

This is a report of the mass zoom call organised by The World Transformed on Tuesday 17th March entitled '**Coronavirus: How Should the Left Respond**'. Around 500 people attended the call. The call was hosted by TWT Steering Group members Hope Worsdale and Deborah Hermanns and the speakers were: Yannis Gourtsoyannis, Ariana Tassinari, Jamie Hale, Helen O'Connor, Grace Blakeley, ACORN, Glasgow Mutual Aid, Birmingham Mutual Aid Kitchen and the Labour Party Community Organising Unit.

Over the coming days and weeks we'll be looking at how we can continue these discussions and make the best use of online spaces which facilitate input from all parts of the movement, and work together to put pressure not just on the Government and employers, but on left wing political leaders, the Labour Party and trade unions to shape their response.

To be kept informed about future zoom calls and all other TWT activities please join our mailing list: bit.ly/TWTjoin

Introduction

TWT organised this call because the Coronavirus crisis is political, and there must be a political response - one which is centred around the principles of collective solidarity, and security and safety for all.

We know full well that this government and the billionaire bosses don't care about these principles. But on the Left we do care about one another, and we do care about ensuring that everyone should have safety and security, and that no-one should be left behind. We cannot sit back and leave the response in the hands of the government and the billionaire bosses - because they do not share our values, and do not prioritise people over profit. They will only act in our interests if we force them to. We have to demand more and better for our friends, families, colleagues, comrades, for ourselves and for all of us.

But in order to make those demands, it's crucial that as the left we develop a shared understanding of the social and economic impacts of the crisis. It's also crucial that we open up new and empowering spaces for collective communication and organising in what is set to be a long period of social isolation. That's why this call was organised, as hopefully the first of many.



Current Context

So far this virus has impacted 140 countries globally, with over 180,000 confirmed cases worldwide and many more unknown. Though the responses from governments have been varied, most have already moved or are moving towards drastic measures including travel bans, shutting down schools, bans on mass gatherings and sporting events and domestic lockdowns.

Our government seems to finally be waking up to the serious economic freefall we're facing - but from the announcements made so far it's clear it's not putting in place enough measures to protect people. No increase in sick pay. No wage protection for those laid off. Nothing meaningful for renters. And none of the big thinking we need in a moment like this - that's why the left must intervene to demand it.

Speakers

Yannis Gourtsoyannis (NHS doctor and a member of Momentum's NCG)

What are frontline NHS workers facing right now? What demands are Momentum making?

The situation:

- I spent the last few days looking after confirmed and suspected Covid cases; seeing the epidemic evolving in real time. This is about to escalate exponentially; as we knew it would. We are bracing ourselves at all levels of the NHS.
- We have seen nothing like this and what we're about to see since the inception of the NHS. It will hit us hard and escalate over the next few weeks.
- Over the next few months our needs will outstrip what we have. We will need 10 times the amount of ventilators, protective equipment etc. than we already have.
- We know from epidemics in history that viruses themselves don't account for the majority of mortality. People will die not of the virus but because the health service has buckled under the pressure. They will die from other conditions because the health service has been diverted to deal with the virus.
- At the same time, the NHS is till one of the best health services in the world and there is no doubt that we will get through this.
- NHS staff are already displaying the most incredible fortitude, professionalism and bravery in this situation. Health workers are going to get hit hard by this...physically, mentally, virologically. Soon, the whole of society will be transformed by this virus. But the whole of society will defeat it too.



What do we do now?

- Momentum has issued a set of demands which [can be read here](#).
- The Momentum demands are good demands. Plenty of health workers support them. Realistically however the demands need to be directed towards Labour so that they can direct towards Tories.
- The Left should avoid getting too bogged down on things like timings of lockdowns, types of lockdowns, intricacies of epidemiological modelling decisions etc. Instead, we need to make economic demands. We need to call for protection of workers, and the requisition of private beds so the most vulnerable don't have to pay.
- Personal Protective Equipment for health workers. Hospitals need to be flooded with PPE as a matter of urgency. The fact that PPE is in shortage across the country is scandalous. The fact that face visors and goggles are having to be re-used is scandalous. The fact that there is a lack of PPE available for a decent programme of "donning" and "doffing" practice is scandalous.
- Health worker staff are about to be overwhelmed by this. It's already started. We will try to have our voice heard but it will be intermittent. Clinical care will be our priority. So the wider Left will have to speak and shout and organise on behalf of us
- Be ready for a rapidly evolving sequence of events in the coming days and short weeks. Look after each other. The "fog of war" will soon descend. It will be difficult to discern truth from untruth, online solidarity from online opportunism and fake news, epidemiologic necessity from government obfuscation. Always remember that political demands will be a necessity throughout this epidemic. Health workers need to be unafraid to make those demands.

Ariana Tassinari (a comrade currently based in Italy)

*How the Left has responded in Italy and what are the key demands you are putting forward?
What can we in the UK learn from you guys?*

The situation:

- Watching the situation unfold in the UK is like watching Italy a few weeks ago. It's frustrating wanting to intervene. Italy is in week 2 of lockdown.
- Situation escalated quickly in Italy: the first cases were in late February and the initial government response was to play down what was happening, to tell people to continue with business as usual.
- We now know that this response was shaped by economic interests.



- In the first few days of March this position became untenable. The impact was being felt strongly in the wealthiest Northern regions, where the health system is considered to be working the best. If the impact was so bad there, it would be disastrous if it spread at the same speed throughout the rest of Italy.
- A countrywide lockdown was imposed from 9th March and is planned until 3rd April.
- Closing all 'non essential' businesses has caused tension- important for us to think about this.
- There has been a trade off between protecting public health and the push from industry to keep the economy going. When the government made the decision to shut down most economic activities, this was presented as a way for everyone to stay home to protect themselves and their communities. Under pressure from employers' in industry, many people carried on going to work. Public facing activities were shut down, but all industry has carried on as normal. There are still 7 million people going to work in unsafe workplaces. The Government says it's down to employers to implement safe working conditions but the vast majority of workplaces are failing to do so. The Lockdown raises the question of who is allowed to stay at home and who can't? Why is the health of some workers being jeopardised?
- Trade Unions have moved slowly on this. They were timid and disappeared from the public sphere- they failed to launch any mass mobilisation. They basically followed the discourse of 'the economy must go on'. Workers themselves put issues of safety on the map- organising grassroots strikes. Some walked out on the first day they were required to come into work, demanding immediate suspension of production until safe conditions could be guaranteed. The Government made an agreement with unions on workplace safety and wage guarantee schemes in case that production must be suspended.

What do we do now?

- We must use the time we have now to prepare resources for workers (unionised and non unionised). Grassroots unions and left wing organisations to set up hotlines, workers can call up to get issues clarified. Must work together alongside various sectors.
- Income protections should be as universal as possible, including workers on 0 hours contracts etc.
- A supplementary demand should be to break the discourse of austerity and debt (strong basis to build on this in the UK).
- Eviction and rent freezes. Labour councils should start organising on this locally until a national response comes out.

Links:

- [An interesting read in English about left demands from Italy](#)



Jamie Hale (Masters student in health policy and a disabled activist, based in Lewisham)

How is this situation impacting you and your life, as well as other people most vulnerable to coronavirus infection? And how should this inform the response of the Left and the demands we should be making?

The situation:

- Disabled people are being put in increasingly dangerous situations.
- We are hearing little about young disabled people and those that rely on care from home, rather than in a care home.
- We're already having to recruit new carers, and are reliant on strangers taking care of themselves not to catch it.
- A large section of the UK population have been told to self isolate for 4 months.
- Increased isolation means decreased mental health and income.
- Vulnerable people can't see those they care about if they still have to travel to and from work. They will be relying on strangers to get by.
- Supplies (including some medical) that some people already rely on now are becoming impossible to come by.
- Austerity has been killing chronically ill and disabled people since its inception. This crisis throws that into relief.
- There is currently no extra care funding to respond to increased needs due to crisis.
- Freelancers are not entitled to sick pay.
- Example of disabled and chronically ill people being forced to work when ill.
- People will risk going in to work when unwell as they can't miss out on income.
- The silver lining is all the mutual aid groups- hopefully they live on beyond the crisis.

What do we do now?

- We must demand
 - Real living wage for personal assistants and carers,
 - Funding for sick pay for carers
 - Extra care funding for disabled people to hire people at short notice
 - A guarantee that disabled people won't be deprioritised due to pressures put on the system by the crisis.
- The Left cannot overlook these demands when formulating our response.

Links:

- You can read Jamie's demands in his own words [here](#).



Helen O'Connor (GMB Organiser)

What common problems are workers facing and will be facing? And what should workers be demanding of their bosses? What do you expect from the unions? How can unions most effectively apply pressure on the government to act?

The situation:

- Cleaners in Lewisham Hospital are not receiving pay, all have walked off the job.
- Workers are already facing issues from structural problems in the NHS and other services caused by privatisation.
- We have seen the idea spreading that the lowest paid workers aren't essential to services.
- Outsourcing companies moving into public sector are incompetent
- There is a shortage of personal protection equipment in the NHS.
- Workers are worried about paying bills, rent and whether they'll have a job to come back to
- Poverty pay impacts workers' health
- If the government can spend 30 billion bailing out businesses, why can't they bail out workers too?

What do we do now?

- Listen to members demands and amplify them
- If the government fails to deliver, we need to take all steps including industrial action to ensure people are protected throughout this crisis.

Links:

- Here is an article Helen wrote for Tribune magazine: ['To Fight Coronavirus, pay Hospital Cleaners Properly'](#)
- [Coronavirus FB support group for workers](#)
- [Lewis cleaners campaign](#)

Grace Blakely (Economist and Author)



What does the financial crash mean? What should we be preparing for? What should the left be demanding?

The situation:

- Capitalism depends on circulation - if circulation stops, the whole system collapses.
- First, we have seen this register in financial markets - stock market indices like the S&P and the FTSE have collapsed all over the world.
- A lot of those falls are bigger than those in 2008.
- This is partly to do with the severity of crisis, and partly because stocks were overvalued before the crisis - predominantly because of loose monetary policy combined with tight fiscal policy. We had the combination of economic stagnation and asset price inflation. Stock prices were already high, therefore they had further to fall.
- In sum, a stock market correction was predictable – but this collapse is nothing like anyone was expecting
- Immediate systemic issues:
 - Corporate debt – CD bubble after a decade of low interest rates (Fed now buying commercial paper and UK announcing loans for businesses)
 - Sovereign debt – some countries might default if their economic situation continues to deteriorate
 - Both these issues could threaten the solvency of some major financial institutions – if lots of corporations can't pay back debt, they go under, then the banks that lent the money have problems - govts will step in and save them, but not clear what the cost will be
- The medium to long-term structural issues may, however, be more significant.
- Disruption of labour market is already impacting individual incomes, as well as corporate incomes.
- SSP isn't enough and doesn't apply to many workers.
- Freelancers, those in gig economy, self employed etc will see drop in income
- Lots of households don't have savings- decade of wage stagnation alongside rising costs of living.
- Many people unable to pay rent, debts, bills etc
- Huge homelessness and destitution risk
- Long term impact on the economy- people using savings or taking out new debt will have to deal with that in the future.
- Without income support the impact will last much longer than the financial crisis
- If all those things explode together, we see an economic crash far worse than in 2008.
- Currently govt trying to stop corporate debt bubble blowing up, but aren't focusing at all on individual income support
- Panics about relevance of the left after Sunak's 'generous' budget. Remember Tories aren't suddenly turning on the taps. They're protecting the interests of capital and their



voter base. That's why we are seeing corporate bailouts and relief for mortgage holders. They don't want to help most of the population- renters, those with debt etc.

- Their increased spending isn't going to help the majority of people and won't mitigate the long term impact of this crisis
- At the moment, many govts are being complacent and don't understand the long term effects, specifically UK and US who aren't focusing on individual incomes - this is going to come back to hurt them in the future.
- We're about to see big corporate bailouts and a massive increase in market concentration across the board. Long term, we could see small businesses going under, even with these loans they can't survive this. Big businesses can buy what's leftover, possibly leading to the regrowth of monopoly capitalism. Close links with MNC's and the state- need to challenge the state on its bailouts so avoid state-monopoly capitalism.
- Need to watch out for big expansion of size of the state. Question is who those resources go towards, and that's where we need to be challenging govt.

Resources:

<https://novaramedia.com/2020/03/19/we-must-democratise-our-economy-or-face-an-era-of-state-monopoly-capitalism/>

<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/03/the-coronavirus-crisis-is-political>

<https://tribunemag.co.uk/2020/03/the-corona-crash>

https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/dygeyj/the-tories-covid-19-plan-puts-boomers-and-gen-xers-before-everyone-else

Community initiatives

Glasgow Mutual Aid (Rory)

- 'Glasgow mutual aid' is one of over 1000 similar groups around the country.
- Setting up support and coordination networks for the next few weeks.
- Putting volunteers into different teams- comms, dispatch.
- Trying not to replicate work that already exists- coordinating existing initiatives. Especially where the volunteers there are vulnerable and can't continue the work.
- Printing out posters in every ward in Glasgow telling people to get in touch if they need support.

Links

- [Link to Covid Mutual Aid Network](#)
- [Link to resources on Safeguarding Training for Mutual Aid Networks](#)
- [Link to Queercare Guide](#)



Manchester Acorn (Xavi)

- Join acorn link and LDN renters union for those in ldn
- Leafleting as much as possible for those not online
- Mapping the local community with other mutual aid groups to understand what services/organisations are already present and active
- Applying pressure on local letting agencies and housing for rent pauses.

Birmingham Mutual Aid Kitchen (Dylan)

- Solidarity kitchen
- Key plea to do social distancing, making it easier for people to do that.
- Making demands about shutting schools and unis, coronavirus basic income, support small businesses rather than corporations
- Developing contingency plans for if volunteers have to self isolate

Links

- [Birmingham Mutual Aid Kitchen Crowdfunder](#)

Labour Community Organising Unit (Charlotte, Portsmouth)

- Main priority is immediate community response
- Setting up mutual aid groups
- Not duplicating efforts, linking in with existing groups
- Support neighbours at hyper localised level, put leaflets through neighbours doors etc
- Provide informal emotional and practical support.
- Try to get press coverage to spread the word
- Digitising community organising trainings - community mapping and digital training
- Contributing to the national conversation about inequality that Covid19 has exposed
- Encouraging as many people as possible to talk about the challenges they've been facing



Some comments and questions from attendees:

- We should be nationalising military and private sector resources
- What practical things can we do to interrupt the individualist/capitalist logic of the current coronavirus response?
- Is there a way to ensure supplies of food and basics to everyone, not just those that can stockpile? Could working with local councils be an option?
- How can people whose income isn't being impacted help beyond signing petitions and supporting people on their own street?
- Is financial support likely to be funnelled into the city and big business? Is this capitalism trying to save itself... will small businesses be able to access it?
- Are there any socialist commentators regularly blogging on key economic indicators - why they're changing - and what they mean?
- How can we amplify the voices of people who are the most vulnerable to COVID-19, into the news coverage about C-19?
- Are there local charities/support networks for people who can't access the care support and PPE that they need to survive that our local activist groups can connect to?
- Is it useful for us all to start calling /mailing our mps regularly? With the demands you have linked to in order to push the government to meet them?

Self-Isolation tips

- Create opportunities for non-physical contact
- Share emotions and check in with each other
- Keep a normal routine - e.g get up and dressed at a normal time
- Keep doing exercise if you can

- Teach/learn new skills
- Virtual socials such as watch parties, virtual pub trip, virtual date nights etc
- Online games
- Collective dancing sessions!

Links:

- [Jamie Hale on surviving self-isolation](#)
- [Sheffield Transformed Quarantine Film Club](#)



Other Relevant Links:

- [Harvard Medical School - comprehensive information covering many topics, includes both what we do and don't yet know.](#)
- [Public Health England: a resource hub including multilingual resources, academic journal collections and training resources](#)
- [World Health Organisation: responding from an international UN perspective](#)
- [National Food Service](#)

