Amid record long-term unemployment, US government denies aid to workers

Jerry White
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With the number of workers unemployed for more than six months hitting an all-time high and millions running out of federal and state jobless benefits, the US government has made it clear that providing unemployment benefits for workers is not a priority.

After the $600-a-week federal supplement to state unemployment benefits expired on July 31, Trump approved a stopgap measure called the Lost Wage Assistance program, which cut federal assistance in half, providing six weekly payments of $300, starting retroactively on August 1. But even this meager money is now running out.

More than two million Californians are getting their last $300 check this week. Another 2.4 million New Yorkers will lose their benefits in the next two weeks, and the program has already ended in Texas, Utah, Iowa, Florida, Arizona, Alabama, Georgia, Montana, North Carolina, Tennessee, Louisiana, West Virginia, Oklahoma, Idaho, New Hampshire and Missouri.

Negotiations on a new stimulus bill were taking place when US President Trump tweeted last week that he was ending any further talks until after the election. Shortly afterwards, however, he called for the passage of a relief package.

Amid demands by California Democratic Representative Ro Khanna, the former co-chair of the Sanders campaign, to “Make a deal, put the ball in McConnell’s court,” Democratic House speaker Nancy Pelosi flatly refused to make any progress on a new stimulus bill.

Asked by CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer why she was not doing more to help “millions of Americans who can’t put food on the table, who can’t pay the rent,” Pelosi replied, in a shocking expression of indifference, “Have you fed them? We feed them.”

Whatever the jostling for electoral advantage, the fact is that the last thing on the minds of any of the millionaire Congressmen in Washington is the well-being of tens of millions of desperate workers and their families.

While the federal and state governments initially expanded unemployment benefits, suspended foreclosures and stopped utility shutoffs to try to prevent a social explosion as tens of millions lost their jobs due to the pandemic, all of these measures are now being eliminated.

Landlords nationwide can start eviction processes while a federal moratorium remains in place through December, according to an updated guidance released Friday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Justice Department. At the same time, landlords will not be required to tell renters about the protections to which they are entitled.

With the pandemic worsening and the cold weather setting in, as many as 180 million people face the danger of having their light, water and other utilities shut off as state protections end. Nationwide, electric and gas debts alone threaten to reach or exceed $24.3 billion by the end of the year, according to an analysis from the National Energy Assistance Directors’ Association released earlier this month.

Thousands of Louisville, Kentucky-area electric and gas customers behind on their bills face shutoffs after the Kentucky Public Service Commission voted to allow utilities to resume disconnections as soon as October 20.

Hundreds of thousands of New Jersey residents also face shutoff as the state moratorium ends this week. “I saw the dollar amount first, and it was like I almost passed out,” Racquel Kooper told a CBS News affiliate after the single mother of three received a past due amount of over $2,300 and cutoff warning.

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About 22 million adults in the US, or 10.1 percent of the total, reported that their households could not afford to buy enough food, according to Household Pulse Survey data by the US Census Bureau. This was nearly triple the rate before the pandemic.

Some 13 million Americans were officially unemployed in September, about seven million more than pre-pandemic levels. This included 2.4 million workers laid off for more than 27 weeks. Another 4.9 million will join the rolls of the long-term unemployed over the next few weeks.

At the same time, the number of permanent job losses grew by 345,000 to 3.8 million as temporary furloughs became permanent. Allstate, American Airlines, Chevron, Disney, Royal Dutch Shell and United Airlines all announced permanent job cuts in recent days.

According to a new study by *Axios*, the real unemployment rate in America—if calculated on the basis of the number of people looking for a full-time job that pays a living wage but unable to find one—is 26.1 percent, or three times higher than the official jobless rate of 7.9 percent in September. If you count anybody over 16 years old who is not earning a living wage, the unemployment rate rises to a staggering 54.6 percent overall and 59.2 for African Americans.

While tens of millions of people are confronting the worst economic and social crisis since the Great Depression, the multitrillion-dollar CARES Act bailout for Wall Street has led to booming bank profits. Goldman Sachs on Wednesday announced that its third-quarter profit nearly doubled to $3.62 billion.

The desperate situation facing the population is hardly mentioned by either Trump or his presidential challenger Joe Biden. While Trump incites right-wing violence to enforce his “herd immunity” policy, both corporate-controlled parties are using the threat of homelessness and hunger to force workers back on the job so they can produce the profits to pay for the giant corporate bailout.

Regardless of the outcome of the election, working class opposition will continue to mount against the ruling class’s murderous back-to-work and back-to-school policies and efforts to loot society’s resources.

Throughout the US and internationally, strikes and protests are continuing to grow, including the walkouts by Polish students against the spread of the deadly contagion in schools and the formation of rank-and-file safety committees at worksites and schools in the US, UK, Germany and other countries.

In every workplace and neighborhood, workers and young people should build rank-and-file committees, independent of the corrupt unions and the corporate-controlled parties, to fight the spread of the disease and to ensure the health and safety of workers.

At the same time, trillions of dollars must be diverted from the bailout of Wall Street and used instead to marshal the international scientific resources to battle the pandemic and address the massive economic and social crisis. This must include the provision of free, high-quality health care for all, full income for all those affected by the crisis, the closure of nonessential production, the ending of in-person learning until the pandemic is contained, and the provision of protective equipment for essential workers.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has made clear, the fight against the pandemic is not primarily a medical, but a social and political issue. The only way the needs of the vast majority of the world’s people can be addressed is through the socialist transformation of society.

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