

# Responding to COVID-19 Through Socialist(ic) Measures: A Preliminary Review

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## ABSTRACT

When the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic, countries stepped up efforts to contain the spread of the virus. Some countries resorted to socialist(ic) measures ranging from nationalizing private hospitals to state-supervising face mask factory operations, and from freezing prices of basic commodities to suspending rent, mortgage, and utilities payments. Typical socialist advocacies such as homes for everyone, egalitarian distribution of goods, free health care for all, and public funding for universities and scientific research, also gain more ground as the crisis worsens. This paper is aimed at documenting and describing these measures, as a springboard for arguing that the global capitalist status quo should be transformed/replaced if humanity is to survive this and future global pandemics. At the very least, this paper will also provide practical ideas and insights which local and national authorities can utilize in the battle against COVID-19 and hopefully, in building the foundations of a future socialist world where humanity will be better equipped to deal with pandemics and other crises.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, socialism, capitalism

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**“Let each of you look not only to his own interests,  
but also to the interests of others.”**

- **Philippians 2:4 in the *English Standard Version* of the Bible**

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**“...society stands at the crossroads, either transition to Socialism or  
regression into Barbarism.”**

- Friedrich Engels as quoted by Rosa Luxemburg in *The Junius Pamphlet* (1915)

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## Introduction: Bible Readers and Socialists of the World, Unite!

As COVID-19 was officially declared as a global pandemic, Bible readers would have reminded themselves of that nice quote from Philippians 2:4, when thinking of how to respond to the crisis. Meanwhile, socialists would have instantly remembered Rosa Luxemburg’s popular quote from *The Junius Pamphlet*, summarized as a choice between “Socialism or Barbarism.” Citizens around the world are again challenged to choose a path for humankind. Choose socialism and we stand a chance to survive and even flourish after the pandemic is eradicated (or subdued). Choose the status quo where Third World

politicians and the rich and famous in the First World are able to get tested for COVID-19 even if they have no symptoms (Sabillo, 2020; Twohey et al., 2020) or where the elderly tearfully stare at grocery shelves emptied by younger and/or faster shoppers (Bilbrough, 2020; Duffield, 2020; Harris, 2020; Neville and Randall, 2020), and we will probably descend into the law-of-the-jungle, kill-or-be-killed barbarism of contemporary zombie movies. Philippians 2:4 gives people a hint on where People of the Book should stand. Within this context, this short article is primarily aimed at convincing more and more people that, especially in the time of the coronavirus, socialism is of course preferable.

Merriam-Webster (2020) provides a clear contemporary and primary definition of socialism: “any of various economic and political theories advocating collective or governmental ownership and administration of the means of production and distribution of goods.” Such definition runs parallel with more traditional and typical academic definitions. Thus, as Amin (2014) notes, movements towards socialism aim “...to abolish the system based on private proprietorship over the modern means of production (capital) in order to replace it with a system based on workers’ social proprietorship,” and may also “...involve mobilization aimed at real and significant transformation of the relations between labor (“employed by capital”) and capital (“which employs the workers”).”

It is in this context that the socialist(ic) measures employed to contain and hopefully, eventually defeat COVID-19 need immediate documentation and description. Using Antonio Gramsci’s language, the current crisis is a challenge and opportunity for socialists to step the war of maneuver against capitalism, especially in the public consciousness. When capitalism is slowly being seen as at least one of the culprits behind the spread of the pandemic (Davis, 2020; “Capitalist agriculture and Covid-19: A deadly combination,” 2020), or as an “incubator for pandemics” (Pappas and Cozzarelli, 2020), or something that “exacerbates” the crisis it brings (La Riva, 2020), pushing socialism into the “mainstream” (Eaton, 2018) becomes more logical and possible. One British political scientist (Muldoon, 2020) even predicts “coronavirus might make socialists of us all,” at a time when the virus’ “vector is capitalism” (Montague, 2020). At the very least, even capitalists emphasize that “(t)he Covid-19 crisis is a chance to do capitalism differently” (Mazzucato, 2020).

### **Going Beyond Private Proprietorship: Nationalization of Private Hospitals and State Supervision of Face Mask Factories**

At least two countries have went beyond private proprietorship by using State power to nationalize private hospitals and supervise the operations of face mask factories. In a move dubbed “unprecedented,” the Spanish government temporarily nationalized all “private hospitals and health care providers...in a bid to combat the rapid spread of the coronavirus” (teleSUR, 2020). Such move is expected to speed up and rationalize health care in a time of crisis. This pandemic must serve as a wake-up call to Spain and governments all over the world on the crucial need to roll back a decades-long history of privatisation and commodification of health. The global federation Public Services International (2020) notes that these nationalizations came after decades of “several

waves of privatisation since the mid-1980s,” succeeded by “laws and policies promoting PPPs” (public-private partnerships). The logic of nationalizing hospitals is further boosted by the fact that private hospitals on their own, can’t cope up with the pandemic. For example, a consortium of big private hospitals in Metro Manila, Philippines seems to admit in a public statement (Macaya et al., 2020) that they can’t handle the crisis without any government help: “The panic is escalating, mortality is increasing, our supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) are running short, our frontline staff are increasingly getting depleted as more of them are quarantined or physically and emotionally exhausted, and a number of our medical colleagues are already hooked to respirators fighting for their lives in various ICUs. Even our ICUs are getting full. Soon we will have a shortage of respirators. We have every reason to be scared; we are indeed, very scared because we feel that we are on our own to face our countrymen in dire need of help.” The same consortium called upon the government to “to centralize all efforts and resources into one or two COVID-19 hospitals, adequately equipped and invested upon by the government, designated to receive, screen and treat PUIs and COVID-19 positive patients when the allowable number of cases per hospital, private and public, is exceeded.” With or without pandemics, nationalizing hospitals is an old but surely good idea (Light, 2003; Maynard and Bloor, 2008).

Meanwhile, Taiwan, a bastion of Asian capitalism, mobilized its “armed forces...to help increase the supply of surgical masks as the country sees a soaring demand for protective gear amid the coronavirus outbreak that has inflicted over 14,000 globally” (Tzu-ti, 2020). Such intervention is expected to help Taiwan reach the target of producing “13 million masks each day” (Wei, 2020). This decisive action on face masks partly explains why Taiwan not only outperformed China in containing the virus (Pu, 2020), but also “sets example for (the) world on how to fight coronavirus” (Chen, 2020). The Philippines can certainly learn something from Taiwan’s example. The former still lacks enough face masks even for its frontliners, as it has only one face mask factory capable of producing only 80,000 masks per day (Rosales, 2020). The Philippines can certainly do a Taiwan by mobilizing some of its armed forces and/or police personnel in stepping up the production of face masks and other necessities for these times, rather than merely utilizing state security forces to man checkpoints to enforce the “enhanced community quarantine” in the capital. The potential of such state mobilization for factory production is promising in the Philippines, considering that its authorities have deployed at least 40,000 police personnel and 3,000 soldiers for Metro Manila’s community quarantine (Sadongdong, 2020). In the long run – as the crisis is expected to last for months, even a year and beyond – mass producing more face masks will be a necessary measure to possibly ensure that more and more workers will be able to work “normally” so as to reduce the chances of massive economic collapse due to lack of economic activity. Countries can also emulate socialist Cuba’s “repurposing” of factories of school uniforms, “to produce face masks” (Oppmann, 2020) for an urgent health need amid the pandemic.

Ruder (2009) expounds on the general viability of nationalization for a more efficient delivery of social services: “(p)rivatization takes the decision-making about such services

out of the public sphere, where these issues can be subjected to political pressures and political demands, and puts them in the hands of private entrepreneurs who are wholly unaccountable—unlike politicians who are subject at least in some limited way to the will of the voters at the end of the day. Similarly, nationalization of industries under threat of bankruptcy has historically been a demand of the socialist movement...to save jobs and ensure the provision of needed services.”. In this time of fast-spreading coronavirus, nationalization and/or state intervention is necessary to accelerate and make more effective the response to a pandemic (in the case of hospitals) and to ensure the swift mass production of desperately-needed protective gears against the virus at a time when capitalists are unable to cope up with the public’s pandemic-induced demands.

### **Weakening the Core of Capitalism: Suspending the Profit Motive Through Prize Freezes, Rent, Mortgage, & Utilities Bill Holidays**

With lockdowns and community quarantines becoming necessary to halt the spread of the virus, national and global productions are also slowing down if not collapsing. At the outset, workers in precarious employment, irregular contracts etc. are instantly displaced. Taxi drivers, small-time vendors, tourist guides, tricycle & pedicab drivers and the like (Gray, 2020; Ratcliffe and Fonbuena, 2020; Clarke, 2020; Luna, 2020) would face either total income loss or income reduction due to the crisis. Thousands of air travel workers are already displaced (Straits Times, 2020; Cecco, 2020; Whitley and Jasper, 2020). Millions will suddenly have reduced incomes or no income at all. The International Labor Organization estimates that the crisis would lead to the unemployment of nearly 25 million people worldwide (McKeever, 2020). Employees in more secure contracts or work arrangements would seem to be not affected by the crisis – as most of them will still receive salaries even without reporting for work, but work-from-home schemes also mean unavailability of additional income sources such as overtime pay. Hence, to provide instant economic relief to those affected by the crisis, some governments have suspended the profit motive – capitalism itself, by ordering a temporary freeze in the prize of basic commodities, and a short-term stoppage of rent, mortgage, and utilities bill payments.

The Philippines’ Department of Trade and Industry (2020) has banned any price increase for basic goods, while the country’s Department of Health (2020) has also frozen the price of essential emergency medicines. The country’s Pag-ibig Fund/Home Development Mutual Fund/HDMF (2020) offered a 3-month moratorium on mortgage and multipurpose loan payments. The Bank of the Philippine Islands/BPI (2020), meanwhile, offered a stingier “30-day grace period” for its “clients’ financial obligations” covering credit cards, personal loans, and auto and housing loans. Firms that “provide internet, wireless communications services, water, electricity and loans” have also offered at least one month of payment deferment (CNN Philippines Staff, 2020).

In the United Kingdom, the Conservative government offered a 3-month “mortgage or rental holiday” for those who “are experiencing financial difficulties meeting” their “mortgage repayments because of COVID-19” (“Support for those affected by COVID-

19,” 2020). Under pressure from Labour leader and lifelong socialist (see Blackburn, 2018) Jeremy Corbyn, the Conservatives also promised legislation to halt evictions and eviction proceedings for the same period (Wharton, 2020). Similarly, in Canada, Ontario’s premier emphatically declared that in these times, “(n)o one will be kicked out of their home or their rental apartments based on not being able to pay the rent – it’s just not going to happen, we won’t allow it to happen” (Goodfield, 2020).

In New York, the state government issued a 90-day “moratorium on evictions of any residential or commercial tenants” and “relief on mortgage payments for those who face financial hardships...” (NBC New York/Associated Press, 2020). Speaking for socialists and progressives, Gowan (2020) opines that such emergency schemes “to stabilize people in their homes” should last “until the crisis has passed. Against the profits of landlords and developers, we must demand the basic measures to support public health, allowing people to take time off work without fear of eviction.” Meanwhile, Canada offers a “six-month loan holiday program,” suspending “federal student loan payments during (the) COVID-19 crisis” (Thurton, 2020). Moreover, the city of Coquitlam in British Columbia, Canada announced that it “won’t charge late fees on utility bills until after September 30” (Dal Monte, 2020). In the same country, Alberta’s premier instituted “deferred utilities payments” (Global News, 2020).

While these measures are at the very most temporary and crisis-bound, they help people imagine what a future socialist world would look and feel like – prospectively a better version of current and historical socialist systems: a world where no one has to rent a home because he/she can have his/her own, and no one has to pay utility bills because utilities are basically free, publicly-funded services. In socialist Cuba (Kapur and Smith, 2002), for a long time, “many tenants were given long-term rent-free leases. Other tenants enjoyed similar benefits since all units built or distributed by the government after 1961 were assigned leases at no more than 10% of household income that conveyed ownership of the unit after 5-20 years of payment.” In the Soviet Union (Morton, 1984), where housing is viewed as a “social good” rather than a commodity, while there were indeed housing shortages, those in government-owned urban housing enjoyed “minimal” rent, with the units “for all practical purposes theirs.” In another case, even critics of 21<sup>st</sup> century socialist Hugo Chavez in Venezuela acknowledged that his administration instituted “programs to massify access to education and health, subsidized food, free housing and direct aid in money,” which at their peak “showed encouraging results to the world: the poorest doubled their consumption capacity, poverty dropped from 70% in 1999 to 30% in 2013, and the United Nations Development Program noted that the human development index had risen to 0.764, ranking Venezuela in 67th place out of 187 countries” (Venezuelan and Ausman, 2019). Related to this, Jacques (2005) tackles the contributions of Chavez’ housing and other social programs as part of the “resistance to U.S. economic hegemony in Latin America.” Meanwhile, the non-socialist country Brunei offers “an interest-free housing loan” for full-time government employees (Hassan, 2017), and offers free housing to “indigenous citizens” and/or “citizens in need” (Xinhua, 2017).

Other alternatives include UK Labour's "New Deal on Housing" (2019) which offers a middle-of-the-way template towards the realization of housing for every family.

With regard to utilities, from 1993 to 2018, building on the Soviet era's subsidized utilities (Hewett, 1984), the government of Turkmenistan, a former constituent republic of the Soviet Union, was able to offer – albeit of dwindling coverage – “free supplies of water, natural gas and electricity to households, as well as subsidies for gas and basic foodstuffs” (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). At least one non-socialist country, Qatar, still provides similar benefits of “free electricity, water, and natural gas” (Meier et al., 2013) to its citizens. The socialist future of free utilities could be a very imminent reality if renewable energy is fully utilized. Discussing renewable energy's potentials, Achim Steiner, executive director of the UN Environment Program predicts that “(b)y the year 2050, electricity generating industries will no longer be charging for electricity” (McMahon, 2016).

### **Compassion and Solidarity in Action: Housing the Homeless, Feeding the Hungry, Taking Care of the Poor**

Prior to the spread of coronavirus, many homeless citizens in both First and Third World countries are routinely ignored by most governments. Bureaucrats were only compelled to act when they realized that the homeless are very (and much much more) vulnerable to the virus (Schneider, 2020), considering that some people are or can become carriers without them knowing it – e.g. people who are asymptomatic: have been infected with the virus yet experiencing no symptoms of COVID-19 (Cai et al., 2020).

In Manila, the Philippine capital, a gymnasium was converted to a temporary homeless shelter offering free food too (Ramos, 2020). In the same city, the Catholic-run De La Salle University (DLSU), in partnership with the religious order Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) has transformed a portion of its campus to a “temporary sanctuary for the homeless” (Guno, 2020). In the United States, California's state government (State of California, 2020) released emergency funding “to get homeless Californians – among the most vulnerable to spread of COVID-19 – safely into shelter & housing,” granted “local flexibility on spending and building shelters,” and “purchased 1,309 trailers and leased first two hotels to provide emergency isolation units for homeless individuals.” Meanwhile, the UK government intends to transform some hotels into homeless shelters with “45,000 self-contained accommodation spaces” (Townsend, 2020).

Such outpouring of solidarity, which reflect Biblical exhortations to do good, as in Matthew 25: 35-40, for the most vulnerable segments of society – the homeless and the poor – should become permanent, with or without this pandemic. Never again should we allow ourselves or our governments to be held hostage by the ideology of apathy. Otherwise, all these pandemic-era acts could risk becoming tokenistic at best and cynically merely meant to preserve the pre-COVID-19 neoliberal, individualist, money-worshipping status quo at worst (see San Juan, 2016; Monbiott, 2016; The Intercept, 2020; Alizadeh, 2020; Reich, 2020). Temporary homeless shelters can do for the period of transition, as

governments work towards the establishment of enough permanent homes for everyone until *homeless shelters* becomes a phrase of the past in a prospectively ideal socialist future. Responding to the current crisis, the National Alliance to End Homelessness et al. (2020) outlines interim and long-term steps toward that end goal.

### **Tilting the System Towards Redistributing the Wealth: Instant Relief for Workers and Businesses**

As governments imposed quarantines and lockdowns to limit the spread of the virus, it became more obvious that most workers will have to stop from working or will be displaced from work, and it also became clear that those displaced can't fend for themselves, especially that the crisis could last for months, probably even a year. For a 3-month period, the Danish government promised to "cover 75% of the salaries of employees paid on a monthly basis who would otherwise have been fired, with companies paying the remaining amount. For hourly workers covered by the agreement, the government will cover 90% of their wages" (Collington, 2020). For a similar period, the UK government "would pay grants covering up to 80% of the salary of workers if companies kept them on their payroll, rather than lay them off as the economy crashes" (Partington, 2020; "COVID-19: support for businesses," 2020).

As of this writing, US leaders are still negotiating on the final amounts/details of a stimulus plan which intends to "pump \$1,200 direct checks to taxpayers, \$300 billion for small businesses to keep idled workers on payroll and \$208 billion in loans to airlines and other industries" (Taylor and Mascaro, 2020) – amounts that seem to be impressive, though still lower than what socialists in the USA are proposing: a \$2-trillion "Coronavirus Emergency Plan" which "includes \$2,000 direct monthly payments to every American" (Queally, 2020). Despite the innate limitations of such government interventions under the dominant neoliberal capitalist system, these broad strokes are somehow better than the governments' responses to the 2008 global financial crisis – which were mostly meant only to bail out the big banks and financial giants (see Sanders, 2008; Stiglitz, 2008; Katz, 2011). The COVID-19-era stimuli packages are meant to keep both businesses and workers afloat, at least in the short term. Mainstream economists (Saez and Zucman, 2020) support such schemes to compel governments to "step in as payers of last resort, which means they would cover wage and maintenance costs for businesses facing shutdown." They point out that "(i)n the context of this pandemic, we need a new form of social insurance, one that directly helps both workers and businesses...Absent government actions, and many businesses and workers do not have enough liquidity to weather dramatic shortfalls in demand causing mass redundancies. Keeping businesses alive through this crisis and making sure workers continue to receive their wages is essential. The most direct way to provide this insurance is to have governments act as payers of last resort, so that hibernating businesses can keep paying their workers (known in economic terms as idle workers) instead of laying them off, and can keep paying their necessary bills such as rent, utilities and interest instead of going bankrupt."

US Senator Bernie Sanders (2020) – who helped fueled America’s 21<sup>st</sup> century socialist surge (see Gong et al., 2019) and one of the two surviving candidates for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination as of this writing – provides a clear interim springboard for more sweeping transformations which can usher in socialism in the workplace by emphasizing that in this crisis, governments must “bail out working people, not corporate executives,” adding that “(a)ny emergency credit extensions or loans to insolvent companies or industries as a result of this crisis must come with strict protections and benefits for workers, unions, and customers, not no-strings-attached handouts for executives.” He also stressed that there should be a ban on “stock buybacks and bonuses for executives” and that “this financial assistance” should make sure “that any corporation in America that benefits from emergency aid does not lay off workers, pays workers a livable wage, provides equity to the government, puts workers on corporate boards, and does not rip-off consumers.” In the future socialist world, the enterprises will all be worker-owned and -managed (see Anderson, 2015; Logue and Yates, 2006), and would no longer need any exhortation to prioritize the common good as they will be innately tethered to it every step of the way.

### **The Logic of Rationing: Egalitarian Distribution of Goods**

Historically, rationing is typically implemented in wartime situations, and whenever commodities are scarce. The rationale behind rationing is thus clear: to ensure that everyone who needs the rationed items will have something, in a period of scarcity. As the COVID-19 pandemic heightened fears of dwindling supplies, some local governments in the Philippines imposed rationing for some items. Pasig City (2020) implements an “anti-panic buying and hoarding ordinance” for items such as bread, sanitizers, rice, alcohol, and canned goods. Valenzuela City implements a similar ordinance (Pedrajas, 2020). On this matter, relatively wealthier, capitalist countries such as the UK and Australia can learn something from the Philippines. Reports from the UK and Australia seem to suggest COVID-19-induced panic buying has left some people – including those from vulnerable sectors and health service frontliners – unable to buy what they need from groceries and supermarkets (Bilbrough, 2020; Duffield, 2020; Harris, 2020; Neville and Randall, 2020). The egalitarian ethos of socialism needs to be activated not only for crisis situations but should be utilized towards a fair or just distribution of goods and services, where the vulnerable sectors would be prioritized, rather than left to fend for themselves. The socialist world that dreamers aspire for is a world where no elderly man or woman would be hungry, as the strongest and wealthiest hoard supplies – the exact opposite of what the capitalist status quo offers us even in a time of crisis.

### **Saving Everyone is A Must: Free Health Care for Everyone**

US Senator Bernie Sanders, a self-described democratic socialist, has been running on a platform of Medicare for All (single-payer, fully-public, universal health care for all), and “the catastrophic implications of the coronavirus” now provides the “best possible argument for a single payer system” (Turque, 2020). As the President of the advocacy organization Physicians for a National Health Program Adam Gaffney (2020) points out,



“(s)ingle-payer healthcare can’t prevent a novel virus like Covid-19 but it could help us plan, coordinate and save lives.” Medicare for All campaigners further emphasize how “the coronavirus is exposing anew the barbarity of our for-profit health system, which blocks people from getting tested and doles out treatment on the basis of ability to pay” (Thibault, 2020). In relation to public health care, Ruder’s “socialist case for state intervention” (2009) remains relevant in these times: “Even if state ownership does not in itself accomplish the full socialist program, the neoliberal trend toward privatizing all manner of formerly public functions—from schools to airports to roads to parking meters—represents an assault on working-class interests. Privatization allows corporations to cut jobs, cut wages, and cut services all in the name of efficiency while they pocket taxpayer dollars in the form of profits. There is no doubt that nationalized health care, for example, would be a tremendous advance over the for-profit, private insurance-based system that, in the name of profitability, makes it more difficult to get health care for those who need it most.” The stakes are higher now, because, bluntly speaking, as this is a global pandemic, the rich and the powerful can only ignore the rest at their peril: no one is safe for as long as everyone is saved, as even just one coronavirus carrier left untreated or ignored can “restart” the pandemic. As Kapczynski and Gonsalves (2020) notes, “(u)nless we bring everyone into the circle of care...we will all be vulnerable.”

Linking the profit-oriented health care system with general failure to contain the spread of the coronavirus, Brooks (2020) further explains that “(w)ith a threadbare public health response and poorly integrated services, an illness like this can spread quietly but ferociously...When the CDC tests did first appear, they were faulty, allowing who-knows-how-many coronavirus cases to slip into the general populace...With no joined-up healthcare system to speak of, coronavirus testing is patchy and mostly privately contracted. Yes, tests conducted by the CDC or a city or state public health lab are free. But these represent only a small proportion of the tests that are needed...” Just more than a week after Brooks’ write-up, as of March 20, the USA has tested only 103,945 citizens so far, with 14,250 COVID-19 confirmed cases (Ortiz-Ospina and Hasell, 2020). In a March 22 Google update (2020), USA’s confirmed COVID-19 cases have reached 27,111. Based on Statista tracking (Elflein, 2020), USA’s confirmed COVID-19 cases did not even breach 1,000 by March 11. Brooks’ warning on the virus’ quiet but ferocious spread has thus come to pass.

To his credit, the COVID-19 “stimulus package” which US President Donald Trump signed on March 18 covers free testing, but it is surprisingly silent on whether COVID-19 hospitalization will be covered. Under today’s dominantly for-profit system, that could mean expensive hospital bills for those who will contract COVID-19. An uninsured COVID-19 patient’s bill – covering treatment – totaled \$34,927.43 (Abrams, 2020). It is in this context that the Human Rights Watch (2020) called upon the US government to “ensure that the costs of treatment for COVID-19 are not a barrier for anyone to access health care,” because “(t)he potential financial burden resulting from medical care or hospitalization may deter many Americans, particularly those who are uninsured or

underinsured, from seeking care.” The same fear can understandably be present among poor citizens of the Philippines, despite the government’s declaration that citizens’ COVID-19 testing will be fully covered by public health insurance (Tomacruz, 2020). Some Philippine legislators have been urging the government to shoulder the cost of COVID-19 treatment too (Panti, 2020), and the central government now promised to cover quarantine and isolation costs too, but doubts on 100% free treatment persist (Ichimura, 2020). The country’s legislature passed the Universal Health Care Act in 2019 but despite its name, the law still allows co-payments and private insurance to co-exist with the National Health Insurance Program administered by the government corporation Philhealth.

Hence, Sanders’ health care campaign resonates in countries such as the Philippines too, especially amid the current pandemic. The systematic review conducted by Cai et al. (2020) on a single-payer system for America found out that “(t)here is near-consensus in these analyses that single-payer would reduce health expenditures while providing high-quality insurance to all US residents; (t)o achieve net savings, single-payer plans rely on simplified billing and negotiated drug price reductions, as well as global budgets to control spending growth over time; (r)eplacing private insurers with a public system is expected to achieve lower net healthcare costs.” Thus, such single-payer scheme could be a good model for countries like the Philippines, especially that its current system always runs the risk of for-profit private hospitals draining the funds of public health insurance.

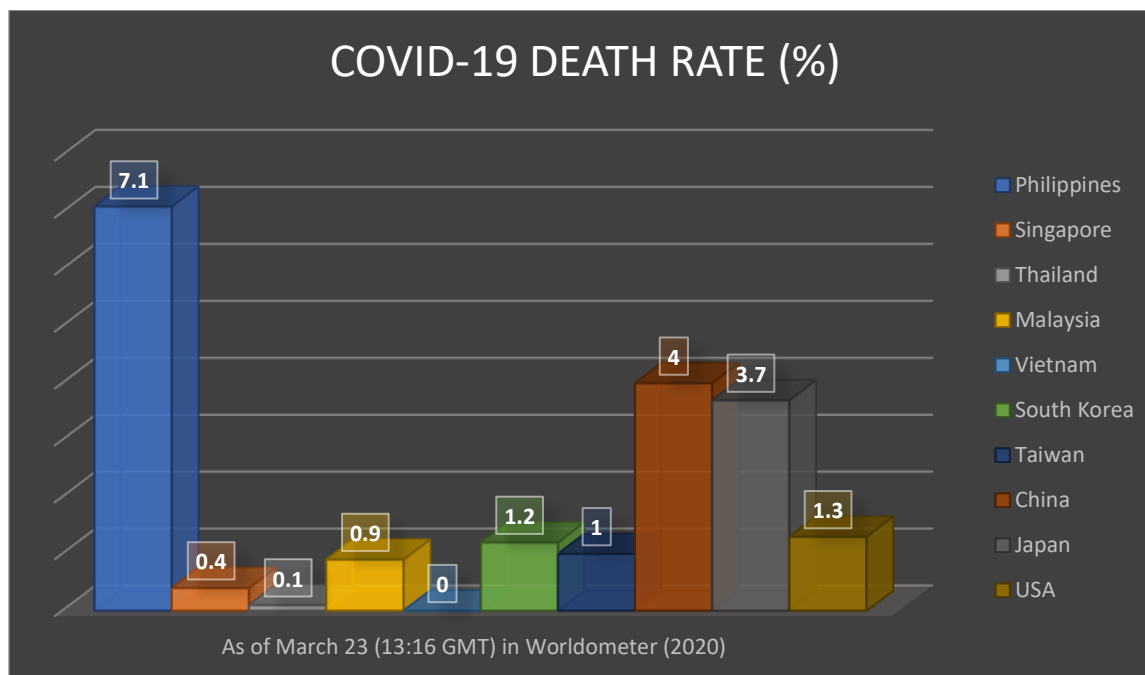
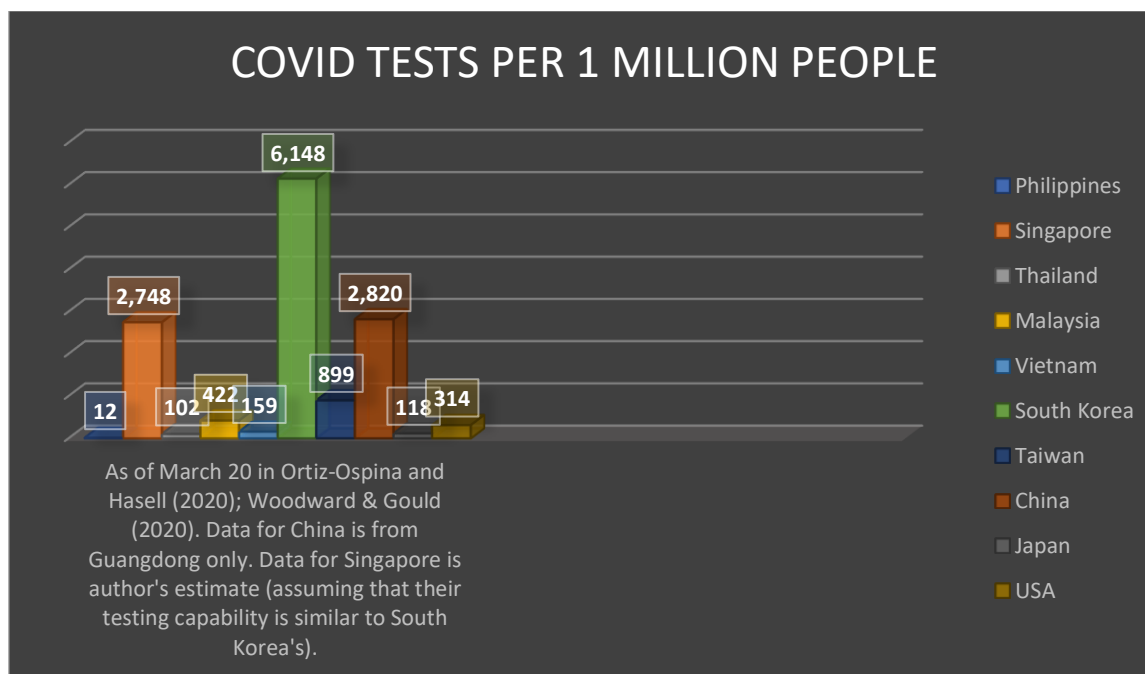
Meanwhile, despite its limitations, socialist Cuba’s achievements in free universal health care – which enabled it to have a relatively high life expectancy, comparable even with that of the United States – are documented (Pineo, 2019; Keck and Reed 2012; Birch and Norlander, 2007) and could serve as another initial model which can be further improved by future socialist health policy planners. Bolstering these studies is Cuba’s proven track record in international solidarity work in times of crises (see Chaple and Mercer, 2017). Not surprisingly, socialist Cuba sent doctors to Italy (Prensa Latina, 2020), Jamaica, Venezuela, and Suriname (teleSUR, 2020) etc. to help fight COVID-19. The Cuban government also said that Cuban doctors are serving in at least 37 countries with COVID-19 (Prensa Latina, 2020). Cuba is also mass producing for international use, medicines which has shown potentials in treating COVID-19 patients (teleSUR, 2020). If all countries will emulate such focus on health care and engage in international solidarity work too, no global pandemic is unbeatable. Another pandemic is always lurking somewhere, and a socialist health care system that prioritizes people over profit will surely help us survive it better.

### **Accelerating Mass Testing: Public Funding for State Universities and Scientific Research**

Reacting to countries resorting to lockdowns as the primary response to the spread of COVID-19, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), reiterated “...a simple message for all countries: test, test, test,” issued a marching order to “(t)est every suspected case, if they test positive, isolate them

and find out who they have been in contact with two days before they developed symptoms and test those people, too,” and stressed that “(a)ll countries should be able to test all suspected cases. They cannot fight this pandemic blindfolded; they should know where the cases are” (Wood, 2020). Ghebreyesus pointed out that the test-and-trace strategy “must be the backbone of the response in every country” so as to prevent “transmission chains” from continuing “at a low level” and then resurfacing “once physical distancing measures are lifted” (US News, 2020). Mike Ryan, a top emergency expert of the WHO, also emphasized that lockdowns will not be enough to contain and defeat the coronavirus. He urged governments “to focus on...finding those who are sick, those who have the virus, and isolate them, find their contacts and isolate them,” because “if we don’t put in place the strong public health measures now, when those movement restrictions and lockdowns are lifted, the danger is the disease will jump back up” (Reuters, 2020).

In a study from the current epicenter of the pandemic (2020), Andrea Crisanti, professor of microbiology at the University of Padua, and Antonio Cassone, a former director of the department of infectious diseases at the Italian Institute of Health, “showed mass testing could eradicate the coronavirus...by identifying and isolating clusters of infected people,” in Vò, Italy. Discussing her country’s relative success in South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha also remarked that “(t)esting (is) central for early detection” of the coronavirus (BBC, 2020). South Korea’s “mass-scale and rapid virus testing capabilities overwhelmingly outshine other nations” including USA, and can be partly credited for South Korea’s relatively low “mortality rate for the novel coronavirus” which “is around only 1 percent, far below the death rate reported in countries like China and Italy” as of March 20 (Kyung-don, 2020). A March 23 Worldometer update pegs South Korea’s death rate for COVID-19 at a still low 1.24%. Contrast this with the death rate in the Philippines – where mass testing is now a popular clamor (Antonio, 2020; Mass Testing Now PH, 2020) but still considered by health officials as unnecessary at this point (Gita-Carlos, 2020) – 6.6% in the same database. The following graphs – providing data from selected Southeast and East Asian countries, and the USA – further give credence to the need for mass testing.



As the government admits, the Philippines still lacks the capacity to conduct mass testing, primarily because of lack of ample testing kits and laboratories for processing samples – a perennial problem caused by lack of sufficient budget for public health care institutions

and facilities and the general weakness of research & development common in many Third World countries that fail to catch up with developed countries, after suffering from long periods of colonialism and even neocolonialism. Nevertheless, somehow punching beyond their weight (considering its lack of enough financial resources), the state-funded University of the Philippines (UP)-National Institute of Health was able to develop cheaper testing kits (Food and Drug Administration, 2020) which will soon be ready for mass production. Responding to the scarcity of commercial alcohol and disinfectants in the market, other state-funded educational institutions such as the Institute for Science and Technology Research (ISTR) of Polytechnic University of the Philippines/PUP (2020) and Central Luzon State University/CLSU (2020) have also found ways to synthesize local alcohol for their various communities' use. Students from UP were also quick to develop a design for sanitation tents which they publicly made available for free (Malasig, 2020). All these examples prove that the socialist program for education – free, fully-funded public education and research for social improvement – can help save us fast from pandemics and other crises. In contrast with most private educational institutions and researchers working in private companies who are typically beholden to the interest (or at times, even bluntly, to the research agenda) of their funders and/or stockholders, state-funded educational institutions are duty-bound to always direct and redirect their resources, skills, and talents to the short-term and long-term resolutions of their society's problems, because the various sectors of the general public are their stakeholders. The examples of UP, PUP, and CLSU in these times prove that "(p)roducts of a publicly subsidized research and education system are expected to contribute much to the society that nurtured them and gave them the chance to maximize their potentials" (San Juan, 2017). Cañete's study (2017) on socialist Cuba's research focused on community needs can further help steer the current research trajectory of state universities in the Philippines and beyond, towards social goals.

The great scientist Albert Einstein (2009) – who was a socialist – believed that "through the establishment of a socialist economy, accompanied by an educational system which would be oriented toward social goals" society's "grave evils" could be eliminated, and that under such socialist framework, "(t)he education of the individual, in addition to promoting his own innate abilities, would attempt to develop in him a sense of responsibility for his fellow men in place of the glorification of power and success in our present society." Humankind's prospective decimation because of COVID-19 – coupled with the ever-looming problem of extreme climate change and its ill effects – all the more compelled us to take such responsibility more seriously, as it is now clear, we're all in this together: we rise and fall together, and perhaps, after decades of failed individualist neoliberalism, it's better to attempt to rise together through the natural ideology of solidarity – none other than socialism. Now more than ever, conditions are ripe for the accelerated broadening and deepening of networks for the "intensive campaign and the organizing work of broad-based, labor-led social movements (San Juan, 2017), which are capable of influencing policymakers and/or altering existing power structures" (San Juan, 2018) towards shaping a socialist world in the hopefully imminent future.

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