

Democrats leave 20 million unemployed in the lurch

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Three weeks after the US Congress went on vacation and allowed federal supplemental unemployment benefits to expire for 20 million workers, cutting their benefits by \$600 a week, the House of Representatives stabbed the unemployed in the back a second time.

The Democratic Party-controlled House reconvened in the midst of its August recess, passed emergency legislation on the US Postal Service, and then adjourned without taking any action on the plight of those thrown out of work by the coronavirus crisis.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi declined to act on the appeal by nearly 100 members of her own caucus, who sent a letter asking that the reconvened House take up legislation to restore federal extended benefits for tens of millions of workers.

The refusal of Pelosi and other leading Democrats to take action on the unemployment crisis shows that the Democratic Party's claim to uphold the interests of working people is a political fraud. The Democrats jump to attention when Wall Street demands a bailout, but they have no time for workers facing poverty, hunger, eviction and homelessness.

Saturday's House session followed the Democratic National Convention, where there was virtually no reference to the cutoff of federal extended benefits during four days of rhetorical bilge about the "decency" and "empathy" of Joe Biden. The alleged tender feelings of the Democratic presidential nominee evidently do not extend to those who lost their federal extended benefits on July 31. He made no mention of them in his acceptance speech, nor did he urge the House to take action on their behalf.

The silence of the Democratic National Convention will be matched this week when the Republican National Convention meets to renominate the president. Trump will stage his own coronation with nonstop declarations about the "great economy" and his prowess in "making

America great again." But the only thing "great" about the present state of affairs is the great scale of the social need and mass suffering to which both corporate-controlled parties are entirely indifferent.

Two weeks ago, Trump signed an executive order purporting to revive the extended federal benefits at a much lower level—\$300 a week, a cut of 50 percent—to be financed through the disaster relief fund of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The White House capped the resources to be made available at a total of \$44 billion, compared to the \$70 billion a month that the supplemental benefits were paying out. In a best-case scenario, this would limit the duration of the \$300-a-week benefits to about five weeks. But even this derisory assistance will be further reduced if natural disasters, such as the twin hurricanes expected to strike the Louisiana Gulf Coast this week, or the California wildfires, place sizeable demands on FEMA.

Only one state, Arizona, has begun paying out benefits using the FEMA funding. Fourteen other states have been approved to do so but have not yet been able to carry through the necessary preparatory and administrative work to put the payments into operation.

Most of these states have declined to contribute \$100 a week from their own funds to bring the supplemental benefits up to \$400 a week, taking advantage of the loophole provided by Trump. The president is allowing states to count existing unemployment compensation payments towards the \$100 a week, rather than providing new money.

Michigan's Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer was one of those who announced they would go forward with the \$300 a week benefit without adding any new state money. Whitmer addressed the Democratic National Convention from a United Auto Workers union hall, and professed her sympathy for autoworkers but said nothing about her decision to limit the size of extended jobless

benefits.

Two of the three largest states, Texas and Florida, have declined so far to join the \$300-a-week program, declaring that they need further clarification on the terms. The largest state, California, is one of the 14 that have enrolled, but Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom said the state could not afford to add \$100 a week to the payout. New York state, the fourth largest, will follow a similar path.

The blatant refusal of the Democratic-controlled House to take action Saturday allowed White House spokesmen to raise the issue themselves on the Sunday television talk shows, pretending sympathy for the unemployed. White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows regularly objected to every penny of social spending while he was a House member himself and a leader of the ultra-right House Freedom Caucus. But appearing on ABC News, he criticized Pelosi, asking, “Why did they come back on a Saturday and only deal with postal? Why did they not deal with enhanced unemployment? Why did they not extend the PPP program that actually helps small businesses?”

Kate Bedingfield, Biden’s deputy campaign manager, appearing on the same program, managed to avoid speaking either of the unemployed or the \$600-a-week supplemental benefit, saying only that Biden “also believes that we need to get money to people who are hurting now,” without saying anything more concrete.

Pelosi herself appeared on the CNN program “State of the Union,” and dismissed the White House suggestion that the House pass a stripped-down bill extending supplemental unemployment benefits, without additional money for state and local governments, coronavirus testing and tracing, food stamp benefits, or the Postal Service. Trump was only offering “crumbs,” she said. “All the president wants is this one thing. He wants his name on a letter to go out with a check in it.”

This is of course true, just as it is true that the Democrats calculate that the cutoff of unemployment benefits will hurt Trump more than themselves in the November elections.

But behind the mutual vituperation and jockeying for electoral advantage, both capitalist parties are committed to meeting the demands of corporate America, which regards compelling workers to go back to their jobs, regardless of the danger to their health and lives, as the number one priority. Every other action of the Democrats and Republicans, from cutting off supplemental benefits to reopening the schools no matter how many coronavirus

outbreaks erupt, flows from this central class imperative.

The truth is that corporate America, like its counterparts around the world, has seized on the COVID-19 pandemic to carry out a long-planned restructuring of class relations, driving down wages, destroying jobs, and undermining long-established social benefits, from Social Security and Medicare to public education.

The cutoff of supplemental benefits, now entering its fourth week, comes amid mounting signs of a further sharp slowdown in the US economy and a skyrocketing of social need.

The *New York Times* wrote of the first circumstance on Saturday, under the headline, “Economic Data Points to Pause in Recovery as Aid Programs Expire.” The newspaper noted: “Real-time measures of consumer spending, business sentiment, small-business reopening plans and even available jobs began flatlining last month, suggesting that the wave of virus infections that swept across parts of the United States in June and July came with economic consequences.”

The *Washington Post* detailed the social consequences in a harrowing report posted on its website Sunday night, under the headline, “Debt, eviction and hunger: Millions fall back into crisis as stimulus and safety nets vanish.” The article began, “Without federal aid to stave off the impact of the pandemic and economic recession, households that were already on the margins are now being pushed to the brink of financial ruin,” and it cited the estimate by a Columbia University researcher that the \$600-a-week supplemental benefit and other federal payments had kept 17 million people from falling below the poverty line as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

As these articles demonstrate, the US political establishment, both the capitalist parties and their media apologists are all well aware of the scale of the social and economic disaster facing tens of millions of working people. Their main concern is to suppress the mass struggles of the working class that will erupt and to block the development of a political movement of the working class against the profit system as a whole.



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