

“It’s just really hard to live”: Chicago workers describe impact of surging food and gas prices

Marcus Day
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Rising prices, particularly for essential needs such as food and energy, are making everyday life increasingly difficult for workers and the poor throughout the world.

With inflation at its highest level in 40 years, US households are spending \$327 more a month, up from more \$296 a month February, Moody’s Analytics has estimated.

In Chicago, the third-largest US city, the current average price for a gallon of gas is \$4.77, which is down only slightly from the record high of \$4.86 reported on March 28, according to auto association AAA.

Gasoline costs across Illinois are up 37.4 percent since last year. Food prices in the state are up 7.9 percent, the highest since 1982. Housing costs have increased 4.4 percent across Illinois, with average rents increasing by 3.5 percent. The increase in rent costs are even greater in Chicago where ApartmentList.com reported in January average rental costs had increased more than 14 percent since 2020.

The surge in prices, coupled with decades of stagnating wages enforced by the big business political parties and the pro-corporate trade unions, is fueling a growing movement of workers in countries around the globe. From mass anti-government demonstrations in Sri Lanka, to truckers strikes in Spain, Argentina and Mexico, to walkouts by teachers in the Chicago suburbs last month and graduate student workers at the University of Illinois at Chicago on Monday, workers internationally increasingly feel that they do not have enough to live and have no choice but to fight to secure their needs.

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with workers in Chicago about the impact of rising food and gas prices.

Melissa, a social worker, said, “Typically I’d like to say I am on a budget, but now we are more on a firm budget, knowing exactly what we are dedicating to grocery shopping and unnecessary trips. Anything extra, like sweets and stuff, we’ve definitely cut down on. Luxuries like cable.”

Melissa described the impact of rising gas prices, saying the cost of filling her vehicle has doubled over the course of the pandemic. “Oh my god, I want to say my husband said he filled it up with \$120. My truck never took \$120. He used to fill up with \$60. Granted it’s an SUV, but still. It really has impacted us, where I’m looking at our budget a lot more closely. If we don’t have to put gas in our car, we just stay home. Eating out, that’s a luxury we cut out.”

As a social worker, Melissa said she’s seen growing signs of need among the military veterans she works with.

“A lot of people in the past felt that they didn’t want to apply for any type of government assistance. I’m encouraging them, and now they have no problem going to apply for it, because they’re seeing that now really is a time of need.”

While her raises have kept up somewhat with inflation, she said, it’s still been a difficult balancing act to keep up with rising prices, and others working in the public sector have not seen their wages and salaries

increase as much. “Like my husband, he didn’t get a raise. And our taxes definitely went up, our health care definitely went up. So it’s like they give you a raise but then everything else increases, so there really is no time to save money.”

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Maria, a pharmacy technician, said, “The cost of medications, even for someone who works for a pharmaceutical, it’s just sad. They need to help everybody, not just a group of people.

“Banks are doing well. I have friends and we were talking, and I said, ‘When people need the money, the banks aren’t giving it. But when someone is making a ton of money and they don’t need it, the banks are like, let’s give them more money.’

“But you have to give something to the people who *need* the money. It’s always too easy, I think, for big businesses to get money.”

“It’s just really hard to live, you know?”

Francheska, an at-home caregiver, said, “I definitely have had to spend a lot more than I used to, especially with gas prices. Everything kind of just went up from there, and it’s just really hard to live, you know? It’s like first you get it figured out and then they find another way to just keep adding on and on. It’s exhausting.

“I make about \$20 an hour and that’s still not enough. I’m just meeting my bills. We’re kind of just stuck here, not being able to grow as a person and do things we enjoy. You have to work, you have to pay your bills. But where’s the fun in that? You forget to do the things you actually love because you’re so focused on having to live. It sucks.”

Francheska said she had not gotten a wage increase in the four years she’s worked for her employer. “I haven’t received a raise, with everything going up, not

at all. So it’s insane to me.”

As with many other health care workers, Francheska has been seriously impacted by COVID-19. “I actually got sick three times from COVID, and that really affected me, mentally and physically. With work, it got really slow. I got let off once. That was the most difficult time. Even now I don’t do as well as I used to financially, and physically I don’t have as much energy to do stuff.

“I think the money is just going to the wrong places, to be honest. Like there’s not really much sympathy for the people. We’ve just been put on the back burner to just figure it all out. And then those that do have it good are living lavishly.”



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