



Dear Friend—

1 April 2020

On my birthday today, I realize how quickly and utterly the world has changed since last year. I also realize how remarkable the community around Democracy at Work is... and how precious it is. Historic crises are always also historic opportunities for change, if we can see and act on them. With that in mind, I would like to share with you some thoughts on capitalism and the virus.

Walter South is the first person we knew personally who has died from the coronavirus. He was a vibrant, sharp-witted activist and intellectual with many broad interests but a special competence in new ways of producing and democratically running affordable cooperative housing. It was a pleasure speaking with and learning from him at the New School University and at the many activities of Democracy at Work that he attended and contributed to ([including his appearance on *Economic Update*](#)). He had a gift for ironic appreciations of the many mis-steps of contemporary capitalism and the self-confident idiocies of those that capitalism puts in power. **Our Democracy at Work community will miss Walter very much** while we grieve how very close to us all this virus has now come and how horrific is capitalism's failure to have properly prepared for or coped with the virus's threats.

What a cascade of catastrophes modern capitalism has loosed upon the world. I focus criticism at capitalism for several reasons. Viruses are part of nature. They have attacked human beings - sometimes dangerously - in both distant and recent history. In 1918, the so-called "Spanish flu" killed nearly 700,000 in the US and millions elsewhere. Recent viruses included SARS, MERS, Ebola, etc. What matters to public health is each society's preparedness: stockpiled tests, masks, ventilators, hospital beds, trained personnel, etc. to manage dangerous viruses. In the US, such objects are produced by private capitalist enterprises whose goal is profit. It was not profitable to produce and stockpile such products, that was not and still is not being done.

Nor did the US government produce or stockpile those medical products. Top US government personnel privilege private capitalism; it is their primary object to protect and strengthen it. The result: neither private capitalism nor the US government performed a most basic duty of any economic system: to protect and maintain public health and safety. US capitalism's response to the coronavirus continues to be what it has been since December, 2019: too little, too late. It failed. It is the problem.

The second reason I focus on capitalism is because the responses to today's economic collapse by Trump, GOP, and most Democrats carefully avoid any criticism of capitalism. They all debate the virus, China, foreigners, other politicians... just never the system they all serve. When Trump and others press people to return to churches and jobs despite risking their and others' lives, he puts reviving a collapsed capitalism ahead of public health.

The third reason capitalism deserves blame is because alternative systems - not driven by a profit-first logic - could manage viruses better. While not profitable to produce and stockpile everything needed for a viral pandemic, it is efficient. The wealth already lost in this pandemic far exceeds the cost to have produced and stockpiled the now missing, tests, ventilators, etc. that contribute so much to today's disaster. Capitalism often pursues profit at the expense of more urgent social needs and values. This pandemic is now bringing that truth home to people.

A worker co-op based economy - where workers democratically run enterprises, deciding what, how, and where to produce and what to do with any profits - could and likely would put social needs and goals (like proper preparation for pandemics) ahead of profits. Workers are the majority in all capitalist societies; their interests are those of the majority. Employers are always a small minority; theirs are the "special interests" of that minority. Capitalism gives that minority the position, profits, and power to determine how the society as a whole lives or dies. That's why all employees now wonder and worry how long our jobs, incomes, homes, bank accounts, etc. will last if we still have them. A minority (employers) decides all those questions and excludes the majority (employees) from making those decisions even though that majority must live with their results.

Of course, the top priority now is to put public health and safety first. To that end, employees across the country are now thinking about refusing to obey unsafe job conditions. US capitalism has thus placed a general strike on today's social agenda. A close second priority is to learn from capitalism's failure in the face of the coronavirus.

We must not suffer such a dangerous and unnecessary social breakdown again. **Thus, system change is now also moving onto today's social agenda.**

Together with the Democracy at Work team, I will continue our work in bringing these analyses to you. We hope it helps our collective effort to assess the world around us and to envision the future. **We can do better than capitalism.**

In solidarity,

Richard D. Wolff
Founder, Board Member