

New reports document declining life expectancy and worsening health of US workers

Jerry White
24 October 2017

Three recent reports provide new data on the worsening social crisis in America.

According to the annual update of the Society of Actuaries' (SOA) mortality improvement scale, released last Friday, life expectancy for 65-year-old men and women declined from 85.8 and 87.8 years to 85.6 and 87.6 years respectively between 2014 and 2015, the most recent years available. The 1.2 percent jump in the mortality rate was the first year-over-year increase since 2005, and the first by more than one percentage point since 1980.

Previous reports noted that life expectancy at birth also declined in the US between 2014 and 2015, the first decline since 1993, at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Someone born in 2015 is expected to live to 78.8, down from 78.9 in 2014.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the decline was due to an increase in eight of the ten leading causes of death in the US, including heart disease, chronic lower respiratory diseases, unintentional injuries, stroke, Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, kidney disease and suicide.

Another study by a team of researchers from the University of Michigan found that middle-age workers ten years away from collecting Social Security retirement benefits are in poorer health than prior generations when they were in their 50s. This includes higher rates of poor cognition, such as memory and thinking ability, and at least one limitation on the ability to perform a basic daily living task such as shopping for groceries, dressing and bathing, taking medications or getting out of bed. The percentage with such limitations jumped from 8.8 percent of people who retired at 65 to 12.5 percent of current Americans

ages 56 to 57 who will retire in a decade.

Americans born in 1960 will not be able to collect their full Social Security benefits until they reach 67, instead of 65, because of the increase in the retirement age enacted by the Reagan administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress in 1983. At the time, they claimed the change was necessary because Americans were living longer and would see continual health improvements in their old age.

The opposite is now the case. "We found that younger cohorts are facing more burdensome health issues, even as they have to wait until an older age to retire, so they will have to do so in poorer health," said Robert Schoeni, an economist and demographer who co-authored the University of Michigan study.

Inequality among seniors in the US is among the worst in the developed world, according to a report issued last week by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which found that the gap between wealthy and low-income seniors is wider in the US than in all but two of the thirty-five OECD member nations—Mexico and Chile. While the rich in America live longer and very comfortably, the poor are working longer, dying younger and increasingly living with pain and ill health.

These are but the latest in a succession of reports documenting higher death rates, higher infant and maternal mortality and declining life expectancy for broad sections of the working population. Meanwhile, Donald Trump routinely hails the record-setting stock market boom as proof of the "success" of his administration.

There is, in fact, an intimate connection between the spectacular rise in the Dow, the ever-greater enrichment

of the top 5 and 1 percent of the country, and the destruction of decent-paying jobs, the lowering of wages and the gutting of social programs. The corporate-financial oligarchy is benefiting from the impoverishment of broad sections of the population.

As *CNN Money* reported, “Declining health and life expectancy are good news for one constituency: Pension plans, which must send a monthly check to retirees for as long as they live.” In fact, the health care policies of both political parties are designed to lower life expectancy for the working class and thereby decrease the sums “wasted,” in the eyes of the ruling class, on retirement benefits and health care for workers who have ceased to be a source of profit.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in November 2013, citing think tank studies on the “crisis” resulting from America’s aging population, underlying the health care counterrevolution set in motion by Obamacare “is a basic concern of the American ruling class, a concern that is generally left unstated—namely, that people in the end are simply living too long. The advances of modern medicine have extended lives, often significantly beyond the age of retirement.

“For the political strategists of the corporate and financial elite, these years of retirement and medical care are not seen as a good, but as a source of costs that must be slashed, so that they can take that money. This is to be accomplished either by raising the retirement age, by lowering life expectancy so that people die earlier, or both.”

The scenes of hundreds of low-wage workers and retirees lining up in Charleston, West Virginia over the weekend for free dental and vision care—in some cases for their first treatment in years—underscores the scale of the social crisis. In McDowell County, part of the depressed coal mining region of southern West Virginia, life expectancy for males is 63.9 years, only slightly ahead of Haiti, Ghana and Papua New Guinea, due to chronic poverty, ill-health, suicide and drug and alcohol abuse.

The reports on life expectancy, health, etc. provide a measure of the drastic social retrogression resulting from the crisis of the capitalist system—a system that is incompatible with the satisfaction of basic social needs.

The working class must take matters into its own hands. What is necessary is a frontal assault on entrenched wealth and the political monopoly exercised

by the corporate-financial oligarchy through its two right-wing political parties. The wealth of the financial parasites must be expropriated and the major corporations and banks turned into publicly-owned and democratically controlled utilities, so that the wealth produced by the working class can be used to provide jobs, education, housing and free, high-quality health care for all.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact