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Research for *Workers*

Brought to the Brink by Recklessness: First thoughts on COVID-19

This piece is dedicated to Mark Golden (August 6, 1948 – April 9, 2020). Mark was a scholar of classics, teacher, life-long social justice advocate and friend to CCPA Mb.

Referring to the role of plagues in ancient Greece, Joel Christensen writes: “Plague stories provide settings where fate pushes human organization to the limit. Human leaders are almost always crucial to the causal sequence, as Zeus observes in Homer’s “Odyssey” [. . .], “Humans are always blaming the gods for their suffering / but they experience pain beyond their fate because of their own recklessness.” There is a lesson here as we deal with COVID-19.

Many have marveled at how fast a new variant of an old virus has collapsed our highly globalized, financialized, fetishized and digitized economy. A lot of observers saw it coming: they didn’t necessarily know it would be a virus (although we’ve been warned) that would set the wheels of misfortune in action, but they understood the reckless ethos underlying advanced capitalist economies and how easily the edifice could crumble.

That recklessness has been building since the 1980s. As economic theory heartlessly turned away from the model that had supported the rise of the middle class (unionism, strong public services, progressive taxation) a new rigid world order was ushered in to a largely unsuspecting people. Conservatives and Liberals alike have been advocating for small government, justified

by ever lowering taxes, weaker public services and greater reliance on the private sector to meet our needs. With government spending and deficits tagged as public enemy number one, austerity measures became the order of the day, leaving us ill-prepared to face a pandemic.

Damaging as these changes are, they would be more manageable had they not been embedded in the juggernaut of globalization – a process that has connected and dislocated economies and cultures at the same time.

COVID 19 is revealing the recklessness of globalization even more dramatically than the 2008 financial crisis did. Financial contagion creates an economic crisis; biological contagion sets off two crises: health and economic - which interact in ways that make the sum of the two greater than their parts.

How then do we respond? If leaders are almost always responsible for the steps that lead to crises, what role do they play in getting us out? In Manitoba, it would seem very little.

My colleagues have documented how Canadian provinces have responded to help those who will be hit hard. But at the time of writing, it is notable that Manitoba has not stepped forward at all, despite the examples being set across the country. Other provinces are providing a variety of programs, such as help with rent, cash to bridge

ERROL BLACK CHAIR

EBC

IN LABOUR ISSUES

CCPA-MB

301-583 Ellice Ave
WINNIPEG
R2B 1Z7

PHONE

204.927.3200

EMAIL

CCPAMB@
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

WEBSITE

WWW.
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

BLOG

WWW.POLICYFIX.CA

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@CCPAMB

people to the time they can access federal supports, extra help for those on social assistance to help pay for food, and emergency funding for workers who have lost their jobs.

Premier Pallister is singularly focused on propping up our healthcare system and given the degree to which successive federal and provincial governments have weakened it, this intervention is gravely needed. But the health crisis is spinning into a multi-faceted challenge requiring heroic action.

What we need are heroes

Manitoba's politicians may be sitting on their hands, but that doesn't mean we're short of heroes. They're everywhere. They are putting their health and even lives on the line so society can maintain basic services, and they keep doing this despite their low wages, lack of basic benefits and, in many cases, precarious relationship with the labour market.

This report explains how government underfunding of the personal care home sector has placed workers, the majority of whom are low-paid, racialized women, at risk. This piece reminds us of the brutal labour relation realities these workers face. The horrific situation in a Quebec 'luxury' long-term care home – charging thousands of dollars/month - exemplifies how bad things can get when private interests prevail, and workers are not adequately supported so they can care for residents.

Healthcare workers of all stripes will be put to the test as the virus peaks. Our situation would not be so worrisome had our public health system not been cut to the bone. The federal government has been decreasing healthcare spending since the 1990s and downloading responsibility on the provinces. Then the Manitoba government introduced reforms that have wreaked havoc on healthcare professionals and patients alike. Even heroes eventually meet their limits: how will they possibly deal with a full blown COVID-19 outbreak? We won't know that answer until this is over. But even before the dust

settles, some trends are already emerging.

What we see so far

Despite the fog of war, to borrow a phrase, some profound truths are emerging. This is what we know so far:

1. As noted by my colleagues in Ontario, the workers we value the least (many of whom are racialized and/or women) are the ones we need the most. I realized this while working in my cozy home, basking in the luxury of self-isolation.
2. As per the latest release of the Labour Market Survey, low-income and precariously employed workers, including youth and women, will be hit hardest by job losses. Unionized workers are faring better, so far.
3. The absurdities of populism can actually crumble under the weight of so many body bags. Trump has had to do an about face, although he keeps reverting back to old habits. Bolsonaro is being shunned by even his right-wing supporters; Doug Ford has risen to the occasion. Boris Johnson, who reportedly regards illness as a moral failure, is now profusely thanking the healthcare system – which his party has been underfunding for years - for saving his life.
4. Politicians' true colours will emerge. On a local level, is Premier Pallister's taciturn, 'let's see what the feds come up with attitude' the final word? His reluctance to loosen provincial purse strings to help the most vulnerable is looking downright mean-spirited compared to other premiers' actions.
5. If there were ever a time for Alberta to re-think its economy, it has to be now. How long will Albertans support Kenny's desperate, reality-defying actions to resuscitate the oil sands?
6. The titans of industry will not lead us out of the crisis; they will follow - after they accept the government largesse they work so hard to

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avoid paying for.

7. Governments and workers and civil society coalitions will lead us out of the crisis.

8. We can stop the environmental train wreck if we want to. If we do, pandemics won't be as likely to reoccur.

9. Globalization, privatization and just-in-time supply chains are really bad ideas. We lose control of our food supply, medicines and cannot prepare in advance for the rolling cascade of crises afflicting us. America's private healthcare system is responding dismally to the crisis.

10. The much poorer global south, with weak to no public healthcare, could be decimated. A tragedy of this proportion will be impossible to ignore.

11. Democracy will suffer. Even Canada is not immune to this trend. Dictators will be born.

12. Finally there will be another crisis UNLESS we collectively recognize that going back to the way things were will be a reckless return to the next crisis in waiting.

Let's stop being reckless

We have put a screeching halt on commerce, traffic, tourism, public gatherings, pollution, and forced some fanatical ideologues to face reality. The world is on pause, and there's more than one reset button. We need to hit the right one. Can we re-start our world in a different direction?

Much has been written in this vein. The Guardian's Larry Elliot notes how much the world changed after the Great Depression, and asks how close we might be to repeating that performance. Our economic model has failed us twice already in this young century; each time it happens we temporarily ditch the model and resort to government intervention. It's time to ditch the model perma-

nently.

Thinking about the recovery

Let's stop electing leaders who support the causal conditions that lead us to crises. The economy never recovered from the 2008 financial meltdown and was teetering on the verge of crisis when COVID hit. In 2017, Time Magazine warned that "the world is not ready for the next pandemic". Reckless leaders felt no need to deal with either issue, and now we've been hammered by both at the same time.

We will have to rebuild our economy and public services. Now that governments are calling all the shots, they need to implement the sorts of policies CCPA Mb. has been promoting through its 2020 Alternative Provincial Budget and all CCPA offices through their research over the years:

- Redirect investment into green infrastructure to kick start the economy, create decent jobs and promote equity.
- Jump on the opportunity to develop green networks between companies like New Flyer in Winnipeg - which produces electric buses, Manitoba Hydro - a publically owned crown corporation with clean energy to spare, and educational institutions like Red River College - where students study the latest green energy technology. Electrify public transit.
- Ensure that crown corporations remain publically owned and run for the good of society.
- Help green entrepreneurs like Iron and Earth in Alberta that provide decent jobs.
- Expand the Employment Insurance system and make it more comprehensive. Use it to pay unemployed workers, especially those in the fossil-fuel sector, to retrain for green-sector jobs.

Can we re-start our world in a different direction?

- Use government procurement to support social enterprises engaged in energy retro-fits, environmental remediation, and that hire workers who struggle with labour market attachment.

- Rigorously re-commit to the five pillars of the Canada Health Act so as to quash once and for all the seeping of privatization into our healthcare system. Increase healthcare funding to the provinces as per the recommendations in this report. Never forget how spectacularly the US healthcare system failed in the COVID-19 crises.

- Expand the purview of public healthcare to include homecare and personal care homes. Make sure employees are paid adequately, with proper benefits and union protection. Never forget how many people suffered and died in insufficiently staffed personal and long-term care homes.

- Re-commit to public funding of research that benefits society. As Linda McQuaig explains, publically owned Connaught Lab could have helped in the fight against COVID-19. “Hated by its corporate competitors, Connaught was unique among pharmaceutical companies in that its focus was on human need, not profit”.

- Invest in social housing that meets stringent environmental standards. Never forget how difficult it has been for homeless people to cope with this pandemic.

- Invest in an affordable, accessible national child-care program. Never forget how essential childcare workers are at all times, but especially in times of crisis.

- Invest in local, environmentally friendly food production. Bring back the family farm.

- Invest in First Nation communities so they have the economic, infrastructure and healthcare resources they need to withstand crises. Support strategies like those found in Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation which uses community economic development to provide employment, training, housing and expand related industries to create local jobs.

- Support legislation to reinstate and enhance labour rights at the provincial and federal levels.

- Provide a living wage, adequate sick pay and protections for all workers.

The cost of dealing with this catastrophe will be immense. An international effort is required to stop the scourge of tax evasion and avoidance that has sucked trillions of dollars from governments facing the colossal task of putting the world back on its feet. Economists Gabriel Zucman and Emmanuel Saez have documented the extraordinary extent of the problem, and the surprisingly uncomplicated way it could be fixed: a wealth tax could raise enough money for all we need. CCPA research also has recommendations for taxing higher income earners, and closing tax loopholes in Canada.

When the fog has lifted and the rebuilding starts we must demand a reckoning from those whose reckless decisions brought us to the brink, yet again. Christensen writes that “plagues in ancient narratives are usually the beginning, not the end of the story.” We need to write a new chapter in our story, one that narrates how we took heroic action so we could finally stop suffering pain beyond our fate.

Lynne Fernandez holds the Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Mb.

CCPA-MB

301-583 Ellice Ave
WINNIPEG
R2B 1Z7

PHONE

204.927.3200

EMAIL

CCPAMB@
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

WEBSITE

WWW.
POLICYALTERNATIVES.CA

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