

Center for Social Concerns

COVID-19 AND THE REBIRTH OF SOLIDARITY

Submitted by Dan Graff on May 12, 2020 – 9:31am

BY DAN GRAFF, DIRECTOR, HIGGINS LABOR PROGRAM, & PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE, DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

This would seem the perfect time for a blog called “The Labor Question Today,” as the novel coronavirus has upended the world of work dramatically over the past several weeks, leaving no realm of labor — paid or unpaid — untouched. And yet, every time I’ve sat down over the past eight weeks to deliver “musings on work, the politics of work, and the work of social justice,” I’ve felt stymied before I started.

The COVID-19 pandemic hit so suddenly, with a social and economic impact so fast, vast, and still expanding, it’s been difficult to understand where things stand at any given moment, let alone where they’re headed. Making matters worse, from the start the Trump administration’s policy response has exacerbated the health crisis, and it continues to promote ill-informed, inadequate, and, at times, insane measures, leaving state leaders, companies, and communities at all levels not only competing for essential medical equipment and safety supplies, but also confusing each other and the public with a patchwork of contradictory policies and practices. In the maelstrom of these uncertain circumstances, it’s been hard to find an anchor to grab onto.

And yet, even though COVID-19 continues to infect and kill thousands, even though we have no vaccine or treatment on the near horizon, even though we don’t have secure testing or contact tracing systems in place, and even though the economic effects remain not just unsettling but also unsettled, those in power pretend we can put the pandemic behind us. As I write, the majority of US governors are in the midst of implementing a variety of “getting our economy back on track” plans, cheered on by the president — even though none of those states meet his own administration’s guidelines for reopening , and even though polls show strong majorities of Americans prefer to take things much more cautiously in the name of public health .

Who’s paying and will continue to pay the price for this headlong rush to get “back to business” as soon as possible? Workers, of course, and those in their households. In particular, workers denied the rights, resources, and power to prioritize their own health, either by demanding a say in safety protocols or by refusing to return to work until they’re in place. Historian Joshua Specht recently coined the term “Coronapolitics” to capture what’s happening here, with elected officials (and by extension all of us) “placing the risk of the pandemic on the most vulnerable workers while tacitly defending the luxury of those

who can afford to stay at home and decide if and when they will ‘return to normal.’ ”

Fortunately, a countervailing Solidarity Politics led by workers and their allies is emerging to confront the practitioners of Coronapolitics.

What is Solidarity Politics?

Solidarity Politics happens when the general public, usually too busy and price-focused to pay much attention, start to notice the indispensable labor performed by grocery store clerks, delivery drivers, food processing factory hands, and farmworkers — and start to believe that the health and safety of those workers matters as much as their own.

Solidarity Politics is articulated when news reporters reclassify usually ignored laborers as the essential workers they are, writing stories about their struggles and exposing long standing injustices to the public eye .

Solidarity Politics gets codified when Congress suddenly recognizes the problem of low pay by boosting unemployment compensation to the tune of \$600 per week and addresses the erosion of the employment relationship by allowing independent contractors to partake .

Most importantly, Solidarity Politics is cemented when employees from the nation’s cutting-edge retail and delivery chains — Amazon, Target, Instacart, FedEx — collaborate on a coordinated walkout to protest unsafe working conditions and lack of paid sick days .

Of course, it’s important not to overestimate the depth, breadth, or potential endurance of these currents of Solidarity Politics now sweeping the country, especially in the face of the more powerful opposing forces of Coronapolitics.

But clearly this is a crisis where the wounds of our economy — and recognition of who bears those wounds most severely — have been rubbed raw in public for all to see, and we have the potential to promote economic policies and practices that build on and sustain Solidarity Politics:

- the right of everyone to quality, affordable housing, health care, education, and child care
- the right to a just wage that includes good compensation, paid sick days and vacation time, and a safe work environment
- the right to representation — in legislative corridors and at workplaces — to demand these

things and more

Over the next several weeks this blog will feature a variety of voices reporting and assessing the multitude of labor questions confronting us during this COVID-19 crisis. Some will address enduring issues that predate the pandemic, while others will focus squarely on the contingencies created in our current uncertain moment. But all will point to the promise embodied by the emergence of a new Solidarity Politics as it evolves, and hopefully ascends, in the weeks and months to come.

Come back soon, and often, for updates and analyses, premonitions and predictions, memos and manifestos — and more — from the near and far-flung Higgins Labor Program community.

Center for Social Concerns

Geddes Hall Building #1212

Notre Dame, IN 46556 USA

Phone (574) 631-5293

ndctrsc@nd.edu

© 2023 [University of Notre Dame](#)

