

COVID-19, vaccines, vaccine passports and proletarian politics

1) The situation of the working class across the world has only got worse since the Covid-19 pandemic started. Governments of the most advanced countries have put in place emergency policies aiming, first of all, at avoiding the uncontrolled unravelling of the capitalist social relation, the dislocation of civil society, and above all a long paralysis of the social process of production. The first plans put in place made the state the ultimate guarantor of the capitalist system. By its coordinated actions, it has ensured the solvency of companies, the continuation of jobs by taking direct charge of a large part of total wages. Finally, it sustains its own debt by the activation of guarantees provided by the respective central banks, which are unprecedented in peace time. Based on the increasing availability of vaccines in the central countries of capital, which makes it possible to achieve sufficient herd immunity in the more or less short-term, since summer 2020 these states have progressively organised to get out of this transitional phase. They have begun, not without conflicts, a major restructuring of economic and social formations. The “health first” of the initial period gives way to the “economy first” of the present phase, including at the price of a significant number of additional infections and deaths. The process of restructuring will be spread over several years and aims at relaunching enlarged capital accumulation supported by public debt, itself “covered” by massive purchases of its titles by the corresponding central banks. The proletariat in the nerve centres of global capitalism is silent and its rare defensive struggles are very weak. Beside these, agitations and inter-classist rebellions under the sign of reaction and the demand for plebiscitary democracy flourish in a manner comparable to those of the *Gilets jaunes*¹.

2) In the countries of the second and third circles of the capitalist mode of production, the

so-called emerging nations and, above all, the poorest countries on the extreme periphery, these state responses have hardly been adopted at all from lack of means. Only the international institutions of the world capitalist order (essentially the IMF and the World Bank) are just about keeping a large part of them afloat by means of non-repayable loans provided sparingly. In many countries, the pandemic has had a profound affect and has generated a growing and long lasting social and political instability. It is an instability which in some countries in this category preceded the outbreak of the health crisis and has been fed by it. There are plenty of examples, from Colombia to Lebanon, from Algeria to Iran, from Tunisia to Cuba, from Thailand to Burma, to take just a handful. These politically confused movements are the visible expression of accelerated class polarisation in a context where the proletariat does not impose its hegemony, because the proletariat itself is on the defensive and, consequently, has not managed to take up the fight for its own interests in the framework of the political class struggle. The movements join together the revolt against the worsening of the conditions of life and work of the poorest with that against the policies of their states in the face of a surge in the pandemic.

3) Into this context which we have very briefly summarised, is inserted the debate on vaccination and methods of health surveillance that states have put in place. While in the countries on the periphery of capitalism, the demand for widespread access to vaccines is getting underway, as in Tunisia and Cuba, in the stronger countries of capitalism some sections of the population with disparate interests and class origins collectively flaunt the refusal of vaccination and/or vaccine passports. The arguments put forward for rejecting vaccination have one thing in common: the calling into question of not just the capitalist use of science but science itself. The experimental method, the search for a closer and closer verifiable approximation to reality, the controlled integration of risks associated with that search, are rejected out of hand. Sometimes they claim that the vaccines are still in an experimental phase (but which ones are not?). Sometimes they shout about the big ge-

¹ See: “GILETS JAUNES: the first attempts at mobilising “the people” for a strong state against the proletariat”, <https://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Leaflets/BLT1812ENvF.pdf>

netic manipulation carried out by “Big Pharma”, sometimes they announce quite simply that the virus is a “cold” of high intensity. Against these idle-brained notions, it’s enough to remember that since vaccination in the most capitalistically developed countries has taken off, almost all hospitalisations for Covid-19 have involved non-vaccinated people. The absence of any critical materialist analysis of the pandemic and its effects on accumulation certainly does not help the understanding that capitalism up to a certain point (defined by the needs proper to accumulation) needs a workforce which is numerous, active and sufficiently healthy for the present social relations to be perpetuated.

4) Different is in part (and only in part) the reasoning on health certifications and their use by the state and capital. In March 2020, we wrote: *“From now on, the management of civil society is more and more about the state of exception, the use of all sorts of shocks (financial, geopolitical, health-related, demographic etc.) to reinforce the hold and the “verticalisation” of the state. It is a matter therefore of a political management par excellence, leading to a general militarisation founded on fear and the insistent demand for protection coming out of civil societies which are less and less conflictual.”*². And also: *“workers, proletarians, are handed over to statist and nationalist propaganda: the strong state, protector of all classes. The perpetuation of methods of control and the militarisation of territory and labour inherited from 9/11 and then the Islamist attacks in Europe is no longer questioned. On the contrary, the arsenal of security resources will grow with extended police controls, the banning of gatherings (justified so far by the lack of a vaccine, but how long will it remain in force?), the spread of cameras in cities and the militarisation of health services, along with so-called public services in general.”*³. It is therefore obvious that even vaccine passports are used as an element of discipline. The threat of being sacked or not receiving wages for the non-vaccinated is certainly real and enables the bosses and the state-boss to reinforce their command over the workforce. On the other hand, we must not forget that whether people work on an assembly line or in an “open space” next to a workmate who does not want to be vaccinated this is something that increases the danger, including for those who are vaccinated, of becoming in their turn, and un-

² See: “Pandemics, nation-states and capital”, <https://mouvement-communiste.com/documents/MC/Leaflets/BLT2003ENvF.pdf>

³ *Ibidem*.

willingly, spreaders of the virus. Taking into account the desire of most wage earners to protect themselves with the only instrument which has shown itself to be effective against the pandemic is just as important for the partisans of the proletarian cause.

5) As for the supposed “health dictatorship” which follows from vaccine passports, it is quite simply an argument which serves to prolong the pandemic, which hits the poor hardest of all⁴. The holders of the idea that there is a “health dictatorship” because of the dreaded obligation to show a vaccination certificate in enclosed spaces, on transport and in workplaces, forget that vaccine certification is much less “intrusive” than the requirement for identity papers, a Social Security card or any other document which says a lot more about us than a QR code associated with a name. And let’s not even talk about the deepening social control exercised by the world of social media and the internet, by the diffusion of cameras in cities, by mobile phones, by traceable transport tickets, credit cards etc. A proletarian policy on the details of the control of health certification must dissociate itself from identity control, a real major tool of social command by the state, which strangely does not arouse the slightest protest from the opponents of vaccine passports. Along similar lines, supporting the fight for access to vaccination on the largest scale (those without papers and migrants first of all), internationally (only 2% of the population of the poorest countries have access to a vaccine⁵) and quickly, and making workplaces secure from a health point of

⁴ According to the 2021 report of the World Food Programme of the United Nations, some 118 million additional people, relative to 2019, could have been affected by famine in 2020 due to the economic consequences of the pandemic, making an estimated total of between 768 and 811 million human beings. https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000130141/download/?_ga=2.110152965.164159811.1628341041-1018212117.1628341041

⁵ “Vaccination happened along national lines. While more than 50% of the population in numerous advanced countries have been vaccinated, the rate of vaccination in the rest of the world is lagging behind and a substantial coverage coverage is only expected after a few months”. The study established that “a distribution of vaccines to individuals at risk in every country after a substantial portion of the population in countries with surpluses have been vaccinated” could “save from 400 to 800,000 lives between June and December 2021, thanks to early sharing of surplus vaccines between countries”. Mehdi Benatiya Andaloussi and Antonio Spilimbergo, “How many lives could be saved through the early sharing of vaccines globally?”, July 2021 in https://cepr.org/active/publications/discussion_papers/dp.php?dpno=16372

view, by imposing the strictest criteria for preservation of workers' health, similarly with public transport, meeting places etc., is a duty for communists⁶.

6) The association of the refusal of vaccine passports with the defence of "freedom" is in the end a serious conceptual error which pushes those who defend it into the arms of the Extreme Right. And let's not forget that in practice it means to call for the right to infect others. The "squabble" between the vaccinated and unvaccinated poor has become one more factor of division within the class which the ruling classes benefit from. It's a division which nevertheless has a very real foundation. As Marx explains in his text *On the Jewish question*, written in 1843, "The state is the intermediary between man and man's freedom" under capitalism. And the human being only exists for capital and its defenders as an isolated citizen whose "rights" are mediated by the state. The state defines freedom as essentially individual and its contours as traced by that of other isolated citizens. "Liberty, therefore, is the right to do everything that harms no one else. The limits within which anyone can act without harming someone else are defined by law, just as the boundary between two fields is determined by a boundary post. It is a question of the liberty of man as an isolated monad, withdrawn into himself" (*ibidem*). It is the very basis of the mistrust and potential opposition of human beings towards each other. "But, the right of man to liberty is based not on the association of man with man, but on the separation of man from man. It is the right of this separation, the right of the restricted individual, withdrawn into himself" (*idem*). The vision of modern communism is completely different: "We are not communists who want to annihilate individual freedom and make the world into a giant barracks or workshop. In truth there are communists who are comfortable with that and who deny and want to suppress individual freedom which, in their view, bars the road to harmony. But

⁶ In this connection we suggest reading a short text in Italian and English by Donatella Di Cesare, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Rome who is responding to the conspiracist ideas of his Italian peers Massimo Cacciari (close to the Democratic Party, the final incarnation of the Stalinist PCI) and Giorgio Agamben (an ideologue referenced by some sections of the ultraleft). In Italian: https://espresso.repubblica.it/opinioni/2021/07/27/news/di_cesare_risponde_a_cacciari_e_agamben_sul_green_pass-311928702/ and in English: <https://medium.com/contrahistorical/dear-agamben-dear-cacciari-fadc2e512f09>

⁷ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/>

we don't want to purchase equality at the price of liberty. We are convinced, and we will try to prove in our following editions, that in any society individual freedom can only be at its greatest in one which is founded on community"⁸. Karl Schapper⁹, *Kommunistische Zeitschrift* no. 1¹⁰, September 1847.

7) The class enemy never stops talking about the necessity to rely on the community to push certain sections of the population to get vaccinated. But the community which the dominant classes speak about is theirs, not that of the social individual who is freed from submission to commodities, money and the state. The community demanded by communists on the other hand is that of "Free individuality, based on the universal development of individuals and on their subordination of their communal, social productivity as their social wealth" (Marx, *Grundrisse* 1¹¹). Community freed from all dependence of the individual isolated from other individuals contain thus the beginning of a new individuality which decisively turns it back on the isolated citizen and their exclusive, discriminatory "freedom". "The higher development of individuality is thus only achieved by a historical process during which individuals are sacrificed"; Karl Marx *Theories of Surplus Value*, 1861-1863¹². And again: "Political emancipation is the reduction of man, on the one hand, to a member of civil society, to an egoistic, independent individual, and, on the other hand, to a citizen, a juridical person. Only when the real, individual man re-absorbs in himself the abstract citizen, and as an individual human being has become a species-being in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his

⁸ Here the meaning of the concept of community must not be confused with that of the representatives of the dominant classes for whom community is synonymous with the society of capital where exploited and exploiters cohabit for the good of valorisation. In 1847, the perspective of a permanent revolution led by the proletariat aiming at the "Red Republic" by going beyond the democratic revolution was very real. The communists of that time worked for that. Their reference to community was clearly within that framework.

⁹ Karl Schapper (Weinbach, 1812- London, 1870) was a member of the Communist League. He was part of the split in the League led by Willich, whose fraction opposed Marx and Engels, but he made up with them in 1856. In 1865, Schapper was a member of the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association (that is, the First International).

¹⁰ Karl Marx *Œuvres Tome IV, Politique* 1 Pléiade p 993, our translation.

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy* ("Grundrisse"), II. The Chapter on Money, [The Origin and Essence of Money].

¹² Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, Chapter 9: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value/ch09.htm>

particular situation, only when man has recognized and organized his "own powers" as social powers, and, consequently, no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of political power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished." Marx *On the Jewish question*, 1843.

8) Thus, intervening in a dispute completely internal to capitalist society between the freedom of the vaccinated and that of the non-vaccinated means completely abandoning the class terrain where communists situate themselves. If the working class was able to express its political autonomy, it would itself take on the task of protecting its members from the pandemic by rejecting state control, by adopting and applying itself all the measures which are necessary. Exactly as it has known how to do in other circumstances and epochs to defend a decent collective life in working class neighbourhoods by chasing out the dealers selling death, the slum landlords and the various figures of command deployed by the state. But that is not what is happening today. That is why it is necessary to ceaselessly criticise the "logic" of the "anti-vaxxers" and the "rebels" against vaccine passports when this rebellion transforms itself into an innate "right" of the "sovereign individual", of the isolated individual who doesn't care about the health of other people. This is the "sovereign individual" who elsewhere is always ready to submit more than ever to the first "strong man" who comes along, to throw themselves with head bowed into demands for a plebiscitary democracy, the first step towards all sorts of authoritarian and fascistic regimes. Fear is also the best friend of reaction, conspiracy theories and every kind of authoritarian regression. It is fear, that of the effects of vaccines, which also takes hold of some proletarians, the direct consequence of the prolonged retreat of class struggle and the loss of confidence in collective autonomous initiative – and consequently the inability to impose a working class health policy separate from that of the state. The recent successes of the "anti-vax" and anti-vaccine passport demos are founded on blind panic, a sentiment which is the exact opposite of that which animates the revolutionary proletariat: the reasoned hope for a different, better future. These demonstrations in the name of "freedom" are totally indifferent to the "social question" and find in the traditional petty bourgeoisie (restaurant owners, café owners, small bosses and artisans, the self-employed) their most hardened battalions, but there are also, unfortunately, some sections of the proletariat, including health

workers. The petty bourgeoisie menaced by capitalist development does not hesitate to impose the worst oppression on the proletarians it employs. In the same way as the demos by the *Gilets jaunes* and similar, these actions must be treated as what they are: the advanced guard of proto-fascism, attempts to constitute a bloc of social reaction ready to confront the proletariat whenever it takes the path of social revolution.

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