

Without work and regular paycheck millions of Americans at risk of eviction as rent comes due

Jacob Crosse
2 April 2020

The beginning of the month brings with it the socially unproductive and unnecessary practice of rent collection for housing, a source of conflict and anxiety for millions of workers and students. Faced with reduced hours, or being completely out of work due to the coronavirus pandemic, some workers have begun to organize rent strikes while many others will forgo their monthly payments to their landlords due to missed paychecks.

Thirty-three states and the District of Columbia have issued “shelter in place” or “stay at home” directives, affecting over 270 million people, shuttering restaurants, bars and other businesses putting millions out of work. Unemployment is expected to soar. While necessary to stem the spread of the virus, in capitalist society, corporations, including real estate holding firms, have used the shutdown to swindle billions of taxpayer dollars while providing no rent or mortgage relief.

In a country in which 33 percent of the population lives pay-to-paycheck and nearly 45 percent have zero dollars in their savings accounts according to a 2019 *GOBankingrates* survey, the loss of multiple weeks of work means many are left with choosing between essential items such as food or medicine or paying rent. In New York City, the epicenter of the outbreak, the *New York Times* reported up to 40 percent of tenants will forgo rent payments this month because they have no choice.

While corporations and stockholders have been given access to trillions of dollars through the unanimously passed CARES act, the act only provided two benefits for working people: A one-time means tested \$1,200 check with several stipulations and the expansion of

unemployment benefits for 13 weeks with \$600 added per week to the benefits.

In cities such as New York and Los Angeles where “low income housing” is considered anything below \$1,000 per month, these pitiful benefits are wholly insufficient and will be weeks late. The Treasury Department isn’t expected to begin mailing out checks and distributing direct deposits into bank accounts until April 17. The Treasury also announced that low-income Social Security recipients would have to fill out a tax return in order to be eligible, meaning millions won’t receive their funds.

A further barrier was also erected by the government for immigrant families. If one member of the household doesn’t have a social security number, the entire household is disqualified from receiving a check. This will leave millions of undocumented workers and their families with no relief whatsoever.

In the US, new unemployment claims exceeded 3.2 million last week and are expected to top 5 million this week. The tidal wave of applicants following massive layoffs in the travel, tourist and service industry has caused hours-long backups on state unemployment phonelines and websites, preventing thousands from completing the labyrinthine process in order to access desperately needed funds.

The US government has left it up to individual states to pass their own legislation regarding eviction practices. While several state governors, including in California, Washington and New York, have enacted 90-day “eviction moratoriums,” there is nothing to prevent landlords from evicting tenants after the moratoriums have ended if they are unable to pay potentially months of back rent. No rent freezes been

enacted.

California Governor Gavin Newsom's eviction moratorium still allows landlords to begin the eviction process if rent is missed, meaning as soon as the moratorium is lifted millions could be served eviction notices.

In order to qualify for the moratorium, tenants are required to declare in writing that they can't pay due to the COVID-19 pandemic with supporting documentation such as a layoff notice from their employer. For the millions of Californians who are part of the "gig" economy, and technically classified as contractors, they won't be able to provide any documentation, nor will the millions of migrant or immigrant workers who have been let go from their "non-traditional" jobs.

This has left millions in a precarious situation, unable to work, unable to pay rent and not eligible for relief. This has provided an opportunity for workers forced to stay at home to use the internet and social media to begin organizing rent strikes in major cities.

This book compiles the most critical programmatic statements, polemics, scientific analyses, interviews, and news articles published by the World Socialist Web Site on the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a social and political chronology of this world historic event based on a Marxist and Trotskyist perspective.

In New York City, tenants with the 1234 Pacific Street Tenant Association formally went on strike Tuesday after their request for a 50 percent reduction in rent payments beginning April 1 and a 100 percent reduction for those that had lost employment was rejected by the management company. Isaac Schwartz, the head officer of Pacific Management, the company which owns the building, declined to meet with the association to discuss an equitable bargain, advising the group that both tenants *and* landlords were "having a hard time due to the COVID-19 pandemic."

According to the tenant association, Schwartz is the owner of 50 rental properties in the city and controls a portfolio "valued at \$87 million."

Tenants have begun flying white sheets in solidarity with renters and homeowners unable to afford monthly payments in cities across the US including in Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Chicago, New Orleans, Austin and Minneapolis.

In an interview for the *Guardian*, Los Angeles

resident Melissa Reyes, 25, explained why she is withholding her rent: "We are all suffering, but we shouldn't have to suffer to this extent, this is about survival and necessity."

Phillip Elliott, 27, a Toronto resident and freelance writer and editor succinctly explained in an interview with *Toronto Life* why his landlord, in one of the most expensive cities in the world, wouldn't be paid this month: "Coronavirus has exposed the flaws in our cannibalistic system of unrestrained capitalism. Pre-pandemic, my wife and I could barely pay the rent for our tiny bachelor. Some weeks, we rationed food. Now, one of my clients cancelled a major project when she lost her job, and my wife lost her serving job—we're both without income. Extortionate rents in Toronto mean we have no savings. Now we don't know what the future holds other than we can't pay rent. We understand landlords have bills, too. Rather than punching down at the poor, landlords should pressure government to cancel rent and mortgage costs during this crisis. We live in a society, not an economy: we're all in this together."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact