

Reality of American capitalism exposed: Millions line up for food aid as pandemic spreads

Niles Niemuth
13 April 2020

“... in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.”—John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, April 1939

The rapid spread of the coronavirus in the United States is revealing the consequences of decades of ruling-class policy, which have left the center of world capitalism completely unprepared for a significant health care emergency. At the same time, the economic crisis brought on by the pandemic is exposing the reality of widespread poverty and insecurity.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, breadlines became a symbol of social distress. Such scenes are reemerging in the form of massive line-ups for emergency food assistance in every state and community.

On Thursday, 6,000 cars lined up for five miles at a food bank drive-through in San Antonio, Texas. Some families arrived 12 hours early to ensure they received some aid. In Inglewood, California, south of Los Angeles, 5,000 cars lined up to receive food on Friday. Food bank usage in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has increased by 543 percent in recent days.

Those who are lining up are not just the poorest workers, who typically rely on food banks in hard times, but also broader sections of the working class and middle class families who have never had to rely on such aid in their lives.

“I’ve never had to go to a food pantry in my life,” Shanell Gray, a recently laid off hotel worker, told the *Columbus Dispatch* at a food distribution in Ohio’s capital city this weekend. “This just went really fast. I

was able to pay my rent for this month. May is the struggle.”

Nearly 17 million workers have filed for unemployment in the last three weeks, the highest number ever recorded. Even this figure, however, underestimates the scale of layoffs. Millions more are either ineligible for benefits or have been unable to apply due to overloaded websites and call centers.

The vast majority of the population has yet to receive any financial assistance. Just 10,000 people had received a direct deposit to their bank account as of Friday, and most states still have not established a means of sending out the \$600 weekly increase in unemployment for four months.

While trillions have been handed over to the banks and gigantic corporations—with no requirement that they wait in lines—every obstacle is being put in place to prevent workers from getting anything and to cut off aid as soon as possible.

Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia, son of the late arch-reactionary Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, has done everything in his power to limit payments, including by excluding gig workers who use phone apps to find work and making it easier for companies to avoid paying sick and family leave.

“We want workers to have work, not to become dependent on the unemployment system,” Scalia declared in an article posted last week on Fox Business News. The comments mirrored Trump’s outraged response to the fact that “we’re paying people not to go to work.”

The consequences will be catastrophic. According to one survey, nearly three-quarters of all workers live paycheck to paycheck. Almost three in 10 American

adults have no savings. With so many hanging on by their fingernails before the pandemic, the often-individual experience that one missed paycheck spells personal disaster has become a mass phenomenon.

Already, one-third of Americans missed paying rent in the first week of April, a figure that is sure to be higher in May as millions deplete their savings accounts to get by without a paycheck. If they are not immediately being evicted, due to a patchwork of local and state level moratoriums, then millions will eventually be thrown into the streets because they cannot afford to pay back the rent they will owe when workplaces reopen.

If the promised stimulus money does arrive from the federal government, it will count for little. The one-time \$1,200 payment will not cover the cost of rent in most cases, let alone food and other essentials. The stopgap measures included in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act passed by Republicans and Democrats last month are woefully inadequate to meet social need.

While so many are hungry for food, the anarchy of the capitalist market has been exposed by the fact that farmers are destroying crops of staple foods as orders and prices fall. No measures have been taken to redistribute and process food for consumption even as stores struggle to keep up with demand for basic food items such as milk and eggs.

Instead eggs are smashed by the tens of thousands, countless tons of green beans mulched and plowed into fields, onions buried by the tens of thousands of pounds in trenches to rot. Five percent of the country's milk supply has been dumped, and it could rise to ten percent with the continued closure of schools, restaurants and hotels.

The massive economic devastation that is unfolding will be exploited by the Trump administration to agitate for a return to work, creating conditions in which those who are unable to find work or refuse to endanger their lives are cut off from unemployment and other aid.

The working class, however, will have its say. Over the past several days, worried comments have begun to appear on the likelihood of mass social unrest.

Bloomberg editorial board member Andreas Kluth warned Saturday that the pandemic will lead to "social revolutions," which the ruling elites must be prepared to confront.

Kluth explains that countless Americans simply do not have the option to stay home to avoid the coronavirus, putting them at risk of getting sick or infecting their families. He notes that the situation is even worse for the millions who live in slums in countries like South Africa and India, where social distancing is not an option, handwashing is impossible without running water and there are no emergency supplies of face masks.

"In this context, it would be naïve to think that, once this medical emergency is over, either individual countries or the world can carry on as before. Anger and bitterness will find new outlets... In time, these passions could become new populist or radical movements, intent on sweeping aside whatever *ancien régime* they define as the enemy."

Capitalism is being exposed to a degree without precedent in modern history. Workers must draw the lessons. A system that funnels trillions to a handful of financial parasites while condemning millions to poverty and death must be swept aside.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)