

Bush, Congress snatch funds from injured 9/11 workers

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22 June 2005

Ever since September 11, 2001, the Bush administration has invoked the mass killings of that day and, in particular, the heroism of firefighters and other workers who responded to the catastrophe to promote a policy of global militarism and attacks on democratic rights.

Now, nearly four years later, the administration and Congress are preparing to take back \$125 million previously appropriated to aid workers who suffered disabling injuries in the rescue and recovery operation at the World Trade Center site.

Last Thursday, the House Appropriations Committee beat back by a vote of 35 to 28 an attempt by legislators from New York to pass an amendment that would have left the funding in place.

The congressional committee decided to let New York state keep a separate portion of workers compensation funding totaling \$44 million. Initially, the Bush administration had demanded the return of that money as well as part of its fiscal 2006 budget plan. The Republican congressional leadership, however, backed off after it became clear that the funds would have to be pried back from the surviving families of 9/11 victims.

Congress had approved a total package of \$175 million to assist the state of New York in compensating emergency responders, volunteers and construction workers injured at “ground zero.” A report issued last year by the Government Accounting Office concluded that the \$44 million had not been used as specified in this legislation.

The New York State government had funneled it through a crime victims program and a state insurance fund covering public employees as the fastest means to provide aid. In part, the money went to pay for medical and funeral expenses.

The administration and its supporters argue that the \$125 million should be returned because the New York state government’s failure to spend money for two years

proves it doesn’t need it.

“The need is not as great as originally feared and those funds are no longer needed,” declared Bush budget spokesman Scott Milburn.

“I don’t understand why they are sitting on the money if they’ve got the money,” said Congressman Ralph Regula, an Ohio Republican who sits on the Appropriations Committee.

The principal reason that more money has not been spent by the state of New York is that employers—including government agencies—are systematically opposing workers compensation claims filed by those who suffered injury and illness related to conditions at the Trade Center site. In addition, many others, knowing the long delays, harassment and humiliation routinely inflicted on workers seeking such compensation, don’t even bother to apply.

The state has confirmed that more than 10,000 people have filed workers compensation claims, but will not say how many of these applications have been denied.

A document released last week, however, indicates that 9/11-related claims are 10 times more likely to be challenged by employers than other claims. The Injured Workers Pharmacy, a firm that supplies medicine to workers waiting for decisions on compensation claims, provided the figure. The company, which negotiates payments with insurance companies and charges a fee after claims are confirmed, said that it had been forced to turn away 9/11 rescue and recovery workers because so many of their claims had been blocked.

Moreover, there is every indication that the \$125 million is wholly inadequate to cover the long-term needs of workers who suffered injury to both their bodies and minds on September 11 and in the months that followed.

Approximately 40,000 participated directly in the initial rescue efforts following the attacks and in the protracted cleanup operation conducted in the smoldering ruins of

the toppled twin towers. Another 100,000 people worked in the immediate area, with many of them exposed to the toxic cloud of dust and debris—including asbestos, lead and mercury—that enveloped lower Manhattan after the attacks of September 11.

Doctors working with the World Trade Center Worker and Volunteer Medical Screening Program, which has examined approximately 12,000 ground zero workers, estimate that fully half suffer from respiratory problems as a result of their work at the site. A similar percentage of those involved in the initial response to the attacks have experienced post-traumatic stress stemming from what they saw and experienced on September 11, 2001. Many diseases—including cancer from toxic exposure—may not develop until many years later.

“There are many workers who are sick as a result of the events of 9/11 who have not received the medical care and medicine that they desperately need,” said Joel Shufro, executive director of the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (NYCOSH). “Not only is this money needed to provide for them, but there is a great need for government agencies to consider the extraordinary circumstances when making eligibility determinations for compensation.”

Several of these workers traveled to Washington last Thursday to participate in an unsuccessful lobbying effort to convince Congress to leave the funding in place.

Marvin Bethea is a hospital ambulance paramedic who was covered in dust and debris while trying to aid people at the World Trade Center. “It was like a big bucket of dirt thrown down your throat,” he recalled. As a result, he developed severe asthma and high blood pressure and suffered a stroke within weeks of the attack. He has been denied compensation.

“People say 9/11 is four years old and people need to move on. How can we move on when we’re not being taken care of?” Bethea asked at a press conference outside the Capitol building. “President Bush, remember we were already victims of September 11 once,” Bethea added, “Please don’t make us victims twice.”

John Feal, a construction supervisor, lost half of his foot in an accident at ground zero, but was denied a victim’s assistance claim. “This shouldn’t even be an issue,” Feal said. “This is wrong. We shouldn’t have to beg and scrape and plead for workers compensation. The White House is wrong. The administration is wrong. Shame on the president.”

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, Bush used ground zero as a photo opportunity, posing with a

firefighter atop a wrecked fire truck and vowing vengeance over a bullhorn. In 2004, he shocked and offended families of firefighters and others who died at the World Trade Center by airing television campaign ads featuring footage of two firefighters carrying out a stretcher bearing human remains.

A speech given by Bush on the first anniversary of the September 11 attacks, as his administration was preparing the war on Iraq, was typical of the president’s hypocritical rhetoric. “We’ve seen the greatness of America in rescuers who rushed up flights of stairs toward peril,” he declared, “and we continue to see the greatness of America in the care and compassion our citizens show to each other.”

The “care and compassion” shown these rescuers and recovery workers has found its realization in the administration’s depriving them of promised money to compensate them for injuries that in many cases have left them unable to continue working.

The money that is being snatched away from injured workers amounts to less than half of what Washington is spending daily on its war in Iraq. In terms of the \$2.57 trillion federal budget for fiscal 2006, the \$125 million does not even approach a drop in the bucket.

Yet the treatment being meted out to the ground zero workers is only the most blatant example of the attacks that the administration, Congress and state governments are carrying out all over the country. In state after state, “workers compensation reform” legislation is being rammed through state legislatures with the aim of boosting corporate profits by slashing benefits for workers disabled on the job.

That the 9/11 workers, whom the administration opportunistically paraded before the country as heroes, are being abused in the same way is an unmistakable expression of the essential policy of both the Republican administration and the Democratic Party leadership. Nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of the enrichment of the financial elite, and war abroad must be paid for through cutting the living standards and basic benefits of workers at home—including those whose sacrifices were falsely exploited in an attempt to sell the war itself.



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