

Chicago mayor appoints corporate leaders to Economic Recovery Task Force

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On Monday morning, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot toured a COVID-19 testing site with actor and activist Sean Penn. Penn's nonprofit organization Community Organized Relief Effort, formerly a Haitian 2010 earthquake relief agency, is financing the erection of testing sites in Chicago and around the US "focused on serving vulnerable and underserved communities, including low-income groups, communities of color, first responders and essential workers," according to the agency's website.

The leadership of Penn's CORE includes the Clinton Foundation's disaster response specialist Greg Milne and pro-business school reform official and former candidate for Chicago mayor Paul Vallas, whose campaign in the 2019 election the actor supported.

As its infection and death rates continue to slowly climb, Illinois has begun a reopening of businesses with some social distancing measures in place. The back-to-work policy will have disastrous consequences everywhere it is being implemented.

Reports indicate more than one million have applied for unemployment in Illinois. Small business relief has been limited and slow. Chicago officials made \$5,000 loans to almost 1,000 micro-businesses, and a \$100 million "resiliency" fund approved only 316 loans, totaling about \$12 million, with an additional 268 loans in the final stages, according to *Crain's*.

Democratic leaders fear that the public health and economic impacts of the pandemic are exposing and worsening the poverty and inequality that color every facet of American life—from employment, health care, housing and food security to education, childcare and access to the internet—stoking social opposition that will not be contained by the myriad community groups and the trade unions that have historically kept workers yoked to the oldest existing capitalist party.

In the wake of decades of deindustrialization and cuts to social services and transportation, cities like Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee and New Orleans are seeing the highest numbers of COVID-19 infections and deaths in working-class African-American communities. Chicago also has a high rate of infections and deaths among its large Hispanic population.

The official response to the horrific consequences of the destruction of working-class living standards has been to promote the politics of identity, diversity and "inclusion."

On April 23, Lightfoot announced the creation of the Chicago Economic Recovery Task Force, to be co-led by herself and **Sam Skinner**, the former president of Commonwealth Edison and one-time transportation secretary under President George H.W. Bush. The 81-year old Republican is an experienced hand in corporate management and capitalist disaster response. The mayor's office

touted his experience during Hurricane Hugo and the San Francisco earthquake, both in 1989, and the bombing of a Pan Am flight over Scotland in 1988.

He served as president of Commonwealth Edison for five years in the 1990s and led US Freightways from 2000 to 2003. Skinner overhauled ground transportation policy nationally in the Bush administration before being appointed to serve as the White House chief of staff.

One *Washington Post* commentator wrote of Skinner's role in disaster response: "Skinner became Bush's favored trouble-shooter, the man who could be trusted to handle things and make a telegenic show of concern." In 1989, as a strike of machinists at Eastern Airlines was gaining support from workers across the transportation industry, including rail workers considering a sympathy strike, Skinner threatened to intervene to break the strike, declaring that labor unions would not "hold the economy hostage." If the strike became widespread, he threatened, the Bush administration would take action "to ensure that this country never faces such a peril again."

In introducing Skinner's appointment, Lightfoot stated, "I have known Sam for over 30 years. He is a friend, a confidant and most importantly knows and loves Chicago."

In announcing the task force, Lightfoot invoked the memory of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and two world wars, declaring that despite the destruction caused by the pandemic, Chicago would emerge "larger, stronger and more powerful than ever before." She then declared the initiative to be "nothing less than the most breathtaking recovery effort our city has ever seen."

It is clear from these statements and the task force appointments that a social crime is being prepared in Chicago.

There is no question that this task force will prepare the way for Lightfoot and the Democratic Party to pursue cuts and corporate handouts as large as or larger than all those carried out by her predecessors. States and cities are seeing their revenues plummet. But no mention was made of the billions being provided each week to the financial markets at the federal level when Lightfoot announced Monday afternoon an anticipated \$1 billion budget deficit for the next year.

She issued a direct warning of cuts and tax increases to come: "If we don't get additional help from the federal government, we are going to be in a world of hurt, there's no two ways about it... The last thing I want to do is have to raise property taxes, for the obvious reasons. It's the third rail anyway, but people are really up against it. Raising property taxes would be adding insult to injury. Then probably next in line as a last, last, last resort is furloughs and layoffs. Can I promise you none of those things will happen? No, I can't."

The task force is made up of working groups led by major figures in the region's corporate-financial oligarchy and its political machine, including the AFL-CIO.

Melody Hobson is co-CEO of Ariel Investments and vice-chair of Starbucks Corporation. She once led the board of DreamWorks Animation. Ariel Investments claims to be the largest minority-owned investment firm. Last year, Lightfoot appointed Hobson to lead World Business Chicago, the city's "public-private" development agency. Hobson is married to billionaire film director George Lucas. Ariel founder John Rogers and Co-CEO Hobson were active in the planning and fundraising for Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign.

Richard Edelman, corporate leader of Edelman public relations and marketing, has been appointed by Lightfoot to "tell the story of the diversity, strength and resiliency of our 77 communities." Edelman claims to be the largest public relations firm by revenue. Its political and corporate clients include the government of Saudi Arabia, Walmart and the Keystone XL Pipeline.

Jennifer Scanlon is the chairwoman of the Commercial Club of Chicago, the premier business organization in Chicago. Scanlon is president of Underwriters Laboratories, the product safety certification company.

Karen Freeman Wilson is a former mayor of Gary, Indiana and current leader of the Chicago Urban League. Freeman Wilson, who endorsed Bloomberg in the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries, was Indiana's highest-paid mayor while leading one of the state's poorest cities. Gary is home to the US Steel works and the Arcelor Mittal Burns Harbor and Gary plate plants. More than one-third of its residents live under the federal poverty line, according to 2018-19 census reports.

In taking her position as head of the Chicago Urban League, Freeman Wilson told WTTW's "Chicago Tonight" program that there is a long-standing problem of "two Chicagos," referring to the extremes of inequality and poverty that have worsened dramatically in recent years. She said that her leadership at the Urban League is an opportunity to help "young entrepreneurs, some who might choose to do business in criminal markets, to do business in legal markets."

Bob Reiter is the president of the Chicago Federation of Labor, the third largest central labor council of the pro-business AFL-CIO. Reiter claims credit for the COBRA provision in the HEROES Act legislation passed by House Democrats last week. The measure, which has no chance of being passed by the Republican-controlled Senate, includes \$1 trillion in funding to state and local governments, whose tax revenues have been decimated due to the lockdown and mass layoffs.

The bill does not raise taxes on corporations or the rich, and again excludes some 12 million undocumented workers from a fresh round of stimulus checks. It also includes bailouts for corporate lobbyists, landlords and mortgage servicers, but does not extend Medicare to laid-off workers who lose their employer-sponsored health insurance. Instead, it provides billions in subsidies to private insurance companies via COBRA.

The trade unions are working with business leaders in the back-to-work drive. The UAW, for example, is working to shift responsibility for maintaining health and safety from automakers to the worker's own "personal responsibility." Reiter replaced Jorge Ramirez as head of the labor council. Ramirez was recruited to the asset management firm GCM Grosvenor by investment banker and Democratic Party fundraiser Michael Sacks.

Ai-Jen Poo is executive director of the National Domestic Worker's

Alliance. She is also a founder of the political group Supermajority, co-founded with Black Lives Matter leader Alicia Garza and Planned Parenthood's Cecile Richards to recruit women for political activism in the Democratic Party.

Roberto Herencia is chairman of Byline Bank, a small business lender in the region.

Evelyn Diaz is president of Heartland Alliance, a nonprofit that intervenes in the circumstances of immigrants and refugees and operates detention and residential facilities. Diaz is expected to lead the Barack Obama Foundation's "inclusion council." Heartland Alliance has been picketed for detaining immigrant children and youth rounded up in the Trump administration's deportations. Complaints about the organization's involvement in detention and deportation have included mistreatment of children separated from their families, with reports that troubled children are administered psychotropic drugs that interfere with their learning and socialization.

The mayor has also emphasized regional coordination. Appointments in that connection include Lightfoot's 2019 mayoral race opponent, Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle, and the board chairman of neighboring DuPage County, Daniel Cronin.

Also on the task force are executives of an urban farming organization, Grow Greater Englewood, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Lightfoot's initiative is not unique, and Democrats are leading the effort to invite the country's billionaires to head up the future development of its major cities. In New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that Microsoft founder and "philanthropist" Bill Gates, who funded nationwide school privatization initiatives under the George W. Bush and Obama administrations, and former Google CEO Eric Schmidt will be brought in to "reimagine" New York's economy, healthcare and school systems.

The six "democratic socialist" aldermen on the City Council have signed onto the "Right to Recovery" program of United Working Families, a front group of the Chicago Teachers Union and Service Employees International Union that works with factions of the Democratic Party, including the Democratic Socialists of America, and Democratic-allied activist organizations like Grassroots Illinois Action. Currently, this coalition is supporting legislation for a 180-day moratorium on rent and mortgage payments and on foreclosures for those who qualify. It also supports a fund for landlords to recoup residential rent payments.

The Democrats will not mount an adequate response to the pandemic because this requires an economic and political system that places human life above the accumulation of private profit. The political parties and institutional structures of the capitalist class cannot provide for the needs of the majority. The working class must mobilize independently, armed with a socialist program to place the ill-gotten wealth of the financial aristocracy at the disposal of the society as a whole and secure the social rights of workers.



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