

Thanksgiving in America: Massive food lines and evictions as benefits expire

Kate Randall

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As this week's Thanksgiving holiday approaches, a social catastrophe is unfolding across America on a scale not seen since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

As of Sunday, there were more than 12.2 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the US and nearly 257,000 deaths. The past week has seen an average of more than 170,000 cases per day, an increase of 59 percent from the average two weeks earlier.

Hospitals are being overrun by the surge of cases. Thousands of nurses at hospitals across the country are coming down with the virus, leaving hospitals short-staffed and placing patient care in extreme danger. In El Paso, Texas, a unit of 36 National Guard troops has been mobilized to work through a backlog of close to 240 bodies, victims of COVID-19, at the county morgue. The bodies will be loaded onto refrigerated trucks.

The Marshall Project, a nonprofit journalism website, reports that as of November 17 at least 197,659 inmates in state and local prisons had contracted the virus and 1,454 had died, a likely undercount due to poor reporting.

As the rise of hospitalizations continues unabated, working-class families across the country are facing a crisis of hunger and poverty alongside the sickness and death from the pandemic. Tens of millions of workers have lost their jobs or been hit by cuts in pay or work hours.

Food lines that already stretch for miles, evictions and foreclosures, and the loss of health benefits are set to increase exponentially when what remains of government assistance runs out immediately after Christmas.

The hunger relief organization Feeding America warns that some 54 million US residents, or one in six, currently face food insecurity. Many families with children were already facing hunger before the pandemic hit.

In Arlington, Texas, 6,000 families arrived for a distribution of frozen turkeys outside a sports stadium on Friday. On November 14, people in Dallas waited up to

12 hours to receive a turkey, 20 pounds of nonperishables, 15 pounds of fresh produce and bags of bread. Photos of the lineup at the food bank showed thousands of cars backed up across four lanes, spanning several miles.

On Saturday in Los Angeles, some 1,000 people lined up on foot for a food distribution at a church.

The moratorium on evictions imposed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) expires on December 31. Since the order does not cancel or freeze rents, all back rent will come due January 1. An estimated 11 to 13 million renter households are at risk of eviction, according to investment bank and global advisory firm Stout.

As no actual relief dollars have been provided by the government to help families with their rent, landlords have used unscrupulous tactics to illegally evict tenants. They have allowed conditions in rental units to deteriorate, leaving renters a choice between leaving or living with mold or infestations of bed bugs, roaches and maggots. Families forced out of their apartments face living on the streets, doubling up with relatives or friends or sleeping in shelters—all of which increase the danger of contracting COVID-19.

Many families struggling with paying for food and housing face the cutoff of remaining COVID-19 relief funds by the end of the year. Long gone is the \$600 federal benefit to boost weekly unemployment benefits. According to the Century Foundation, 12 million Americans will lose their unemployment benefits on December 26 when two major pandemic programs expire. Another 4.4 million will have already exhausted these benefits before they expire.

The two programs set to lapse are the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), which provides benefits to self-employed individuals not eligible for traditional state programs, and the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) program, which

extends an extra 13 weeks of benefits to people who exhaust state benefits. Both were established by Congress as part of the CARES Act, which doled out trillions of dollars to corporations and banks.

President Donald Trump makes no secret of his contempt for the US and world population facing death and impoverishment. Focused entirely on his plot to nullify the election and establish a presidential dictatorship, he says nothing about the rising toll of sickness and death or the inability of millions of families to pay the rent and put food on the table. On Saturday, he skipped a discussion on the pandemic at the G20 summit in order to play a round of golf at his Virginia resort.

A week ago, Trump made his first public statement in days to reiterate his opposition to a lockdown of the economy to contain the pandemic and save lives. Days later, Democratic President-elect Joe Biden gave a press conference and declared that a Biden administration would never impose a national lockdown. This followed the call by Michael Osterholm, a member of his own coronavirus advisory board, for a six-week nationwide lockdown and full pay for affected workers.

Both parties have conspired to block any congressional action to provide a new round of jobless benefits and other relief measures for workers and small businesses following the July 31 expiration of the minimal benefits provided under the CARES Act.

The public health disaster and the social crisis are two sides of a human catastrophe that is the result of deliberate policies carried out by the Trump administration and, in all essentials, backed by the Democrats. The bipartisan response to the pandemic is driven not by the goal of saving lives, but by the economic interests of the ruling corporate-financial oligarchy. The sole concern is to protect the wealth of the billionaires through government handouts and free money from the Federal Reserve, ensuring a record rise on the stock market.

The antisocial interests of the financial elite are the main obstacle to any effective measures to contain the pandemic and save lives. Nothing is permitted that infringes on the self-enrichment of moguls such as Amazon's Jeff Bezos, who has doubled his personal fortune to \$200 billion in the course of the pandemic.

And to pay for the bailout and explosion of corporate and government debt, workers are being forced into factories and workplaces that are rife with the virus so as to continue the flow of corporate profit. This is the dirty secret behind the back-to-work and back-to-school drive,

the centerpiece of the deadly policy of "herd immunity" openly pursued by Trump and tacitly supported by Biden and the Democrats.

Workers are deliberately being driven to the edge of destitution and homelessness in order to force them back into the factories, workplaces and schools.

The corporatist trade unions are fully supporting the back-to-work and back-to-school drive, while covering up virus outbreaks in the factories and schools and policing the workplaces to block opposition by workers.

There is growing anger in the factories and among teachers. Many are following the lead of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* and forming rank-and-file safety committees independent of the unions and the Democratic Party to coordinate action in defense of workers' health and lives.

Only the independent intervention of the working class in opposition to both capitalist parties and the profit system they defend can produce a progressive and humane solution to both the pandemic and the social crisis.

The struggle to save lives and livelihoods is a struggle against the capitalist system. It requires the expropriation of the corporate oligarchy and utilization of its vast wealth to shut down all nonessential production until the pandemic is contained, provide full wages and income protection for laid-off workers, ensure safe working conditions for essential workers and marshal the resources needed to rebuild the health care system and provide free health care for all.

Workers and educators should establish rank-and-file safety committees at every workplace and school to enforce safe working conditions, organize strike action where necessary, and prepare the ground for a political general strike to halt the destruction of workers' lives and livelihoods.

Economic life must be reorganized along socialist lines through the nationalization of the health care industry, the banks and the major corporations under the democratic control of the working class, so as to base the economy on social need, not private profit.



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