

Anarchism in a pandemic and the struggle needed

Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group

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The coronavirus pandemic started in a market in Wuhan late last year. It grew into a crisis through bureaucratic suppression of bad news by local “Communist” Party authorities. It has now become a global catastrophe because of haphazard and often complacent reactions by capitalist governments. So far, there is no vaccine to prevent it and no treatment that can cure it. The best that doctors can do is treat the symptoms and hope the body of the patient fights it off.

This would be bad enough even in a libertarian communist society, but capitalism makes it so much worse. What needs to happen? As any epidemiologist could tell you, in the absence of a vaccine, you test as many people as possible, isolate the people infected and trace their contacts. At the same time you cut off the path of infection by practising good hygiene and reducing the number of people that each person contacts.

Here in Australia, the Federal Government is trying hard (thus distinguishing itself from the United States, where Donald Trump has blown hot and cold on the issue), but won’t go all out because of the consequences for business. So we get very strict rules about movement of individual people and physical distancing, but they go out of the window when they interfere with the operations of employers.

As this article is being written, new Australian cases of COVID-19 are decreasing and it looks as if the spread of the disease is slowing in the most heavily hit countries of Europe. It is rampaging through the United States and is just getting started in most Third World countries – where it threatens to kill a hundred times more people than it has so far.

In Australia, you can’t have more than a hundred people in the same indoor space – unless it’s a worksite. Pubs, clubs and restaurants are closed down, even small ones – but building sites go full steam ahead. You mustn’t sit in a park with a friend or two – but any retail shop can stay open serving up to a hundred customers at a time, provided there’s 4 square metres a person.

The glaring contradiction became obvious when six Qantas baggage handlers tested positive to COVID-19 on 31 March. People don’t become immune to the virus just because they’re at work, so any work people do away from home brings a risk of infection. This can only be justified if the work is essential to the functioning of society. Instead, Scott Morrison says “every job is an essential job”. Many people who should be paid to stay home and prevent the spread of the virus are instead going to work to keep the capitalists in business.

Anarchism in a Pandemic

People with little or no knowledge of Anarchism might think the coronavirus pandemic provides a refutation of our philosophy. After all, having people just decide individually what to do would lead both to hoarding and to no effective action against transmission of the virus. This, however, would not be Anarchism but capitalist individualism.

An Anarchist society could fight the pandemic more effectively than capitalist ones. We wouldn’t have to worry about the viability of business, so we could close down all non-essential activities. Construction, for example, could be put on care and maintenance. Production of luxuries or other low priority goods could be ceased, letting workers go home, turn their plant to medical equipment and supplies as required, or reinforce the supply chain of necessities. And a panel of medical experts, elected in each region and given parameters by the affected communities, would hold the necessary authority to set health guidelines.

How would these guidelines be enforced? How would we achieve the physical distancing so important to preventing transmission? We'd do it the same way we would handle enforcement of any of our laws, whether that be concerning serious crime, anti-social activity or anything in between.

While this is not the place for a detailed discussion of an Anarchist criminal justice system, we can say a few things. In the first place, we'd have community discussion and persuasion, acting through reason and social solidarity. When it comes to recalcitrants (we're not so naive as to think they won't exist), communities will defend themselves. Rather than having a standing police force though, we could roster volunteers from the widest sections of the community (noting a pandemic might necessitate a considerably larger roster for the duration of the emergency). Importantly, the volunteers would not have powers above and beyond those of citizens generally. And, since there will be no prisons because we will refuse to be gaolers, in the last resort recalcitrants could be exiled to a comfortable island.

The Capitalist State in a Pandemic

By contrast, governments in Australia have become increasingly authoritarian. The New South Wales and Victorian Governments have laid down the toughest restrictions, banning many activities that couldn't possibly spread the virus. Instead, they draw the line where cops can easily enforce it. Armed with arbitrary powers and a wide area of discretion, they are spreading fear and enforcing social conformity. Indigenous and immigrant youth are only too familiar with "discretion" in the hands of racist cops. They are highly likely to undermine the social solidarity needed to keep up the regime of physical distancing for the period of at least six months which will be necessary.

There is another dimension to the actions of the capitalist State, though. Under the hammer blows of necessity, the Coalition has abandoned the dictates of neo-liberalism and introduced policies it scoffed at only three months ago. They doubled the unemployment benefit. They introduced free child care. They banned evictions. They introduced a flat rate wage subsidy (the Jobkeeper Payment) at about the minimum full time wage. And there's more to come. Of course, Scott Morrison is boldly saying everything will "snap back" to pre-pandemic levels when the crisis is over, but that's a lot easier said than done. Class struggle will determine the results.

In a telling development, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has spent the last month handing out waivers to competition rules, so that companies can *co-operate* to improve the supply chain for necessities and increase production of medical equipment. Think about it.

None of this makes for a workers' paradise, however. The measures taken are full of gaps and injustices because they are aimed firstly at keeping capitalism functioning under emergency conditions and secondly at preventing widespread industrial action by the working class. So free child care excludes centres run by local councils. The Jobseeker Payment excludes people on disability pensions. There's no rent relief yet for residential tenants. And neither workers on temporary visas nor casuals with under twelve months seniority get the Jobkeeper Payment. Government reforms are about capitalist stability first and daylight second. Justice doesn't get a look-in.

The Struggle Needed

Three areas of struggle are necessary immediately. Firstly, industries not essential during the pandemic need to be closed – for the good of the workers involved and the population generally. Importantly, the entire construction industry should be put on care and maintenance. Building workers need to be paid to stay home and not spread the virus. Secondly, workers in essential industries need to take action to defend their health and safety and to institute fair rationing systems where hoarding has distorted supply chains. And thirdly, the whole working class needs to support those locked out of the Jobkeeper Payment. This is especially crucial for workers on visas, who are being left destitute. They will be under pressure to accept cash jobs that ignore physical distancing, thus spreading the virus to the detriment of all.

The union bureaucracy is in the road. The ACTU, having asked the Government to extend the Jobkeeper Payment to the whole workforce, has received a slap in the face for its troubles. But it's not proposing to fight back. The CFMMEU officials, disgracefully, aren't calling for building workers to be paid to stay home. And officials of the SDA, which covers supermarket workers, are so committed to class treason that their organisation doesn't deserve to be called a union.

The Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group calls on Anarchists to start rank and file groups in the unions to fight for a workers' response to the coronavirus pandemic. Workers need to use workplace power to force the closure of non-essential industries, adequate protection of health and safety and the provision of a living income for all. If a groundswell for these demands gains strength, the officials will have either to give in to the rank and file, or be swept aside.

In the course of this struggle over immediate issues, workers will raise broader demands, both about the management of the pandemic (e.g. civil liberties) and the sort of society we want afterwards. And it is in the context of this struggle that we can begin to win the argument for Anarchist Communism and to build the movement for a workers' revolution that can create it.

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