

Washington, DC workers speak on budget cuts and inequality

Our reporters
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The cut off of cash assistance for the long-term unemployed last December has left nearly two million people in the United States with little or no means of supporting themselves. In the delayed passage of the 2014 budget, Democrats in Congress dropped any demand to extend the jobless benefits.

In recent discussions on renewing these benefits, Senate Democrats have sought to promote an image of their party as defenders of the unemployed and opponents of social inequality. However, their proposal to extend the program for five months is only a temporary scheme aimed at bolstering the party's prospects in the 2014 mid-term elections.

Cuts to social spending implemented by both parties have worsened conditions in Washington DC, where 20 percent of the population lives at or below the federal poverty line. Wards 7 and 8, which comprise the southeastern section of the city, have been hit the hardest by such measures. This was illustrated last month in a flurry of reports noting record levels of homelessness among the city's population. (See, "Homeless population in US capital up 135 percent from last year")

On Sunday, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to residents and workers in the nation's capital about the cuts in federal jobless benefits for the long-term unemployed. Many saw this as a calculated attack on their living conditions and had few if any illusions about either political party representing their interests.

Tiz, a young man who lives in a southeast neighborhood, told the reporters workers and the poor could only expect the worst from the government. "The way I see it, the rich are trying to just wipe out the poor and the lower classes. They want to erase us. Things are going to get real ugly in this country real soon. You

can't just take and take and expect the people you're taking from not to do anything about it."

Tiz stressed the social trauma inflicted on the area by unemployment and cuts to social services. "Really, there are a lot of scars in this part of the city. I see how it affects people's minds. If you bump into someone on the street, they might shoot you. Not because they're angry at you, but because they live in this kind of hell day in and day out."

Tiz found it hard to understand why the rich were not even willing to offer "breadcrumbs" anymore, saying, "I believe you when you say it's going to take a revolution to change things. Petitions and protests don't do anything, and we all know how the government's giving itself more power to step in and crush people who challenge things."

Joy, currently unemployed, said she sees "how the government wants to cut everything we depend on to live." She said she has seen reductions to food stamp assistance, unemployment benefits, and TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) payments.

Grafton, a cook who is only offered limited work hours, talked about the necessity of building collective resistance against such cuts. "There has to be a way we can get together and voice our opinions and really fight these kinds of things. We should plan a meeting and try to get the mayor to do something about this mess."

When reporters pointed to Washington, DC Mayor Vincent Gray's failure to do anything about alleviating growing poverty and homelessness in the District of Columbia and his recent comments about ending the city's "handout culture," Grafton agreed the Democratic mayor was part of the problem. "I guess I'm just used to thinking old thoughts. But if you all organize a meeting of your own, I want to be there."

Evelyn, who is unemployed and receives food

stamps, remarked, “Of course, these cuts shouldn’t be made. I agree the Democrats are bad too. They think we’re blind or something just because they try to rob us blind. Nothing has changed under Obama.”

Evelyn added she wanted to see “workers, the poor, the unemployed, and the sick” organize a way to fight back against the Republicans and the Democrats.

John, a government employee, expressed frustration over the jobs crisis in DC. Pointing to widespread unemployment where he lives, he commented, “A job is hard to come by these days. It seems like you can’t find one unless you know someone.” He immediately connected social concerns where he lives to international developments. “Look at countries like Egypt and the Ukraine. They had people rise up. It’s going to happen here too.”

A WSW reporter clarified that genuine political outrage in Ukraine had been exploited and used to bring right-wing elements and fascists to power, and that the Obama Administration had supported these groups. John replied, “Are you for real? That’s crazy. That reminds me of his drone strikes and how they took out al-Awlaki,” a reference to the US citizen, Anwar al-Awlaki, killed by the CIA in Yemen in 2011.

“You know, for a long time, I used to think about all these problems in terms of race,” John added. “But now I’m beginning to see that race is only part of the issue. The real conflict is about economics and class.”



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