

Biden administration ramps up drive to get women “back into the workforce”

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The Biden administration is engaged in a full-court press on the value to big business of its proposals to extend the child tax credit, establish universal pre-K programs for three- and four-year-old children and subsidize child care for working mothers.

The administration argues not that these programs would benefit families or society as a whole but that they would serve corporate interests by increasing the supply of female labor in the workforce.

Brian Deese, director of the National Economic Council, appeared on three Sunday television talk shows. In each appearance, he sought to downplay concerns over inflation in the cost of basic necessities like food, gas and rent, claiming that these were the byproducts of the recovery of the US economy from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

He thus managed to combine two monumental falsehoods: that the US economy is recovering and that the COVID-19 pandemic is subsiding.

Actually, the instability and imbalances in the US—and the world economy—are growing, particularly in the financial sector, swollen by the massive injection of funds from the Federal Reserve and subsidies enacted by Congress, including last year’s CARES Act and Biden’s American Rescue Plan, passed earlier this year.

Trillions of dollars have been pumped into the financial system. This is the ultimate source of the inflationary pressures throughout the world economy, now being experienced by working people in the rising cost of daily necessities, which is wiping out whatever meager wage increases they have been able to obtain.

As for coronavirus, the pandemic is swelling again towards another winter surge. But for the Biden administration, this is not primarily a problem of death and devastating illness but of a persistent shortfall in

the labor market. Companies cannot find the necessary workers at the bottom-of-the-barrel wages they are prepared to pay.

In each of his appearances on the Sunday network interview programs, Deese argued that the solution to the labor market crisis was to overcome the withdrawal of millions of women workers from the labor force, which he blamed on child care concerns and fear of coronavirus infection. This was a major purpose of the Build Back Better legislation that is currently stalled in Congress, he said.

On CNN’s “State of the Union,” Deese called child care “not only a big cost driver for families, but a big impediment for more parents and women to get back into the work force ...”

On ABC’s “This Week,” he said that the Build Back Better legislation “will cut the cost of child care by more than half for most working families.” He continued, “Child care, we know that 2 million women have had to come out of the workforce as a result of COVID and this pandemic. By providing affordable child care, affordable elder care, we’re going to help get those people back into the workforce, which will reduce price pressures ...”

And on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” he deflected several questions from host Chuck Todd about whether the administration believed that higher immigration could ease the “worker shortage ... particularly in the service sector.” (Neither the host nor his guest would entertain the possibility that higher wages would be a good method for obtaining more labor.)

Deese then declared, “We’re focused on those drivers that will actually help Americans get into the workforce, and those are things like getting COVID under control and also providing child care. You know, that is a here-and-now issue. That’s not a tomorrow

issue for a lot of families, a lot of women, more than 2 million women who have left the labor force, precisely because they have to manage these family issues. If we can get quality child care, quality preschool in place, that's going to free them up to get into the labor market."

Even more emphatic on this issue was Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, appearing as the Biden administration representative on CBS's "Face the Nation." She elaborated on this issue, saying, "Labor force participation is quite depressed, relative to pre-pandemic levels. I think part of it reflects concerns about COVID and exposure to COVID, especially in jobs that involve public-facing activities. And I—partly, the fact that child care workers, educators are in short supply creates child care problems. That also tends to suppress labor supply. So, as I say, when we really get control of the pandemic, I think labor supply will go back to normal."

After her initial acknowledgement that concern over the pandemic was a major issue in discouraging workers from taking "public-facing" jobs in the restaurant, hotel and similar industries (which are also among the lowest paying), Yellen treated the pandemic as though it was a thing of the past and focused on obtaining child care as the main obstacle for women workers returning to their jobs or taking new ones.

She went on to argue that the United States had fallen behind Europe in the number of women in the workforce because of inadequate social provisions, saying that universal early childhood education and tax credits for child care "will help boost labor force participation, particularly that of women."

Some important facts and figures on this issue were spelled out in a column by Bryce Covert published by the *New York Times* over the weekend, which criticized conservative Democratic Senator Joe Manchin for opposing the Build Back Better legislation. While expressing justifiable outrage over the extent of child poverty and deprivation in America and the consequent loss of human potential, Covert sought to tailor her argument to the right-wing framework of capitalist politics, where every measure has to be justified by considerations of profit.

"Child care also frees parents, and, in particular, mothers to work outside the home. Universal preschool in the District of Columbia, introduced in 2009,

increased the labor force participation rate for mothers with young children by 10 percentage points," she wrote. "Universal child care in Quebec, begun in 1996, helped the province achieve the highest rate of prime-aged working women in the world. The resulting increase in tax revenue has more than covered the cost of Quebec's program."

Covert applied the same argument to the issue of paid family leave for workers who need time off to care for a sick child or parent or for maternity/paternity leave. "An estimated 6 million extra people would stay connected to the labor force if we had paid leave," she wrote. "Without it, we'll keep hemorrhaging workers. ... The whole economy loses billions in productivity when people are forced to miss work to take care of their family members."

These arguments, whether made by Biden administration officials on national television or by liberal columnists in the pages of the *Times*, accept the same premise: The sole measure of human worth is participation in the labor market, which means, under capitalism, selling your labor power to a capitalist who can exploit it for profit. Those who do not contribute to the enrichment of the financial aristocracy—the elderly, children, those who have withdrawn from the labor market because of an entirely justified concern over COVID—have no claim to any of the resources of society.



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