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The Pandemic and after: prospects for peace and disarmament, a view from the United States.

Panel presentation for the Abolition 2000 2020 Annual General Meeting, May 23, 2020, via Zoom. by Andrew Lichterman, Western States Legal Foundation, Oakland, California, USA

Given that we have an international panel of presenters, I will focus mainly on how things look in and from the United States.

We are in the very early stages of the greatest crisis since World War II. Because it still is early on, this is a moment of great uncertainty. In January of 2021, the tentative date for the NPT Review Conference, we still are likely to be in the depths of this crisis, both in its health and its economic aspects.

Nonetheless, this crisis already is revealing—and reminding us-- about some fundamental things.

We go into a crisis like a major war or a pandemic with the ruling class we have, and the political structures we have. We likely will be stuck with them for the duration. Wars and pandemics give governments a rationale for imposing heightened authority, and also give much of the population reasons to accept or at least tolerate it.

Crises like these may transform entire economies. They may cause mass death, displacements and migrations. The world wars of the 20th century did all of this. But barring total social collapse, political changes engendered by the crisis come later. A crisis may delegitimize the old order and its elites due to their poor performance and the inequities the crisis revealed. But even where this is true it takes time -- likely some years -- for these grievances to coalesce into political formations capable of rising to power.

This crisis has revealed that the decline of the United States is more advanced than most believed. The response to the pandemic has shown much of the US managerial class to be selfish, callous, and incompetent. The few well-administered states and localities only highlight the mismanagement of the national response. What little virus testing has been done has found close to a million and a half people infected. Almost 90,000 Americans are dead and the toll continues to grow, falling most heavily on poor and minority communities. There still is no national plan either to control the spread of the epidemic or to sustain working people through an economic downturn that has no end in sight.

By January, the United States likely will be in the depths of both an economic and political crisis. The pandemic probably will have killed several hundred thousand, and still be a lingering

threat. The attempts by the Trump administration and many Republican governors to force millions of people back into dangerous workplaces will have heightened the death toll but failed to revive the economy. This will intensify the antagonisms of a vicious election campaign whose results may be contested by either side.

It is difficult to foresee what a second Trump term might look like. His reelection, and the way it would be accomplished, could mark the end of what democracy there is here, and the beginning of a period of domestic unrest that could lead to extreme outcomes. Under these conditions, a nuclear-armed authoritarian nationalist government would pose great dangers to the rest of the world, and hopes for disarmament would be a dead letter.

A Biden administration would be different, but those hoping for U.S. reengagement on arms control and disarmament may be disappointed. The powers of the Right that brought Trump to power or profited enough to tolerate his excesses will not go away. Even if a Democratic Party administration brings the old liberal internationalists back to power, their capacity to shape policy will be weakened. The U.S. will be a less influential participant in international institutions, its role in them diminished.

More generally, for the foreseeable future both the people and political classes of the United States will be preoccupied with our internal conflicts and problems. Reviving and transforming the economy will be an immense task. Economic recovery also will be wracked by conflict as those who benefit from the status quo seek to impose the costs of the pandemic and its aftermath on those who can afford it least.

A Biden administration likely would constitute neither revolution nor even reform, but rather a neoliberal internationalist restoration. They will be happy to portray themselves as steering a path between those who put them into office and the still-potent powers of the Right. With reinvigorating the economy at the top of the agenda, we might see a Green New Deal—one big enough to impress Americans accustomed to a meager welfare state, but likely too small to make a dent in global warming. We also would probably see continued high levels of military spending, which a neoliberal internationalist government would see as Keynesian stimulus, a means to assist high-tech industries, and an inoculation against criticism from the nationalist Right.

The less successful the economic recovery and the more intense the domestic discord, the more likely we are to see the United States seek to shift blame to foreign enemies, regardless of which party prevails in the election. This will be a dangerous gambit. Russia and China, both ruled by authoritarian nationalist governments, also likely will be facing significant challenges at home stemming from the pandemic and its aftermath. Great power competition will be intensified by a struggle to shape a global economy altered by the pandemic.

All of this means that the next five to ten years will bring a heightened risk of war among nuclear-armed states. Our attentions must turn to approaches that reduce the risk of war. Arms control, even measures that seem very meager from a disarmament perspective, will be important. Even when the prospects for agreement seem dim, negotiations between nuclear-

armed adversaries allow their military and political leadership to better understand each other's intentions, and their fears.

As was true during the Cold War, the countries that stand between the main nuclear-armed antagonists, both geographically and politically, will have a crucial role to play, as will the movements that arise within them. We have already seen this in South Korea, where a government with a peace agenda came to power through the efforts of a broad-based social movement. Movements that frame a politics independent of any of the nuclear-armed great powers will be essential everywhere. There must be no new blocs, no new Cold War.

Only our movements can change the path we are on, can flatten the curve of a rising risk of war. But in the absence of a war crisis immediately involving nuclear-armed states, the movements likely to arise in the wake of the pandemic will not be focused on peace and disarmament. Their main thrust will be the rebalancing of immense inequities in meeting basic human needs that have been laid bare by the pandemic: health care, food, shelter, and public services like water and power. These struggles will have the potential to raise fundamental questions about governance and about the structure of the economy. And we must not lose sight of the fact that all of this will take place amidst ecological shocks, which like the pandemic will recur in waves: wildfires, food chain collapses, famines, yet more pandemics.

Military spending will get some attention. But one of the truths that has emerged from the pandemic is that there is no direct trade-off between military spending and other forms of government spending. How well the human needs of the majority are met depends more on structures affecting distribution of wealth and the extent of democratic control over the economy. The main evil of high-tech militarism is that it defends an unjust and unsustainable order of things, not that it misuses resources within it.

To avoid catastrophe, we will need new movements and a politics broad and deep enough to transform our economy and how we conceive the State and its purposes. Nuclear disarmament will come only through the vehicle of such movements, such politics. This same path also is our best hope for reducing the risk of war. Our task is to discern how work for peace and disarmament, the strand we know best, can best strengthen the fabric of the whole.