

# The Working Class Pandemic: Wildcat Strikes and Working Class Self-Organizing in the US

by Robert Ovetz

In *Lizard Talk*,<sup>1</sup> historian Peter Linebaugh provided a history of ten plagues stretching back to the biblical era, as close as anyone has gotten to an epidemiology of class struggle. Linebaugh names this little book after Zora Neale Hurston's notion of how folk knowledge of tactics and strategy is passed along from worker to worker. Plagues, pandemics, and outbreaks have been the mechanism for reimposing control of an unruly working class, what he describes as the "utility of the plague to the maintenance of class discipline." But they have also been the openings for expanding and circulating the tactics and strategies of worker struggle which we are seeing around the US today.

During the 1793 plague in Philadelphia, Linebaugh reminded us, servants deserted their masters, demanded huge wage increases, freed prisoners, and self-organized care for the stricken. The 1831-2 cholera plague attacked multi-racial working class neighborhoods like Five Points in Manhattan, which also happened to supply the critical longshore workers for a key choke point in the international supply chain. Likewise, the 1918 flu pandemic corresponded not only with a WWI strike wave but a revolutionary circulation of struggles and general strikes from Russia, Mexico, Germany, and the US<sup>2</sup> that lasted until the early 1920s.

If capital established a "pathology of the class relation (workers are sick, rulers are healthy)," the working class responded in ways that recognized that "pestilence, in its social dynamics, contains a possibility of liberation." According to Linebaugh, struggle was the workers' own vaccine during deadly pandemics and even foreshadowed them. "The struggle for justice became the therapeutic treatment of choice upon the part of the slaves, the poor, the afflicted."

With the explosive spread of wildcat strikes across the US, we are seeing another class struggle over the use of the COVID-19 pandemic. It's become increasingly clear how capital's dependence on the "essential labor" of now unruly health care, food service, transport, cleaning, and logistics workers in key sectors of the economy has made it extremely vulnerable to disruption. How vulnerable is marked by the once "unorganizable" Amazon/Whole Foods tracking worker organizing at every store.<sup>3</sup> While these strikes are mostly defensive, for the time being, the US working class has shown some signs that is relearning how to "walk the talk of the lizard," whispering its warnings of global insurrection. This is especially amplified by the nationwide protests

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<sup>1</sup> Linebaugh, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Ovetz, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Peterson, 2020.

against police violence and systemic racism that reportedly resulted in a surge of wildcat strikes in Seattle.<sup>4</sup>

The COVID-19 crisis has not been immune to the working class pandemic of class struggle, particular by workers doing reproductive labor. It is now clear that capital is concerned not only with the disruption of production, but also the reproduction of labor. The explosion of wildcat strikes in the US and the rapid turn of both neoliberal parties to massive Keynesian policy, combined with more attacks on previous gains, has put worker self-organizing and strike action back on the agenda. The genuine risk to sustaining and connecting these strikes is skyrocketing rates of unemployment and cuts in the public sector which will be paid for by even more neoliberal pain, austerity, outsourcing, and privatization.

### **Workers are Wildcatting**

By June 10th, at least 400 wildcat strikes<sup>5</sup> and a threatened national general strike by two transport unions<sup>6</sup> have swept the US since march when the country went into lock down to stop the spread of the deadly Covid-19 virus. The organization and strike actions by workers has been breathtaking. We have seen truck drivers, construction workers, nurses, warehouse, transport, meatpacking, call center, carpenters, fast food, trash collectors, prisoners, and a wide range of other kinds of workers organize wildcat strikes. This wave indicates that overt class struggle is suddenly back on the agenda in the US, and much of the world for that matter.<sup>7</sup> Strikes aren't the only form of organizing taking place, joined by short sitdown work stoppages<sup>8</sup> and demonstrations by nurses and doctors in seven states protesting<sup>9</sup> the lack of critical safety equipment and petitions, and widespread media attention to the plight of essential workers.

There is no doubt that global capitalism is in deep crisis. After several years of a rising global authoritarian embracing nationalism and protectionism, much of the global economy has come to a standstill. Mass layoffs of countless millions of workers and the collapse in income has caused investment to collapse, markets to crash, and government tax revenue has been severely depleted resulting in unions for California state employees caving into wage cuts, for example.<sup>10</sup> The initial response of the state has been to further ramp up state socialism for business, corporations

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<sup>4</sup> While there is a debate over whether to call these wildcat strikes because employers unilaterally closed their shops when they expected workers to wildcat, the numbers are impressive. See <https://paydayreport.com/covid-19-strike-wave-interactive-map/>

<sup>5</sup> See <https://paydayreport.com/covid-19-strike-wave-interactive-map/>

<sup>6</sup> Amalgamated Transport Union, April 3, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> [feverstruggle.net](https://feverstruggle.net) has provided the most comprehensive tracking of global strikes during the pandemic and includes a map of strikes in europe at [https://framacarte.org/en/map/greves-sous-covid\\_71152%233/54.88/20.21](https://framacarte.org/en/map/greves-sous-covid_71152%233/54.88/20.21)

<sup>8</sup> Lalasz, April 7, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Democracy Now, April 3, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Venteicher, June 20, 2020.

and large property owners and stop gap Keynesianism for workers in the wealthy countries with utter destitution and disaster for the rest of the global working class.

When the pandemic crisis passes the bill will come due. There will continue to be state socialism for corporations and capitalism for workers. Unemployment will be used to bring down the hammer on what remains of the organized and unionized working class. Work will be reorganized to become even more precarious and the workplace even more despotically managed by data based surveillance. Skyrocketing deficits, borrowing, and corporate bailouts will become justification for further neoliberal austerity, privatization, disinvestment, and tax cuts for the rich and capital and regressive taxes on workers. Emergency executive powers<sup>11</sup> will become normalized wielded with grotesque violence by authoritarians and corporate parties to recoup what is owed. In fact, by early July the countries with the four highest rates of COVID-19 infections are the US, Brazil, India and Russia—all countries ruled by right wing authoritarian populists.

To understand the immense disruptive possibilities of working class self-organizing it will also be necessary to prepare for the inevitable counterattack. There are some efforts to begin such preparation. The UNITE HERE union attempted to organize its members, nearly all of whom are out of work as the recreational sector has shut down, in Southern California and Nevada, as well as workers seeking out its help. The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America have teamed up with the Democratic Socialists of America to help workers seeking its help to organize wildcat strikes during the pandemic.<sup>12</sup> Considering DSA's top down focus on elections and media coverage this effort is unlikely to produce much more than a few news stories. Efforts to call for a day of action and general strike on May 1st failed to materialize.<sup>13</sup>

### **Workers are Self-Organizing**

The story we've heard from right to left that workers cannot be organized, capital and the state are too powerful, mass surveillance and the rise of the far right is making organizing too dangerous, are all based on the wrong premise. Faced with the terror of being fatally sickened and spreading the virus to others, unemployment, starvation, and being sacrificed for the capitalist economy, workers are not being organized—they are self-organizing.

This means that unions and others on the left need to throw out their archaic tactics and strategies and find that workers have, are, and will continue to organize themselves from the bottom up and circulate their struggles to meet their needs. Unions will come under immense pressure to finally abandon the narrow focus on bargaining over the now long abandoned legalistic Fordist wage-productivity deal<sup>14</sup> and throw off the harness of the contract and labor law. It is long past the time for our unions to apply its remaining power and vast resources in support of the working class

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<sup>11</sup> Schmemmann, April 2, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America, n.d.

<sup>13</sup> See Cooperation Jackson's call for general strike at <https://cooperationjackson.org/announcementsblog/towardsageneralstrike> and National Educators United call for mass action at <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdRIKFU2RYxtbCeIYGpCLSFX41oI6xjMxVmXmTif2nXhGmE1w/viewform>

<sup>14</sup> Carpignano, 1975.

rather than just triaging its loyal members. Alongside the sprinkling of union organizing efforts there have been a plethora of organizing webinars hosted by informal worker groupings that may bear fruit once workers return to their workplaces.

As nearly all the workers going on wildcat strikes are not formally in unions, most likely have their own unknown committees<sup>15</sup> in the workplace, they are not limited by federal or state labor laws, union contracts, or other control mechanisms. That's what makes wildcat strikes so dangerous—they are unmanaged and uncontrolled.

### **The Centrality of Reproductive and Logistics Labor**

What ties nearly all of the wildcat strikes together is that they are being carried out by workers doing reproductive labor or what is often euphemistically called caring, effective or service labor.<sup>16</sup> These workers were initially called “heroes,” even by bosses who just faced strikes, because it is their work that literally keeps capital alive by reproducing labor power of other workers. By May, as many states forcibly reopened, these heroes again became expendable. Not surprisingly, the anti-racism and police violence protest wave that erupted following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis corresponded to the reopening from a pandemic in which people of color were infected, hospitalized, and died at far higher rates than whites.

The central importance of such reproductive labor has been lost on most unions in the US which have given up on nearly all but those in the public education and the private health care industries. The composition of most reproductive workers is that they extremely low paid and precarious (who isn't anymore, really?), disproportionately people of color, turnover rates are very high, and are extremely exploited in many other areas of society. These workers are not too hard to organize, as it is repeatedly claimed. They're just too hard for unions pursuing collaboration with exploitative bosses to organize.

The fatal mistake of presuming that their labor is unproductive to capital<sup>17</sup> is the flipside of the mistaken assumption that reproductive workers as impossible to organize. In reality, what used to be unwaged labor that reproduced labor power for capital, the work of cooking, cleaning, caring, educating by primarily women and girls, has increasingly moved into waged work. In fact, much of this waged work is merely a commodified form of the unwaged work they still do, or used to do more of, in the home. This has always been life giving “essential” work which is exemplified by the centrality of this labor during the pandemic. The difference is now it is essential to the survival of capital at a time when the labor power of countless millions of exploitable workers is at stake.

This dual myth of un-organizable and unproductive has left capital virtually unrestrained to deploy a new technical composition that features various extreme strategies of exploitation, domination, and division by legal status, sex, gender, race, wage, job status, etc., and control that are

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<sup>15</sup> Ovetz, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> The Marxist Feminist Collective, April 3, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Cleaver, January 16, 2011.

now becoming ubiquitous among better organized higher skilled workers.<sup>18</sup> For example, many of the same communications technologies and algorithmic data management systems used to control and intensify reproductive labor are now found among the professions including professors, doctors, nurses, and lawyers.

What these struggles have in their favor is that they are now doing “essential” labor that is simultaneously dangerous and fatal to those doing the work. Carers, cleaners, and food workers are still being celebrated every evening all around the world. After long being dismissed as “unskilled” and “disposable” it turns out that reproductive work is actually quite central not only to human survival but is keeping the entire capitalist economy from grinding to an even longer halt. When these workers refuse to work no one else will be able to work either. These workers have immense strategic leverage to disrupt the entire global economy. Even localized refusals to work — of which there have been many — can reverberate throughout the economy.

The wildcat strikes are demonstrating that these reproductive industries are extremely vulnerable to its disruption—a strategy first proposed by the so-called wages for housework/student movements in the 1960-70s—along numerous global choke points.<sup>19</sup> It turns out that the wages demanded by those movements now make it possible for reproductive workers to refuse work rather than willingly hand over their labor power—the original objective of the movements.<sup>20</sup>

When workers in education, health care, food production, preparation, and logistics stop working, all other workers stop by default. During the wave of 2018-19 wildcat and official teachers strikes in nine states and Puerto Rico children couldn’t go to school and many waged workers were prevented from getting to their jobs. Today, when food and logistics workers stop working no one eats. The global attack on reproductive labor is the working class’s pandemic, striking at capital’s circulatory system producing labor power available for work.

Reproductive workers are now exploiting the vulnerabilities in the long and thin “just in time” global supply chain. The sudden disappearance of toilet paper is not because of scared or greedy consumers. They are caused by unforeseen disruptions in a virtually uninterrupted global division of labor<sup>21</sup> that capital is now suddenly struggling to respond to. This illustrated the many weak links in the “just in time” logistics network. Although research is ongoing, the wildcat strikes by truck drivers, in warehouses and platform delivery companies may have helped contribute to the disruption of logistics all over the country. One of the most widespread wildcat strikes was by truck drivers “slow rolling” interstate freeways all over the country.<sup>22</sup> Although yet to be widely coordinated, disruption at key global choke points offers the greatest potential for turning our planet back away from its path towards ecological catastrophe.

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<sup>18</sup> For a further explanation of the technical composition see Ovetz, 2020, pp. 1-39.

<sup>19</sup> Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Federici, April 1975.

<sup>21</sup> Angry Workers of the World, March 23, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Premack, April 29, 2020.

Similarly, while the disruptive power of workers in logistics is better recognized, here unions and the left have mostly abandoned or failed to make much inroads organizing workers. That hasn't stopped Amazon/Whole Foods, Instacart, Shipt,<sup>23</sup> and other logistics workers from disrupting the global supply chain not only in the US but numerous other countries hit by the pandemic,<sup>24</sup> such as in Italy where widespread wildcat strikes in March effectively triggered a general strike against a deal made by the big three unions and the state<sup>25</sup> to keep the factories open.

As capital relies ever more on managing a global “just in time” supply chain through the use of algorithmic data management,<sup>26</sup> these relative small wildcat strikes have temporarily tipped these global corporate giants off balance. These multinationals initially responded by raising wages and making empty promises to supply safety equipment, extending unprecedented paid leave, offering minimum income cash subsidies, and firing key organizers like Amazon warehouse worker Chris Smalls<sup>27</sup> in New York City. As Kim Moody has aptly put it, this is “workers’ just-in-time moment.”<sup>28</sup> This crisis for humanity is simultaneously a crisis of rupture for capitalism.

### **Disruptive Power and the Circulation of Struggle**

The simultaneous eruption of wildcat strikes in numerous countries in mostly unorganized industrial sectors offers another key lesson. In this way, without any top down central coordination by leftist parties or corporate unions, the working class has become an international “class for itself,” to use Marx’s term,<sup>29</sup> for the time since the 1960s. Before the 1960s, the working class also exhibited itself as international during the waves of wildcat strikes, workers councils, general strikes, and revolutionary insurrections in the late 1910s<sup>30</sup> and the 1930s.

As news of each local wildcat strike instantaneously circulates, other workers become inspired and launch their strike elsewhere. Like the children’s arcade game “whack a mole,” the global working class is popping up in one place and as capital and the state seek to whack it back down, pops up simultaneously in numerous places all along both up- and down-stream of the now fraying global supply chain.

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<sup>23</sup> Shipt Shoppers, April 6, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> While some Amazon workers are unionized in France, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Spain, none have yet to make inroads in the US which is telling considering the number of self-organized wildcat strikes in both Amazon warehouses and Whole Foods stores.

<sup>25</sup> In Italy, the independent SI COBAS union threatened to break this no strike pledge. See Luzzi, n.d.. Strikes in many other countries have been reported by [Feverstruggle.net](https://feverstruggle.net).

<sup>26</sup> Cant, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Smalls, April 2, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Moody, April 15, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Marx, 1847.

<sup>30</sup> Ovetz, 2019.

These struggles offer the most significant possibility of the global working class recomposing its power in nearly two generations. To do so it will not only need to circulate but also become explicitly coordinated, prepared for the predictable and inevitable response by capital and the state to control, coopt, diffuse, manage, redirect, and repress each separate struggle.<sup>31</sup> For capital and the state's strategy to prevail it will require quarantining each struggle off from one another in the same way as those who are capable of doing so are quarantining off from one another to dampen the contagious spread of the virus.

While others organize and strike, we need to study and be prepared for emerging strategies of capital and the state for dampening the circulation of these struggles with the same intensity it seeks to dampen the spread of COVID-19. Here we have to prepare for the role unions tied to capital and the state will seek to play in attempting to dampen and diffuse self-organized workers. We have seen this not only in Italy but early in the pandemic when unionized Kroger supermarket workers took a temporary \$2 pay bump, paid sick leave, and vague promises of meager assurances of safety measures to stay at work.<sup>32</sup>

In the three CARES Act pandemic bills<sup>33</sup> signed into law in March we also have the meager \$1,200 to \$1,700 cash bribes to US taxpayers, 133% increase in unemployment benefits, which were also temporarily extended to precarious platform "gig" workers, and the first ever 2 weeks of paid sick leave, and 12 weeks of family or medical leave covering about 85 percent of workers.<sup>34</sup> These policies are intended to dampen demands of workers who otherwise might engage in disruptive class struggle. Federal loans even paid a large portion of salaries for employers do not lay off more than 10 percent of their workers at least until funds stopped being distributed by June. Much of this money turned out to have been paid mostly to large corporations who still laid off workers. The California governor even spent \$125 million in cash aid to undocumented immigrant workers,<sup>35</sup> demonstrating that even in the shadows these workers hold incredible leverage to disrupt production. In a crisis, capital and the state are willing to resort to temporary "universal basic income," an idea that originated in US libertarian think tanks as a way to gut social democratic social wages, shrink government employment, and attack public sector unions.

These Keynesian stop gap measures pale in contrast alongside massive trillions of dollars of insurance to corporations, investors and banks included in the pandemic laws.<sup>36</sup> These are intended to shore up corporate balance sheets in the face of the undeclared consumption strike by workers and their families who refuse to spend on anything but critical necessities. These should be ac-

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<sup>31</sup> Ovetz, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> CBS 19, April 2, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Applebaum and Fremstad, March 26, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Long, March 17, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Ho, April 15, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Appelbaum and Fremstad, March 6, 2020.

knowledge as capital and the state resorting to nationalization of both the financial and production sectors by subsidizing companies operating expenses in exchange for maintaining employment of their workers. Similar levels of aid to the states and local governments was missing in order to accelerate the shrinkage of the public sector following the crisis as tax revenues collapse and austerity follow. Unlike several EU countries that are paying substantial portions of workers salaries directly to workers, the US is sending trillions of dollars directly to corporations while extending only meager temporary cash aid and paid leave to workers.

Caution is called for when employer offer temporary family/sick leave, reduced hours, temporary pay, and minor alterations in working conditions in response to demands for safety precaution and equipment during the closures. These will be offered as a condition for increasing use of surveillance, speed ups, and lengthening the work day—all of which are already being reported by those working remotely at home. Federal bailouts described above will give corporations breathing room to launch a counter-attack by extending the crisis further beyond the pandemic to extract further alterations in the relations of production, wage and benefit cuts, outsourcing, and automation.

### **Shunned Like the Plague: The Struggle is Against Work**

The wildcat strikes wave showed how workers simultaneously struggle for higher pay and safer working conditions at the same time they are struggling against work. If Karl Marx famously observed, “labor is shunned like the plague,”<sup>37</sup> today work is refused for literally being the vector spreading a plague. Reproductive and logistics workers are refusing to do work that degrades their humanity by making them sacrificial slaughter to the virus in exchange for keeping capitalism going even as it is in free fall.

But more importantly, these workers are refusing to do work, the same dangerous exploitative work most are forced into for the lack of other means to survive and despite the destruction it inflicts on the planet. As useful, meaningful work at a wage level that allows one some of the comforts of life continues to evaporate the refusal of available work will be further shunned like the plague. Even as unemployment skyrockets with the number filing for unemployment shooting up 600 percent in the first week, doubling in the second, and totaling 22 million in the first four weeks,<sup>38</sup> workers are refusing work even as starvation looms. The June and July nationwide nurses strike at the largest for profit hospital chain over the lack of protective equipment and staffing demonstrates that this refusal continues.<sup>39</sup>

This struggle has demonstrated the need to moves the struggle against work<sup>40</sup> to the center of our organizing. There are so many other things people would rather be doing than work, a desire we almost all share regardless of what differences keep us divided. As capital has sought for the past forty years to raise productivity and intensity of work through a new technical composition, the

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<sup>37</sup> Marx, 1844, p. 274.

<sup>38</sup> Rainey and Forgey, April 9, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Sainato, June 23, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Cleaver, 2019.



struggle for less, not merely better paying, work has been missing entirely from our response. The refusal of work during the pandemic has become the refusal to work for the pandemic of capitalism.

The danger to capital and the state (what Marx and Engels called its “central committee”) from the refusal of work shows itself in the rapidity to which states have engaged in fiscal pump priming by spending trillions of dollars, a variation on Brazil’s fiscal stimulus and anti-poverty policy *Bolsa Família*, which puts cash into peoples’ hands to spend to artificially keep those that still have work, working, has returned to the US which abolished its own version, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, during the Clinton years. This is not simply a demonstration of the ease in which wealth can be redistributed or ecological and social problems solved, both futile demands of the loyal opposition. Rather, it now demonstrates to reproductive workers—considered among the most powerless until March—of how quickly they can win less work and more pay by striking. No corporate foundation funded NGO social movement mobilization has managed to extract even a minuscule fraction of what has poured out in fiscal spending since March. The right wing populist US Trump administration will forever be remembered for temporarily using fiscal policy in an unprecedented level to extend cash aid to the poor, unemployed, starving, and precarious platform workers and their families. If he returns to fiscal spending as a strategy to get re-elected which currently seems unlikely by July, Trump may ironically become the Republicans Franklin D. Roosevelt, saving capitalism by using state socialist strategies.

On the other side, it also raises warnings for what will follow once the epic dangers fade and billions return to work. Capital and the state will seek to be repaid through even deeper cuts, austerity, privatization, layoffs, repression, intensified algorithmic management regimes, precarization, and new enclosures of the public sector such as moving entire public education systems to corporate online conferencing platforms.

### **The Workers’ Shock**

Naomi Klein has garnered much deserved attention for demonstrating how capital and the state use shocks like the pandemic to shift power even more in its favor.<sup>41</sup> During such crises, Klein continues to remind us today, capital carries out its previously blocked plans and strategies to impose what David Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession,”<sup>42</sup> a term so widely used it is entirely forgotten that Marx already documented it in Part 8, “So-called Primitive Accumulation,” in *Capital*, Volume I published in 1867.<sup>43</sup> It’s easy to forget Marx when the solution presented by Klein and others is to wishfully return to the Keynesianism of the Green New (capitalist) Deal.

What Klein and many other social democrats have failed to recognize is that workers also have the ability to inflict shocks too—through self-organized unmanaged strikes. Such working class

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<sup>41</sup> Klein now calls it “corona capitalism,” March 16, 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Harvey, 2005, pp. 157-169.

<sup>43</sup> Marx, 1867, pp. 873-876.

inflicted global shocks come infrequently—1848, 1871, 1877, 1894, 1917-21, 1932-38, 1945-46, 1960-70s—and have now returned.

To understand these struggles it is necessary to assess how worker organizing has managed to adapt to and devise new tactics and strategies to contest and rupture the current global organization of capital, the technical composition. Understanding how reproductive labor has self-organized demonstrates both possibilities and risks. Reproductive workers have found new tactics and strategies to organize and disrupt the reproduction of labor power to keep capitalism functioning during the pandemic. If they are defeated, capital will be unrestrained in further efforts to impose the strategy of platform work to other sectors such as education.

We are already seeing the suspension of a wide range of marginally beneficial federal regulations and oversight, policies that resulted from previous waves of worker struggles. All union elections have been suspended by the National Labor Relations Board, Occupational Safety and Health Administration has stopped enforcing all workplace safety regulations,<sup>44</sup> clean air and water rules have been revoked and left unenforced by the Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Railroad Administration has waived workers safety rules, and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration has waived rules limiting work hours, to name a few.<sup>45</sup>

Education has long been the terrain of struggle against the imposition of a new technical composition of capital. Workers have managed to respond with rigidity, impeding these plans by fighting charter schools in K-12, on-line education in higher education, and the continuing neoliberal attacks most vividly seen in the wave of wildcat strike waves in mostly Republican controlled states as well the colony of Puerto Rico in 2018-19.

This means that crisis has allowed the rapid ushering in new strategies for breaking recent waves of worker organizing. Platform workers have been folded into the unemployment insurance program thereby placing the increasingly organized and unruly sector increasing under state management. Borrowing from the platform sector, the state has succeeded imposing further algorithmic data management tools such as Zoom on public and private school teachers, language schools, and college and university faculty on top of recent forced introductions of Learning Management Systems and quantitative performance assessment systems.<sup>46</sup> Both strategies may prove to be successful in tempering the rapid growth of organizing, unionization, and wildcat strikes in both sectors thereby ushering in a new technical composition of educational capital.

## **A New Lizard Talk**

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<sup>44</sup> Strikewave has tracked the declining number of OSHA reports at <https://www.thestrikeywave.com/osha-complaint-map>. See also Grabell, Yeung, and Jameel, April 16, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Moody, April 8, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Estimates are that 1.57 billion children (91.3% of all learners) and 63 million teachers in 188 countries are isolated at home and is 372 million students attending 90,000 schools in 22 countries are now holding classes on Zoom or other on line conferencing software. (Education International, 2020; and Lieberman, 2020)

Self-isolation and the massive decline in wages and the resulting collapse in production and reproduction has accelerated the search for a new technical composition of capital with the intention of extracting even more work. As Cleaver reminds us in *33 Lessons on Capital*,<sup>47</sup>

capitalists introduce machinery not only to raise productivity...but also to increase work. Machines set the rhythm of work, so by speeding them up the capitalists can force the workers who work with them to work faster, and thus harder (and sometimes longer). With machines running continuously, workers find it difficult to create 'pores' of free time in the working day. (329-330)

The pandemic has demonstrated two types of mortal vulnerability The global human population is vulnerable to the myriad plagues of terror worsened by the climate catastrophe caused by rapacious capitalism. So too has it demonstrated the vulnerabilities of global capitalism to a re-composed global working class.

Around the world many are documenting and assessing this newly re-composed working class power and working to circulate it. Its success holds out the greatest promise for reorganizing the planet to reverse the five centuries of damage caused by the pandemic of capitalism. Just as the plagues of the 14th to 17th centuries harkened the end of feudalism in Europe, and the plague of 1918 heralded the working class as a threat to capitalism, the COVID-19 pandemic may unleash a new cycle of class struggle that will at long last write the obituary for capitalism in this century.

### **About the Author**

Robert is a precarious university lecturer and the author of *When Workers Shot Back: Class Conflict from 1877 to 1921* (Haymarket 2019) and *Workers' Inquiry and Global Class Struggle: Tactics, Strategies, Objectives* (forthcoming from Pluto Press, January 2021). His writings can be found at: <https://sjsu.academia.edu/RobertOvetzPhD>. Follow Robert @OvetzRobert

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<sup>47</sup> Cleaver, 2019.

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