James Connolly Memorial Lecture

CAPITALISM CANNOT SOLVE ITS MANY CRISSES

Eoghan O’Neill

“If you strike at, imprison, or kill us, out of our prisons or graves we will still evoke a spirit that will thwart you, and perhaps, raise a force that will destroy you! We defy you! Do your worst!”

Connolly Memorial Oration by Jimmy Corcoran

“Re-invigorating the Struggle”
CAPITALISM CANNOT SOLVE ITS MANY CRISES

JAMES CONNOLLY MEMORIAL LECTURE

JAMES CONNOLLY COMMEMORATION

DUBLIN
COMMUNIST PARTY OF IRELAND
2020
**INTRODUCTION**

*Eugene McCartan, General secretary, CPI*

**JAMES CONNOLLY MEMORIAL LECTURE, 2020**

“Capitalism Cannot Solve Its Many Crises”  
*Eoghan O’Neill, National Executive Committee, CPI*

**JAMES CONNOLLY COMMEMORATION, 2020**

“Re-invigorating the struggle”  
*Jimmy Corcoran, chairperson, Cork Branch, CPI*
SINCE its foundation in 1921 the Communist Party of Ireland has marked the execution of James Connolly by the armed forces of British imperialism for his role as commander of the armed forces that rose up in the 1916 Easter Rising against the occupation of our country by British imperialism.

We as a party do not simply mark his passing and acknowledge the deep wound inflicted by his execution to the Irish and international working class forces but continue the struggle he bequeathed to us, that is, to finally secure the independence of our country and the establishment of a workers’ republic.

Even in the darkest of times, on the battlefields of Spain during the war against German, Italian and Spanish fascism (1936–39), our comrades who fought in the International Brigades took time from that intense struggle to gather to mark Connolly’s execution on 12 May 1916, while the British occupation forces, along with the many Irish quisling supporters in our country, wallowed in his blood, believing they had finally put paid to the influence of Connolly upon the Irish working class when the Irish Independent wrote, “Let the worst of the ringleaders be singled out and dealt with as they deserve,” signalling that the execution of Connolly was necessary. The following day Connolly was executed in Kilmainham Gaol.

Their dream of ending Connolly’s influence proved an abysmal failure. Every generation of Irish communists and working-class activists carries forward his ideas. They take inspiration and insights from his great theoretical legacy, in his profound understanding of how capitalism works and influences the lives of working people. They take courage and strength in their day-to-day struggles against the bosses, both native and those who represent transnational corporations in Ireland.

Connolly’s profound understanding and insights into the
interconnectedness and unbreakable relationship between the struggle for social and national liberation showed that it was, as it remains, the Irish working class that are the incorruptible inheritors of the fight for our freedom, that it is only the working class that can guarantee the freedom and independence of all our people and our country.

This was never more true than today, as we know from experience that the Irish ruling class has no desire, nor is it in its own economic interests, to establish a sovereign, independent, democratic Ireland, from Derry to Kerry. They have long since been bought and paid for by imperialism—British, European, and American. They have no desire to break the connection with imperialism, because it is not in their own material interests to do so.

As we have done for generations, this year, in May 2020, Irish communists and our youth organisation, the Connolly Youth Movement—despite the coronavirus pandemic and the quarantine of working-class communities and, the deepening crisis of the global capitalist system—celebrated the legacy of James Connolly.

A decade ago we established the annual James Connolly Memorial Lecture to provide an opportunity to draw upon the rich legacy of Connolly but also as an opportunity to deal with the many contemporary issues facing humanity in general and the working class in particular. This year’s lecture could not be a public one; nevertheless we could not allow this year, the 104th anniversary, to pass without honouring James Connolly, a period when capitalism is moving into a deepening health, economic, environmental and political crisis, nationally and globally.

This year’s lecture dealt with the growing and deepening crisis of capitalism. It provides us with the necessary insight into the workings of the capitalist system and the deepening irreconcilable contradictions built into it. Since the last global financial crisis of 2007–10 the Irish state and ruling class have been telling us that there was no money for building build public housing, no money for developing the public health system. Yet when the covid-19 pandemic hit and created the conditions for an almost total shutdown of large sections of the capitalist economy, both here in Ireland and globally, the Irish state discovered a money tree, weighed down with billions of euros that it could borrow to bail out the Irish capitalist class.
It was unable for a decade or more to build public housing for the tens of thousands needing a home or for the homeless. It could not invest in public health but instead promoted private health services over the public good. They could find money to save capitalism, but no money was available to meet the needs of working people.

The system is completely dysfunctional, as the lecture lays out clearly. Not alone is it a dysfunctional system but by its very nature it is now endangering all biological life on our planet. The choice facing humanity is stark: we either end capitalism or it will end life on our planet.

The second section of this year’s celebration of the legacy of James Connolly is the oration that was to have been given in Arbour Hill Military Cemetery, Dublin, on the Sunday nearest to the anniversary of Connolly’s execution on the 12th May. Each year members and supporters of our party gather in the cemetery to honour James Connolly and the other leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising. This year’s speaker was Jimmy Corcoran from Cork, chairperson of the Cork Branch of the CPI.

The oration emphasised the continued subservience of the Irish ruling class to the forces of imperialism, a continued subservience reflected in the decision by the Government to celebrate the notorious and barbarous collaborators of the Royal Irish Constabulary and the equally barbaric Black and Tans. It was only under intense public pressure that the caretaker Fine Gael government backed down.

The oration also drew attention to the continued occupation of part of our country by British imperialism, as well as the necessity for workers to resist any attempts to make us pay for the current crisis.

Both the lecture and the oration are a clarion call to our class that that we need to stand together in unity for the coming battles. Workers should not pay for this deepening crisis of capitalism but need to look beyond it. It is only when all wealth that is produced by the hand of labour, and all natural wealth, is owned and controlled and shared equally by the working class that we can set about building a new and decent, just society, in which working people and nature come first and the greed of a minority is finally consigned to the dustbin of history.
OME 3.5 million people infected, 240,000 people dead, over 2 billion people on lockdown are the latest figures, which are rising by the day. Due to decades of attacks and cuts in the public provision of health care, taken with the substitution and subsidisation of private health providers, health-care systems all across the capitalist world are being over-extended and are reaching full capacity, causing great grief and worry among working families. Ireland is no exception.

The total human cost is difficult to determine at this stage, because we are in the midst of the pandemic. However, what has been exposed is an economic system which values the return of profits over the return of our loved ones from hospital.

We know that with this lockdown, economic activity is also on lockdown. The US, UK, China, Germany and France, some of the world’s largest economies, are experiencing record decreases in output and GDP growth, leading towards recession. This is ushering in a new state of economic depression that will match, if not overtake, the two biggest slumps of the global economy of the past hundred years: the Great Depression in 1939 and the Great Recession in 2007.

You will hear the argument that the new economic depression is caused by covid-19. However, this is a false conclusion, just as the housing or sub-prime mortgage and the stock market crashes were said to be the cause of the previous economic crises. Certainly they were the catalyst, but within this lecture we will put
forward the argument that capitalism, as the dominant global economic system, is the central cause of the downturns and slumps in economies, because capitalism has contained within its working mechanism internal contradictions, that cannot be overcome, which ensure recurring, periodical crises.

The Marxist economist Michael Roberts sums up the general periodic crises thus: One is the law of value, which states that only labour creates value; two is the law of accumulation, where the means of production will rise to drive up the productivity of labour and to dominate over labour; and three is the law of profitability, where the first two laws create a contradiction between rising productivity of labour and falling profitability for capital, which results in a tendency for the rate of profit to fall over time. This can only be reconciled by recurring crises of production and investment and, in the long term, by the replacement of capitalism.

So the central argument of this lecture is that it is the capitalist system, with its inherent contradictions, that creates recurring crises. We will also argue that the capitalist economic system cannot prepare for the likelihood of global pandemics and other environmental catastrophes, due to its profit motive and destructive nature.

Lastly, we will put forward the argument that only if we rid ourselves of the capitalist mode of production can we protect ourselves from the great global crisis that humanity will soon have to face.

THE CLASS DIVISION OF SOCIETY AND THE LAW OF VALUE
Within society there are two dominant classes. Those that own and control industry and finance represent a certain class, a class of owners, otherwise known as the capitalist class, bourgeoisie, or sometimes referred to as the ruling class. These are very often easily spotted, as they flaunt their wealth in rich-list magazines—the likes of Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Richard Branson, or our own Dennis O’Brien, while many others remain in the shadows out of the media spotlight. All have the common feature of owning or controlling shares in vast asset portfolios. These are the owners of the means of production.

Within society there must also exist another class, of non-owners: the workers, i.e. those who do not have any stake or
ownership in the means of production. Yet this class produces everything that is made and without the labour of which no capitalist class could exist. This class is more commonly referred to as the proletariat or the working class—the majority of people who go to work in factories, farms, offices, call-centres, shops, and every other capitalist enterprise, in return for wages.

Within the dominant classes there also exist strata, those on different wages or those who have varying degrees of wealth. However, this distinction is a quantitative difference rather than a qualitative difference: i.e. class is distinguished by the relationship to the means of production, not the level of wages or wealth one possesses.

With one class being the ownership class and the other the working class, the relationship between the two is antagonistic. They represent separate class interests, which can never be reconciled, because their separate interests are derived from the source of wealth accumulation.

Capitalists accumulate wealth through a non-equivalence or unequal exchange that takes place within a production process which produces profits for the owners. Workers within the prevailing wage system are being told they are getting their equivalent wage relating to their work. The reality is that wage labour leads to a non-equivalent exchange: workers are being ripped off or, more correctly, they’re exploited.

What is obvious to workers is that employers and employees have separate interests. The capitalists own the means of production and thereby are the dominant class in society, controlling all aspects of our lives and preventing workers coming together freely to determine how we live together. Ownership of private property, of the means of production, is the central antagonism between the classes.

Marx, in *Capital*, described this as a dual process, where one process is revealed to workers and another is not. The first process comes in the form of commodity–money–commodity, or C–M–C, where workers go to work, we produce all sorts of commodities (C) in return for a wage (M), so as to be able to pay for other commodities (C)—food, clothes, TVs, phones etc., our particular needs and wants at a given place and time.

This C–M–C cycle is the relationship that workers are conscious of and are satisfied at least that there is an exchange of
equivalents being paid. But in reality this is just a con job. The working class, since the time of the industrial revolution, have been lied to and robbed by the capitalist exploiters.

In the capitalist wage system another process runs simultaneously, hidden from the transactions and contracts between employers and employees. The capitalists have no interest in the C–M–C cycle, as this will not produce profits. They function within an M–C–M’ cycle, where the capitalist enters with a sum of money, commodity production within the labour process takes place, and then the capitalist leaves with the surplus—the portion of wealth extracted from those who labour and must constantly repeat this process.

That is why capitalism is an infinite-growth system; yet we live on a finite planet.

Notice, nowhere during this process is the capitalist involved in any productive activity. From turning a tree into a table or turning a seed into food on a table, workers in various industries utilise their skill and talents to transform raw materials into finished goods, through a whole division of labour—goods which, by virtue of the relations of production, are solely owned by the capitalist. It is within this process where workers are being ripped off, where the non-equivalent of exchange or exploitation takes place, and where capitalists are able to accumulate profits.

But in order for a profit to be made, commodities need to be produced for the purpose of being exchanged or sold in the capitalist commodity markets—in shops, businesses, on line etc. in the first instance. In order for that to happen a commodity needs to have value, where it satisfies a social need, want, or desire.

The value of these commodities is determined by what is common to them all, and common to all commodities is labour power, or more correctly the socially necessary labour time employed to create the commodity, given the level of productivity of labour—the level of technology utilised by labour in the production process. This is Marx’s law of value.

The higher the level of technology, the more productive labour will be; but, conversely, this will lower the value of each individual commodity. For example, cars became affordable for the general public (the value of each car dropped) when the socially necessary labour time to produce a car decreased, due to advances in production-line and other manufacturing techniques, which were
implemented by one, then another, then by all car manufacturers.

Profits are the manifestation in money form of what is known as the surplus value of labour—the extra value added to a commodity by labour power acting upon materials to create it, expropriated by the capitalists. In other words, the source of capitalist wealth is not based on their work but the means by which they exploit the working class as a whole, by virtue of their ownership of the means of production. One need only look at the fact that, due to lockdown, labour power is unable to produce goods for capitalists and hence profits can’t be made; this relationship has been made abundantly clear.

What this reveals is that wealth and wealth accumulation is not about the amount of work you do or the level of skill you possess, it is about the ownership of the means of production. The social power of capitalists in dictating wages is drawn from their ownership of the means of production, the means by which they employ labour.

So, no matter what the level of wages that labour is able to guarantee, once it threatens the viability of the industry to be profit-generating, the power to cut jobs, cut wages, close down, move production elsewhere, or, as the recent case of Keeling’s company shows, bring low-cost labour in, will still be in the hands of the capitalist class. This highlights the fact that focusing solely on the level of wages is, in the end, futile.

In a capitalist system, clearly it pays to own the means of production, not to work the means of production. In essence, this leads us back to Marx’s law of value, that all value is created by labour, and thus all profits are the product of labour power but become the possession of the capitalist class.

**CAPITALIST COMPETITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND THE LAW OF ACCUMULATION**

The modern global capitalist system is based upon the three forms of exploitation of the surplus value of labour: *absolute surplus value* (increasing working hours and number of workers), *relative surplus value* (increasing technology and productivity, which decreases the amount of labour needed for each unit of commodity produced), and *super-exploitation* (driving wages below the value of labour power, the level needed for the social reproduction of labour).
Imperialism, according to Lenin, is the most advanced stage of capitalist development, where monopoly capitalism is its chief characteristic and finance capital has exceeded and become dominant over productive capital. In order for capitalists to extract greater amounts of profit and accumulate greater amount of capital they must seek to extend their markets, their lines of credit, their access to resources, cheap labour, and their sphere of influence in underdeveloped nations and regions across the globe.

The advancement and spread of capitalism has further monopolised the world economy, where today a relatively small number of multinational companies and finance houses dominate the global economy, ensuring the dependence of peripheral states to the core imperialist centres. The military-industrial complex safeguards their interests when their hegemony is threatened, and it also gives them the power to control the extraction and trade of the world’s resources, which is why the US has spent $6.4 trillion on foreign military action and war expenditure since 2001, and why it has increased its military budget from over $200 billion in 2001 to now close to $1 trillion per year, while millions of its citizens live in abject poverty and its infrastructure is in decay.

Competition and the need to maximise profit drives companies towards implementing one or all of the forms of exploitation. In practice this manifests through takeovers, mergers, and closures, leading to monopolies and oligopolies. This is a fundamental and historical process of capitalism: competition leads to private monopolies, because, ironically, competition is a threat to profitability, which ultimately leads to the necessity to protect profitability by military superiority and dominance. Choice—the watchword of capitalism—is just another illusion under its mode of production.

This historical progression has not just meant the monopolisation of single industries, but the merger of finance and industry has facilitated the monopolisation of entire upstream and downstream processes, From oil to aeroplanes, food to pharmaceuticals, these and many more industries have over time been whittled down to where now only a few major companies are competing for market share: oligopolies. The ownership of the means of production of the global economy is now concentrated and controlled by a tiny minority of global elites.

Where they aren’t directly owned by monopoly firms they are
indirectly controlled, from the extraction and processing of the raw material to the manufacturing and assembly, from the transporting and logistics to the whole array of banking and market structures for the financing, selling and retailing of the final goods of these global commodity chains.

This allows the large MNCs to bribe and/or fund the native political establishment in some developing or underdeveloped regions as well as some of the rich developed countries, to facilitate an industrial policy and set-up in their interests—which seeks to divide, threaten and weaken organised labour.

The final goal of it all, of course, is not only to increase the share of profit, the share of wealth going to the owners of the companies, but to weaken and drive down the share of wealth going to labour power, to ensure that future accumulation of profits can be maintained.

The utilisation and conscious implementation by the capitalists of outsourcing, whereby companies in the south are contracted by large transnational companies of the global north, will inevitably further intensify competition, increasing the ranks of the reserve army of labour—the unemployed—in developed countries.

The capitalist class have no shame in breeding sentiments of xenophobia and racism amongst members of the working class, blaming poor workers in India, Mexico and China for “stealing jobs” and decreasing the standards of living of the working class in Europe and America as they organise and profit from this misery.

Like every innovation in capitalist economies, profit is the motivating factor; and as each new advancement in productivity lowers the value of each individual commodity, by lowering the socially necessary labour time needed in its production, the profit rates available in capital-intensive industries continually decrease, further driving competition and the utilisation of the three forms of exploitation in the capitalist economies.

This happens simply because of the basic laws of supply and demand. If less labour is needed for each unit of commodity produced, the operation of the market will normally drive the price down: the producing capitalist can lower the price in order to increase market share; competitors can copy the innovation and reduce their own labour cost per unit of commodity; and consumers will not be willing to pay the old higher price for the
product. And because less labour is needed for each unit of commodity, the rate of profit must also fall, since the surplus value per unit must be lower.

This intense competition for profit is what is driving the new wave of industrial innovation: automation and the development of artificial intelligence. Capitalists are investing heavily, often through public funds and government grants (socialising costs but privatising the benefits), in these areas so that they can be used to increase their productivity, to drive down costs, to subsume competitors, to increase market share, and ultimately to increase their profits—that legal imperative in capitalist economies.

It is no coincidence that these innovations are being developed and implemented first in the global north—because the profit margins of companies operating there are much tighter than for those directing the operations of the global south, where they can extract super-profits from the workers of that region. Yet it will only be a matter of time, just like the car industry, for the advancements in automation to be introduced by every capitalist enterprise, which will ensure a further depression on the rates of profit.

Marx’s law of accumulation predicted this historical development of capitalism, where “Competition among capitalists forces them to continue to expand their production in order to accumulate more profit or be driven out of business by others. Competition drives each individual capitalist to increase the productivity of labour . . .”¹ This law and the law of value has created a “contradiction between rising productivity of labour and falling profitability, which leads to the third law, the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall for capital,” which ensures recurring collapses of the capitalist system.

**THE LAW OF THE TENDENCY OF THE RATE OF PROFIT TO FALL**

The capitalist system is insatiably driven by and reliant on the extraction of profit from labour in order for it to expand and accumulate even more capital and surplus value. Without this dynamic transfer and continuous motion of value, capitalists would cease to exist, so they must continually seek new ways and areas to exploit workers.

As we saw, the law of value has meant that the more labour-intensive an industry is, the more profit can be extracted, and vice
versa. So, when this is aggregated for an entire industry, the extraction of profit is highest in labour-intensive industries, and the rate of profit declines in capital-intensive industries.

As each worker is the source of profit, increasing the productivity of labour has, ironically, over time undermined the source of capitalist profit. This is an internal contradiction of the system. It is this contradiction that drives capitalism’s destructive course in the search for greater returns on investments, no matter the consequences.

An individual capitalist can of course reap lots of profit, especially those who lead technological innovation, but this is only a temporary windfall, until others implement the changes, and then the whole industry is transformed, like our example of car manufacturing, where the return on each car decreases for the entire industry, due to the decrease in the socially necessary labour time required to manufacture the said car.

The profit windfall comes in the form of an increase in the quantity sold, gaining market share. However, in the long run this is not enough to offset the decrease in value by this increase in productivity; and therefore the rate of profit decreases over time.

The Marxist economist Esteban Maito, in his study and graph of world profit rates, shows that the average global rate of profit was above 40 per cent in the 1870s, where today it is in the region of 15 per cent. Historically, as competition between capitalist companies and countries, as well as competition with the socialist bloc, intensified, this led to the need to introduce higher productivity for each individual worker in every branch of the capitalist economy in order to stay in business, which resulted in decreased rates of profit over time.

This overall decrease incentivises those seeking higher returns to invest in assets with higher yields, which comes with higher risks, making asset bubbles more likely. These asset build-ups and bursts occurred a number of times, including, but not limited to, the Long Depression (1870–1900), the Great Depression (1929–1939), the 70s Crisis (1975–1979), the Great Recession (2007–2009), to what we have now, which we will call the unfolding crisis. This historical process of capitalism has shaped the development and underdevelopment of countries right across the globe and has led to the periodical crises within the capitalist system.
It is within these crisis periods where historically new technological advances have changed the productive forces and the structure of nations, from industrialisation with the steam engine and textile industry to mass transportation with railway and steel expansion, from mass production with electric technology to individual mobility with automobiles, through to the age of information and information technology and to the modern era of automation, automation infrastructure management systems, and AI.

As each of these major advances was introduced as a way to overcome crises in profitability, it only laid the seeds of the next crisis. This historical process has led to a further monopolisation of the global economy by a small number of large MNCs, who consolidate industries while also consuming and accelerating the depletion of the earth’s resources, which has hastened the global ecological crisis.

This law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall is particular to the capitalist mode of production, which produces recurring crises, affecting and devastating the lives of billions of people.

Esteban Maito, who has collated and tracked the data on the falling rate of profit, explains:

The downward trend of the rate of profit, its empirical confirmation, highlights the historically limited nature of capitalist production. If the rate of profit marks the vitality of the system, the logical conclusion is that it approaches further to an endpoint . . .
Periodic crises are specific to this mode of production, and allow, ultimately, a partial recovery of profitability. This regeneration capacity is a characteristic aspect of capital and the cyclical nature of the capitalist economy. But the periodic nature of these crises has not stopped the downward trend of the rate of profit on the long term ... The antagonisms of world capitalism become progressively sharper and the tendency towards breakdown increasingly approaches its final form of an absolute collapse.²

The capitalist system finds itself spiralling inwards as competition among capitalists drives technological change of productivity, which decreases the value of labour. This, as we’ve stated, undermines the rate of profit, which causes a crisis within the system. As a crisis unfolds it causes weaker businesses to fail and oligopolies and monopolies to increase, which then facilitates and incentivises the further exploitation of workers. As the system spirals it leads to further drives in increased productivity, which further decreases the value of labour, and so on and so forth, each rotation ushering in a new crisis of differing magnitudes, time and time again.

With each crisis comes another attempt by the capitalist ruling class to overcome these internal contradictions of the capitalist mode of production. For example, the tectonic shift of global manufacturing to the global south over the past forty years, where 82 per cent of all manufacturing now takes place, was a direct response to the profitability crisis of the 1970s. This shift temporarily helped profit rates to recover, especially for the large multinationals, who were able to avail of super-exploited labour power.

However, this shift also led finance capital to dominate over industrial capital in the core Western capitalist countries, as one by one industries either shut down or were outsourced to areas of the global south or to tax havens, such as Ireland. Debt, finance and property became the drivers of western economies, with “bloated equity markets, debt-driven economic activity, and unhinged property values,”³ where all connection to reality-grounded value was severed.
This financialisation of Western economies showed its first signs of the dot-com crisis in 2001 but didn’t fully unleash itself onto the global economy until the crash in the housing markets of 2007, leading to the Great Recession. Of course the first to pay were the workers who were left jobless, or wages or hours were cut. The resulting decade of austerity with the weakening of the working class has allowed the capitalist class to further implement the three forms of exploitation outlined above as an attempt to overcome decreased profitability.

“The global economy was facing the worst collapse since the second world war as coronavirus began to strike in March, well before the height of the crisis, according to the latest Brookings-Financial Times tracking index.”⁴ This index covers a group of twenty economies. The index comprises three types of variable: indicators of real economic activity, such as gross domestic product, imports, and exports; financial indicators, such as stock market indices and capitalisation; and confidence indicators, both business and consumer. These variables combined can deliver a snapshot of the world economy and individual economies.

This is the evidence that the global economy was already on a cliff edge; it’s just that the coronavirus tipped it over and added a heap of weight onto its fall.

The three laws of motion within the capitalist mode of production—of value, of accumulation, and of falling profitability,
which creates recurring crises—are internal contradictions which the system cannot overcome.

However, the capitalist class will continue to attempt to overcome them. It is this very fact that has driven the capitalist mode of production into a system of destruction, a system which has increased the likelihood of global pandemics and other environmental kickbacks, due to its destructive nature on habitats, the oceans, the earth, and the air. This is why we must not succumb to the idea that the unfolding economic crisis is due to covid-19: it is simply another crisis of capitalism.

**COVID-19 AND CRISIS: COULD WE HAVE BEEN PREPARED?**

As we stated in our introduction, the covid-19 pandemic has created many casualties, and we have heard some commentators or celebrities stating that the coronavirus is the “great equaliser.” True, the virus does not have borders and is likely to spread to anyone, regardless of race, religion, gender, age, or any other category that we use to define members in society; however, in the absence of swift governmental responses and access to universal free public health care, a person’s ability (a) to afford health care, (b) to be out of work and (c) to self-isolate very much depends on a person’s or a family’s financial situation. Class certainly affects how we experience the coronavirus: the rich are much better placed to avoid, prevent and survive the virus than the poor. Race also seems to be a factor and may overlap with class in some respects.

What do have a bearing on casualty numbers are (1) government responses and (2) the availability and access to health-care facilities. The role of the government raises the question of role of the state in a class society, such as capitalism. While the precise relationship between government and state remains to be properly theorised, for our purposes we can take them to be pretty much the same. The state arises from the irreconcilability of class antagonisms and ensures the rule and interests of the ruling class. Putting our faith in the state or government to protect and advance our interests seems an unviable strategy.

This leads to two conclusions: first, in the long run, the government or state will always place the interests of the capitalists before all other interests; second, state-provided public services, including its role in addressing the coronavirus pandemic, may be
of real and vital importance to workers and ordinary people but are also always in the interests of the capitalist system.

Capitalism always needs a supply of sufficiently healthy workers to produce goods and services and a supply of consumers to purchase products. In the absence of struggle the pandemic will bring about no change in the way the capitalist system works and exploits the working class. The confirmation of this can be seen when we have the Irish state paying private hospitals €115 million per month!

The large number of infections, deaths and scale of lockdown is very much connected to the capitalist mode of production and its attack on public health care system. So, building on from our understanding of the contradictions of capitalism, it is important to ask the question, Could we have been prepared for a pandemic of this scale?

The acclaimed journalist John Pilger writes: “That the virus has been allowed to sweep through modern, developed societies is a crime against humanity.” He was referring to the ongoing destruction and privatisation of the British NHS carried out by successive “New Labour” and Conservative governments, what he calls the Americanisation of the health services, which left Britain unable to cope with the advent of the coronavirus.

But Britain is hardly unique in that respect. The European Union imposed economic conditions on Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain—the “PIIGS”—following the recession, which involved cutting social services, including health. None of these states were in any way prepared to deal with a health emergency, least of all the pandemic which hit them. A recent report by Emma Clancy, an EU policy adviser, stated that since 2011 the EU has made sixty-three individual demands on member-states to cut spending on health and to privatise or outsource services to meet arbitrary debt and deficit budgets. It also made 105 separate demands on states to raise the pension age and/or reduce spending on pension and aged care. Is it any wonder, then, that we have the nursing-home scandals? Once again, the covid-19 has only exposed the already existing crises in this area.

Not to be left out, they also instructed member-states thirty-eight times to reduce employment protections, collective bargaining rights, and job security! Following the Great Recession, clearly sovereignty and democracy fell victim to capitalist demands!
It is not the case that a pandemic was unforeseen. Pilger, in the same interview, stated that the Conservative government in Britain was warned about shortages, leaving the NHS vulnerable in the event of a pandemic, four years ago. In fact numerous simulations and predictions at national and international levels were carried out. A WHO report as recent as September 2019 stated that “there was a ‘very real threat’ of a pandemic sweeping the planet, killing up to 80 million people. Preparedness is hampered by the lack of continued political will at all levels,” read the report.

Michael Roberts in a recent article cites that “in early 2018, during a meeting at the World Health Organisation in Geneva, a group of experts (the R&D Blueprint) coined the term ‘Disease X.’ They predicted that the next pandemic would be caused by an unknown, novel pathogen that hadn’t yet entered the human population. Disease X would likely result from a virus originating in animals and would emerge somewhere on the planet where economic development drives people and wildlife together.”⁶ Remember, that’s in 2018, two years ago!

What we can deduce from this is that scientific and health experts around the world had fully expected a pandemic to hit, and capitalist governments were informed of this fact. Their inability to deal with the numbers requiring medical attention is not so much a “lack of will,” as stated by the WHO, but a lack of interest in funding and staffing a universal public health-care system, which could have prepared us for the predictions made by WHO. The rules of the system simply didn’t allow it! Governments were willing to take on the risk in order for profits to be made and the odious national debt to be paid.

Instead, public and health services have been attacked, privatised, stripped and systematically underfunded in efforts to allow capitalists to profit from our essential needs. The unpreparedness of capitalist governments, in Ireland and elsewhere, is just a symptom of the wider crisis of capitalism, namely the crisis of profitability.

**THE CRISIS OF CAPITALISM IS LEADING US TO DESTRUCTION**

As we stated previously, the crisis of the 70s led to the shift in industrial manufacturing to the global south. Western capitalist countries transitioned from predominantly industrial-based to
service-based economies. Services and utilities, post-World War II, however, had been largely publicly owned and run by state-owned enterprises or services. It is no coincidence that, beginning in the 1970s, these companies and public services began to be stripped and underfunded in order to make way for private operators to enter the market.

As mentioned earlier, we must think carefully and clearly about the role of public services in a capitalist society. If the state is an instrument of the capitalist class to secure and advance their interests, what is the role of state-provided services? One answer is that while they certainly provide some vital assistance to those who are unable to access services in the market, i.e. low-earners, the unemployed, the poor, etc., they also provide an essential stabilising force for capitalism, economically, socially, and ideologically.

This phase in capitalism is often referred to as neo-liberalism. Many try to label it in order to distinguish it from an earlier, “friendlier” capitalism, in the hope that we can end neo-liberalism without ending capitalism. But there is no distinction to be made. Neo-liberalism should be thought of as a particular period of capitalism, but not something different to it.

Due to the historical falling rates of profit and periodical crises, capitalism has chosen the following trajectory: to move industry to countries of the global south, where labour is much cheaper and can be super-exploited, while at the same time finance and debt became the drivers of the economies of the global north, in concert with opening up the public services for privatisation.

These shifts themselves have to be put into context of capitalist activity and the wider global emergency which has increased the likelihood of global pandemics, and other environmental crises, hitting broad communities and regions around the world, due to capitalism’s destructive nature. This virus may have originated in China but its development into a global pandemic can only be attributed to the destructive drive of the capitalist mode of production, which placed profits above people’s lives until it was too late to stop its spread.

Capitalist production is not just having an impact on climate change but is in fact creating a global change in “atmospheric circulation, ocean circulation, the carbon cycle, the nitrogen cycle, the water cycle and other cycles, sea-ice changes, sea-level
changes, food webs, biological diversity, pollution, health, fish stocks, and more.” The destruction to habitats is also leading us to the sixth extinction wave in geological history, with more than one million species threatened with extinction within decades. This global change is threatening the sustainability of civilisation as we know it.

This has led those in the field of Earth System science, headed by the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme, to make the formal recommendation back in 2000 that we have left the Holocene epoch and have entered a new epoch—the Anthropocene: the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on the Earth System. They state that “the magnitude, spatial scale, and pace of human-induced change are unprecedented in human history and perhaps in the history of the Earth. The Earth system is now operating in a ‘no-analogue state.’”⁷ We cannot compare it with previous times, because it is unlike anything that has gone before. Twenty years on from this report and little has been done to change the ecocidal course of capitalist development.

The period from 1950 to the present is known as the Great Acceleration, and the reason for this is the accelerated pace (“hockey-stick shape” curves) at which capitalist production and consumption has developed, which has impacted on the natural cycles and processes within the Earth System.

We must re-stress the point that the laws of value, accumulation and profitability, and its contradictions within the capitalist mode of production, are what have driven this acceleration, an acceleration which has increased the probability of pandemics and other global emergencies occurring, that human civilisation will soon face.

The accelerated pace of capitalist production and consumption is driven in the search of profit. As the covid-19 pandemic has proved, this necessity has exposed the vulnerability of citizens in capitalist nations to this and future global emergencies. The crisis has also revealed to people what a decade or more of cuts in funding, recruitment, pay and conditions will do to essential services, such as health.

However, this is not just a crisis in the health service but reveals a fundamental lack of investment and downgrading of the public system as a whole, including health, housing, education, and wel-
fare. The virus has exposed our vulnerability to mass illness; but we also know that there already existed a crisis in our public systems before this pandemic, resulting from the austerity policies that governments have been implementing since the Great Recession of 2008, which itself was a result of the periodical crises of capitalism.

As we have already pointed out, the state in capitalism provides public services primarily to stabilise the system and serve the interest of the capitalists. It should be no surprise, then, that these services are totally inadequate to meet human need and decency.

Yet the crisis has also revealed the beauty and love people have for each other. It has shown us those who we truly value and need most are the workers in health, retail, child care, education, cleaning, and others essential services.

International solidarity from the socialist states, such as Cuba and Viet Nam, and their dealing with covid-19 internally has proved their resilience and compassion for their people and the global family, despite the criminal sanctions, blockade and demonisation by the Western imperialist powers.

It is workers and their labour power who are essential for producing the goods and services we need to survive, and not those who live off the labour of others: the landlords, the capitalist owners, the bankers and the shareholders, and all those who seek to profit from this pandemic and future crises, as well as living off the wealth created by labour and nature.

The wealthiest people on this planet, the billionaires and their companies, are either hiding in their luxurious bunkers or asking for bail-outs from the public purse. They are the parasitical class who feed off the labour of the global working class. They are the class that are the least essential and least effective at actually tackling the three major crises facing humanity: the global pandemic crisis, the ongoing global economic crisis, and the global environmental crisis. If this crisis shows us anything it is that we don’t need their “leadership”; they need ours.

Within these three global crises another will emerge, in the form of a political crisis. The legitimacy of established governments and political parties will inevitably be scrutinised, on the basis of their reactions to and their preparedness for this and future crises.
There is both great potential and great danger in times ahead. The danger we can envisage is the response of the capitalist class, to support and fund a rightward deviation towards fascism and war at both a regional and global level. This has been their response in the past, and we must do everything in our power to halt this march towards barbarism.

The great potential, and only alternative, is to rid ourselves of the capitalist mode of production, the laws of motion, and its internal contradictions, and its destructive course, to champion and bring forward a socialist mode of production. We must lay the basis for a society based on the common ownership of the means of production. The covid-19 pandemic has truly shown that capitalism is a system that serves the interests and desires of a tiny minority, not the needs and interest of the vast majority of humanity.

Socialism, a society where workers and the people have real, democratic decision-making power over all areas of our lives, is what humanity urgently needs if catastrophes such as this pandemic, or the developing environmental crisis, are to be addressed and averted. We need real collective democratic power over all aspects of society: economic, social, political, cultural, and everything else. Only then will we be able to determine how we live together and utilise the shared resources and wealth to provide a truly human and decent society for all of us.

We stated at the beginning that the unfolding economic crisis was not caused by covid-19 but was in fact a crisis of capitalism, of the periodical crises built in to the working mechanism of the system. The arguments presented here will hopefully add to the growing anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist sentiment bubbling up around the world, as once again the spectre of communism will haunt the capitalist world!

However, the crisis for the system triggered by this pandemic will not lead to change in the absence of struggle. That, comrades and friends, is where our efforts should be applied in this historical moment.

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James Connolly Commemoration, 2020
Re-invigorating the Struggle
JIMMY CORCORAN
Chairperson, Cork Branch, CPI
—
Sunday 10 May 2020

COMRADES AND FRIENDS,
We are gathered on line today to commemorate James
Connolly on the 104th anniversary of his murder by the British
state.
Comrades, over the past decade we have seen many com-
memorations all over Ireland. Anniversaries and commemorations can serve a political purpose. They can be used in an attempt
to neutralise the revolutionary nature of past events. Leaders can be deified and the social forces that propelled them to leadership
can be ignored.
Sometimes commemorations are used in a blatant attempt to
rewrite history. We have seen how the centenary of the industrial-
ised slaughter that was the First World War was used as a pretext to reimagine Ireland’s position as a subject nation in a more benign way. The Redmondite wing of Fine Gael continues to question the legitimacy and the necessity of the War of Independence.

So wedded are sections of Fine Gael to the rehabilitation of Britain’s role in Ireland that a few months ago the minister for justice, Charlie Flanagan, tried to organise a commemoration of RIC and DMP members who were killed during the War of Independence. Throughout their existence the RIC were the iron fist of British rule in Ireland, and they played a major role in evictions during the Land War. Among their many atrocities, a hundred years ago, in March 1920, the RIC murdered Tomás Mac Curtáin, the Sinn Féin lord mayor of Cork. And Flanagan thought it would be okay to try and rehabilitate them!

So why does the Communist Party of Ireland commemorate the memory of James Connolly? Is it simply to remember a giant of the Irish labour movement? Is it to honour the major role he played in the 1913 lockout and in the Easter Rising? Is it because, along with James Larkin, he organised the unskilled workers in Ireland, north and south, urban and rural, and made them aware of their strength as a class?

By his leading role in these events alone James Connolly deserves to be remembered. But Connolly was more than a man of action; and while we commemorate his life, which he dedicated to the overthrow of British Imperialism and native capitalism, we are in the happy position that Connolly, the political theorist, was a prolific writer; and thanks to the work of the Communist Party of Ireland, which kept his works in print at a time when the political and clerical establishment tried to murder Connolly a second time by keeping his writings hidden away, Connolly still speaks to us.

One might ask, since Connolly was murdered 104 years ago, of what relevance are his works today, except to students of history? I will answer that by quoting from the foreword to his book The Reconquest of Ireland. “The conquest of Ireland had meant the social and political servitude of the Irish masses, and therefore the re-conquest of Ireland must mean the social as well as the political independence from servitude of every man, woman and child in Ireland.” He also said: “The first right of man is to live, and that he
cannot enjoy that right while the means of life for all, are the private property of a class.”

James Connolly would have recognised the political and economic forces that still determine the lives of the Irish people. Today the Irish working class are facing a difficult future. An economic recession is forecast. The capitalist parties, the capitalist press and their tame economists will have us believe that it is all the fault of the coronavirus, and we are all in it together. They lie: the seeds of this recession were sown in the financial crash of 2008 and the capitalist response to it.

Economic crisis is woven into the fabric of capitalism. Homelessness, hospital waiting-lists, overcrowded classrooms, existed before the pandemic. We, the citizens of the Irish state, pay 7 billion euros interest yearly because the EU forced us to take on 42 per cent of the debt of European banks. One doesn’t have to be a genius to ask if one is the result of the other.

But the silence from official Ireland is deafening. Sections of the capitalist press are preparing us for more cut-backs in public services when the pandemic is over. They claim the state bailed us out and now we will have to repay them by offering up our futures as a sacrifice. Siren voices from the rotting corpse of social democracy call for “social partnership.” Political opportunists are using the situation created by the pandemic to reach out to Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael and go into government. No doubt they will say it is in the “national interest.” Whose national interest? Where is the common national interest of a homeless family and a millionaire capitalist?

In Labour in Irish History, Connolly showed that the ruling elite in Ireland always put their own class interests before those of the majority, and they always compromised with first the English crown, then the British state, to protect their own interests. And they always wrapped their class interest in the banner of the “national interest.”

For Connolly, the Irish working class were the only incorruptible inheritors of the fight for Irish freedom. This was not mere rhetoric. As a class, all we have is our labour power to provide for our continued existence. We cannot send our wealth to some offshore tax haven. We cannot relocate our factory to some low-cost economy. We are rooted to Ireland. We can, of course, emigrate, which too many of us were forced to do over the genera-
tions, which means breaking the bonds of family and friendship; or we can fight for a better future.

Connolly understood that the strength of the working class lay in its unity, and he fought hard to build that unity. We must stand together as a united class to resist all attempts to force us to pay for the next recession.

Comrades, one hundred years ago, as he lay dying as a victim of British rule, Cork’s martyred lord mayor Terence MacSwiney said: “It is not those who inflict the most, but those who endure the most who will win.”

Comrades, the Irish working class have endured enough, it is time to fight back.

We must stand as one in our communities, demanding public housing for all. Connolly knew from experience that the sympathetic strike was the key to using the organised strength of workers to support each other in struggle. We must demand the repeal of the 1990 Industrial Relations Act, which makes such strikes illegal.

We must demand that there be no return to a two-tier health system and instead campaign, north and south, for a single all-Ireland health service.

Today, as we commemorate James Connolly, the path before us is clear. We can continue along the capitalist path, which will lead to more inequality, more poverty, greater pressure on natural resources and ultimately the end of human life on the planet.

We can continue to become more integrated in the EU, with less and less ability to take the economic choices needed to provide for all our people. We can watch as the EU becomes more and more integrated, and, as in Connolly’s day, we will provide soldiers for our Imperial masters’ wars.

There can be no going back to the normality of homelessness, precarious employment, overcrowded classrooms, hospital waiting-lists.

We must organise, build resistance to the attempts by the EU, the British and Irish governments to force us to pay for the crisis.

And we must go beyond that and build the people’s organisations that will bring about unity, independence, and socialism.

In the words of Connolly, “Our demands most moderate are. We only want the Earth.”
The Communist Party of Ireland not only commemorates the death of James Connolly and the deep wound inflicted by his execution on the Irish and international working class but continues the struggle he bequeathed to us: to finally secure the independence of our country and the establishment of a workers’ republic.

This pamphlet contains the text of the James Connolly Memorial Lecture, given by Eoghan O’Neill, and the oration for the James Connolly Commemoration, given by Jimmy Corcoran.