

COVID-19 in Detroit: A Case Study in Resilience and Resistance

People respond to the pandemic while seeking a secure path forward

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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Detroit has been disproportionately impacted by the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in early-to-mid- March.

Almost no preparation by the municipal administration was made in advance of such a tremendous healthcare and subsequent social crises.

The majority of the African American population in the city, constituting nearly 80% of the overall residents, is working class. There are large numbers of people living and working without adequate health insurance. Several thousand households do not have running water in their dwellings. Environmental degradation due to industrial production and waste mismanagement is linked to the proliferation of respiratory illnesses.

These living and working conditions cannot be excluded from any assessment of the rate of infections and deaths since the advent of COVID-19 in the city and the state of Michigan. These same factors are also relevant in other major urban areas throughout the United States.

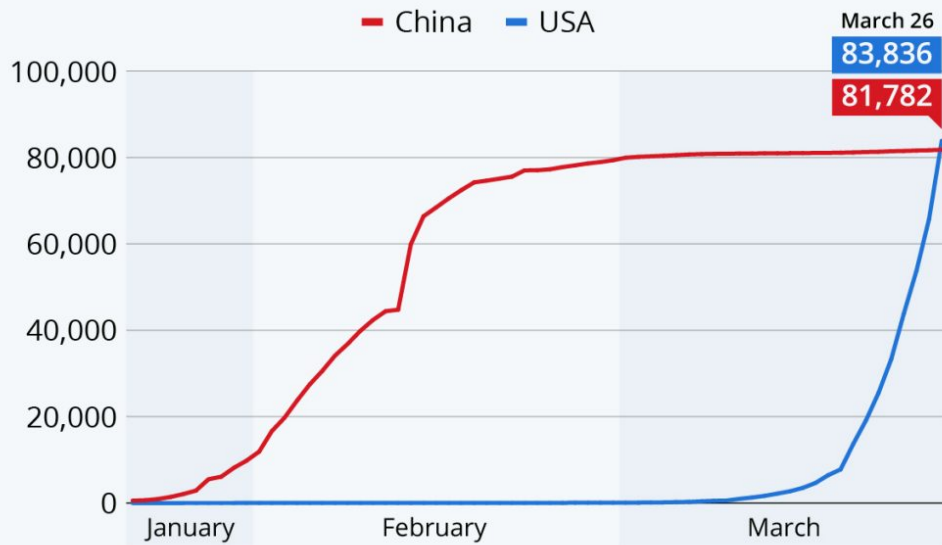
Moreover, the U.S., with the largest capitalist economy in the world, is now the epicenter of the worst pandemic to inflict North America and Western Europe in over a century. The current administration of President Donald Trump had ridiculed the notion of a potential pandemic and utilized racism in an attempt to stigmatize the People's Republic of China. Daily White House briefings led by Trump and Vice President Michael Pence often degenerated into denunciations of China along with the World Health Organization (WHO), to which the administration suspended funding amid an international medical emergency.

Trump has accused the WHO of being biased in favor of Beijing. He also falsely asserted that the Geneva-based United Nations affiliated agency did not inform the U.S. of the severity of COVID-19 infection rates. However, these allegations have been discredited by both China and the WHO. Information on the character of the virus and data related to its spread and effect on patients was widely shared with the international community beginning in late 2019 and early 2020.

The accusations made against China cannot conceal the hard facts that the U.S. has 1,193,813 COVID-19 cases and 70,802 deaths. With pressure by the capitalist ruling class to "reopen" the economy, therefore, forcing people back to work in the remaining jobs and businesses, without an organized resistance movement, it is inevitable that there will be another surge in infections and deaths.

U.S. Surges Past China in COVID-19 Cases

Total confirmed COVID-19 cases in the United States and China (as of March 26, 2020)



Source: Johns Hopkins University



statista

COVID-19 graph showing US surpassing China in number of infections

Detroit and Michigan Rates of Infections and Deaths

As of May 7, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the state of Michigan is 43,950 and some 4,135 people have died from the illness. There has been a higher concentration of infections in larger urban and metropolitan areas around Detroit and Flint.

In Wayne County there are 17,667 cases of COVID-19. Detroit is the seat of the county with 9,566 cases and 1,147 deaths. Data on the racial identity of those infected indicate that African Americans, whom make up 14% of the state's population, are represented in 32% of the cases and 41% of the deaths.

Nonetheless, the rate of infections and deaths are declining significantly in Detroit. The majority of people appear to be abiding by the social distancing and other preventive measures guidelines. Many businesses are closed along with schools, colleges, universities, office buildings, plants, construction site, etc. in abidance to the stay-at-home orders issued by Governor Gretchen Whitmer.

Economic Toll of the Pandemic: Markets and the Masses

There have been approximately 34 million people who have filed for unemployment benefits in the U.S. within less than two months. Automotive production, service sector jobs, educational institutions and even healthcare facilities are furloughing and laying-off

employees.

In Michigan, over one million more people are jobless due to the existing crisis. The City of Detroit administration has already instituted an austerity budget for the next two fiscal years in anticipation of the drastic reduction in tax revenue fueled by long term structural unemployment.

Untold numbers of workers applying for unemployment benefits have undergone bureaucratic barriers to payment. The State websites for jobless claims are often stalled and phone calls go unanswered for hours. Others have been denied benefits for spurious reasons which are “non-monetary.” The hostile posture and character of State government in Michigan adopted as policy under the previous administration of Republican Governor Rick Snyder have not been adjusted by the Democratic successor Gretchen Whitmer.

The automotive companies are planning to phase in production beginning after May 11. These decisions come with profound risks. If there are COVID-19 outbreaks in the plants which exceed previous cases, the facilities will be forced to close down again. Moreover, with more than 34 million without employment, the demand for consumer goods will decline drastically.

Image on the right: Detroit Receiving Hospital during the COVID-19 outbreak in the city



A much nationally-championed public relations campaign suggesting that Detroit is undergoing an economic resurgence is largely based upon developments in the service and hospitality sectors. Obviously a major setback for this narrative is the closing of the casino hotels downtown which will remain shuttered for many months to come depriving the municipality of millions in tax revenue.

Many people’s healthcare coverage is linked with their jobs. As a consequence of rising unemployment and poverty, more workers and their families will be forced out of medical insurance plans furthering the burden being placed on hospitals.

Public transportation will undergo cuts in service routes while the schools have no plans to reopen anytime soon during 2020. Plans have been announced to provide lap top computers and tablets to K-12 students for the purposes of online learning.

Prior to the Great Recession of the 2000s and the subsequent imposition of Emergency Management and Bankruptcy during 2012-2014, Detroit was transformed from a majority city of homeowners to one of renters. As a direct result of the lack of legal guarantees for renters related to price controls, moratoriums on payments and the lack of available

housing for low and moderate income residents, many people are being forced out of the city center and into the suburbs, rural areas or other states. This pattern, on the ascendancy for many years, will accelerate in the coming period.

The economic imperatives of the ruling class are to force people back to work irrespective of the failure to provide safeguards from infection. We have witnessed with dismay the spread of the pandemic in the meat processing plants around the country. Even in the auto plants in Michigan, several workers died as a result of COVID-19. Those workers speaking out against the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other safety issues are routinely disciplined and terminated without due process.

Moving Forward: The Political Questions of the Period

Moratorium NOW! Coalition was formed in 2008 amid the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of 1929-1941. At that time we demanded an immediate halt to all foreclosures and evictions while fighting in the courts and on the streets to save the homes of people living in the city and the state.

Later we expanded our focus to challenging DTE Energy and their profit-making objectives which ignore the fundamental human rights of the people facing utility shut-offs and the subsequent peril associated with such measures. By 2014, when water shut-offs reached epidemic proportions as a direct result of the illegal Emergency Management regime and bankruptcy, we exposed the link between the financial institutions and the denial of tens of thousands of working people their right to water.

Today these demands remain relevant to the situation in Detroit, the state of Michigan and the U.S. as a whole. In a daily briefing from New York Governor Cuomo on May 7, he extended a moratorium on evictions for another two months in that state.

In Detroit and the state of Michigan no one should be foreclosed or evicted in this period. This same moratorium should apply to water and utility shut-offs. Rents and payments should be waved until the economic situation in the state reaches some level of stability.

These demands extend to the request for Cuban medical assistance to the people of Detroit and the U.S. The socialist orientation of Cuban healthcare methodology is much needed in a city where racism and national oppression has rendered hundreds of thousands jobless and threatened with financial ruin.

Judging from the history of resistance in Detroit, the workers and oppressed will rise to the occasion. Prior to the pandemic, there was already a rising political ferment related to housing demolition projects, tax captures and over taxation. Undoubtedly, the economic and social crisis will spark more layers of society into political action and organization.

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Author's note: The above remarks were delivered during an online public webinar sponsored by the Moratorium NOW! Coalition based in Detroit.

The event was designed to raise the demand for Cuban medical assistance in Detroit in

response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the city and the state of Michigan. Detroit and other municipalities around the state have been designated as “hot spots” due to high rates of infections and deaths.

Others participating in the program were musician and activist Sarah Torres; Lisa Valanti of the Cuba Caravan from Pittsburgh; Maureen Taylor, Michigan Welfare Rights Organization State Chair and member of Michigan Coronavirus Task Force on Racial Disparities; and Gail Walker, Executive Director, Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO) based in New York City.

Abayomi Azikiwe is the editor of Pan-African News Wire. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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