

# Coronavirus and the Crisis of African American Human Rights

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*Pushing workers back to work and attempting to “normalize” the economy was the growing consensus among the capitalist class, not just Trump.*

*“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and **medical care** and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.” (Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights — emphasis added)*

*“We have to make the world see that the problem that we’re confronted with is a problem for humanity. It’s not a Negro problem; it’s not an American problem. You and I have to make it a world problem, make the world aware that there’ll be no peace on this earth as long as our human rights are being violated in America. (Malcolm X)*

With the overwhelming evidence that the capitalist system is fundamentally antithetical to the realization of human rights, including what should be an elementary right — access to healthcare — the presidency of Donald J. Trump has been a godsend for the capitalist rulers.

The obsessive focus on Trump the person, his style, his theatrics, the idea that he represents an aberration, an existential threat, allows for the ongoing structural violence embedded in the DNA of racialized capitalism to hide in plain sight.

But for the Black working class and poor it is suicidal to embrace this illusion. Maintaining a clear understanding of our situation, unimpeded by illusions and ideological mystifications, has always been a tool we used to ensure our survival before the ideological swing to the right over the last decade and a half.

White “America” pretends once again to be surprised by the emerging facts that African Americans are disproportionately bearing the brunt of the coronavirus assault. But why should anyone be surprised? African Americans make up a disproportionate number of the 87 million people in the U.S. who are under-insured or lack health insurance, who occupy the lowest paid jobs, jobs today deemed “essential.” It is in our communities where the toxic waste dumps are located, the petroleum processing companies, the hog farms, garbage dumps, the buildings with lead paint and asbestos, and the highways pumping out millions of tons of pollution every day.



We declare our right on this earth to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary.

(Malcolm X)

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And it is in our communities that, before gentrification, over the last 40 years, governments under the pressure of neoliberal austerity cut budgets and services. It was in our communities, both urban and rural, where the hospitals and clinics were closed, the sewer and sanitation deteriorated and something as basic to life as water was commodified, contaminated and often cut off.

Trump didn't create these conditions. The higher rates of hypertension, asthma, and diabetes that ravage the health of our people, and almost ensure a death sentence if Black people contract coronavirus, were not created by Trump over the last three years. These conditions are the result of the cold, hard logic of environmental racism fueled by the profit motive that creates disposable people and communities.

The denial of the human right to health to African Americans, particularly to African workers and the poor, has been a permanent feature of the gross human rights violations that our people have experienced over the decades and centuries in this white supremacist settler-colonial state.

The human right to health is not the right to be healthy or the right to health care, but a more complex and nuanced understanding of the right to health. The enjoyment of this human right is determinate on the availability of all of the other human rights and collective services necessary to create and protect the conditions in which people can lead a healthy life — the right to housing, education, food, a clean environment, paid sick leave, parental leave, leisure and water, to name a few.

Basic goods and rights are denied by capitalism.

It is, therefore, a reactionary, indeed counterrevolutionary position to engage in the politics of diversion by focusing on Donald Trump. When Trump floated the trial balloon of pushing workers back to work by Easter, leftists who should have known better reduced this decision to the heartless agenda of Trump when the fact was that pushing workers back to work and attempting to “normalize” the economic situation was the growing consensus among the capitalist class represented by opinions published in the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*, and by positions taken by members of the banking industry.

Trump and capitalist rulers want to return to “normal,” but for the African working class and poor who have not even “recovered” from the collapse of economy in 2007-2008, normal is a one-sided race and class war that degrades, dehumanizes and destroys Black life.

The systemic conditions of poverty, unemployment and underemployment, mass incarceration, police killings, gentrification, infant and maternal mortality have always been comparable to those of nations in the global South, but now, the pre-mature death from coronavirus should reveal to all, except to the most dishonest, that the real enemy is this racist, capitalist/imperialist system. — what we refer to as the Pan-European colonial/capitalist white supremacist patriarchy.

If Black lives really matter, it is obvious that we are the ones that must make them matter. It must have been made clear by now that this system of racialized capitalist domination and imperialist aggression against non-European people, from the African continent to Venezuela, will not be defeated by online petitions, webinars and polite appeals to the neoliberal criminals who run the Democratic Party.

We are at war.

We did ask for this war. We want peace. We want our human rights. But we are not pathological. We know that the very way in which this system is organized, that is, its essence, is organized to ensure our spiritual, psychological and physical death. Therefore, we have no other choice but to fight for our human rights.

That realization and understanding must inform our strategies and the tactics we employ, from participating in the electoral system and strike actions in response to the coronavirus to building dual power structures that allow us to exercise community self-determination and power that is grounded in our class interests and independence.

The enemy will come to understand that we will not quietly die. We will not beg their system to recognize its unfairness, nor will we call for the enemy system to somehow “repair” us – its’ victims.

No, we must come to the painful, and for some scary, conclusion that the system that destroys us and the majority of humanity but be fought and defeated. This is what distinguishes the [People\(s\)-Centered Human Rights \(PCHRs\)](#) tradition that emerges from the Black radical human rights tradition, from the system’s state-centered, legalistic, liberal counterpart.

PCHRs rejects the liberal colonial/capitalist conception of human rights. It asserts that oppressed peoples cannot afford the fiction of a non-political, objective concept of human rights, which, beneath the surface of universality, reaffirms individualism, and rationalizes market capitalism and white supremacist patriarchy. For the African working class and poor, the fight for human rights is a life-or-death struggle, with the future of our communities and peoples at stake.

We again turn to Malcolm and the [radical Black human rights tradition](#). Malcolm counsels us that one must be ready to pay the price required to experience full dignity as a person and as members of a self-determining people.

And what is that price?

“The price to make others respect your human rights is death. You have to be ready to die.... It’s time for you and me now to let the world know how peaceful we are, how well-meaning we are, how law-abiding we wish to be. But at the same time, we have to let the same world know we’ll blow their world sky-high

if we're not respected and recognized and treated the same as other human beings are treated."

There was never a social contract that involved Africans in the U.S. — only a racial contract among the white rulers to maintain white minority ruling class power. That commitment translated into the systematic, brutal violations of the human rights of Africans.

We are clear. Trump is a useful idiot for the neoliberal forces who are in power. Our job is to de-mystify the structure of the capitalist dictatorship so that our targets are clear and we can aim true.

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