# Pandemics - Coronavirus demands international solidarity, not authoritarianism

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The outbreak of the novel coronavirus has unleashed terror upon the people of Wuhan. It has killed over 1000 and possibly infected hundreds of thousands. It has also spread beyond China and has the potential to become a pandemic that will kill millions.

This living nightmare is the work of modern capitalism. Virus outbreaks are not flukes of nature, nor are they akin to alien invasion. It is the cut-throat, profit driven and ecologically destructive logic of production, in particular food production, that enables the spread of toxic pathogens. In an increasingly globalised world with long production chains, the risk of epidemics developing into pandemics is dramatically increased.

Despite epidemiologists warning for years that deadly pandemics are becoming more likely, governments everywhere have failed to adequately prepare. The US government has made substantial cuts to the pandemic preparation plans while in Australia there is no central disease management system. And although pandemics are literally defined as cross border events, preparation is overwhelmingly organised on a national basis, including by extremely wealthy countries that are likely to be the least directly affected. After the Ebola outbreak in 2014 the World Health Organisation warned that low and middle income countries are the most vulnerable to pandemic threats. Despite this, countries like Australia offer negligible amounts by way of global assistance.

The generally poor or crumbling state of healthcare in most countries also exacerbates the threat and the pain of new virus outbreaks. As we are seeing in Wuhan right now, people are trapped in a city without the capacity to humanely and effectively treat them. People with the virus are being turned away from hospitals. Many are dying not because they could not be saved but because they were not given medical treatment. Inside the hospitals, the conditions are overcrowded and frenetic. Supplies and protective gear are scarce and nurses and doctors are continuing to contract the virus. No doubt the fate of doctor Li Wenlieng weighs heavy on all of their minds. Now a lawyer who has reported on the overwhelmed conditions in Wuhan hospitals has been reported missing.

An international inundation of aid and support could relieve the horror. This is what the people of Wuhan are again and again calling out for. Instead governments everywhere have responded with authoritarian and punitive measures, aimed at forcible quarantine and containment.

The Chinese government is leading the way in this. After suppressing the news of the outbreak they have now locked down the city of Wuhan. The government describes the situation as a "peoples war" but rather than a war against a virus, it looks very much like a war against a city's population. Officials are conducting door to door searches, rounding people up to be warehoused in enormous quarantine centres. People are barred from entering or leaving the city. Those locked in have been designated "contaminated" and are forsaken, supposedly for the greater good.

It is precisely this besiegment that has accelerated the contamination. The mortality rate in Wuhan

is significantly higher than the overall rate. There are reports that it may even be rising. Goods and services, both medical and otherwise, are slow to get through and there are fears that there may soon be critical food shortages. Despite all the international coverage and concern about coronavirus, there has been pitifully little offered by way of aid. It took one whole month after the outbreak for China to send additional resources to Wuhan. The US have donated some medical supplies but nowhere near enough. Cuba, one of the poorest countries on earth have sent doctors. Australia has not donated one single cent.

This is criminal. If resources were pooled, and especially contributed by the wealthiest countries, every victim of the virus could be given high quality medical care. Detachments of international health workers could be sent from to assist the effort. Patients could be airlifted from Wuhan to the best hospitals in the world. And all of this could be done methodically and safely so as to minimise the threat of contagion.

Instead most governments have complemented the approach of the Chinese government with their own custom slates of authoritarian measures. The most common measure is travel bans on people attempting to leave Hubei province. Inside China these bans have the effect of tightening the net around a desperate population; it makes it practically more difficult for people to flee their contaminated hellscape when they are barred by both their own government and the international community. These bans also add political justification to the Chinese government's response, which is being praised by the global ruling class as strong and decisive.

There is no proof that lock downs and travel bans stop the spread of diseases or viruses. This is one of the reasons, in addition to ethical concerns, that they are not commonly recommended by health authorities. In general there is substantial skepticism, to say the least, within the medical community about the efficacy of authoritarian quarantine measures.

On the other hand, in the throes of managing a deathly pandemic it is possible that a humane response may include certain authoritarian restrictions. In general measures that impinge on rights and liberties should be evaluated concretely, based on the resources available to states, the methods of how they are introduced and the threat that they are designed to mitigate. In some cases such measures may be justified.

But our starting point cannot be to accept that inhumane authoritarian controls are the only way to manage a crisis. We should be especially critical of such controls when they are introduced by governments who refuse to offer aid and assistance to those on the frontlines of the crisis despite being in an economic position to do so. And we should be especially critical of such controls when they are introduced by governments with longstanding fetishes for border control, mandatory detention and racism.

Australia was one of the first countries to respond to the outbreak. The government imposed a blanket travel ban on all non citizens and non residents from China, and announced a policy of forcible quarantine for Australian citizens and residents returning from Hubei. These measures are unjustifiable, inconsistent and inhumane.

People seeking to leave a city in the midst of a dangerous health crisis should not be prevented from doing so, if and where there is the capacity to take necessary precautions against contagion. That such precautionary measures are available is proven by the fact that Australian citizens and residents are permitted to board planes and travel to Australia. It is totally arbitrary to discriminate against people based on their visa status. The virus itself makes no such distinction.

There are also thousands of empty hotel rooms and apartments throughout Australian cities which

could allow people to self-isolate in comfort for the recommended 14 days. Services and resources could easily be provided to people in isolation, as demonstrated by a couple on a quarantined cruise ship who had wine delivered to them by a drone! This is in stark contrast to the treatment being meted out to the Australian citizens and residents who are returning from Hubei.

It is medievalist and completely unnecessary to lock people in prisons because they are feared to be diseased. To lock people up in the detention centre on Christmas Island specifically is macabre.

Christmas Island detention centre is a torture facility, established in the early 2000s by the Howard government. It was a crucial institution in developing one of the most brutal border regimes in the world; a regime built around the premise that no refugee attempting to come to Australia by boat will ever be let into the country. To make good on this the island was legally excised from Australia's migration zone, refugees were made prisoners with indefinite sentences and were subjected to unrelenting physical and psychological abuse. Later, similar prisons were built on Nauru and Manus Island.

After closing in late 2018, the detention centre was reopened by Scott Morrison mid-way through 2019. Despite costing around 5million per month to keep open, Morrison justified this on the grounds that it is "a deterrent to those who would have looked to game the system". For the likes of Morrison- who has a replica boat on his desk engraved with the words "I stopped these"- it is money well spent. Christmas Island detention centre is like the boat trophy on a giant scale. It stands as a proud testament to three decades of bi-partisan racism and cruelty; the modern ruling class' answer to the White Australia policy of their forebears.

But better than maintaining the Christmas Island detention centre as just a symbol, is justifying its existence by finding more victims to force inside its fences. Putting the centre to use helps to normalise the hyper policing of borders and imprisonment as a casual, regular thing that the state imposes on people. Shortly after the prison's reopening Morrison sent a Tamil family from Biloela, Queensland to languish there, in a kind of purgatory while the government attempts to finalise their deportation. Now they are joined by hundreds of Chinese Australians, most of whom do not have coronavirus but have found themselves subjected to a bizarre, brutal and unprecedented quarantine protocol.

The use of Christmas Island for quarantine was not the last resort. It was the government's first choice. It is unimaginable that such measures would have been readily used against Americans or Europeans, if the virus had originated there . The increasingly hostile imperialist rivalry between China and the US aligned block, combined with the long history of anti-Chinese racism in Australia, were inevitably factors in the government's decision. Australia has a long history of interning, scapegoating and dehumanising "foreign enemies".

In this way the internment of Chinese people on Christmas Island does not just serve to normalise and diversify the use of detention centres. It also feeds anti-Chinese racism. The long entrenched tropes of the "yellow peril" present Chinese and other Asian people as a sinister contagion. It is not hard to see how the government's response to the coronavirus feeds into these tropes. It was effectively a green light to the spread of a racist moral panic. Chinese (and Asian people in general) are being viewed with open suspicion or are facing outright abuse on public transport, at schools and at work. A few days into the panic a man died of a heart attack in Chinatown in Sydney because by-standers were unwilling to offer him CPR. Based on the fact that he looked Chinese they feared he may be contagious.

None of this is to say that it is in the interests of Australian capitalists to block people coming from China. In fact this crisis is detrimental to several sectors that rely on Chinese tourists, and it is

especially disruptive to the university sector which uses international students- of which Chinese students make up the biggest group- as a cash cow. Neither was it the immediate objective of the government to use this crisis to ratchet up suspicion and racism towards Chinese people- though this is certainly something they do want to do in general. The government wants to stop the virus spreading to Australia. But the approach they have taken to this is informed by the preexisting authoritarian, nationalistic and racist impulses of politicians and state bureaucrats.

Australia is leading though not alone in answering this health crisis with knee jerk authoritarian measures. It is to be expected that for capitalist governments (including China) there will always be a preference for authoritarianism over a considered, humane and internationally coordinated response.

This is even more pronounced in the current political climate. During the SARS and Ebola outbreaks very few governments initiated travel bans and quarantining. But when the coronavirus broke several jumped in eagerly to both praise China for besieging a city and to announce their own lock down measures. This shift fits with the general rise of authoritarianism. In a world of intersecting crises it is unsurprising that authoritarian measures are increasingly deployed by a class that senses its disconnect from and lack and control over the broader population.

It is up to left wing people to reject this trend. Part of that means treating emergency authoritarian measures with intense suspicion even when there is a real threat. The argument that "something needs to be done" is always mobilised during times of moral panic to justify extreme measures that would not otherwise be accepted. This is the same process that justifies militaries carrying out "humanitarian interventions" which end up looking very much like invasions. It is the same logic that informs bans on protests and strikes during times of crisis. Just as the left rejects attacks from the state in those scenarios, we cannot uncritically go along with them today. Instead we should demand a humane response based on international solidarity and compassion.

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**P.S.**

• Red Flag. 13 February 2020:
https://redflag.org.au/node/7018