

Illinois and Chicago offer paltry COVID-19 assistance program to residents

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As the number of Illinois COVID-19 cases rise, Governor J.B. Pritzker, a Democrat, has moved the state into phase 4 of the “Restore Illinois” plan. The new development eases phase 3 restrictions, allowing previously halted activities and businesses to resume with rules such as 50 percent maximum capacity or less, social distancing measures, and mandatory masks.

COVID-19 cases are growing out of control across the United States, with over 130,000 deaths. Despite Illinois sharing the trend with a growth in new cases, the state is reducing social distancing measures. According to Worldometer, the lowest 7-day-average cases of COVID-19 in Illinois was 602 on June 18. This week, Illinois’s 7-day-average increased to 800 and the rate of infection will only grow as social distancing measures are relaxed without any measures for containment.

The reopening in Illinois is part of a broader campaign by the Trump administration, with the support of the Democrats, Republicans, and the media, to force workers back to work under conditions where doing so risks sickness and death. Pritzker was asked by a reporter during a press conference on June 17 if he would consider closing the economy again in Illinois, Pritzker responded, “I’m not considering moving back to a previous stage as you know in our restore Illinois plan.” He continued, “We will be, as you know evaluating adjustments that may need to be made along the way. Because during phase four we want to make sure that businesses are continuing to reopen.”

In an effort to defuse opposition to this homicidal return to work campaign, the Pritzker administration announced a \$900 Million Package Community and Business Grant Programs for Illinois. Similarly, City of Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, also a Democrat, is implementing a \$1.13 billion COVID-19 grant

program. Both programs are funded by federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) act, which transferred trillions to the stock market while only providing a pittance for social relief.

The pandemic has decimated the lives of workers across the country. The national unemployment rate currently stands at roughly 15 percent as compared to only 3.5 percent last May. In Illinois, at the end of May, unemployment rose to 14.7 percent statewide, compared to 3.5 percent last May, totaling 738,500 lost jobs. In the Chicago region, which includes the city of Chicago and large suburbs like Naperville, unemployment surpassed the state total, reaching 15.4 percent compared to 3.3 percent last year.

Unemployment is leading to sharp increases in food insecurity among Chicago workers. In May, the Greater Chicago Food Depository stated it is serving 76 percent more people in need of food than in January. Lightfoot’s program will not address the massive needs of workers. Of the \$1.13 billion, \$403 million will go to COVID-19 Direct Response and \$376 million to Airport assistance. This leaves only approximately \$350 million for social programs, a pale comparison to Chicago’s \$1.8 billion 2020 police department budget.

Moreover, only \$4.5 million will go to food assistance, \$10 million for mental health, and \$11 million for community Healthcare Infrastructure. This distribution is not an adequate amount to have any meaningful effect. Many of these social programs were cut by previous Democratic administrations of Chicago such as Rahm Emmanuel’s notable closing of schools and mental health institutions as cost-cutting measures.

In a conference call reported in the *Chicago Tribune*, Lightfoot warned of possible austerity measures. “The magnitude of the problems and the challenges that we all face is such that only the federal government has the

resources and the wherewithal to act at a scale that'll make a meaningful difference," Lightfoot said. "Without that, we are looking at a lot of really, really difficult or impossible choices." Adding, "Ultimately though, all options including raising property taxes and including layoffs have to remain on the table."

Before the pandemic, according to census.gov, some 20 percent of Chicago's residents lived in poverty, 1 in 10 residents lived in extreme poverty while 1 in 4 children lived in poverty. This staggering social inequality will only be exacerbated by the pandemic, soaring unemployment and looming cuts to social services.

Pritzker's COVID-19 assistance programs fails to meet the pressing needs of Illinois workers. Under the state program, the Illinois Housing Development Authority is launching two programs. The Emergency Rental Assistance is a \$150 million program that provides \$5,000 grants in emergency rental assistance to Illinois tenants who are unable to pay their rent, which is estimated to amount to approximately 30,000 renters who are disproportionately impacted by the pandemic in the state, and the Emergency Mortgage Assistance Program, which is expected to assist approximately 10,000 eligible homeowners who are unable to pay their mortgage.

The amount of people expected to be reached by these programs is a fraction of a percent of the population that requires assistance and will serve no one in a reasonable capacity. Before the pandemic hit, blockclubchicago.com reported that Chicago's five eviction courts were seeing around 23,000 eviction cases each year. With massive unemployment, this number will grow sharply.

Illinois is a state which according to *Forbes* has a total of 17 billionaires with Governor Pritzker himself being among them, having a combined net worth of \$52.5 billion. This amount of wealth is more than enough to provide the necessary health care and social assistance to maintain social distancing and eliminate the outbreak, except it is wasted and hoarded in the hands of a few.

To fight against this homicidal policy of herd immunity and austerity, workers will find a solution only in an international and socialist program independent from all capitalist factors. The Socialist Equality Party is running Joseph Kishore and Norissa

Santa Cruz in the presidential election to fight for an independent, working class alternative to the political and economic system that insists that workers must suffer all the consequences of the pandemic while the rich get bailed out.

We encourage all students and workers to join the Socialist Equality Party and fight for the formation of new revolutionary leadership in the working class.



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