

Young worker and student discusses life during the pandemic in Nashville, Tennessee

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with a university student and young worker in Nashville, Tennessee about life during the COVID-19 pandemic. El, 20, had worked as a barista in a local coffee shop until he decided to quit in November due to the deteriorating working conditions.

Like other establishments, the coffee shop was shut down for about six weeks in March and April. During this time, El received no pay or benefits. “When we were getting furloughed, they [company management] said, ‘Don’t worry about filing for unemployment, we’ll do it for you,’ and then they never did. So, we pretty much all did not get unemployment because of them.”

“And when we came back on May 1, they never rehired our manager that we had, but they never told any of us either. They just completely, I would say, ghosted her. She was a great manager. Before it was amazing, because she was always there and she would always listen and she looked out for us. But they never hired her back. I guess, I learned eventually, because she really fought for us during the pandemic.”

“They just started to give us all her duties. We had to do all the inventory and whenever something would go wrong at the store, like if something would break, they would ask us to fix it. They would never stock us right. There was almost a period of two months where the bathrooms had no toilet paper or paper towels and customers would get so upset about it, but there was nothing we could do and we would tell them that. And they just completely ignored the situation. So, it was pretty rough.”

As El explained, this also put additional pressure due to the already low wages because there was no longer a salaried manager working during the shifts who did not take a cut of the tips. The group of about seven employees who ran the shop all made the poverty wage of \$8.75 an hour. Meetings with the shop’s owner about pay, workload and working conditions produced no results. Empty promises of forthcoming resources and hiring additional help were made to keep the staff on the job, but never materialized.

El and his co-workers are among the small army of low-wage workers running Nashville’s \$7 billion hospitality industry. “The cafe is in West Nashville, but it’s still pretty close [to downtown]. We also work close to Belle Meade. I think it is one of the richest neighborhoods in America, if not the richest. And wealthy people do not tip. They get very upset too. Definitely not fun.”

Meanwhile, the health and safety conditions deteriorated with the surge of the pandemic. “At the beginning, like in May, they

gave us masks, but after that, no. They were really bad at stocking us, so we never had disinfecting wipes. We never had alcohol spray for the tables. It was always out and the bottles broke three or four times so we could never use them. It would just take forever to ever get anything to us. But the conditions got really bad in June and July.”

At that point, Nashville’s Democratic Mayor John Cooper allowed businesses to reopen with 75 percent seating capacity. This was part of the general premature reopening of the economy that was to have such deadly consequences throughout the US in the summer and autumn. “Our owner, he put every single table back,” El explained. “I took a picture one day. We have probably nine tables with four seats each and two bars that have six seats each and every single one was full of people. No masks, nothing. And this is something like a 50-square-foot shop.”

“It was so bad and we would always tell the owner, ‘We’re really not comfortable with this many people being in the shop.’ And he would say, ‘Well, Mayor Cooper put it at 75 [percent], so it’s probably fine. You guys are probably OK. As long as you wear your mask and wash your hands, you’ll be OK.’ I felt so uncomfortable being there every day. There were just so many people and the bar’s not that far from where people sit. It’s like probably six feet. There were probably 40 to 45 people in the shop at one point.”

Since quitting in November, El still keeps in touch with his former coworkers. He noted that one of the workers “went home for Christmas and when she came back, she gave it [COVID-19] to three other co-workers. They are doing OK, but still can’t taste or smell.”

“I don’t even think when they got COVID that they even shut down,” he added. “They also made an Instagram post after someone tested positive. They closed down for a day, but they never even said that it was because of COVID. They just said that they were taking a cleaning day. So, all the people that went there that day, they had no idea.”

El endorsed the call by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* for the closure of all schools and nonessential workplaces with guaranteed income to workers and compensation for small businesses until the pandemic is under control and the population inoculated. He also supports the formation of rank-and-file safety committees to advance the independent interests of the working class in the struggle against the pandemic and the murderous “herd immunity” policies of the

ruling class.

El expressed his hope that service workers in Nashville and throughout Tennessee will read his interview and contact the WSWs to lay the foundation for the formation of a rank-and-file safety committee of hospitality and service workers which can ally with other workers in education, auto, health care and logistics throughout the state, across the US and internationally.

“We are often looked down upon as the lowest skilled workers, relying on our customer service to earn our livelihood,” he said. “It is time we stand up against our exploitative owners and fight for what we believe in. We are only strong when we are together.”

El is also studying biology and ecology at Middle Tennessee State University in the hopes of one day working as a park ranger for the National Park Service. However, with the pandemic raging unchecked in Tennessee and throughout much of the US, El has decided to take the spring semester off. He is not alone. “I was talking to the Financial Aid Office and they told me that tons of people were doing it. He was talking about how good he is at deferring people’s financial aid now since he has done it so much.”

Factoring into El’s decision was the disastrous experience of remote learning. “It’s completely online and all the teachers they have you can tell are very lacking in resources. All the assignments they give are on really poorly designed websites and some lectures are really hard because you cannot hear your professors at all. Most of the time they do not even know how to share their screen or put up a projection of what they are doing. It is also pretty hard to ask questions in class and it is weird when the teacher asks questions and no one knows when to reply because we are all just online. So, it has been pretty difficult to learn that way. Everyone is going through this right now, but it has definitely not been the most conducive to learning. I can say I have not learned anything in the past two semesters. It has been rough.”

When asked about the government’s response to the pandemic, El responded, “I always think about how crazy it is, how easily it could have been prevented. Like back in March, if we had just kept everything closed for six more weeks, it probably would be so much less significant than it is now. I also think about how all the vaccine companies all worked independently of each other instead of all working together because they all wanted to be the first ones to get the money and get the vaccine done.”

He also remarked on how workers responded very differently to the pandemic, noting the opposition which erupted in the working class to the drive to reopen the economy and how this eventually fed into the protests against police violence following the murder of George Floyd.

“I thought it was interesting to see the class consciousness that was around in April and May, when it was the push to open the economy back up,” El recalled. “I remember seeing a lot of tweets showing or saying, ‘Oh, you see how valuable the workers are now.’ Or how ‘the government wants us to get back to work because they can’t function without us.’ ... [I]t was also very prevalent during the Black Lives Matter protests with people seeing that the police were just an extension of the ruling class. They just serve to protect them.”

Over the past few months, the connections between the ruling

class’ bipartisan “herd immunity” policy and the unprecedented political crisis in the United States have been laid bare, culminating in the January 6 fascist assault on the US Capitol and the inauguration of President Joe Biden under conditions of a siege.

“He’s the reason I probably started to question in general,” El remarked on Donald Trump. “I remember being like, how could this happen? How could this awful businessman be elected, and pretty easily too?” He added, “And I’ve been trying to tell people, like people who think that it will get better once Trump is gone, if he can do this much and he is dumb, think about what happens when someone intelligent takes office. I always tell people that the conditions that created Trump are probably even worse now. He is definitely not the last.”

El stated of the Democrats, “It seems that they have been completely complacent in responding to what he has done. And I think probably because it just takes the viewfinder off of them. It probably also works to serve them because they’re two sides of the same coin.”

“They have not made really any opposition. Even with the impeachment, which was like, ‘We’re going to do the bare minimum to say that we’re opposed to him.’ It’s crazy because it’s basically like saying you can incite a coup and storm the Capitol and nothing will happen.”

Speaking on Joe Biden’s response to the attempted coup, El stated, “Watching his speech on the day of the coup, he could not even just say they were fascists, which is insane to me because there were people literally wearing ‘Camp Auschwitz’ hoodies. I was like, ‘What?!’ And the people with all the hoodies that said ‘Anti-Antifa.’ That is literally just saying you are a fascist. And him calling for, ‘Oh, we need unity,’ like dude, just call them out. But his response was, ‘Trump needs to say something. I am not going to say anything. Trump needs to say something because this is Trump’s fault.’ Dude, just say something. It’s not hard.”

El does not have high hopes for the incoming Biden administration. “I’m honestly expecting a lot of divisiveness in the American people. The Trump part is going to be so pissed that Biden’s president, but I doubt anything will honestly change. Capitalism is definitely in its decay, so I’m sure that they will just blame a Democrat for ruining the economy, even though it’s the inevitable contradictions. I would be surprised if anything significant happens. I know Joe Biden loves war, so he might send us to war somewhere, in the Middle East or China.”



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