

COVID-19: Time to Consider Certain Alternatives

by Phillip W. Weiss

The COVID-19 crisis forces us to ask certain questions: What kind of society are we that can expel tens of millions of people from the workforce? What kind of society are we that can play fast and loose with our most important resource, human beings? What kind of society are we that can lock out people from a workplace?

A lockout is one of the cruelest forms of rejection. Its message is clear: YOU ARE NOT WANTED. YOU ARE NO GOOD. YOU ARE WORTHLESS. YOU DESERVE NO CONSIDERATION. YOU ARE NOT WORTHY OF PROTECTION. To expel a worker from the workplace, except for legitimate cause, is to tell a worker that he or she is NOTHING. It is bad enough when this happens to one worker, but when it happens to FORTY-ONE MILLION workers, that gives cause for concern.

Every person is entitled to fair and equitable treatment under the law. To eliminate a job or shut down an entire industry as a matter of public policy or political expediency is unfair and open to abuse. A political group may use a plausible pretext, for instance, a pandemic, as an opportunity to settle old political scores. In the long run, no one benefits. The short-term political gains are quickly outweighed by the long-term social and economic damage done to the society. Even if fairness is restored to the decision-making process, that alone may not guarantee a quick or complete recovery. In the case of the

COVID-19 crisis, for those who have income and can afford to enjoy the reduced levels of noise, traffic and pollution resulting from the shutdown of the economy, the decision to shut down the economy may seem to be a prudent decision. For many others, however, the need for steady income far outweighs other considerations.

This need for steady income raises another question: can our society tolerate a continuation of an economic system that is prone to volatility? By now it is obvious that the private sector alone cannot provide a stable economy. There is concern that several major industries, including airlines, auto, construction, hotels, banking, oil and gas, restaurant and food service, and sports, are at risk of collapsing.

We cannot afford to let these industries fail. The consequences would be catastrophic. Instead of government bailouts, which are emergency stop-gap measures to keep an industry afloat, what is needed is a new form of economic joint management that will combine the resources of the private sector and government to ensure the unimpeded operation of all strategic industries for the long-term and which would eliminate the need for bailouts. This new form of industrial management would be neither efficient nor cheap but would keep these major industries functioning and thereby ensure long-term economic stability. The alternative is to do nothing, keep things as they are, experience more insecurity and uncertainty, and wait for the next crisis. The choice is ours; the choice is YOURS.

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