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Robert Ovetz: The Working Class Pandemic in the US

By April 9th, at least [81 wildcat strikes](#) and a [threatened national general strike by two transport unions](#) have swept the US since march when the country went into lock down to stop the spread of the deadly Covid-19 virus. The organization and strike actions by workers has been breathtaking. From construction workers to nurses, warehouse, transport, meatpacking, call center, carpenters, fast food, trash collectors, prisoners, and a wide range of other kinds of workers, class struggle is suddenly back on the agenda in the US, and much of [the world](#) for that matter. Strikes aren't the only form of organizing taking place, joined by [short sitdown work stoppages](#) and demonstrations by [nurses and doctors in seven states protesting](#) the lack of critical safety equipment and petitions, and widespread media attention to the plight of essential workers. There are several key impacts and consequences of this worker self-organizing and strike action for global working class struggle.

There is no doubt that global capitalism is in deep crisis. After several years of a rising global authoritarian embracing nationalism and protectionism, much of the global economy has come

to a standstill. Mass layoffs of countless millions of workers and the collapse in income has caused investment to collapse, markets to crash, and soon government tax revenue will be depleted. The response of the state has been to further ramp up state socialism for business, corporations and large property owners and stop gap Keynesianism for workers in the wealthy countries with utter destitution and disaster for the rest of the global working class.

When the pandemic crisis passes the bill will come due. There will continue to be state socialism for corporations and capitalism for workers. Unemployment will be used to bring down the hammer on what remains of the organized and unionized working class. Work will be reorganized to become even more precarious and the workplace even more despotically managed by data based surveillance. Skyrocketing deficits, borrowing, and corporate bailouts will become justification for further neoliberal austerity, privatization, disinvestment, and tax cuts for the rich and capital and regressive taxes on workers. [Emergency executive powers](#) will become normalized wielded with grotesque violence by authoritarians and corporate parties to recoup what is owed.

To understand the immense disruptive possibilities of working class self-organizing it will also be necessary to prepare for the inevitable counterattack. There are some efforts to begin such preparation. The UNITE HERE union is organizing its members, nearly all of whom are out of work as the recreational sector has shut down, in Southern California and Nevada, as well as workers seeking out its help. The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America have teamed up with the

Democratic Socialists of America to help [workers seeking its help to organize wildcat strikes during the pandemic](#). Recognizing that making call for a general strike is not organizing one, [Cooperation Jackson has called for general strike](#) and National Educators United and its California chapter have called for actions including strikes on May 1st.

In the midst of the wave of wildcat strikes and a surge in new organizing, there are some lessons to be learned by this rising in class struggle in the US.

Workers are Self-Organizing

The story we've heard from right to left that workers cannot be organized, capital and the state are too powerful, mass surveillance and the rise of the far right is making organizing too dangerous, are all based on the wrong premise. Faced with the terror of being fatally sickened and spreading the virus to others, unemployment, starvation, and being sacrificed for the capitalist economy, workers are not being organized—they are self-organizing.

This means that unions and others on the left need to throw out their archaic tactics and strategies and find that workers have, are, and will continue to organize themselves from the bottom up and circulate their struggles to meet their needs. Unions will come under immense pressure to finally abandon the narrow focus on bargaining over the now long abandoned legalistic [Fordist wage-productivity deal](#) and throw off the harness of the

contract and labor law. It is long past the time for our unions to apply its remaining power and vast resources in support of the working class rather than just triaging its loyal members.

As nearly all the workers going on wildcat strikes are not formally in unions, most likely have their own **unknown committees** in the workplace, they are not limited by federal or state labor laws, union contracts, or other control mechanisms. That's what makes wildcat strikes so dangerous—they are unmanaged and uncontrolled.

Reproductive and Logistics Labor are Central

What ties together nearly all of the wildcat strikes together is that they are being carried out by workers doing reproductive labor or what is often euphemistically called **caring, effective or service labor**. Most unions in the US have given up on reproductive workers except in the public education and the private health care industries. The composition of reproductive workers is that they extremely low paid and precarious (who isn't anymore, really?), disproportionately people of color, turnover rates are very high, and are extremely exploited in many other areas of society.

In addition to the mistaken assumption of reproductive workers as impossible to organize is the **fatal mistake of presuming that their labor is unproductive to capital**]. In reality, what used to be unwaged labor that reproduced labor power for capital, the work of cooking, cleaning, caring, educating by primarily women and

girls, has increasingly moved into waged work. In fact, much of this waged work is merely a commodified form of the unwaged work they still or used to do more of in the home.

As a result, capital has been virtually unrestrained in deploying a new technical composition that features various extreme strategies of exploitation, domination, and division by legal status, sex, gender, race, wage, job status, etc., and control that are now becoming ubiquitous among better organized higher skilled workers. For example, many of the same communications technologies and algorithmic data management systems used to control and intensify reproductive labor are now found among professors, doctors, nurses, and lawyers.

The wildcat strikes are demonstrating that these reproductive industries are extremely vulnerable to its disruption—a strategy first proposed by the so-called wages for housework/student movements in the 1960-70s—along numerous global [choke points](#). It turns out that the wages demanded by those movements now make it possible for reproductive workers to refuse work rather than willingly hand over their labor power—the [original objective of the movements](#).

If food production, preparation, and logistics stop, all other workers stop by default. The global attack on reproductive labor is the working class's pandemic, striking at capital's circulatory system producing labor power available for work.

Reproductive workers are now exploiting the vulnerabilities in the long and thin “just in time” global supply chain. The sudden disappearance of toilet paper is not because of scared or

greedy consumers. They are caused by unforeseen disruptions in a virtually uninterrupted global division of labor that capital is now suddenly struggling to respond to. It is this strategy of disruption at key global choke points that offers the greatest potential for turning our planet back away from its path towards ecological catastrophe.

Similarly, while the disruptive power of workers in logistics is better recognized, here unions and the left have mostly abandoned or failed to make much inroads organizing workers. That hasn't stopped Amazon/Whole Foods, Instacart, and other logistics workers from disrupting the global supply chain not only in the US but numerous other countries hit by the pandemic, such as in Italy where widespread wildcat strikes in March effectively triggered a general strike against a deal made by the big three unions and the state to keep the factories open.

As capital relies ever more on managing a global "just in time" supply chain through the use of algorithmic data management, these relative small wildcat strikes have tipped these global corporate giants off balance. We can see how quickly they are responding by raising wages and making empty promises to supply safety equipment, extending unprecedented paid leave, offering minimum income cash subsidies, and firing key organizers like Amazon warehouse manager Chris Smalls in New York City.

Disruptive Power and the Circulation of Struggle

The simultaneous eruption of wildcat strikes in numerous countries in mostly unorganized industrial sectors offers another key lesson. In this way, without any top down central coordination by vanguardist parties or corporate unions, the working class has become international for the time since the 1960s. Before the 1960s, the working class also exhibited itself as international during the waves of wildcat strikes, workers councils, general strikes, and revolutionary insurrections in the [late 1910s](#) and the 1930s.

As news of each local wildcat strike instantaneously circulates, other workers become inspired and launch their strike elsewhere. Like the children's arcade game "whack a mole," the global working class is popping up in one place and as capital and the state seek to whack it back down, pops up simultaneously in numerous places all along both up- and down-stream of the now fraying global supply chain.

These struggles offer the most significant possibility of the global working class recomposing its power in nearly two generations. To do so it will not only need to circulate but also become explicitly coordinated, prepared for the predictable and inevitable response by capital and the state to [control, coopt, diffuse, manage, redirect, and repress each separate struggle](#). For capital and the state's strategy to prevail it will require quarantining each struggle off from one another in the same way as those who are capable of doing so are quarantining off from one another to dampen the contagious spread of the virus.

While others organize and strike, we need to study and be prepared for emerging strategies of capital and the state for dampening the circulation of these struggles with the same intensity it seeks to dampen the spread of COVID-19. Here we have to prepare for the role unions tied to capital and the state will seek to play in attempting to dampen and diffuse self-organized workers. We have seen this not only in Italy but more recently when [unionized Kroger supermarket workers](#) took a temporary \$2 pay bump, sick leave, and vague promises of meager assurances of safety measures to stay at work.

In the three pandemic bills signed into law in March we also have the meager \$1200 to \$1700 cash bribes to US taxpayers, 133% increase in unemployment benefits, which were also temporarily extended to precarious platform “gig” workers, and inaugural paid family/sick leave handed out to some workers to cleave them from those engaged in disruptive class struggle. In a crisis, capital and the state are willing to resort to temporary “universal basic income,” an idea that originated in US libertarian thinktanks as a way to gut social democratic social wages, shrink government employment, and attack public sector unions.

These Keynesian stop gap measures pale in contrast alongside massive [trillions of dollars of insurance to corporations, investors and banks](#) included in the pandemic laws. These are intended to shore up corporate balance sheets in the face of the undeclared consumption strike by workers and their families who refuse to spend on anything but critical necessities. These should be acknowledged as capital and the state resorting to nationalization of both the financial and production sectors

by subsidizing companies operating expenses in exchange for stemming layoffs to no more than 10% of their workers. Similar levels of aid to the states and local governments was missing in order to accelerate the shrinkage of the public sector following the crisis as tax revenues collapse and austerity follow.

We should similarly be on the lookout for employers offering temporary family/sick leave, reduced hours, temporary pay, and minor alterations in working conditions in response to demands for safety precaution and equipment during the closures. These will be offered as a condition for increasing use of surveillance, speed ups, and lengthening the work day—all of which are already being reported by those working remotely at home. Federal bailouts described above will give corporations breathing room to launch a counter-attack by extending the crisis further beyond the pandemic to extract further alterations in the relations of production, wage and benefit cuts, outsourcing, and automation.

The Struggle is Against Work

One thing that has gone unnoticed is that workers are simultaneously struggling for higher pay and safer working conditions at the same time they are struggling against work. If Karl Marx famously observed, “[labor is shunned like the plague](#)” (MECW, Vol. 3, 274), today work is refused for literally being the vector spreading a plague. Reproductive and logistics workers are refusing to do work that degrades their humanity by making them sacrificial slaughter to the virus in exchange for keeping

capitalism going even as it is in freefall.

But more importantly, these workers are refusing to do work, the same dangerous exploitative work most are forced into for the lack of other means to survive and despite the destruction it inflicts on the planet. As useful, meaningful work at a wage level that allows one some of the comforts of life continues to evaporate the refusal of available work will be further shunned like the plague. Even as unemployment skyrockets with the number filing for unemployment shooting up 600% in the first week and doubling in the second, now at 6.6 million during the first week of April for a total of **17 million in a merely three weeks**, workers are refusing work even as starvation looms.

This struggle has demonstrated the centrality of moving the **struggle against work** to the center of our organizing and struggles. There are so many other things people would rather be doing than work, a desire we almost all share regardless of what differences keep us divided. As capital has sought for the past forty years to raise productivity and intensity of work through a new technical composition, the struggle for less, not merely better paying, work has been missing entirely from our response. The refusal of work during the pandemic has become the refusal to work for the pandemic of capitalism.

The danger to capital and the state (an adjunct of capital) from the refusal of work shows itself in the rapidity to which states have engaged in fiscal pump priming by spending trillions of dollars. The state has effectively replicated Brazil's Bolsa Família to put cash into peoples' hands to spend to artificially keep those that still have work, working. This is not simply a

demonstration of the ease in which wealth can be redistributed or ecological and social problems solved, both futile demands of the loyal opposition. Rather, it now demonstrates to reproductive workers—considered among the most powerless until March—of how quickly they can win less work and more pay by striking. No corporate foundation funded NGO social movement mobilization has managed to extract even a miniscule fraction of what has poured out in fiscal spending since March. The right wing populist US Trump administration will forever be remembered for using fiscal policy in an unprecedented level to extend cash aid to the poor, unemployed, starving, and precarious platform workers. Ironically, Trump may now become the next Franklin D. Roosevelt, saving capitalism by using state socialist strategies, a strategy he can be expected to continue pursuing to win re-election.

On the other side, it also raises warnings for what will follow once the epic dangers fade and billions return to work. Capital and the state will seek to be repaid through even deeper cuts, austerity, privatization, layoffs, repression, intensified algorithmic management regimes, precarization, and new enclosures of the public sector such as moving entire public education systems to corporate online conferencing platforms.

Recomposition of Working Class Struggle

Naomi Klein has garnered much deserved attention for demonstrating how capital and the state [use shocks](#) like the pandemic to shift power even more in its favor. During such crises, Klein

continues to remind us today, capital carries out its previously blocked plans and strategies to impose what David Harvey calls “[accumulation by dispossession](#),” a term so widely used it is entirely forgotten that Marx already documented it in [Part 8](#), “[So-called Primitive Accumulation](#),” in *Capital*, Volume I published in 1867. It’s easy to forget Marx when the solution presented by Klein and others is to wishfully return to thinly disguised Keynesianism of the Green New (capitalist) Deal.

What Klein and many other social democrats have failed to recognize is that workers also have the ability to inflict shocks too—through self-organized unmanaged strikes. Such working class inflicted global shocks come infrequently—1848, 1871, 1877, 1894, 1917-21, 1932-38, 1945-46, 1960-70s—and have now returned.

To understand these struggles it is necessary to assess how worker organizing has managed to adapt to and devise new tactics and strategies to contest and rupture the current organization of capital, the technical composition. Understanding how reproductive labor has self-organized demonstrates both possibilities and risks. Reproductive workers have found new tactics and strategies to organize and disrupt the reproduction of labor power to keep capitalism functioning during the pandemic. If they are defeated, capital will be unrestrained in further efforts to impose the strategy of platform work to other sectors such as education.

Education has long been the terrain of struggle against the imposition of a new technical composition of capital. Workers have managed to respond with rigidity, impeding these plans

by fighting charter schools in K-12, on-line education in higher education, and the continuing neoliberal attacks most vividly seen in the wave of wildcat strike waves in mostly Republican controlled states as well the colony of Puerto Rico in 2018-19.

This means that crisis has allowed the rapid ushering in new strategies for breaking recent waves of worker organizing. Platform workers have been folded into the unemployment insurance program thereby placing the increasingly organized and unruly sector increasing under state management. Borrowing from the platform sector, the state has succeeded imposing further algorithmic data management tools such as Zoom on public and private school teachers, language schools, and college and university faculty on top of recent forced introductions of Learning Management Systems and quantitative performance assessment systems.⁸ Both strategies may prove to be successful in tempering the rapid growth of organizing, unionization, and wildcat strikes in both sectors thereby ushering in a new technical composition of educational capital.

To Be Determined

Self-isolation and the massive decline in wages and the resulting collapse in production and reproduction has accelerated the

⁸ Estimates are that 1.57 billion children (91.3% of all learners) and 63 million teachers in 188 countries are isolated at home and is 372 million students attending 90,000 schools in 22 countries are now holding classes on Zoom or other on line conferencing software. (Education International, 2020; and Lieberman, 2020)

search for a new technical composition of capital with the intention of extracting even more work. As Cleaver reminds us in [33 Lessons on Capital](#) (2019),

capitalists introduce machinery not only to raise productivity...but also to increase work. Machines set the rhythm of work, so by speeding them up the capitalists can force the workers who work with them to work faster, and thus harder (and sometimes longer). With machines running continuously, workers find it difficult to create 'pores' of free time in the working day. (329-330)

As the pandemic has demonstrated yet another mortal vulnerability of the global human population to the myriad terrors of climate catastrophe, so too has it demonstrated the vulnerabilities of global capitalism to a recomposed global working class. Around the world many are documenting and assessing this newly recomposed working class power and working to circulate it. Its success holds out the greatest promise for reorganizing the planet to reverse the five centuries of damage caused by the pandemic of capitalism.

Notes and References

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Robert is the author of [When Workers Shot Back: Class Conflict from 1877 to 1921](#) (Haymarket 2019) and [Workers’ Inquiry and Global Class Struggle: Tactics, Strategies, Objectives](#) (forthcoming from Pluto Press, January 2021).