Washington D.C. legislature endorses limited rent relief, bars assistance to undocumented immigrants

Our reporter
18 April 2020

On April 7, the Council of the District of Columbia voted unanimously in favor of a limited rent freeze for the duration of the coronavirus crisis plus 30 days. Far from addressing the dire crisis bearing down upon the nation's capital, however, the Council's emergency omnibus bill did practically nothing to offer relief to workers struggling from the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The only actual rent relief offered in the legislation is available solely for tenants whose landlords request a deferment of their mortgage payments on the leased properties, with tenants receiving "proportionate" savings in their rent, although they would have to pay this back at some point. The Council also voted to create a 90-day mortgage deferment program for the holders of residential or commercial mortgages that lenders must accept if the mortgage holders request a deferment.

The Council also banned utility shut-offs, calls from debt collectors and vehicle repossession during the pandemic and allowing "compassionate release" of certain non-violent offenders. The bill approved various other measures such as funding hospitals, waiving some graduation requirements, and other items relating to the public health emergency.

In the days since March 30, when Washington, D.C. and the states of Maryland and Virginia announced stay-at-home orders, the number of confirmed cases of coronavirus in the District has exploded from 495 to 2,354 as of Friday. In the same period, cases in Maryland went from 1,660 to 10,791 and in Virginia, 1,250 to 6,919. According to the *Washington Post*, a total of 750 people in the region have lost their lives to COVID-19.

The stay-at-home orders have resulted in the sudden closure of DC's restaurant and entertainment industries, two major sources of employment in a city that has consistently ranked among the most expensive to live in the United States. According to the Council for Community and Economic Research's Cost of Living Index in the second quarter of 2019, the median monthly rent in DC was $3,002, while the median home price was $1,069,329.

The suburban areas circling the US capital are similarly expensive, with Arlington, Virginia and Bethesda, Maryland also considered to have extremely high costs of living.

In contrast, thousands of the region's residents, working in hospitality industries such as restaurants, hotels and theaters, along with the thousands working in the "gig economy," struggle to pay their monthly bills. The District is also home to a vast informal economy of workers who are paid in cash, from dishwashers and bartenders to housekeepers and street vendors. Many of these workers now find themselves unemployed or their places of work shuttered.

One of these workers, a street vendor named Reina Sosa, who sells fruit outside the Columbia Heights Metro Station, told the *Post,* in Spanish, "We don't have money to pay for the rent or lights or gas," because her business has been deemed non-essential amid the pandemic.

For this latter group, the city legislature had nothing to offer in its supposed "relief" legislation. Without official pay stubs, workers cannot apply for unemployment benefits. Similarly, workers without documented United States citizenship and Social Security numbers are cut off from receiving

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unemployment.

After having initially promised to provide emergency cash payouts and special unemployment insurance to DC's large community of undocumented immigrants, the exclusion of any assistance to this group caused an immediate uproar from the public. Seeking to wave off the impact of the loss of employment to the undocumented, Council Chair Phil Mendelson, a Democrat, said, "Those discussions are ongoing, looking at alternatives for how we can find dollars and provide some assistance to undocumented workers, so that issue is not being ignored."

Mendelson's tepid response exposes the disgraceful state of the Democratic Party and its leadership. Far from having to fight to move legislation through the Council, the Democratic Party controls 10 of its 13 seats, two others being nominally independent and one seat being vacant.

This is further evidenced by the fact that the emergency legislation passed last week includes an authorization for the District to borrow as much as $500 million to ensure liquidity at a time when sales tax revenues have cratered. And yet the Council could find no money for the most basic unemployment support for all residents, including undocumented workers and those with non-traditional incomes.

According to the American Immigrant Council, as of 2017, roughly 26,000 immigrants in Washington, D.C., or roughly 25 percent of the city's immigrant population, were undocumented.

Indeed, the Democratic Party-controlled Council left the job of solving workers' problems to big business. Spying an easy public relations opportunity as well as a way to hold on to a reserve labor supply if restaurants and nightclubs reopen, Events DC, a quasi-public entity that owns the Washington Convention Center and two sports stadiums, among other venues, announced last Thursday it will provide $15 million out of reserves meant for disaster relief to support hospitality workers and undocumented immigrants.

The chair of the board at Events DC, Max Brown, told the *Post*, "A large number of our workers in restaurants and hotels are undocumented workers and it's an important group in our city who are valued members of our communities. And folks are in dire need right now."

Like so many other examples with the coronavirus pandemic, the viral disease has exposed the economic disease of capitalism. The levels of stark inequality are now preventing capitalism from providing even the most basic support to the population in the midst of a historic crisis.

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