

Barack Obama's Christmas gift to workers

Washington, DC workers speak out on federal budget cuts

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In the aftermath of the US Senate's passage of the fiscal budget for 2014, the media has praised the so-called bipartisan spirit of Congressional Democrats and Republicans in passing the bill. The agreement will end federal extended unemployment benefits, cutting off 1.3 million from assistance days after Christmas. Also affected are members of the federal workforce, who will be forced to contribute additional funds toward their retirement with no increased benefits seen in return.

In addition, the bill also includes over \$30 billion in cuts to Medicare, with more promised in future budgetary negotiations. Finally, the budget makes permanent over \$1 trillion in cuts implemented during last winter's federal "sequester."

Heavily affected by the bipartisan attack are workers in Washington, DC and its surrounding suburbs, where the federal government is a major employer, both directly and through a huge growth in private contracting. In a region long claimed to be a "recession-proof" because of government employment, workers face some of the steepest levels of inequality in the United States. Currently, the top 5 percent of D.C.'s income earners bring home nearly \$500,000 annually, while the bottom fifth survives on less than \$10,000 a year.

The availability of affordable housing in the city has declined steeply, with rental units charging less than \$750 per month falling by nearly 20 percent, from 65,000 in 2000 to 49,000 in 2008. This trend has only accelerated since then, with new high rises being constructed in the city on a daily basis, aimed at accommodating the rising population of wealthy residents moving into the city. (See "Widening social

inequality in US capital")

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers near an employment assistance office in the impoverished southeast region of the city about the impact the budget bill's passage will have on them and their families.

Danielle, a worker at the employment office, spoke about the cuts to unemployment assistance while waiting to catch a bus. "I think these things are wrong," she said. She asked, "If the government is printing the money [in reference to the Federal Reserve's policy of pumping money into Wall Street] then why is unemployment being cut?" When reporters responded, saying that these funds were being given to financial institutions to cover debts they had incurred at the expense of the population, Danielle said, "Why do they get to do these cuts when they aren't affected by it? They don't care about workers' needs because they are already set."

Asked about her thoughts on President Obama, Danielle stated that she had "supported Obama because he is the first black president and a great speaker, but he's not a representative of our community." When asked if there was any part of the Obama administration's platform that she supported, she responded, "No, he's a puppet. He talks the good game to get there, but once in office things don't change." Danielle added, "Obama has to go."

Danielle said she intended to print copies of the WSWs leaflet reporters had given to her to hand out to her coworkers.

Jerry, a former security guard who has been unemployed for the past three months, told WSWs reporters, "I know a lot of people being affected by the

cuts. I see everybody coming in this [unemployment] line, people of all different races now. It used to just be black people in it, but now I see black, white, and Latino.” He added, “People are either rich or poor, there is no more middle class.”

Jerry also expressed disdain for the policies of the Obama administration, saying, “I think he is a puppet, someone else is pulling the strings. There is a lot more going than just these cuts. They are always taking from us to fund the military; they’re always going somewhere to invade, but who wouldn’t fight back? That is their land. They are only defending themselves, but we say they are the bad guys. Someone else is in control of Obama. That’s why you don’t see them funding public schools.”

Jerry added, “They make it seem they are all for the people. It is not like that. Democrats and Republicans are all on the same side. They act like they are representing the public, but then go on vacation, drink margaritas and smoke cigars together.”

Alan, an unemployed worker waiting for a bus with his nephew, echoed sentiments of others in regard to the budgetary agreement. “They say they came to an agreement, but it’s the same thing. They don’t care about us, they don’t look out for the little people.” When asked about Obama, Alan responded, “The financial elite calls the shots, he has to go along with what they say. Somebody has got to step up to the plate. They are renovating D.C., knowing we can’t afford it.”

An older gentleman passing by said, “The unemployed need more benefits. I only have two more checks to go.” He said that the new budget had effectively eliminated several months of benefits that he had expected to receive. A lady interjected, “There are buildings going up, but no jobs.”

“What are the unemployed supposed to do?” asked Gregory, a retiree. “They worked for those benefits, now who is going to take care of them? They will become desperate and will start robbing and stealing.” When reporters made a reference to the Detroit bankruptcy, Gregory stated, “If I worked for 30 years, and I lose my job and I don’t get my benefits, that’s criminal. You cut the little man out; it’s a Catch 22, where do they go? We already paid them.” He continued, “I worked 42 years on one job, and they only gave me \$1,300 in Social Security a month. Years

ago people could retire on Social Security. Where is the money now?”



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