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The Parallels Across Time

Fourth Option:

Throughout history, global catastrophes have always impacted vulnerable communities at an alarming rate. This COVID-19 global health pandemic has continued this trend and exposed the shortcomings of our current systems of power. Capitalism has placed people in an impossible situation where their economic and physical well-being is compromised. While the economy has shut-down fundamentally due to all the stay-at-home orders, millions of workers have lost their jobs and health insurance. The government's reaction to this crisis has displayed strong contempt for ordinary people and extraordinary service for the nation's wealthiest people. As a result, my family and I have been increasingly concerned about our socio-economic situation and physical health. Unfortunately, my sister, uncle, mother, and aunt put the health of our family at risk for our economic well-being. With a large number of cases in Los Angeles County, in some ways, the impact of this epidemic mirrors the smallpox outbreak in Tenochtitlan half a century earlier.

While there are multiple essential workers in my household, my sister and uncle are the only two workers who must show up to work to get paid. My sister works at Costco, one of the largest retail companies in the country, which has witnessed an enormous increase in customers. Since the pandemic started, people have become increasingly worried about their groceries and household necessities. Through the use of social media websites, there have been multiple videos circulating on the internet that depict the massive lines of customers surrounding Costco

buildings. Even though the government prohibited gatherings of more than ten people, the Costco lines were full of hundreds of people. My sister is considered a frontline worker, where she is designated at the entrance, placing her well-being at risk by directing the line of restless customers. The long lines of customers at grocery stores demonstrate the level of anxiety and stress that most individuals are facing every day. Furthermore, my uncle qualifies as a front line employee at a medical dispensary. However, my uncle's exposure is prolonged because he deals with individuals at a much more intimate level. Since marijuana dispensaries are considered essential businesses, my uncle has been jeopardizing his health for his financial well-being. With this pandemic creating new economic and social issues, the demand for medicinal products has increased dramatically. The dispensaries in Los Angeles County have witnessed an endless stream of anxiety and stress-related purchases over the past few months. My uncle, being a budtender, must consistently interact with new customers by directly selling their products. Consequently, my household is continuously at risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus because of the essential workers in our family.

In addition to the family members who must expose themselves to work, my mother and aunt go into work for specific tasks. My mother works in the construction industry and, while she can work from home, the job does demand in-person business at times. With construction categorized as essential business, there are many meetings, plans, and other tasks that require workers on the construction site. Even though my mother works from home on most days, she does expose herself to people with the virus by visiting job sites and meeting with her co-workers. My mother does fear for the safety of herself and our family, but her fear of losing her career is much higher. Without the financial benefits of her job, my college career and our

livelihood would take a turn for the worse. Similarly, my aunt's work responsibilities require her to go into work half the week as a psychiatric social worker. However, her occupation is a lot riskier because she currently works with clients at a hospital and a prison. Hospitals and prisons are full of people in condensed spaces that have harbored multiple COVID-19 outbreaks on a national scale. Therefore, the face to face contact that social work demands, my aunt is at considerable risk for contracting the virus. There have already been a few confirmed cases at her job, and she decided to self-quarantine herself until proven healthy. Although my mother and aunt have two different careers, their employers' responses are identical because they place their employees at risk regardless of being able to work from home.

While I have plenty of family members working in "essential businesses" throughout Los Angeles County, their stories reflect the plight that millions of Americans are facing today. For low-income communities, people cannot afford the luxury of being able to quarantine themselves at home for months at a time. The economic hardships of working-class families have been increasing exponentially due to the loss of income and healthcare. As millions of people have lost their jobs and employer-based health insurance, Americans expect to pay for rent, groceries, bills, and other necessities. In other words, the government is forcing people to adhere to the stay-home orders and pay for their livelihood without any income. Many people, like my sister and uncle, have managed to secure a source of income through "essential businesses." Unfortunately, due to the difficult economic circumstances, individuals are putting the well-being of themselves and their loved ones at risk. Unlike the many countries that have provided their citizens with healthcare, hazard pay, available testing, and income compensation, the United States provided a one time check for (some) Americans. The federal government has

systematically jeopardized the lives of marginalized communities by forcing them to work. Since Congress prioritized capital growth, their stimulus bills transferred trillions of dollars from regular people into the hands of corporations. The level of orchestrated attacks on Americans' socio-economic well-being is going to be as devastating as the colonization of the Americas. Similar to how Native Americans never recovered from the Europeans' invasion, workers are doomed to live in perpetual poverty. With millions of Americans already suffering, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to mirror the smallpox outbreak more and more every day.

Although smallpox decimated the Indigenous population, the outbreak resulted in the consolidation of power. During the conquering of the Tenochtitlan, the Spaniards were unable to defeat the Aztec empire before their smallpox epidemic. Without any immunity, this unknown plague spread like wildfire and, "By the time the danger was recognized, the plague was so well established that nothing could halt it"¹. Similar to the COVID-19 pandemic, the general population's lack of recognition resulted in widespread cases throughout the city. Unlike this current global health pandemic, the spread of this disease, combined with the lack of immunity, caused a large percentage of the population to be infected. Smallpox may be deadly for those without resistance, but the death rate of Native Americans in Tenochtitlan came from the destruction of their civilization. Since numerous people fell ill due to the disease, their society came to an abrupt stop where "They could not get up to search for food, and everyone else was too sick to care for them, so they starved to death in their beds"². With their civilization fundamentally "shut down" by smallpox, Tenochtitlan lacked many of the essential services and necessities needed to function correctly. As a result, many Indigenous people died due to the lack

¹ The Siege of Tenochtitlan: The Plague Ravages the City, 93.

² The Siege of Tenochtitlan: The Plague Ravages the City, 93.

of medical care and available resources. This particular phenomenon is strikingly similar to the lack of hospital beds, personal protective equipment, and health care practitioners resulting in deaths from COVID-19. Following the deaths of many Aztecs and the subsequent harm to their civilization, the Spaniards were able to conquer Tenochtitlan successfully. Since this transfer of power occurred, the European invaders have dominated the Indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Despite the COVID-19 crisis being one of many health pandemics in the world's history, this pandemic is worldwide, and many countries have reacted in different manners. The United States is actively coercing my family into exposing us to the virus to sustain our economic well-being. With my sister and uncle on the frontlines of COVID-19, my household is subject to contracting the virus daily. Although other occupations allow their employees the luxury of working from home, my mother and aunt are examples of workers who have nonetheless risked their health and reported to work. As the weeks turn into months, the most privileged sectors of society continue to receive government assistance through the federal stimulus bills. While, on the other hand, marginalized communities must bear this economic burden on their own. This pandemic parallels the smallpox epidemic in the Americas, because of its lasting impact on the structure of inequality. Ultimately, the most vulnerable populations will continuously be exploited by those in power.