

US labor secretary says “reopening” will proceed in face of surging pandemic

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Speaking on the “Fox News Sunday” program, Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia made clear that the White House remained committed to reopening the US economy and forcing workers back to work despite an uncontrolled spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Scalia, the son of the late far-right Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, is a leading figure in the Trump administration and a member of the White House Coronavirus Task Force. On Sunday, he said, “I believe that we can continue to reopen our workplaces safely.”

He added, “Our workplaces can be very safe places to be.”

Scalia is lying. He knows very well that workers who have returned to work in manufacturing industries such as auto or been forced to continue working in meatpacking, logistics, mass transit, agriculture and other sectors are getting sick and dying from COVID-19 across the US.

His department’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has received some 6,000 coronavirus-related complaints and to date issued just a single citation. Scalia has refused to make federal guidelines for a safe return to work during the pandemic mandatory.

In his Sunday TV interview, Scalia made it clear that the Trump administration has one priority: to get workers who were temporarily displaced due to coronavirus lockdowns back on the job as soon as possible to resume producing profits for corporate America. He ignored the pandemic and talked about the June employment report. Calling it “an extraordinary jobs report,” he said, “[W]e added nearly 5 million jobs in June. The projections had been that we might add around 3 million, so we did extremely well.”

Asked if rising COVID-19 cases in 40 states, including some where hospitalizations are hitting

record highs, showed that the return to work had been “too soon” or “too fast,” Scalia said, “We knew that as people came out of their homes, emerged from their basements and the like we knew that cases would go up.”

Seeking to downplay the unfolding catastrophe, he continued: “We are far, far better prepared to deal with those cases now,” adding, “We’ve got a much better understanding of how to treat the virus.” Both of these statements are false. Hospitals in major cities such as Houston are now being overrun by coronavirus patients, and the virus itself has mutated and is infecting people in ways it had not in the initial months of the pandemic.

To the extent that Scalia acknowledged the life and death dangers facing workers in the expanding pandemic, he argued, like others in the Trump administration, that it was a matter of individual responsibility and implied that the surge was the public’s fault.

“Yes, we have new cases, we have to keep an eye on that,” he said. “But there are precautions that the president and the vice president have underscored and those do remain important and we’ve gotten a reminder of that over the last couple of weeks.”

The moderator asked Scalia about a recent statement to Congress by Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell, who warned that unless the pandemic were brought under control, the nation’s economic outlook would remain uncertain. Scalia dismissed the Fed’s concerns and boasted that seven-and-a-half million workers had been forced to return to work over the past two months. “We’re doing very well,” he declared. “We do need to be careful about the virus, but I am just optimistic.”

Scalia was nominated as labor secretary by President

Trump, confirmed by the Senate and sworn in on September 30, 2019. He replaced the Alex Acosta, who was forced to resign after it emerged that as US attorney for the Southern District of Florida he had approved a plea deal and “non-prosecution agreement” for convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein in 2008.

Scalia’s background is in corporate law, having worked at the Los Angeles firm Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, where he specialized in helping large companies resist labor regulations. Throughout the Trump administration, the Labor Department has been used as a front for attacking workers’ rights and suppressing their wages and benefits. Scalia was added to Trump’s coronavirus task force on May 18, when the back-to-work campaign was launched in earnest by the White House, with the support of both political parties.

On June 9, Scalia told lawmakers that his agency had issued only one pandemic-related citation--to a nursing home in Georgia for failing to report that six workers had been hospitalized within a 24-hour period. The proposed penalty from OSHA was \$6,500.

At one point in the Sunday interview, Scalia said, “We know that there remain many Americans still out of work. We want to help them get back to work.”

In order to “help” workers get back to work, Scalia made it clear that he was not in favor of an extension of the federal supplemental unemployment benefit of \$600 when the next coronavirus stimulus package is voted on by Congress, likely at the end of this month or in early August. “There are some states where you can get on an annual basis \$75,000 a year right now on unemployment, and, as we reopen the economy, I don’t know that we need a benefit like that,” he said.

He hinted that he might support a drastically reduced federal benefit in the range of \$25 a week as part of a deal with the Democrats that included Trump’s call for a payroll tax deduction. He also suggested that a new “stimulus” bill would include even more extensive cuts in business regulations than those already carried out by the administration.

Trump is pushing for a cut in the payroll tax largely because it would eliminate a major source of funding for Social Security and Medicare, boosting the drive to dismantle what remains of basic social programs dating back to the last century.



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