

If I Didn't Believe, I Wouldn't Know How to Breathe: The Fortieth Newsletter (2020).



Liu Xiaodong (China), *Refugees 4*, 2015.

Dear friends,

Greetings from the desk of the **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

Here's a story that encapsulates the terrible situation of our world: Associated Press reporters were on a Turkish coast guard vessel which picked up 37 migrants, including 18 children, from two orange life-rafts in

the Aegean Sea on 12 September. The refugees were from Afghanistan, a country that shudders from an endless war. One of the refugees, Omid Hussain Nabizada **told** the reporters that the Greek authorities held them in Lesbos, put them onto life rafts, and then sent them into the turbulent seas. They were left there to die.

Since 1 March, Greece has suspended the right of refugees to claim asylum. The authorities have placed refugees into makeshift camps. The Moria Reception and Identification Centre in Lesbos (Greece) was built to hold 3,500 people but at its height it housed 20,000 people (due to the pandemic, the population was reduced to 12,000). Four days before Nabizada and others were rescued from the Aegean Sea, a fire tore through the Moria camp. Around 9,400 people lost their overcrowded shelters. This camp was constructed in 2015 to briefly hold migrants as they made their way to Europe from Afghanistan, Syria, and other areas where the West has perpetuated its many wars.

When the other European countries began to shut their doors to refugees, Greece became Europe's plug; the refugees got stuck in places such as Moria.

In August, the engine of a boat exploded off the coast of Zuwarah (Libya), killing 45 refugees from Chad, Mali, Ghana, and Senegal. Fortunately, 37 people survived the explosion. It was a reminder that the passage of refugees across the Mediterranean Sea has not abated. In fact, the UN Refugee Agency **said** that 2020 has seen a threefold increase in refugee traffic in Italy and Malta as compared to 2019. The numbers of those on the move has not slowed down, despite the pandemic.

During the Great Lockdown, as aircraft fly relatively empty across much of the world, rubber boats and old trucks continue to carry large numbers of the impoverished peoples of our planet in search of a better life.



Oweena Camille Fogarty (Mexico), Untitled.

In 2018, a World Bank **study** showed that half the world’s population – 3.4 billion people – live below the poverty line, a number that increased during the pandemic. The Bank used the measure that a person who makes less than \$5.50 per day is poor. Over the course of the past half century, states have increasingly privatised the delivery of key social services, such as education, childcare, health care, sanitation, and housing. These social costs are now borne by people with meagre means. That is why, in 2006, economist Lant Pritchett **suggested** that the threshold for measuring the poverty line be lifted to \$10 a day. But even at this level, it is just not possible to cover the basic costs in a privatised society. Nonetheless, based on this threshold, Pritchett published an important paper which suggested that 88% of the world’s population lived in poverty.

The crushing weight of the Great Lockdown during the pandemic has worsened the social and economic condition of the vast majority of the world’s population. In June, the World Bank **estimated** that around 177 million people will slip into ‘extreme poverty’, the first such slip in thirty years. Half of those who will fall under the poverty line due to the pandemic will be in South Asia, while a third will be in Sub-Saharan Africa.

A new **study** from the International Labour Organisation shows that the working people around the planet lost 10.7% of their income in the first nine months of 2020; this equals a loss of \$3.5 trillion. Workers in the

poorer states bore the brunt, with losses of around 15% of their income, while workers in the richer countries saw losses of 9% of their income. The ILO found steady cuts in employment in the first two quarters of the year, with every indication that these losses will continue for the rest of the year, *if not permanently*.



Maysa Yousef (Palestine), *Identity of the Soul*, 2014.

Migrants like Omid Hussain Nabizada leave their homes where employment has collapsed and make perilous journeys. If they survive the passage, they at best find menial jobs (if they are able to find employment at all),

earn a pittance, save that money, and then send it home. In 2019, such migrants sent \$554 billion in remittances to their families in their countries of origin. Some countries – such as Haiti, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan – **rely** on these remittances for more than a quarter of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In April 2020, the World Bank **estimated** the ‘sharpest decline of remittances in recent history’, dropping by 19.7% to \$445 billion. These declines, along with a decline in foreign direct investment and the collapse of exports for many of the countries of the Global South, have already created a dangerous balance of payments problems in many countries.

Refusal by wealthy bondholders (London Club), and the countries that back them (Paris Club), to allow for debt **cancellation** or even proper debt suspension puts immense pressure on these states as well as on the families that will lose an important source of basic income.

The lack of basic services – particularly health care in the midst of this pandemic – will create deeper distress. In 2017, the World Bank and the World Health Organisation **warned** that half of the world’s population did not have access to essential health services and that, each year, 100 million people are driven into poverty by the lack of income to pay for health care costs. This number is conservative, since in India alone – **according** to the national survey on social consumption – 55 million Indians were impoverished due to health care costs in 2011-12. That warning was not heeded.



Francisco Amighetti (Costa Rica), *La Niña y el viento*, 1969.

On 10 September 2020, World Suicide Prevention Day, the WHO's Director-General Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus **reminded** us that every forty seconds someone somewhere dies by suicide. Importantly, he noted that the means by which many commit suicide must be kept away from people, 'including pesticides and firearms'. The mention of pesticides points a finger at the endless suicide epidemic in rural India, where hundreds of thousands of farmers and agricultural workers have taken their lives; this was revealed in a series of powerful **reports** by Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research Senior Fellow P. Sainath. The National Crime Records Bureau in India **showed** that, in 2019 – before the pandemic – every fourth suicide was committed by daily wage earners. These are the people hardest hit by the pandemic and the Great Lockdown; we have to wait until next year's report to grasp the full impact of the deep social impact on farmers, agricultural workers, and daily wage earners, all of whom will be struck by the three pro-agribusiness farm bills foisted on the Indian population by its government this month.



Last week, the foreign correspondent Andre Vltek (1962-2020) died in Istanbul. A few years ago, André introduced me to the Cuban singer Silvio Rodríguez, particularly his song *La Maza*. Here are a few lines from Silvio, in honour of Andre:

*If I didn't believe in what I believe
 If I didn't believe in something pure
 If I didn't believe in every wound*

...

*If I didn't believe in what hurts
If I didn't believe in what stays
If I didn't believe in what fights*

...

*What would my heart be?
What would the mason's hammer be without a quarry?*

The greatest tyrant in our time is a social system that impoverishes the majority of the world's people, such as the people who drowned recently in the Mediterranean Sea, so that a small minority can live a life of luxury. If I didn't believe in another world, I would find it hard to breathe.

Warmly, Vijay.



I am Tricontinental:

E. Ahmet Tonak. Interregional Office.

I am currently working on a notebook about the capitalist crisis and the stalled world Revolution', the COVID-19 induced Reserve Army of Labor, and the myth of the welfare state and the net social wage in Turkey.