

Intersecting Crises: Intersecting Resistance

Jeff Shantz

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Crisis is a central feature of capitalism. It is rooted in the many contradictions of capitalist systems. The contradictions between collective production and private ownership, forces and relations of production. The contradiction between working class needs, use values, and capital's requirements for profit, exchange values. The division between production and consumption. The fundamental struggles between capital and labor within production. Workers needs for the value they produce (higher pay in limited terms) and capital's need for surplus value and profit. And the existential contradiction between capital's expropriation of nature as "resource" and the ecological necessities for sustainable life on the planet.

Notably, these crises are not extraordinary manifestations, the system losing its way, but rather are intrinsic to capitalist systems. Crises erupt as more or less disruptive at periods within capitalist economies. At certain points more than others the nature and extent of crises under capitalism become more clearly visible or grasped.

The current period provides one such moment of clarity. The dual crises of Covid19 and the struggles erupting over police violence and racial inequality put a sharp focus on contradictions within capitalism but also show the disparities and inequalities inherent in the system. Behind them is a context of planetary ecological crises and threats to survival.

These crises also show that struggles (not least of which involve class) are at the center of capitalism as fundamentally—struggles over nature, over social resources, over necessities, over the means of subsistence and sustenance. They show that the demands of the system (ownership, profit, relations of production) are sharply, irreconcilably, at odds with the needs of the majority of people within it (for health, safety, wellbeing).

Covid Crises

Covid19 has served as a concentration point bringing together impacts and effects of intersecting systemic crises of capitalism. It has intensified burdens on working class people and communities who have been faced with lost jobs, lost work hours, lost pay—all while having to pay rent and being faced with possibilities of evictions (by landlords who would never accept having to do without).

At the same time, health impacts of Covid19 have been disproportionately devastating in working class communities, particularly for working class people and communities of color, given the stratified and unequal character of the labor market in countries like Canada and the United States. Workers of color disproportionately make up labor forces in service sector industries. They have had to keep the grocery store shelves stocked with essentials. They have done the delivery work, both in supplying stores but also doing delivery work for restaurants through the falsely named “gig economy” or “gig labor” jobs for companies like Skip-the-Dishes and Uber Eats.

Workers of color, especially migrant workers, have had to continue the labor of planting, growing, and harvesting crops and ensuring foods are available to make it to the grocery stores and restaurants in the first place. The awful burden to health and wellbeing borne by farm workers, especially precarious migrant workers, under Covid19 has played out in stark terms in agricultural centers like Windsor-Essex in Ontario, Canada (my own birthplace and hometown area).

The “hothouse of Canada,” Leamington, Ontario, was the location of severe Covid19 outbreaks centered on farms employing numerous migrant workers who were most harmed by Covid19 outbreaks.

Migrant workers in Canada are granted few rights, whether employment rights, civil rights, or basic human rights. They are typically denied basic workplace protections, proper and adequate housing, basic health and safety protections. They are denied organizing and union rights. Even more they are often made to work when sick, facing threats, explicit or implicit, that refusal to work will lead to deportation and ineligibility to work future seasons.

Housing conditions are often abysmal, with several workers sheltered together in what are best described as shacks in close quarters in small spaces that make social distancing impossible. Often these shelters lack clean, potable water or proper washroom facilities. All while farm owners and operators receive subsidies from government.

Policing in Crisis

With lower paid and precarious labor, the experience for many workers of color and with impacts of job loss and health crises in their communities, there have been intersections with the other crisis of the time—racist policing.

The economic crises and threats to health, housing, and employment—threats, in no small part, to survival—in working class communities, especially communities of color, have intensified already incendiary conditions for a more generalized uprising against ongoing, historic, police violence in these communities. Sparked by events caught on camera, the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the shooting in the back of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, rebellions in defense of Black lives, and against police brutality—but more generally against state practices of oppression and repression against racialized working class people.

In Canada, similar struggles have arisen in response to recent lethal police violence inflicted on Black and Indigenous people, including Regis Korchinski-Paquet in Toronto, Chantal Moore and Rodney Levi in New Brunswick. Notably, these killings occurred during so-called “wellness checks” for people experiencing mental health distress. This too has shown the social inequalities and lack of adequate health care and social supports available to working class people—the very inequity laid bare by Covid19.

At the same time this exposes a contradiction between the needs of working class people for health, wellness, care, and sustenance, which remain under-resourced, and the massive expendi-

ture of social resources plowed into policing and carceral structures, institutions, and agencies—which are viewed by capital and states as essential. And, indeed, which are essential for business and property owners within capitalism. As critical criminologists have long pointed out, modern policing has its roots as the standing force for maintaining systems of inequality and exploitation. Capitalism could not have developed without the police as a force for colonialism and class stratification and the protection of property relations.

One can see all of this in grotesque form in the ignorant, uncaring response by the Trump administration contrasted with their “law and order” promotion of their re-election campaign and Republican National Convention as police pageant.

Crisis States

Crises do not occur as natural phenomena. They are wielded in various ways politically, economically, and culturally. What is sometimes called the neoliberal period has been effected through what I have referred to as Crisis States¹. This analysis examines political shifts from the welfare state to the repressive states of the neoliberal offensive on behalf of capital.

Through Crisis States, capital and governments impose various crises on working class communities, transforming labor markets and production relations to benefit capital more completely. Dismantling the Planner State (the social welfare projects of the post-war decades of Keynesianism) from the 1970s onward. Crisis States have involved a destruction and retooling of social services and programs that have some utility to the working class and poor (welfare, rent controls, health care, etc.) while building up the repressive functions of the state (police, prisons, military). This has all involved a transferring of social resources, from health care to housing to utilities to media over to capital through privatization, P3s (public-private partnerships, etc.)

It is no coincidence that this is the period of mass incarceration. The 1994 Crime Bill is an expression of Crisis State lawmaking. The War on Drugs is its cultural form. This has significantly coincided with shifts in production relations, movement of production centers out of “the rust-belt” in the US, moves to service industries, increased unemployment, poverty, and homelessness, especially impacting blue collar Black workers and communities. The rise of prison industries and private and for-profit prisons are also part of this Crisis State transformation.

Crisis States have also involved outright attacks on organized labor through anti-union laws, strikebreaking, intensified policing of strikes (and other working class mobilizations), etc. These have created intersecting crises within the working class. The response to these crises from the state has not been social commitments to health and wellbeing, but rather anti-social commitment to state violence, force, and repression.

The Other Side of Capitalist Crisis: Resistance

Like other aspects of capitalism, such as the labor market, wages, the working day, production, or profit, crisis must be viewed from two perspectives. Crisis States, and the push for increased accumulation of capital, represent the perspective of capital. But crises under capitalism must also be viewed from working class viewpoints. The working class standpoint (and intervention in) is grasped through resistance and social struggles. In this, the present period of crisis poses important challenges to the unilateralism of capitalist crisis.

The Black Lives Matter movements and mobilizations against state violence offer the most striking, and noted, of these. But we must also recognize ongoing Indigenous struggles for

sovereignty and return of land (“Land Back”). And the widespread, growing expressions of workers rebellion, including wildcat strikes and calls for general strikes that have emerged with a vigor not seen in generations in state contexts like Canada and the United States.

Not only have these uprisings moved politics beyond the realms of electoralism, representational politics, and a politics of appeal (to hegemonic authorities). They have started to form and shape new infrastructures of resistance, the more enduring, generative, resources that sustain struggles over time and allow for the move from defensive to offensive struggle.

Perhaps most significantly in the context of the current crises are mutual aid and solidarity organizing as people have worked collectively to support their neighbors and communities. From the mutual aid societies preparing meals and care packages of essentials (toilet paper, sanitizer, soap, etc.) for people isolated under Covid, to those distributing tents, clothing, food, etc. for unhoused people in collective tent cities, mutual aid groups have stepped forward to assist with medical care and self defense during street uprisings against police.

There have also been examples of rent strikes and anti-eviction defenses in numerous cities as working class people collectively oppose the brutality of landlords demanding rent (even as governments have offered mortgage relief for owners) while people are without work or have reduced incomes.

Wildcat strikes in and against workplaces have also happened, including strike actions by service workers and delivery drivers (such as Amazon and Purdue Farms workers). One telling example saw miners walk out at Hudbay’s Lalor mine in northern Manitoba over their COVID-19 concerns after contractors were flown into town even after a request by the town council that the company suspend air travel into the region.

This has resonated too with longstanding concerns of Indigenous communities resisting resource extraction industries on their territories. Some Indigenous communities in British Columbia (unceded territories) set up blockades to stop tourists from entering their territories during the crisis.

Already dots have been connected and there have been calls for a general strike. This is a potentially transformational development for a radical, revolutionary, working class rising, putting forward the idea of the general strike and making it familiar to new generations of workers in ways that have not been seen in contexts like Canada and the US in decades. #GeneralStrike was the top trend on social media for a couple of days in mid-March. It returned in August when a stunning wildcat strike by National Basketball Association players spread to professional baseball, soccer, and perhaps most surprisingly, hockey. While the strike was undercut by professional politicians (acting in the service of owners) to defuse and divert the strikes into electoralism once again, there was a moment of some anticipation.

Conclusion

Crises are always in the end about struggles. The intersecting crises of the current period have been met by struggles bringing together working class communities across lines of stratification, if incompletely yet. Organizing remains a key. Capital organizes. That is what the Crisis State projects represent and manifest. The working class organizes too, if under conditions of duress, desperation, even despair. The moment of Covid authoritarianism, of pandemic and policing, shows renewed forms of working class organizing beyond the conventions of stabilizing, reactive, politics.

Organized labor remains quarantined in part in the ossified structures of business union managerialism. Might the emerging politics place revolutionary unionism, syndicalism, back in the heart of working class resistance, as its tools, wildcats and the general strike, become more familiar? Might the new struggles raise the specter of class solidarity—of class struggle? Might the terrain of crisis shift, with force, to become not a crisis of capital but a crisis for capital?

Note

1. Jeff Shantz. 2016. *Crisis States: Governance, Resistance & Precarious Capitalism*. Brooklyn: Punctum

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