House Speaker Pelosi signals readiness to cut unemployment benefits

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5 August 2020

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi in an interview on PBS' "NewsHour" program Tuesday signaled the Democratic Party's willingness to reduce benefits for the nearly 30 million US jobless workers who had been receiving $600 a week in enhanced federal unemployment pay. The jobless benefit, part of the CARES Act, which allocated trillions for the corporations and banks, expired this past week.

The federal benefit, along with a moratorium on rental evictions from properties with federally backed mortgages, was allowed to lapse at the end of July, leaving millions in the lurch.

Shortly before the expiration of the federal unemployment benefit, the House of Representatives, in a near party-line vote, passed a $694.6 billion defense appropriations bill for 2021. The bill, overwhelmingly supported by the Democratic Party, included funding for 91 F-35 fighter jets ($9.3 billion) and nine new Navy ships ($22.3 billion). Added together, the cost of these 100 pieces of military hardware could provide supplemental jobless benefits for 30 million people for nearly two weeks.

While both parties worked around-the-clock for the financial oligarchy and their cratering stock portfolios by passing the CARES Act in late March, now that Wall Street has been rescued, the two big business parties are taking their time in working out the terms for imposing the full brunt on the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic on the backs of the working class.

Throughout the PBS interview, Pelosi, with an estimated net worth of $120 million, portrayed herself and the Democratic Party as champions of working people. However, when gently pressed by the news anchor, Judy Woodruff, the House speaker signaled the corporate-financial elite that the Democrats were prepared to cut the already inadequate $600-a-week benefit, saying, "Let's find out what we can afford." She added, "We will find our common ground."

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows have been meeting daily behind closed doors with Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer and Pelosi. While the Democratic negotiators have claimed "progress" in the talks, the White House representatives, who had proposed cutting the unemployment supplement to $200, have said the two sides remain far apart.

All parties are seeking to pass a new bill that would provide reduced benefits, using the prospect of hunger and homelessness to blackmail workers into returning to virus-infected work sites or take other work at lower pay when their previous jobs have been eliminated.

At the end of the interview, Pelosi made clear that the goal of the Democrats was the same as the Republicans: "reopening" the economy (i.e., resuming at full blast the flow of corporate profit) by forcing teachers and students back to school so as to allow "our parents to go to work."

For his part, President Donald Trump in a Tuesday press conference threatened to issue an executive order to suspend the payroll tax, the primary source of funding for Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. He also took the opportunity to lash out against China, claiming that the looming wave of evictions in the US was "China's fault."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to unemployed workers about the consequences of a cutoff or reduction in the federal unemployment supplement.

April, a cook from rural northern Illinois, said: "The $600 dollar added bonus really did help. We could not have survived without it. It made me realize that everyone needs to be making a basic amount to live and

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thrive.

"I was actually getting slightly more with the added money than I was with my paycheck before being unemployed, only because my pay was so low. Now that the benefit is gone, I am still unemployed and my partner now makes way less than he did previously.

"I went from working one job. Now I can't find full-time work. I'll have to work two or three jobs just to get by. And then my partner started a new job and was denied Medicaid because he makes $3 too much. He makes $11 an hour.

"We have a little saved up. I hope to stay in my apartment and be able to take care of the necessities, but if I don't find work before then, I am not sure what we will do once September arrives. I am constantly oscillating between being angry and scared. Everything is so unequal. You have millionaires and billionaires and then you have the rest of us just trying to get by."

A cashier from Virginia who was forced to return to work after the state failed to process her unemployment claim told the WSWS: "I was a cashier, now I am a personal shopper. I applied for unemployment benefits back in April. The benefits never were approved.

"I had panic attacks fearing for my safety. Luckily for me, my family and girlfriend, who was able to get the expanded benefits, were able to help me with rent throughout the last few months. If it wasn't for them, I'd have been working throughout this entire pandemic.

"Two weeks ago, the last bit of money I received from the $1,200 check Trump sent ran out and I was forced to return to work. I'm not sure if I have a compromised immune system, but I had open heart surgery, so I'm worried if I catch this disease. My parents are elderly. I see people in my state socializing and not wearing masks. I'm definitely scared.

"The fact that I didn't get any benefits throughout the entire pandemic has really hurt me financially. My girlfriend and I had plans to move into a house together, but that isn't going to happen now for a long time.

"This order to get back to work is really tough on people. We're being forced to take high risks with our health in the middle of a health care crisis. If someone in the US government had actually done something to help people before this pandemic happened, we wouldn't be in this situation now."

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