

Cutting food stamps: The ruthlessness of the American ruling class

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Food assistance benefits for over 45 million Americans will be slashed starting this Friday, in the first-ever nationwide reduction in benefits under the US government's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), popularly known as food stamps.

The cuts total \$11 billion over the next three years and amount on average to a month's worth of food assistance. They will mean yet more privation for millions of working people, including the poorest and most vulnerable members of society—children, elderly people, the unemployed, the disabled and new mothers.

That this brutal cut takes place under conditions of continuing mass unemployment and economic slump, with record numbers of people living in poverty and homelessness and hunger on the rise, testifies to the ruthlessness of the American ruling class. The callous indifference of the media and the entire political establishment, beginning with the Obama White House, to the suffering of broad layers of the population is reflected in their virtual silence on the imminent cutback in benefits.

As far as the corporate-controlled media is concerned, snatching food from the mouths of hungry children is not even worth reporting. As for the politicians, Democrats as well as Republicans are saying virtually nothing because there is a bipartisan agreement to impose the cuts.

Meanwhile, the government bailout of Wall Street and corporate America continues unabated. The Federal Reserve is expected this Wednesday to announce the extension of its \$85 billion-a-month subsidy to the stock market and the banks in the form of its “quantitative easing” money-printing operation. Trillions of dollars have been pumped into the financial markets and interest rates have been kept at near-zero to drive up share values to record highs in the midst of

the deepest crisis in the real economy since the Great Depression.

This channeling of social wealth into the coffers of the super-rich has produced the highest levels of social inequality in nearly a century. The American financial aristocracy is choking on its own wealth. Just last week, *Forbes* magazine reported that the ten highest-earning individuals in the US in 2012 each took in more than \$100 million, with the top two making more than \$1 billion apiece.

The universal claim that there is “no money” to fund social services comes as corporations, awash in cash and profits, systematically avoid taxation. According to a *USA Today* report published Monday, one in nine corporations in the Standard & Poor's 500 stock index paid no taxes last year. Among them are Verizon, which recently imposed new concessions on its workers, and the Murdoch-owned News Corp., which publishes the *Wall Street Journal*. The average effective tax rate on corporations in the S&P 500 was 12.6 percent—barely a third of the nominal corporate tax rate.

The starker indicator of the real state of the US economy in the sixth year of the crisis that erupted in 2008—and the clearest refutation of the official claims of a “recovery”—is the staggering growth in the number of people dependent on food stamps. Their ranks swelled by 70 percent between 2007 and 2012 and they continue to grow.

The food stamp cuts scheduled for this week are the result of the expiration of the 2009 Recovery Act's temporary increase in food stamp benefits. The increase was originally slated to last through 2015, when SNAP benefits are scheduled to rise, so as to ensure that there would be no reduction in benefits.

But in 2010, congressional Democrats used \$14

billion that had been set aside for food stamps to fund other measures, vowing to return the money before the benefit hike expired. With the unspoken sanction of the White House and congressional Democrats, that never happened.

In current negotiations over a new farm bill, the Democratic-controlled Senate is proposing an additional \$4 billion in cuts to the food stamp program over the next decade. The Republican-controlled House of Representatives has passed a bill that would cut \$40 billion from SNAP and force adults between 18 and 50 to either work or attend work training in order to reapply for benefits, as well as instituting drug-testing for recipients.

As always, the more draconian Republican proposal serves as the baseline for a “compromise” in which the Democrats, even as they posture as defenders of the poor, agree to increase the scale of cuts to a level that was likely agreed upon in advance by the White House and the two big business parties.

The slashing of food stamp benefits comes just weeks after a 16-day government shutdown that set the stage for a bipartisan deal to extend most of the social cuts included in the \$1.3 trillion “sequestration” process that began last March. Those cuts are on top of another \$1 trillion in cuts pushed through during the 2011 crisis over the US debt ceiling.

On January 1, the federal program that provides extended unemployment benefits for the long-term jobless is slated to expire, throwing millions more into poverty and outright destitution.

All of this is preparation for a bipartisan assault on the core social programs that date from the New Deal of the 1930s and the Great Society of the 1960s—Social Security and Medicare.

What is involved here is a social counterrevolution, the aim of which is to uproot and destroy every social gain won by the working class over the past century—from pensions and health benefits to public education and child labor laws. The bankruptcy of Detroit, which is being used to gut city workers’ pensions and strip them of their health coverage, along with the sell-off of public assets such as the art work at the world famous Detroit Institute of Arts, is a foretaste of what is coming nationally—and internationally.

This is what capitalism has to offer the working class—mass poverty, accompanied by ever more bloody

wars and increasing political repression.

The working class can halt this attack and defend its basic social rights—to a job, a decent wage, nutrition, education, health care, pensions, access to culture—only by mobilizing its vast social power in a political struggle against both parties of Wall Street and the ruling class whose interests they slavishly defend.

The resources needed to provide a secure job and decent standard of living for every person exist in abundance, but they can be mobilized and expanded only by putting an end to the economic despotism of the corporate-financial elite. The corporations and banks must be taken out of private hands and transformed into public institutions under the democratic control of the working population. The ill-gotten wealth of the financial parasites must be expropriated and used to meet social needs.

The wealth produced by the working class must be used for the benefit of society as a whole, not the personal accumulation of wealth by a tiny elite. This is the program of social equality and socialism, fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.



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