



***Reasserting collective rights and taking collective social action in the COVID-19 era  
[aka solidarity kills neoliberalism]***

*Global Trade Union Assembly "Beyond Insecurity: A new approach to work, wages and wealth distribution" August 27, 2020*

*No one in the global union movement wants to return to the old normal. What will it take to shift the debate? Is it how we organise or the demands we are making? Do we need to re-imagine work, economy or democracy? Or perhaps all three?*

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The old normal doesn't exist even if we wanted to return to it. After the COVID-19 crisis, recession and depression, we have either shifted the balance of power and fundamentally changed our political and social priorities to start building a more just, fair and decent world; or we have sunk into an even more fragile, fractured, divided society with mass unemployment, widespread poverty, dictatorship, and inevitably war.

Shifting the debate involves understanding that the vulnerabilities and fragility exposed by the COVID-19 crisis are not the result of bad policies or bad governments, but of patriarchy, racism and neoliberalism. More than 40 years of neoliberalism systematically dismantled the social protection, employment protection, access to food and universal public health care so desperately needed right now. Even our ability to act in solidarity - acting collectively in the public interest - has been severely undermined. It is the neoliberal nexus of individualism and private interests that is killing us now, not the coronavirus.

To build a better future we need to overcome patriarchy and racism and fundamentally challenge capitalism - a system that turns everything into commodities bought and sold for profit. Change must be transformative. It requires transforming society and the prevailing political systems, but also transforming our trade unions so that we have both the political will and the power to see it through.

At this moment we don't have that power. We need to build it through union organizing, more organizing, and struggle. And to do that we need to reassert fundamental trade union rights - the right to organize, the right to collective bargaining, the right to strike. We can revitalize and use existing ILO conventions on the right to freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, the right to employment, the right to social protection, and protection against termination to defend workers' collective rights and create the political space we need to organize. (The Termination of Employment Convention (No.158) has been aggressively resisted by employers

and government for 40 years and pretty much forgotten by the trade union movement. Yet comprehensive protection against unfair dismissal is urgently needed in this crisis.)

What we do not need are new ILO conventions like the proposed convention on Responsible Business Conduct (RBC). This not only reaffirms the corporate business interests that got us into this crisis, but also legitimates the privatization of social regulation. It marks the end of any political commitment to public accountability. The social and political transformation we need cannot begin with compromise. There is a fundamental difference between compromise that *results* from struggle, and compromise *instead* of struggle.

We must begin by reasserting that the collective right to public health, education, housing and food and nutrition as universal human rights, not commodities to be bought and sold for profit.

This year is the 100th anniversary of the IUF and it is relevant to note that the constitution of the IUF recognizes food production, processing and distribution as a basic social service to the community, stating that: "*It is the responsibility of the labour movement and, in the first place, of the workers in the food and allied industries, to ensure that the world's resources in food be utilized so as to serve the general interest rather than private or public minority interests.*"

Indeed, the expansion of corporate power over the global food system over the past 40 years has systematically undermined the general interest, with hundreds of millions of people living hunger. This will worsen in the coming world food crisis. Yet we again see some international trade unions signing on to a statement [*Call to Action for world leaders: preventing a global food security crisis while combating COVID-19, April 9, 2020*] that recognizes the corporate control of the world food system through free trade regimes and together with these global corporations promises to leave it all in their hands as long as they feed people along the way. So *hunger* is also a commodity bought and sold for profit.

To move forward we need to dismantle corporate free trade regimes, not fix them. The corporate free trade regimes that extend corporate control of agriculture and the world food system and undermine food sovereignty and the right to food must be dismantled. The corporate free trade regimes that enforce the privatization, commercialization and commodification of health care must be dismantled.

We must do this because the de-commodification and nationalization of health care; the de-commodification and nationalization of water; public investment in sustainable agriculture and food; promoting energy democracy - are all *illegal* under these regimes. The non-elected, unaccountable economic managers who run our governments will simply use the rules in free trade agreements to prevent the transformation we need. Note that the same economic managers are saying at the height of this global pandemic - with tens of millions infected and a million dead - we *cannot afford* universal public health care. This is impossible to accept. It is not a debate on affordability and government budgets. A massive reallocation of wealth and resources nationally and internationally must take place. Our urgent obligation to build and

secure universal access to human rights through collective means cannot be *unaffordable* or *illegal*.

Last month the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) published a report called, *Preventing the Next Pandemic: Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission*. In that report they identify seven human-mediated factors that "disease drivers" in the emergence of zoonotic diseases like SARS-CoV-2:

- 1. increasing human demand for animal protein;*
- 2. unsustainable agricultural intensification;*
- 3. increased use and exploitation of wildlife;*
- 4. unsustainable utilization of natural resources accelerated by urbanization, land use change and extractive industries;*
- 5. increased travel and transportation;*
- 6. changes in food supply;*
- 7. climate change.*

This list also gives us a good insight into why returning to "the old normal" is not an option. It would produce another pandemic with even more disastrous consequences in a deepening climate crisis.

If we consider the concerted, collective social and political action needed to address these "disease drivers" to prevent the next pandemic, then we are already talking about a transformation that requires the dismantling of neoliberal regimes and corporate free trade regimes, recapturing the state in the public interest, a move to sustainability built on de-commodification and nationalization, and the massive reallocation of resources to do this.

That in turn suggests it is imperative to bring about this transformation and restore the collective action and solidarity needed to build a just, fairer, more decent and ecologically sustainable world to live in - and not just to survive from one pandemic until the next until climate change brings it to an end. That doesn't seem like a choice, but an urgent call to action.