

Detroit, COVID-19 and the Worsening Capitalist Crisis

Jobs losses mount in the healthcare, service, production and public sectors while political officials fail to defend residents against the economic downturn

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Detroit still remains at the center of the COVID-19 pandemic as infection rates continue at unacceptable levels amid the rapidly declining economic situation.

Although the rate of people entering hospitals suffering from the virus and the number of deaths are declining as of late April, thousands of people are sick and will face additional challenges as the future of their places of employment, housing and healthcare access are not assured.

One of the most egregious aspects in the current situation was the announcement recently that the largest hospital in the region, Beaumont, was closing its campus in Wayne, a municipality in the western region of the county. This same hospital along with other healthcare facilities, had said a week earlier that it would reduce its workforce due to the lack of elective procedures and routine medical evaluations as a result of the COVID-19 emergency.

Healthcare workers employed at Beaumont have suffered hundreds of lay-offs during this period of restructuring. Spokespersons for the nurses have indicated that they were not kept abreast of the management decisions being made in regard to the closing and reduction in staff.

Beaumont corporate officials say that the closure of the Wayne facility is temporary in order to shift its operations to other services since the COVID-19 admissions are ebbing across the metropolitan area. Nonetheless, there are daily news reports showing images of crowded hospital wards where there is a lack of personnel to provide quality care to patients.

According to an [article published by Michigan Radio](#) based upon a press conference with Beaumont CEO, John Fox, who said of the closure of the Wayne campus that:

“It had been converted to take COVID-19 patients only. Since it appears the pandemic is leveling off, all the patients and staff were sent to other hospitals. ‘So, we did not need the Wayne 200 beds for that. And we’re now having it being sanitized and we’ll be on the process of converting it back,’ Fox said during an online news conference. He said it made more sense to put staff and resources to fight the COVID-19 in the health system’s other seven hospitals in the metro Detroit area. Sanitizing the Wayne hospital will take days. Then, Beaumont will apply to the state to get approval to alter its use.”

However, throughout the entire Beaumont Hospital system some 2,475 people are being laid-off while 450 positions will be eliminated. Fox says that the job categories being removed are not related to providing healthcare to patients.

Another major hospital is the Detroit Medical Center (DMC) and its Sinai-Grace facility on the northwest side has been the scene of protests. One nurse was terminated at the hospital because she posted a seven second video on Facebook about precautions being taken in treating COVID-19 patients. Nurses have reported that there is a lack of staff to address the enormous problems at the facility while personal protection equipment (PPE) is in short supply.



Detroit nurse files suit for dismissal from Sinai-Grace Hospital amid pandemic

The nurse who was fired, Kenisa Barkai, has filed a lawsuit against Sinai-Grace. The company says that she violated the social media policy. Sinai-Grace was the scene of a sit-in during March to protest the conditions prevailing at the facility. The workers were told to go back to work or leave the hospital. They decided to leave and go home rather than work under such circumstances.

Barkai is taking legal action in response to the termination. The local NBC affiliate, WDIV, wrote in a report on April 21, saying:

“The lawsuit cites Michigan’s Whistle Blowers Protection Act, which states an ‘employer shall not discharge, threaten, or otherwise discriminate against an employee regarding the employee’s compensation, terms, conditions, location, or privileges of employment because the employee, or a person acting on behalf of the employee, reports or is about to report, verbally or in writing, a violation or a suspected violation of a law or regulation or rule promulgated pursuant law of this state.’ Sinai-Grace has repeatedly been the focus of media reports during the COVID-19 outbreak.” (See [this](#))

Nursing homes in the metropolitan Detroit area, similar to other parts of the United States, have been a center for COVID-19 infections and deaths. The outbreak which captured the attention of the U.S. public and raised awareness about the seriousness of the pandemic was the tragedy surrounding the nursing home just outside of Seattle, Washington during February and early March. Other convalescing and assisted-living facilities have met similar fates. In New Jersey, 17 bodies of former residents were uncovered at one nursing home.

In Detroit and the state of Michigan, the names and locations of nursing homes where COVID-19 infections were in existence, was being withheld from the public. These facilities were the scene of many fatalities in the battle against the virus. The state-controlled Michigan Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs reports that there are 292 homes for the aged and 4,211 adult foster care homes in Michigan with total bed capacity of more than 57,000.

As of April 21, the State of Michigan Health Department declared that it would report on the locations where COVID-19 cases were present. Agencies working in the areas of senior care welcomed this policy shift. The data coming out of the nursing homes will provide a more accurate picture of the degree to which the virus has spread throughout the state and the U.S. as a whole.

The Michigan-based [Bridge Magazine](#) has been investigating the conditions inside the nursing homes in the state. In an article the publication reviews recent events including:

“A Genesee County nursing home where 17 resident deaths were reported on Saturday (April 18), with an additional 24 residents testing positive, seven of whom were hospitalized. Twenty-six employees tested positive. That followed reports that 21 residents had died of COVID-19 at two Wayne County nursing homes, with 46 other residents with confirmed cases of the coronavirus. On Friday (April 17), an official at Hillsdale Hospital in rural southern Michigan reported that a county nursing home had 42 cases of COVID-19 among staff and residents, accounting for seven nursing home deaths among 10 total coronavirus deaths in the county.”

Mass Unemployment and the Need for a Program of Resistance

Since the declarations of emergencies in various states and the issuance of guidelines from the White House Task Force in mid-March, 22.3 million workers in the U.S. have applied for unemployment benefits. This represents 14 % of the workforce being rendered idle over a period of six weeks.

Nonetheless, these figures are undoubtedly undercounts since many workers claim that they cannot even gain access to the websites and phone centers where the filing are taking place. Many say that the websites are down and that phone numbers listed to call are constantly busy or there is no answer. Oftentimes workers are disconnected while waiting to file for benefits.

In states like Michigan and Pennsylvania the escalation in jobless claims account for 20% of the workforce. The stimulus checks sent out to taxpayers with documents are by no means adequate to sustain workers through this long term crisis. There is no economic relief for undocumented workers many of whom toil in what is described as the “essential” job categories.

Unprecedented levels of unemployment will only compound the dire conditions of working families particularly among African Americans and other oppressed groups. The people of color communities in cities such as Detroit, New York City, Newark, Atlanta, New Orleans, Memphis, Chicago, etc. are being disproportionately affected by the pandemic. One by-product of unemployment is the loss of healthcare insurance. This will of course adversely impact the medical system even further prompting additional lay-offs and the reduction in services during a period where just the opposite is required.

In Detroit, the Moratorium NOW! Coalition has launched a campaign to request the intervention of Cuban medical personnel in the city to address the shortages of healthcare personnel along with bringing a socialist perspective to the pandemic. With the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predicting the potential for a “second wave” COVID-19 infections this coming Fall and Winter seasons, the capacity of the existing hospital systems, municipal structures and social services to maintain any semblance of effectiveness could very well be compromised.

Therefore, the burgeoning discontent among people suffering from job losses, inadequate healthcare, the lack of water, education and housing, requires a programmatic approach which is designed to address the crisis from the perspective of the working class and oppressed. Corporate-backed Mayor Mike Duggan of Detroit has already announced a bank-driven austerity budget for the next two fiscal years absent of any debate or discussion with community organizations and labor.

Demonstrations occurring in the hospital system and the service industry could easily spill over into other sectors of the population. Low-wage workers employed by Target and Amazon say they will engage in a “sick-out” on May 1, International Workers Day, to highlight the deteriorating conditions under which they work.

[USA Today carried a story](#) on the upcoming May Day national actions noting:

“More than 350 Amazon warehouse workers in 50 locations pledged to call out from their jobs starting Tuesday, according to Athena, a coalition of local and national organizations representing workers.

Target workers are planning a mass sickout May 1, which is International Workers Day, said Adam Ryan, a liaison with Target Workers Unite, an employee activist group.”

Workers in other industries need to learn from these efforts as the political pressure by the capitalist ruling class on the White House to encourage people to go back to work increases. Yet the COVID-19 pandemic has by no means run its course. Also millions of people are unemployed and are unable to resume normal economic activity.

As the crisis worsens an ideological struggle will intensify between forces on the Left against right-wing elements seeking to exploit the fear and uncertainty for the purposes of prompting a neo-fascist agenda. It will be important for progressive forces to take independent organizing initiatives to combat the further erosion of living standards inside the country.

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