

## FOUR POINTS OF ORIENTATION IN THE CURRENT CRISIS

*Maoist Communist Group – March 2020*

*“The people waved their silvery iron hoes and their solid arms to build water conservancy and renovate mountains and rivers, shaking the earth. / Ask the Plague God, where are you going? People burn paper money, light candles, and light the sky to send the Plague God away.”*

— *from* Mao Tse-tung, “Farewell to the Plague God,” 1958, a poem he wrote after learning that schistosomiasis had been wiped out in Yukiang County, Kiangsi.

How should US Communists orient ourselves in the current crisis?

We must proceed from what ought to be an evident fact: this is not a revolutionary crisis, but something like its inverse. In a revolutionary crisis, there is a complete break between the majority of the people and the state. In a revolutionary crisis, the old superstructure falls apart and various social forces create a new one under the leadership of a revolutionary class. In contrast, today, in the absence of the proletarian vanguard, the coronavirus crisis has spontaneously led the masses to pin their hopes of resolution on extending the reach of the imperialist state.

In sector after sector, nearly the entire labor force has been laid off. Workers have been left to fend for themselves, many without severance pay or health insurance. Those who continue to work do so in the most dangerous conditions. Overnight, sections of the petty-bourgeoisie have been proletarianized, joining millions of workers in the expanding reserve army of labor. But the resulting discontent has *only strengthened* demands for state intervention.

One symptom of this feature of the present crisis is that praise of the Chinese state response as a model has extended far beyond the usual neo-revisionists to all manner of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideologists, including far-right populists like Orbán and Di Maio. This broad resurgence of state worship has only been reinforced by the dispersal of the masses from their usual sites of concentration: factories and other workplaces, universities, public squares. There has been a general retreat to the home, leading to a reinforcement of the family. At the same time, the sharp drop in the demand for labor-power – the commodity that the family unit exists to reproduce – has destabilized it from within, as evidenced by reported increases in domestic violence over the past weeks.

On the ‘left,’ opportunists have wasted no time demanding the reinforcement of the imperialist state, in the name of ‘public health’ and ‘mobilizing resources,’ and have encouraged the masses to seek shelter in its arms. See, for example, the Trotskyites of the IMT: “*Nationalize the entire health sector and integrate it into a democratically administered public health provider. Nationalize all essential commercial spaces and convert those most suitable into hospitals and ‘fever clinics’ ...*”<sup>1</sup> They would do well to read Engels:

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<sup>1</sup> <<https://socialistrevolution.org/a-socialist-program-to-fight-covid-19-and-the-economic-crisis/>>

*“The modern state, no matter what its form, is essentially a capitalist machine – the state of the capitalists, the ideal personification of total national capital. The more it proceeds to the taking over of productive forces, the more does it actually become the national capitalist, the more citizens does it exploit.”*<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the crisis has ‘taught’ renegades of all stripes that the state is not an instrument of class domination, but an expression of reason that exists above classes – abandoning Marx for Hegel, as it were. As is in its nature, opportunism thus converges with imperialism, which in numerous countries has been hard at work nationalizing industries and mobilizing resources while taking ‘emergency’ political measures that have accelerated its slide towards reaction: urban militarization, passage of measures allowing arbitrary detention without trial, banning demonstrations, postponing elections, suspension of legislative powers, restrictions on journalism....

The question is then – to borrow Lenin’s formulation in *Two Tactics* – how do we teach the crisis something? That is: how do we put a proletarian imprint on the current course of events? To teach the crisis something not only requires a correct analysis of the political situation and corresponding tactical slogans, but also a mass base that will take up our slogans and give them force. We must then recognize that strictly speaking, we cannot teach the crisis *anything*, in the sense that our current subjective forces cannot influence its objective development in a meaningful way.

As China exploits the crisis to win hegemony, while the fragmented US bourgeoisie turns inward and Europe tears itself apart – e.g., on the fiscal front, over the question of Eurobonds versus ESM credit lines – Communists are powerless to leverage the inter-imperialist conflict to our advantage.

It is true that flickers of light have begun to appear in the gloomy sky that has descended so swiftly in the current crisis.

In the working class, there has been spontaneous and dispersed resistance by those who refuse the deadly choice offered to them by the bourgeoisie: *do you want to die of hunger from not working? Or do you want to die of infection from working?*

Here, we refer first and foremost to the wave of wildcat strikes in various sectors, both organized (e.g., Detroit bus drivers, warehouse workers in Memphis, Pittsburgh sanitation workers, autoworkers throughout the Midwest) and unorganized (e.g., Amazon, Whole Foods, and Instacart workers). Beyond such strike activity, widespread social discontent among the broad masses has led to proliferating efforts at collective class cooperation and assistance to deal with the crisis beyond and outside of the imperialist state and its institutions.

Social crises always see a sharpening of the class struggle. But as long as the revolutionary proletariat is not organized in its Party, we cannot play an effective role in determining the outcome of the current crisis.

Against the most deluded “left”-fantasists, who abstractly pose action slogans of the type ‘the solution is revolution,’ those of us still on earth must caution that, even if this *were* a revolutionary situation, we would be in no position to storm heaven and drive out those who keep us in darkness. Like Engels to Tkachev, or Lenin to “*Tkachev the Little*” (Nadezhdin), we invite our own *microscopic* Tkachevs to live up to their slogans:

*“If nothing else will do, if the people are ready for revolution, and you are too; if you are simply unwilling and unable to wait any longer, and have no right to wait; if you claim the right to choose the moment to strike, and if it is, at last, ‘now or never!’ – well, dear Karlchen [Tkachev] do what you cannot refrain from doing, make revolution today and smash the Russian state into a thousand pieces, otherwise you will end up bringing about an even greater misfortune!”*<sup>3</sup>

Although we currently lack the forces to influence the objective course of events, the crisis can be used to *advance our subjective position as a class*, if we orient ourselves as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, Ch. 3, 1880, < <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/ch03.htm>>.

<sup>3</sup> Engels, “Refugee Literature,” Article IV, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 24, USSR, 1989, 35.

(1) We must continue to develop and consolidate the theory and program of revolutionary Communism. The current crisis in no way cancels the need for ideological training and struggle, but on the contrary, demands an accelerated practice of both.

—*Ideological training.* To paraphrase Lenin, Marx’s statement that “*every step of the real movement is more important than a dozen programs*” is not true in a period of theoretical chaos. Of course, in the US, narrow practicalism and theoretical obtuseness is less a particularity of the current period than it is an invariant *national feature*, as any reader of Engels’s letters of the 1880s-90s knows.<sup>4</sup> The extraordinarily low ideological level among Communists in the US demands rigorous study of the classics of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism so that we accumulate a reserve of theoretical forces capable of analyzing the concrete situation and putting forward appropriate tactical slogans.

—*Ideological struggle.* Communists must wage an uncompromising ideological struggle with bourgeois thought if we want to advance the revolutionary political process. The proletarian vanguard in the US is still in its initial stage of formation, and as a result, our struggles with opportunist trends take on tremendous significance. It is only in the course of the struggle against opportunist errors, both right and “left,” that our proletarian class thought will develop into a pole and expand its audience. The ideological struggle must be accompanied by concerted efforts at instilling Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideas in the working class so it can liberate itself from bourgeois ideological influences.

The crisis situation gives urgency to both ideological training and struggle. As we have argued, the peculiarity of the crisis consists of a sharp increase in unemployment, overnight proletarianization, and resulting social discontent accompanied by, on the one hand, efforts at class aid and a wave of strike activity; and on the other hand, spontaneous demands for the extension of the imperialist state, reinforced by social dispersal and a return to the ‘private.’

In this situation, we must give conscious shape to every manifestation of discontent by the masses and provide them with answers. This demands that we arm ourselves with our proletarian class thought and develop it. It is our duty to meet the advanced sections of the spontaneously awakening masses with theory and a program to guide them. If we fail in this task – if we fail to become what Lenin, with reference to the great leaders of the 1870s, called “*coryphaeuses*” – then the expanding popular chorus that daily demands expanded powers for the imperialist state will continue to grow in energy and numbers, and we will develop only our weakness and irrelevance.

Our orientation must therefore be to raise ourselves above the swamp of dispersed and spontaneous resistance struggles so that we can lead the working class and the masses instead of trailing behind them with narrowly practical ‘activism.’ In the absence of firm proletarian leadership, the bourgeois state will always reabsorb resistance struggles and *socialize* them, that is, take up the demands they bear as apolitical ‘social issues’ in order to block a revolutionary proletarian *politics*. Here we must remember that the bourgeois state is not the state of the bourgeoisie *per se*, but an instrument of class domination through which the bourgeoisie masters the class struggle, *above all by incorporation*.

(2) We must expose the bourgeois state’s inability to handle the crisis – both from the perspective of ‘public health’ and that of economic and social collapse – without becoming bourgeois ‘policy analysts’ who provide ‘advice’ to the state so it can better manage the crisis and its consequences. We must clarify that this is a crisis of capitalism – not of society versus nature – and show that the capitalist state has not suddenly assumed the collective interest of society, but continues to represent the collective interest of the dominant class. In the face of spontaneous demands for expanding the imperialist state, we must above all use the coronavirus crisis to demonstrate that the imperialist state only exists to safeguard a *dying* economic base. Capitalist relations of production have long become a fetter on the development of productive forces.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Engels to Sorge, March 10, 1887: “*The workers over there are only beginning to enter the movement, they are still quite callow and in particular tremendously backward theoretically, as a result of their general Anglo-Saxon and special American nature and previous training—for them things have to be tackled from a practical point of view.*”

The first form of exposure must be *integral propaganda* that aims to win over the most steadfast militants to the perspective of Communism and the project of forming the proletarian vanguard. These militants will be drawn from among not only progressive intellectuals, but also from the most advanced layer of workers.

The second form of exposure must be *agitation* that aims to stir up discontent among the masses of the working class against capital and its state in order to prepare the conditions for a future period of mass action under our leadership.

(3) We must use the current situation to gain a foothold in the working class in order to overcome our astonishing lack of strength. Our agitation must in particular be oriented to the concrete task of organizing independent and democratic unions in unorganized sectors, both those that have experienced mass layoffs and those in which workers have continued to work in dangerous conditions.

In sectors that have experienced mass layoffs, we must expose the ways that capital has leveraged our disorganization and disunity to dismiss workers without severance pay or continued health insurance, refuse guarantees of rehiring, and even win worker support for their own bailouts as they lobby the state to weaken labor laws. In sectors in which workers continue to work under dangerous conditions, we must vividly expose the culpability of capital in spreading the coronavirus by forcing workers to keep working, failing to provide adequate safety equipment, and classifying non-essential sectors as ‘essential.’

(4) In the immediate period, we must take up and organize collective class cooperation and assistance, the most advanced mass idea to emerge from the crisis. The development of small areas of collectivity in the face of mass dispersal will take on a heightened importance in determining whether the aftermath of the crisis will be marked by greater resistance or greater submission to monopoly capital and its state. The links that we forge through collective class cooperation and assistance – including distribution of safety equipment to workers, organization of unemployed councils, and emergency relief – should be mobilized to advance the project of forming independent and democratic unions once the acute phase of the crisis has passed.

If we orient ourselves according to these four points, we will be able to prepare ourselves for the next period of our development, in which we will be born as a political Party that has conquered our proletarian class independence, backed by the force of the worker masses.

It is only in this future – not yet discernible, and only inevitable if we handle the present correctly – that we will be able to light the sky and drive out both the plague and the Plague God – both deadly viruses and the imperialist bourgeoisie that exceeds them in its virulence – and bid farewell to them both.