

Florida housing advocate describes devastating impact of end of eviction moratorium

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Last week's Supreme Court ruling striking down the Biden administration's eviction moratorium will vastly accelerate the ongoing housing crisis in the US. This is all the more so since it takes place in the midst of a worsening pandemic that has killed over 654,000 people in the US alone, as of this writing. Moreover, the federal unemployment supplement will expire across the country in a matter of days, and consumer prices, including for housing, continue to surge.

Although evictions are not tracked in the US nationally, the Princeton University Eviction Lab has documented 488,069 evictions since mid-March 2020 in the six states and 31 cities it tracks, with some cities already at or above pre-pandemic eviction levels.

Rents across the country are skyrocketing. Tampa, Florida is leading the way with a 15.6 percent increase in rent in just the first half of 2021, the highest jump in the country, according to data from CoStar, a national real estate group. The next highest rates of increase have been seen in Austin, Texas (15.3 percent); Raleigh, North Carolina (14.9 percent); Orlando, Florida (14.5 percent) and Phoenix, Arizona (13.7 percent).

Last week, the Commerce Department reported that the government's key inflation gauge, the core personal consumption expenditures price index, rose 3.6 percent in July compared to the same month a year ago, the biggest jump since May 1991. A broader index including volatile food and energy prices rose 4.2 percent year over year, the highest reading since January 1991. Energy and food have risen 23.6 percent and 2.4 percent, respectively, year over year, accounting for much of the inflation.

The National Equity Atlas estimates that around 6.4

million households are behind in rent, though the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities puts that number as high as 11 million. Total rental debt is estimated to be \$21.3 billion, averaging \$3,300 for each household that is behind on rent payments.

While \$46.5 billion in pandemic-related federal assistance has been allocated, only some 11 percent has actually been distributed, with some states, including New York, failing to date to distribute a single penny.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with William Kilgore, a housing activist with the tenants union in St. Petersburg, Florida, on the implications of the termination of the eviction moratorium.

St. Petersburg, located on Florida's Gulf coast, is the largest city in Pinellas County, with a population of 272,000. According to US Census Bureau 2019 statistics, the median household income in Pinellas County is \$54,000, with 11.4 percent of the population officially in poverty, though Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED) puts its poverty rate at 12.2 percent. Between 2015 and 2019, the owner-occupied housing unit rate was 67 percent, meaning that roughly a third of housing is owned by landlords and management companies.

"Here in Pinellas, we have just over 2,000 open eviction cases since the start of the pandemic," Kilgore said. "We are looking at these cases moving to the final eviction. They don't yet have the writ of possession, the final eviction order that has the deputy turn over property to the landlord and remove any tenants remaining on the property, and by force if necessary."

"There have been 2,500 writ of possession orders since March of last year. One thing about the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention]

moratorium, is it was weak to begin with and only covered nonpayment of rent if you had financial hardship from COVID. It would protect you in this case. But landlords can get around this by evicting you for violation of a lease agreement, if you have an unauthorized person staying at your place, or simply at the end of the lease term they would tell you they are not continuing the lease."

Kilgore explained that some landlords were holding off on filing because of the eviction moratorium and will now start filing. He said court proceedings for debt payments for rent are "something we will see in the next several months, even the next years," comparing the impact to that during the Great Recession, which was triggered by the 2008 financial crisis. He said many indebted and bankrupt homeowners are still dealing with the consequences of that crisis in court.

Addressing the social impact, he said: "People are going to be falling into permanent poverty, some folks are going to be having a real hard time, and it's going to continue to affect the health of the community. In Florida, we've seen some of the highest rates of COVID, and now we are seeing the largest surge so far."

Almost 21,000 new cases were recorded in the state on Saturday. According to official figures, nearly 44,000 Floridians have died of COVID-19 to date.

"There was a study by UCLA that estimated there were 10,000 additional COVID-19 deaths tied to evictions in the first four or five months of the pandemic, before the moratorium... So, I think we are going to see a larger number of deaths due to this.

"They are willing to sacrifice people's lives in order to maintain the multibillion-dollar rent industry."

St. Petersburg is a sign of things to come for the rest of the US. The Sun Belt region has seen the highest housing price increases, as housing demand outstrips supply, affecting rentals as well as private homes.

The number of US rental apartments shot up by around half a million in the second quarter of 2021, according to industry consultant RealPage, the biggest quarterly increase since data began to be collected in 1993. Occupancy was at a record high of 96.9 percent last month.

Also in July, the cost of new leases compared to what previous tenants paid surged 17 percent. Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics, told

Bloomberg Businessweek, "The entire housing market is on fire, across the board from homeownership to rental, from high-end to low-end, from coast to coast."

In the lead-up to the striking down of the moratorium, little or no effort was made by the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, which controls both houses of Congress, to extend the ban on evictions. The right-wing Supreme Court majority remarked in its unsigned eight-page ruling that "Congress was on notice that a further extension would almost surely require new legislation, yet it failed to act in the several weeks leading up to the moratorium's expiration."

The reality behind pathetic pleas from so-called "progressive" Democrats such as Ayanna Pressley, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Cori Bush for legislation to extend the eviction ban is the determination of the Biden White House and the Democratic congressional leadership to end all federal aid programs enacted during the pandemic, except for the trillions being pumped into the financial markets by the Federal Reserve to protect and expand the fortunes of the corporate oligarchs.

This is an integral part of the bipartisan policy dictated by the ruling class to reopen the schools and return to "business as usual," even as COVID infection, hospitalization and death rates soar to new record highs. The aim is to blackmail workers back into unsafe factories, workplaces and schools under threat of destitution and homelessness.



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