

How we meet this crisis

To our friends and comrades -

We find ourselves at the beginning of an emergency, in a situation that is going to get much worse before it gets better. Many of you are in the trenches, securing and providing aid for the pressing and immediate needs (physical, social, and spiritual) of your families and communities and of our class; and doing so in a way that secures the future of our struggle. We send you thanks, love, encouragement, and a spirit of solidarity.

The crisis

We know that this pandemic, and the economic recession it's triggering, is going to hit our people hard. The homeless, the hungry, the unemployed and low-wage workers, the uninsured and underinsured, the already-ill, undocumented immigrants, incarcerated people - the poor of all colors and in all communities - are going to bear the worst of these crises. Our class has already been bearing the worst of the spiraling economic, political, ecological, social, and moral crises of this time. Tens of millions of us were already living in a state of emergency, which is only being made more intense.

And we also see that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic recession will not just impact the poor. Our society has been made fragile by the incompetence, thievery, delusions and desperation of a ruling class without any real solutions to our problems *or* their own problems. This fragility is why our medical system is completely unprepared for this crisis - why we are not meeting the need for diagnostic tests, hospital beds, protective equipment for health care workers,

and ventilators. And it's why the public health recommendations of social distancing are so difficult or simply impossible for millions of Americans to meet on their own, increasing the risks to everyone's health. This recession, like the one triggered by the global financial crisis of 2008, will mean fewer jobs, with worse wages, and more unstable and unpredictable employment. It'll speed up the growth of poverty and the free-fall of the so-called "middle class" into the ranks of the poor and those one paycheck or health crisis away from poverty. People who thought of themselves as safe in this system will find their lives threatened by it, will find their destiny linked to, and indicated by, the fate of the poor, whether they see that reality clearly or not.

Our tasks

As the crisis deepens, our tactics - our forms and methods of organization and action, our campaigns and demands - will have to shift and adapt rapidly. Our capacity for tactical leadership will be tested in new and more demanding ways. And we have to have confidence that our class and its leaders are equal to this test. As we step up to the plate, our creativity, vision, agility, credibility, and competence will grow dramatically. We must recognize at the same time that the rock solid foundation of this confidence and flexibility rests in the soundness of our political strategy. We can't afford to be agile for its own sake or for the sake of appearances. We can't lead from a place of fear, insecurity, or a desire to feel in control. We will not be able to keep our bearings in the whirlwind and really adjust without an unshakeable commitment to our basic strategic direction as well as the values and principles that drive us.

Our strategic task is still to unite the poor as a politically independent force and to establish the poor as the leaders of the rest of the dispossessed (that is, all of those with no ownership over the means of economic production) - especially of the middle layers of society. And accomplishing this task still depends first of all on the identification, development, and uniting of leaders. These leaders must emerge from

the many and diverse sections and struggles of the poor and dispossessed today; we must tend to the formation and organization of leaders not only of this or that community or organization, but of our whole class.

So as we strive to meet this moment - even in the midst of our own fear and loss, anger and urgency - we must meet it on these terms. How are we strengthening, defending, caring for and protecting our leaders? How are we demanding more from leaders, especially new leaders, and getting them new experiences, responsibilities, successes and failures to learn from? How are we explaining and narrating this crisis, using it to teach our leaders (and equip them to teach) about the failures of the current economic and social system, the shared interests of the poor and dispossessed globally, and the need to take and wield political power together to transform society? How are we deepening their ability to build and lead mass organizations of the poor, especially in the context of widespread confusion, fear, and anger? How are we further uniting our leaders, building deep connections between them, and increasing their understanding of the whole situation and of our shared tasks, and not just their own organization, campaign, or front of struggle? How are we feeding their discipline, their enthusiasm, their ability to feel deeper and see farther?

In this rapidly changing situation, our style of work and approach to these questions must develop equally rapidly - but these are still the same basic questions, founded on our uncompromising commitment to the unity and social leadership of the poor. And in truth, many of our best answers are likely ones we discovered before this crisis but haven't had the will or ability to move forward with. The pandemic and recession are, in many cases, just making it more clear why we need these efforts and how they should look in practice; and these efforts will still be needed after the pace of events begins to slow down. Just as the crisis is revealing important truths about our economic, political, and social system, it's revealing important truths about our own organizations - their limitations, weaknesses, strengths and potentials. We have to be open to these lessons, face them honestly, and not shy away from them.

We are not in any position to stick our heads in the sand and wait for this storm to pass. For many of us that's a practical impossibility as well as a moral and political one. But it would be just as irresponsible to lose focus and let ourselves be led along by events instead of using this moment to lead and forge new leaders.

Organize, organize, organize

We can't do this unless we deepen our understanding of this moment, based on deep study and factual investigation. We can't let ourselves be satisfied with the surface of events. To respond effectively, in a way that meets the needs of today without sacrificing the demands of tomorrow, we've got to understand this pandemic and recession in the context of the much deeper and longer crisis of global capitalism, rooted as it is in the great and ongoing technological revolution shaking society at its foundations. We have to understand it in the context of our drive to unite the poor and dispossessed globally, to expose the reality of poverty in the United States and unite the poor here with the poor all over the world. This means studying the economics and the geopolitics of the situation as well as the maneuvers and plots of our enemies. But it also means studying our own experiences in real time. We have to stay connected and share reports with each other from the front lines, learning from the ways our class is already moving and responding.

We know that the ruling class will do everything it can to avoid accountability for any part of this crisis. They'll blame the poor, they'll blame immigrants, they'll blame Trump, they'll blame China, they'll blame bad timing and bad luck. They will use the crisis to double down on their attacks against the poor here in the US and around the world: this is already becoming clear in the inhumane policies targeting asylum-seekers at the border; attempts to undermine Social Security; the exclusion of workers from paid sick leave; the bailouts of banks, airlines, and fossil fuel companies; and the refusal to lift the deadly sanctions against Venezuela, Iran, and Cuba. Their solutions will seek to divide the poor and isolate the poor from the rest

of the dispossessed. They'll turn more resolutely toward neo-fascism and put forward a program to shore up whatever social base of support they can while ignoring the roots of this crisis and the looming reality of the next one.

Our task then, is to organize, organize, organize so that our class can undo these plans and carry out our own: to arm the poor with massive, independent, disciplined, and capable organization. To build such organization requires revolutionary leadership - this is and must be the heart and soul of our response to this pandemic and economic crisis.

And we see that this is what you are already doing - with love, intelligence, and determination. Please keep doing it. There is much to do and much to learn, and we are so thankful for each of you as we take on these great, necessary, and entirely possible tasks together.

With care and gratitude,
The Standing Committee
of the University of the Poor Political Coordination Committee