

State of California removes COVID-19 benefits for workers, allows companies to keep outbreak details secret

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Last Friday, the state of California removed nearly all measures instituted last year to protect workers from the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic.

These included the ending of an eviction moratorium that kept residents in their homes even if behind on rent to prevent further viral spread due to homelessness. Also abandoned was an expanded sick leave program for public sector workers providing up to 80 hours of paid COVID-related sick leave. The state had also instituted a ban on power shutoffs last year which also came to an end on Friday. A few weeks prior to that, the state of California cut off expanded unemployment benefits for 2.2 million of its residents.

According to current estimates, 724,000 California households are behind by a collective \$2.5 billion in rent. In order to be exempt from eviction, residents must now have paid at least 25 percent of their back rent due between September 2020 and September 2021. Similarly, residents cannot be evicted for rent owed between March and August of 2020. Nonetheless, landlords are still fully entitled to begin court proceedings to collect all of back rent owed starting on November 1. Rent relief is still being offered, however the process for applying is extremely lengthy and subject to delays ranging from one week and many months.

Hundreds of thousands of Californians are also due to have their utilities shut off after the passing of last Thursday's deadline. According to the Greenlining institute, the accumulated customer debt on utility bills is over \$2.7 billion throughout the state. The state recently passed \$2 billion in utilities relief, which, in addition to being less than what customers owe statewide, will likely not be used up in its entirety.

While millions of Californians are being threatened by electricity shutoffs, the large utility behemoths, particularly the Pacific Gas and Electric company, are allowed to initiate blackouts whenever they choose with no compensation to customers, regardless of whether or not bills are fully paid. Rather than using its billions to update antiquated infrastructure, including some utility towers still standing after more than 100 years, PG&E now regularly initiates blackouts to save costs often with life-threatening effects on some of its most vulnerable customers. This comes after a string of independent investigators found the utility at fault for sparking a significant portion of the massive wildfires plaguing the state for the past few decades.

Although coronavirus transmission rates and deaths are lower relative to most other states, California still has been hit hardest by the virus in absolute terms. Since the pandemic began, the state has had nearly 4.7 million coronavirus cases and nearly 70,000 deaths, a tenth of the official coronavirus deaths recorded in the US. Despite a recent decrease in numbers, the state still is experiencing about 7,000 cases and 100 deaths per day.

It is under these conditions that the state is abandoning needed protections for workers. In addition to the eviction and utility measures, the state also ended a requirement that companies provide two weeks of paid COVID sick leave for employees. Asked whether or not the governor had any plans to extend the program after it elapsed on Thursday, Newsom's office responded, "California has been working proactively to prepare for the end of federal benefits this month by connecting Californians with other public benefits." In other words, there is no chance that the program will be

restored.

These latest actions represent a watershed moment in the state's response to the pandemic and demonstrate that the capitalist elite are fully prepared to let the virus rip unhindered throughout the population. They follow the governor's June 15 announcement that the state would end all restrictions on social gatherings including physical distancing mandates and capacity limits. Newsom stated at the time, "California is turning the page on the pandemic, thanks to swift action by the state and the work of Californians who followed public health guidelines and got vaccinated to protect themselves and their communities."

Two months later, the Delta variant swept through the state with the state government doing nothing to reverse the June 15 measures.

State officials also seized upon the June 15 announcement to allow initial unemployment benefits to elapse. Despite the fact that the state still has an official unemployment rate of 7.6 percent, a number twice as high as the pre-pandemic level, expanded benefits were summarily ended in early September. This was in line with the Biden administration's decision to cease federal subsidies to individual states to continue the programs. Newsom's office stated at the time, "The state of California is unable to extend federal pandemic benefits, but state unemployment insurance, disability insurance and paid family leave will not be affected by the September deadline."

Also on September 10, the state senate approved assembly bill 654, removing a requirement that the Department of Public Health publicize coronavirus outbreaks by individual locations and job sites. The bill was passed by a vote of 37-0 with 3 abstentions. The state senate, the upper body of the state legislature, is comprised of 31 Democrats out of a total of 40 seats. The Democratic supermajority not only passed the bill unanimously but also included an urgency clause in the bill insuring that it would immediately take effect after being signed by Governor Newsom.

Responding to the bill's passage, David Snyder, attorney and executive director of the First Amendment Coalition, called it "very disappointing." Said Snyder, "The bill now does not seem to be ensuring transparency, but rather going in the opposite direction—and ensuring that the public, local leaders and local health authorities are going to be in the dark."

Indeed, the Democratic Party in California, like its Republican counterparts, has blood on its hands. Fully aware that detailed knowledge of outbreaks at schools and workplaces would accelerate mass protests and strikes by workers, the two parties unite in unanimous opposition to such exposures. Far better to let workers and their families fall seriously ill and die than put profits at risk.

Even with only a third of county health departments providing details of individual outbreaks sought by public records requests—the state as a whole only released aggregate data by industry—the eruption of known coronavirus cases at workplaces has been nothing short of catastrophic. Hundreds of workers at meat processing plants such as poultry producer Foster Farms and at least 1,700 at Amazon warehouses have fallen ill from the virus.

Similarly, school outbreaks are being drastically undercounted. In Los Angeles alone, the state's largest and nation's second largest school district, the United Teachers of Los Angeles worked hand in glove with the district to reopen schools, leading to an explosion of infections. The district claimed that infection rates among children went down after schools reopened, however, at the same time, cases went up throughout LA County with children comprising a higher percentage of infections as the Delta variant surged.

In order to fight back against such barbaric measures, workers must form their own organizations of struggle independently of the Democrats and the Republicans. This requires the building of independent rank-and-file committees to insure workers' safety. To find out more about forming or joining a rank and file committee, click here. The *World Socialist Web Site* will also be holding an international online meeting on October 24 to discuss a socialist strategy to end the pandemic. We encourage all readers and supporters to attend this important event.



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