

Pandemic: A Left Strategy Against Coronavirus in Pakistan

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Concentration of crisis

We are passing through one of the gravest crises faced by humanity to which no one can afford to be indifferent and neutral. It is clear that the crisis is exacerbated due to the priorities of our ruling elites, who relentlessly pursue fantasies of regional domination rather than the welfare of the public. We have tanks, missiles, even a nuclear arsenal, but do not have enough beds, ventilators and medicine for our patients.

The state is in crisis, due to an accumulation of structural weaknesses and lack of political will. There is confusion and disarray in nearly every sector of social life, as the patriarch guardian of our civilization, the state, has revealed itself to be incompetent and cruel in the most pressing of times. Our society, for all intents and purposes, is passing through a stateless existence in the midst of an emergency. The essential work being carried out by health-workers is despite the presence of the state, not due to it.

Many are suggesting that we should come together in this moment of crisis and forget our political differences. However, a problem transforms into a crisis precisely due to the lack of preparedness, inadequacy of resources and infrastructural apartheid that are political choices made by our ruling elites over the years. This crisis reflects the utter bankruptcy of their policies as they put the very survival of the human race in question.



Budget for the fiscal year 2019-20

Moreover, the most important decisions of our lives are made precisely in moments of crisis. Yet, these decisions are completely overtaken by governments in the pockets of vulture capitalists, military hawks, and unaccountable technocrats. Rulers insist that ordinary people should avoid politics during a crisis. Yet, if key decisions pertaining to our future are taken during these emergencies, it is essential for us to think about the crisis politically, rather than surrendering our right to political engagement.

The coronavirus is not a politically neutral issue. As one of the gravest threats to modern civilization, it has emerged as the most concentrated expression of the social, economic and political contradictions that shape our global order. We cannot treat it as an aberration in the generally smooth functioning of the system. More health crises are looming, while a climate catastrophe threatens the very fabric of our existence. There is no point of return from these crises.

A new world has to be built on a set of shared values and practices distinct from those of the present. This is why populist demands such as Basic Income and free utilities are essential but inadequate, as the system is not geared towards fulfilling them. Therefore, the Left should not only bombard the system with rational demands deemed impossible by the system, we must also construct a long-term strategy to reorient theory and practice. The existing political institutions of the Left (and the Right) are inadequate to meet the challenges of our time. We must develop a new language and a practice of socialism if we are not to be overwhelmed by the persistent immediacy of the multiple crises we face.

Coronavirus is the Representation of the Crisis

A doctor of the Red Cross China said “we have to stop the time; we have to stop all economic activity”. There is something ironic, yet true about this statement. Unconsciously the doctor is acknowledging that we have to stop the flow of the capitalist mode of time, which only functions when there is unbridled accumulation of capital, circulation of commodities and ruthless mechanical exploitation of workers. In other words, if we want to stop further spread of COVID19, we have to completely halt the circulation of commodities and immobilize the production process. Very simply, a house of cards has fallen. An entire world of illusions, self-deceptions, and sophistries has died. We’ve come to the end of a very long string. The crisis due to the unbridled circulation of commodities was already there. COVID 19 just exposed the charade that is the market economy.



Dr Usama Riaz: The front line medic from Gilgit-Baltistan who passed away on 22nd March after contracting corona virus in the line of duty

First, we should be very clear that what we are looking at is not a “recession”. It is not a “financial crisis”. This coronavirus pandemic is a profound dislocation of the essential components of economic and social life itself. If it is not addressed in such terms - if, instead, like the Imran Khan government, we try and treat this as something that can be managed in a normal setting and expect that the hot weather will kill the virus - we will find ourselves facing hundreds of thousands of

deaths, as the government's own modelling shows. To avoid this dire outcome, normal economic and social life must change fundamentally. What was normal economic and social life in Pakistan before this?

For the middle and elite classes, it was a normal life where they have very well defined routines and the resources to live happily in this country. But for the working classes life prior to the emergence of COVID 19 was already a nightmare. Formal workers were agitating for minimum wage, social security and proper safety at workplaces, while the informal and contractual workers were fighting on a day to day basis, knowing that at any time their factory, workshop or educational institution could fire them without notice or warning. So when we say that to avoid COVID 19, we have to fundamentally change normal social and economic life. What we are saying is that we have to change the ruthless way of life of the capitalist economy in which workers are disposable beings. If the capitalists in cahoots with the Pakistani State still think that they can just close down factories, businesses and other production processes without caring for the lives of working poor of this country then there will be two fundamental implications.

The first implication of this refusal of care would be on the public health task of demobilizing much of the economy, through social isolation and self-distancing. Until the virus has peaked and the immediate crisis has passed, it will become near impossible to place society, in effect, in something like a state of hibernation for the necessary time period to slow the spread of the virus. If workers do not get proper health facilities, food cards and basic income they will not be able to stay in homes. They will try to come out to find work opportunities, which will further prolong the pandemic. In a way this pandemic is proving that the only way quarantined life for an unforeseeable future in Pakistan or anywhere else would work, if the working poor have all the resources required to stay home in self-isolation. Because, as we know, securing a public health goal requires getting money into people's hands so that they can socially distance and self-isolate with security, and without the need to work unnecessarily.

For an economy with large numbers of insecure, uninsured, temporary, daily wagers and part-time workers to receive health care alongside universal basic payments, we need radical redistribution of wealth. In this whole COVID19 crisis, workers and working class families are already becoming the biggest losers. Clothing brands like Limelight, Generations and Outfitters are closing their factories without giving workers their salaries or even paid leave, with many being laid off entirely.

This is just the start of a long unknown crisis. It is of fundamental importance that besides asking for basic income, we form self-help, community committees, because in the coming days things will be much more difficult.

The second implication of the State's refusal and incapacity to help workers follows that if the State fails to provide workers with mandatory paid leave, food cards and complete health facilities, then in the coming months, despite curfews, lockdowns and quarantine, workers will be on the streets agitating and demanding for the mere basic necessities that one needs to continue bare life- food, shelter, income and health facilities. If other factories, businesses and workplaces follow the example set by Limelight and Generations, soon workers of Pakistan will be left asking the fundamental, existential question, "What is our place in this newly quarantined reality?"



We must keep in mind that coronavirus is a concentration of multiple crises that include broken health-care and education systems, absence of minimum wages and social security, continuous dehumanization of workers and an overdeveloped rentier state. The working poor of this country were already challenging the immediate structures of oppression in the form of workers strikes, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement, women, students and peasants marching for their rights. The current crisis due to limitations on the circulation of capital will propel workers to go beyond the mere negation of the immediate structures of oppression to pose the fundamental question, "What kind of human relations exist under a neoliberal capitalist society?" This second negation (negation of the negation) of the whole capitalist economy has revolutionary implications.

Good Governance or Dual Power?

Many commentators view the crisis as simply a case of neglect and bad governance. There is no doubt that the incompetence of the current regime has only amplified the threat due to its indecision. Yet, in the previous section, we explained how the crisis is not simply one of specific policies, but the general orientation of our state and political economy. More importantly, there is no normal that we can return to, considering that the state will only accelerate exploitation of workers to pay for the crisis.

Therefore, in the absence of a viable governance model, we must begin imagining alternative forms of being and belonging that do not correspond to the logic of capital accumulation and the state. This requires working both with the government (it would be foolish to completely dismiss the government during this crisis) but also seek new spaces of solidarity beyond the state. This requires building networks of care in the areas abandoned by the state, particularly working class neighborhoods.

What could such solidarity look like? It requires building functional self-help and volunteer teams in spaces where the state is absent to spread awareness, provide food and shelter to the most vulnerable, raise voice for those wronged by employers, and coordinate between health workers and the community.

The aim of such activity cannot simply be charity-derived out of feelings of pity for the poor. We must think of these practices politically, as we endeavor to build a world beyond the limits imposed by capitalism. We should aim to build an entire network of people and organizations that derive their strength from serving the communities they live in and building feelings of trust and solidarity within these communities.

With the weakening of the state apparatuses, we are in a situation where we will either witness perpetual social decay contained by further militarization of society, or we can return to the concept of dual power, a strategy geared towards building autonomous working class power beyond institutional representation. For example, we know once the crisis is over, the ruling classes will force the public to pay for the crisis with unemployment, underemployment, debt and price hikes. The only defense the public will have in such a situation will be their ability to self-organize and resist, using networks of mutual aid to prolong their struggle.

Dual power is part of a strategy of rupture that transforms existing social relations and gears production and distribution towards meeting human needs. This means building networks where the creative potential of the working classes can be established, and a new will can both be formulated and imposed by working class actors within their communities. Such alternative forms of worker committees are necessary to impose limits on capital accumulation, particularly once people return to the work.

Organs of popular decision-making are all the more necessary, as politics at the top will remain frozen among intra-elite actors. This is because one cannot imagine elections or any mass mobilizations in the coming months (other than riots). In the absence of high-politics, we must develop alternative visions and practices for a future society. If we think with big ideas but act specifically and locally, we can begin developing a nucleus for alternative forms of power, existing outside and independently of institutional frameworks.

It is certain that people will rise against the unbearable conditions being imposed on them. Worker committees can become the central force that both provides aid in these difficult times, and prepare to lead the masses for a decisive fight with the system. If there ever was a time to develop a practice of socialism, embodied by the most robust elements of the working classes, it is now.

“All Power to the People”

For the Left in Pakistan, now is the time for bold ideas because the normal mode of politics that entails making demands on the state alone will not work. We all know that greed of the ruling elite, multiple IMF loans and subsequent privatization of essential sectors of the economy, and an over-developed state, do not have the capacity to handle this crisis. And that they don't really care about the workers. The mobilization must start now, right in the middle of this crisis. It is our responsibility to stand with workers who know that the state and factory owners will abandon them. The formation of worker, community and self-help committees must start now—we are already very late in catching up with this crisis. On the one hand we need mass awareness through our committees about the precautions one should take to avoid further spread of COVID19, and on the other we need political mass education about worker control of the production process, community control of food and resource distribution, and people's control of health and medical facilities.

The message from the scientists and the medical professionals is very clear. As the Chinese doctor said, “We have to stop the time”. This means an almost complete shutdown of the production process and hence the circulation of commodities. This is a leap in the ongoing crisis of capital worldwide. This means that in the absence of production and circulation of capital, the underdeveloped states of the global South like Pakistan, are on the verge of a breakdown.

The slogan “All power to the people” cannot be more urgent than it is today. With courage, clarity and commitment, let's dive into this pandemic and organize for alternative power. We must train each other as medical workers, provide solidarity to the workers and neighborhoods in small numbers, elect local representatives to inventory food and other basic supplies, run mass people's clinics, and devise systems for worker and community controlled provision of essential necessities. In this moment we have nothing to lose but the chains of the past.

We have a new world to win!

Dr Ammar Ali Jan and Zahid Ali

P.S.

• Pakistan Left Review. :

<https://pakleftreview.com/2020/03/26/leftperspectivecorona/>