration was produced like a Broadway musical, with a variety of well-known stars, complete with sing-alongs and ending with fireworks. And, for some of the tens of millions of people across the country who watched, it brought a sense of hope for the future.

Biden’s plan was to get down to business and go to the White House after the ceremonies and

sign 17 executive orders, memorandums, and proclamations to address, or at least appear to address, people’s real concerns. One halted any remaining orders signed by Trump that had not been implemented yet. In the days following, Biden continued to send policy signals to those who voted for him that he would carry through on what he promised. Whether that will have an impact on the nearly 70% of Republicans who say the election was stolen, which means Biden is not the legitimate president, remains to be seen.

Among Biden’s first orders were some addressing:

Racism and Inequalities

One act claims to have the aim of “embedding equity across federal policymaking and rooting out systemic racism and other barriers to opportunity from federal programs and institutions.” Another ends Trump’s policy of excluding non-citizens from the current census, which will affect the apportionment of congressional representatives. Another directs the government to interpret the Civil Rights Act as prohibiting workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, ending discrimination against LGBTQ people in federal agencies.

Rights for Immigrants and Non-Citizens

Another Biden directive preserves DACA (the Dreamers Act for young immigrants), establishes a pathway to citizenship, ends the building of the Mexican border wall, and ends the travel ban from predominantly Muslim countries.

The COVID Crisis

Biden has ordered a coordinated federal plan to give support for the production and

distribution of vaccines and PPE, and to have the U.S. rejoin the World Health Organization.

The Environment

The administration has rejoined the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, revoked the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline, reversed the rollbacks on vehicle emissions standards, restored the acreage of several national monuments, and put a temporary moratorium on oil and natural gas leases in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Aid to Those in Need

The administration is increasing aid to those in need of food assistance, extending the moratorium on foreclosures on certain federal loans and evictions on federally subsidized properties through the end of February or March 2021, putting a pause on federal student loan payments until September 2021, reinstating federal workers' rights to bargain, and more.

But none of Biden's orders and proclamations address the root causes of the exploitation, oppression, or threats to life itself embedded in the capitalist system.

At the beginning of his first full week in office, Biden began officially nominating his cabinet members. Many had served in the Obama administration, all have served the interests of corporate America. He also signed a "Buy American" order that encourages the federal government to purchase goods and services from U.S. companies, very similar to Trump's failed program to create jobs. To those who look at it closely, it is obvious that the Biden program is designed not to challenge, but to save the capitalist system.

Hard Times - Not Hopeless Times

Hard times can break people, or prepare us for what is ahead. We saw an indication of the possibilities that we can expect when, in reaction to witnessing the slow, torturous murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police on May 25, 2020, millions of people (some claim 25 million) took to the streets. People didn't wait for a solution to this violent racism. Students were trapped in their homes with the failed shift to online learning, while millions of others were unemployed, so there was little standing in their way to act. If there wasn't a demonstration organized where people lived, they called one and people showed up. People who had never been active didn't hesitate. It was clear that something had to be done, so they did it and the demonstrations spread everywhere - even in the smaller towns and cities where there weren't organizations in place to mobilize people's outrage.

This mobilization had an impact and continues to have an impact, most importantly on those who participated in or supported it. It confirms that we are not alone in our opposition to the racism, police brutality, and other horrors of this system. And our forces can respond quickly. Police departments and city governments had to react when confronted with the problem of the racist police violence they are responsible for. Demands to defund the police emerged, which forced discussions about the allocation of city resources to serve communities rather than oppress them, among other questions. Commissions were set up, city councils passed resolutions, and some funding was cut to the police with some funds reallocated to community projects, though not at the scale many had hoped for. But in a number of places the discussions continue.

One reality is that, with no civilian replacement for the police, people, especially in poor

neighborhoods, were not about to abandon the only protection they had beyond themselves to respond to the violence that surrounds them, even if the police presence tends to escalate the situation.

An important reason for Biden's flurry of policy initiatives is to keep people from going into the streets again in 2021 as they did in 2020. The intent is to focus people's hopes on "normal" government edicts and dragged-out legislation that will never fundamentally change the brutal role of the police or any of the other oppressive institutions of this society.

But it's not just the Biden White House. Some corporations responded to the 2020 unrest by donating large sums of money to organizations they claimed represented the fight against racism. They directed their human resource departments to review hiring practices, carry out diversity training and discussions about racism, and maybe hire a few more people of color.

The Democrats and the NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) went to work as well. The NGOs, flush with new funding, reached out to activists to bring them into their projects, which, for the most part, continued to be tied to city or state administrations and definitely their corporate funders. For some of them, including some large unions, it was election time, that is, time to get out the vote for the Democrats, as if that was a way to address police violence and other problems. And yet, in 2019, there were Democratic mayors in 61 of the 100 largest cities in the country. And Democratic mayors headed 18 of the 22 cities with the highest number of police killings.

Nonetheless, some killer cops have been put on trial and some have been forced to quit. The process of a cop just being put on desk duty or administrative leave with full pay following the killing of someone, is no longer automatic. In

addition, symbols of racism have come under attack. Monuments to racists have been torn down, school names and building names have been changed. The confederate flag no longer flies over the Mississippi capitol or at NASCAR races. The message that "Black Lives Matter" has had an impact.

But the reality is that since the murder of George Floyd, police killings have continued at the same rate as the year before. In 2020, police shot and killed 1,004 people. It was a year in which there were only 18 days where police didn't kill someone. Nine of these were after the murder of George Floyd. As of January 26, 2021, incomplete reports say that 58 people have been shot and killed by police just this year. It usually takes a while for the real totals, as there is no official national accounting for police murders.

Most of the demonstrations have stopped. But this is not an end, it is a pause. Now every time a cop kills someone, the authorities brace for a response.

In addition to those large demonstrations, there were numerous strikes across the country - mostly small wildcat strikes - usually over health and safety abuses by the bosses. Hospital workers demanded PPE, bus drivers demanded that riders enter the rear doors and skip the fare (which is being eroded in many places), and workers at Amazon and other workplaces demanded safer conditions, masks, and clean work areas. Teachers are still resisting orders to return to the classroom, refusing to endanger the health of their students, their families, and themselves. And during the demonstrations against racism in response to the murder of George Floyd, there were numerous, often short, symbolic strikes, especially on May Day. Last year more than 1,200 strikes have been tallied by the Payday Report website.

Unfortunately, the brutality of this system has continued in its many forms. One of the worst is in the meatpacking and poultry plants. These animal slaughterhouses and packing plants stayed open as the virus swept through them, infecting workers in the already crowded and dangerous conditions. Most of the workers in these plants are recent immigrants and many are undocumented with almost no alternatives if fired. At one Tyson plant in Iowa, a manager set up a betting pool among supervisors on how many workers would get the virus. Over a third of the workers were infected and five died. A total of 225 meatpacking workers were reported to have died of COVID in 2020.

Most workers don't face those extreme conditions, but we see the same disregard for life when we see cuts to staffing in public services and intensification of work, which may be followed by demands for increases in benefit copays or even direct wage cuts.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, most large unions haven't played much of a role during this time. The nurses' unions have been an exception, often mobilizing and giving support to nurses and other hospital workers demanding safe conditions for patients and workers. These are usually demonstrations aimed at getting publicity, because work stoppages under these conditions are almost unthinkable. The flight attendants' union has made demands for the health and safety of passengers and themselves. Some transit union officials have given support to workers demanding safer working conditions, minimizing contact with passengers, and regular cleaning of busses, trains, and other work areas. But often, after the pressure from the workers stops, the guidelines remain on paper, while the safety measures become "relaxed."

A number of unions have stopped having membership meetings, blaming it on the difficulty of having online meetings. Obviously, the union apparatus would prefer to make all the decisions without the involvement of workers. When they do have online meetings, it gives them more control over who can speak and who can't.

Workers in the public sector are facing challenges of lack of funds in the city, county, and state budgets. Everything is under attack, including the wages and benefits of those who deliver public services. These cuts don't just impact jobs and paychecks. There are tens of millions of people who rely on these services. Without a concerted fight, we will be facing even more enormous cuts in social programs - in public education, medical coverage, housing, transportation, programs for the elderly and young, and more.

The small acts of resistance we have seen recently show what is possible. But workers in one workplace or even one industry going on strike and successfully defending themselves is difficult. Nevertheless, this virus is showing us that workers are all in the same situation and that a real fightback is possible.

And the Left?

Unfortunately, the left in the U.S. remains invisible to the majority of the population, especially the working class.

The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) claimed a membership of 85,000 at the end of 2020, making it the largest group on the U.S. left. They are best known for their electoral activity around Bernie Sanders and their relationship to recently elected members to Congress Democrats Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib, among others.

For the most part, those who consider themselves to be revolutionaries are much smaller in number. There are a number of small Trotskyist groups in different parts of the country, Speak Out Now being one. There are groups that base themselves on various Stalinist perspectives. And there are numerous groupings that involve themselves in various efforts around community organizing, with anarchist and other leanings. Some are involved in anti-fascist organizing, some have a focus on organizing "gun clubs" that are ready to stand up against the violence of the extreme right groups.

Unfortunately, none of these groups has a significant presence in the working class, and they are certainly not in a position to provide a leadership to the struggles that lie ahead. This is a situation that must be taken seriously if we are to meet the challenges in front of us, from the direct attacks on the working class to the existential threat of global climate disruption. To get beyond the current isolation and begin to meet these challenges will take a concerted effort to develop a real implantation in the working class and build networks between groups with the goal of consolidating forces.

Where Do We Find Ourselves?

The pressures of this period are building across the U.S. and around the world. In the U.S. the Biden-Harris team's response may succeed in diverting the efforts of some. But the capitalist system that is responsible for the crisis, that rests on the exploitation of the working class and the ruin of nature, remains. The goals of the capitalist class, on clear display during the pandemic, will continue to follow one of its guiding directives, "Let no crisis go unexploited." And they are making preparations for when this pandemic subsides.

We need to make our own plans. This virus has united us in many ways. It has given us a picture

of the future capitalism holds out to us. And it isn't a future that we can accept. We are in this together, regardless of where we work. Strikes or fights at private companies need to be supported in any way we can. Any proposed cuts on social programs need to be met with a broad social struggle. We need to make demands that go beyond the sparse budgets of the city, county, or agency budgets - they need to be directed at the wealth controlled by the one percent. We only need to remember the \$1 trillion increase in the wealth of U.S. billionaires early in the pandemic to identify the beginning of a solution to this problem.