

A Shift in Perspective: Covid and the US working class

by Chris Mason

The total number of COVID-19 infections in the US has now passed the 5 million mark, and the number of dead from the virus exceeds 160,000. If this is a time of strife for the entire nation, it is all the more so for the average worker, particularly those labeled “essential” who don’t enjoy the luxury of working from home. When the nationwide lockdown was announced the US stock markets recorded their worst performance since Black Monday in 1987. The stock market crisis suggested to the wider populace that there is a link between the financial markets and the human labor that goes into the economy.

Voices from the front line

But these past few months have proven to many workers that the platitudes of the corporations are as hollow as they appear. Many working people are waking up to the fact that they are seen as disposable costs in the corporate drive to maximize profits. This has been made even more apparent by the news that the top 1% of Americans have actually gotten richer during the pandemic. As unemployment increases, many workers are seeing that those in charge of the corporations are unwilling to risk money to employ them, and they would rather sack them to make even more money. The veil of what those at the top actually think about those at the bottom has been thoroughly ripped off by the virus.

U.S. BILLIONAIRES HAVE BECOME **\$565** **BILLION** RICHER SINCE MARCH 18.

(JEFF BEZOS ALONE IS WORTH **\$36.2 BILLION**
MORE THAN HE WAS ON MARCH 18.)



SINCE MARCH 18, NEARLY
43 MILLION AMERICANS
HAVE FILED FOR INITIAL
UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS.
THE EXTRA \$600 WEEKLY
UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS
EXPIRED ON JULY 31.

@SOYOUWANTTOTALKABOUT
SOURCE: IPS-DC.ORG, CNN BUSINESS

Jack: Mailroom worker

This can be seen not just by looking at statistics, but also by actually talking to those workers on the front lines that have been labeled as essential workers. They all share a common experience despite differences in where they live, or their type of job. This pattern is simple, and could even be seen as the equivalent of "gaslighting" in an abusive relationship, where the abuser psychologically manipulates the abused party to make them doubt their own perception of reality.

An employer sends out an email, has a small meeting, or even posts something on a bulletin board about how proud they are of the work the employees are doing, how essential they are, and even going so far as calling them 'heroes'. While there is nothing inherently wrong with this first step, it's what comes next that makes this treatment borderline abusive. The messages of gratitude and thanks are followed by lackluster personal protection and safety measures against the virus, hardly any increase in pay outside of upper management, and no guarantee that they will stay employed should things get worse.



Unemployment Benefits applications handed out in Hialeah, Florida this week EFE (EFE)

Jack, a corporate mailroom employee living in Washington State who has been designated as an essential worker, describes getting periodic emails from his employer. They would always begin: "We're all so appreciative and proud of your hard work". But the only measure taken to ensure workers' continued

safety was the single disposable mask in a plastic bag that they all received.

Mark: UPS worker

Mark, a UPS supervisor in Portland Oregon, described a similar experience where the employees were provided with almost no protective equipment, despite UPS being a company worth \$3 billion in net income, and \$53 billion in net revenue. The employees had to ask for outside donations in order to get proper masks and gloves for their work. Mark described getting praise from UPS corporate management, and encouragement to keep up the good work. The UPS bosses even talked about how grateful they all are. However, both Mark and Jack's employers made them feel like they should keep their heads down, and to not complain or they would risk losing their jobs. Mark's employer would occasionally, after giving workers glowing praise, remind them to be grateful that they even have jobs at all.



Ryan: Security Guard

Ryan, a security guard in Kansas, talked about how at the onset of the virus, when the prospects of what a lockdown might entail were still unclear, he would receive emails from his company reassuring everyone that there was no need to panic, and they would be able to stay afloat during the pandemic. He recalls that there was a small mention at the end of the email saying how grateful 'they' were for everyone's hard work. Ryan says that now the emails he's getting never fail to mention how grateful the company is preceding a routine message about changing parking rules, new break times, or something else totally mundane. He says, "Now it just feels like it's an email signature as if they are obligated to send them and not because they actually mean it". These obvious platitudes are followed up by no new procedures to keep the work area clean, or to make sure that people coming in and

out don't pose a health risk to other employees.

All three experiences reflect a broader national trend of companies' gaslighting their employees while providing no job security, hardly any added safety measures, and no pay increases at all. With Congress deliberating a "corporate liability shield," the power of workers to sue employers for Covid19 related damages, may be taken out of their hands. If the Democrats and Republicans get their way, employers will be exempt from Covid related litigation by employees. But the silver lining in all this may be that many workers have experienced a major shift in perspective, realizing what they perhaps already knew—that the very people who go out of their way to make commercials thanking them, rather than giving them any sort of pay increase, actually view them as disposable.

It is only through and open and robust discussion scientific socialism, ie Marxism has developed. Classconscious.org would like to play its role in developing such a culture again. We are attempting to foster debate by publishing articles that may not fully align with the position of our editorial collective.