

# **“NO NEW NORMAL”**

## **By Brendan Boehning**

A simple question: is your greatest desire to return to your wage-labor job? Or do you long for the return of love, friendship, comradeship, companionship?

A follow-up: by all the evidence, what does the ruling class crave most?

We know they are the tiny minority: the corporatists, the industrialists, the bankers, the market racketeers. But they speak loudly, like the drunk at the end of the bar, and they’re making it known, unashamedly, and with as much urgency as a drunk running out of liquor, just how much they loathe every single day of potential exploitation they’ve lost.

Daily death tolls in the US and the UK are rising by the hundreds. Meanwhile, the most at-risk members of the global population – Africa, the Asian subcontinent, the Middle East, South America, refugees, prisoners, those trapped in warzones – are only just beginning to feel the pandemic’s effects; and we know that only catastrophe awaits them.

However, the elite and the heads of state who serve them clamor for a hastened end to restrictions on business and market activities. The G20 met the week of 6 April to fret over the glut of oil on the international market. *The New York Times* for 5 April quotes a Fatih Birol, Executive Director of the International Energy Agency: “Mr. Birol also said that he was worried about the fate of the global oil industry, which he called ‘one of the pillars of the global economy.’”

Could a statement of priorities be any clearer? And this just as the skies are clearing and the air becomes breathable again, with nitrous oxide levels falling drastically over Paris and Lyon, Barcelona and Madrid, Lisbon and Porto!

But not to worry: “Members of the OPEC oil cartel and its allies have agreed to withhold almost 10m barrels a day from next month after the outbreak of Covid-19 wiped out demand for fossil fuels and triggered a collapse in global oil prices” (*The Guardian*, 13 April). Problem solved then; the industry will be kept alive long enough to one day begin pumping carbon dioxide back into the atmosphere.

Already, with worldwide infections rising and death tolls mounting, certain countries, including even Italy and Spain, are moving towards a “step-by-step resurrection” of the economy (the phrase is from Sebastian Kurz, Chancellor of Austria, who delivered it from behind plexi-glass while wearing a face mask). Four or five days of a “flattening curve”? A few days in a row with fewer deaths? *Back to work with you!* To be even discussing a “return to normality” in the interest of the economy is grotesque.

Hans Kluge of the World Health Organization has said: “Now is not the time to relax measures. It is the time to once again double and triple our collective efforts to drive [the pandemic] toward suppression with the whole support of society.”

On the one hand, the science is clear: so much about Covid-19 remains unknown (the possibility of re-infection, the effectiveness of antibodies, the timeframe for, and efficacy of, a vaccine, etc.). On the other, in the face of the unknown, our rulers are clear: leap into the breach!

If we are to take our rulers seriously when they demand this leap into the unknown, why then should we *not* be taken seriously in our demand for a leap *beyond* the economy, into an unknown world of authentic humanity?

Even the most cautious world leaders speak of “a new normal,” which is easy enough to envision: wearing gloves and a mask as you hammer away at your computer, physically enclosed and separated from your fellow human beings, while the profits of your labor rush across broadband networks, upwards and into the bank accounts of the owners and managers. Aside from the masks and gloves, what exactly is the qualitative difference? This virus has demonstrated concretely how alienated our lives already were – how isolated, how distanced, how lacking in warmth and purpose.

There should be no “new normal.” If we learn anything from this pandemic, it should be that what is truly valuable cannot be found on the market. Ironically, the harshest judgment of the system has been leveled by the system itself, in its categories of “essential and non-essential workers.” In cities all around the world, we see nightly displays of communal applause for the healthcare workers battling the disease. Who claps for the bankers, the insurance agents, the media barons, the bond traders? Not a single soul.

The panicked response of the elites makes it clear: they need us more than we need them. The collective response of human beings makes this clear: what we need most is that which we most love: community, solidarity, humanity. These are the true values of *life*, not the warped valuations of the spectral market. This pandemic has granted us the greatest general strike in human history. Let’s put it to good use.

Now is not the time to relax our demands. It is the time to once again double and triple our collective efforts to end the oppression of the economy for the whole liberation of humanity.

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