

Soaring food prices threaten workers with food insecurity and starvation

Jacob Crosse
18 May 2022

Around the world, in developing and so-called advanced countries alike, millions are facing food insecurity and hunger amid soaring prices and shortages of food.

Last month, the World Bank estimated that food prices will increase by 22.9 percent this year, driven largely by a spike in global wheat prices. The FAO Food Price Index, which tracks monthly changes in the international prices of a basket of food commodities such as sugar, dairy, cereal and vegetable oil, is nearly 30 percent higher than in April 2021.

In the United States, the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that overall food prices rose 9.5 percent last month, and meat costs are 20 percent higher than in 2021.

As inflation continues to rise, workers' wages are failing to keep pace. Calculations by *Business Insider* last week found that when factoring in inflation, "real wage growth" for workers in the US in the information technology, utilities, financial activities, mining and logging, manufacturing, construction, education and retail trade sectors decreased from January 2021 through April 2022. Most industries, including trade, manufacturing and construction, saw a decline between three and four percent.

As real wages decline for millions of workers throughout the world, the over 40 percent increase in wheat prices this year has already led to a substantial increase in global hunger. A report released last week by the UN's World Food Programme (WFP), titled "A hunger catastrophe," estimated that 811 million people around the world, or one-seventh of humanity, face "food insecurity" and "go to bed hungry" every night.

The same report noted that the number of people suffering from "acute food insecurity has more than doubled," from 135 million in 2019 to 276 million last year, to an estimated 323 million this year. An estimated 48.9 million people are "currently on the very edge of famine" and at risk of "starvation."

This "seismic hunger crisis," the report notes, was driven by four factors: war, ongoing crop failures due to the effects of climate change, "economic consequences" from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the overall increased cost of food. The WFP remarked that the organization paid 30 percent more in 2022

for the same food products than it paid in 2019.

The increase in food prices led UNICEF on Tuesday to release an emergency "child alert," warning that without emergency funding, 600,000 children are at immediate risk of "severe acute malnutrition." The report revealed that this leading cause of preventable death in children, also known as "severe wasting," has increased "by more than 40 percent" since 2016.

In a statement accompanying the report, UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell wrote, "The world is rapidly becoming a virtual tinderbox of preventable child deaths and child suffering from wasting." According to UNICEF/WHO/World Bank statistics, India leads the world in children affected by severe wasting, with over 5.7 million children under the age of five suffering from severe malnutrition.

Following India, some 812,564 children in Indonesia are suffering from severe wasting, putting them at risk of dying from common childhood illnesses. This is followed by 678,925 children in Pakistan, 482,590 in Nigeria and some 327,859 in Bangladesh.

The food crisis is not limited to developing countries. Expressing the globalized nature of modern production and the catastrophic impact of inflation on the working class the world over, a survey conducted in the United Kingdom and released Tuesday by Sky News found that, to alleviate inflation burdens, 27 percent of Britons aged 16 to 75 "skipped meals" in April. Another 65 percent sought to reduce costs by not turning on their heating.

Speaking before the Treasury Committee at the House of Commons on Monday on the danger of rising inflation, already at a 30-year high of 7 percent, Bank of England Governor Andrew Bailey frankly admitted that "there's a lot of uncertainty."

Bailey confessed, "Sorry for being apocalyptic for a moment, but that is a major concern." Verifying Bailey's concerns, British retailer Marks & Spencer warned the following day that food price inflation could increase by a further 10 percent in the UK by the end of the year.

In the United States, parents around the country are unable to locate baby formula. In some instances, parents have been

forced to drive to Mexico to find formula, while others have nowhere left to turn but the hospital.

On Tuesday, multiple news outlets reported that two children, a toddler and a preschooler, had to be hospitalized at the Le Bonheur Children's Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee in cases "directly related to the formula shortage," Dr. Mark Corkins told WHBQ-TV.

"This is literally not just Memphis, not just Tennessee or the South. This is literally all of North America being affected," Corkins said. Dr. Corkins added that he was forced to treat the children with IV fluids and nutrients because neither the hospital nor any stores carried formula the children could tolerate. He said he expects that more children will end up in the hospital unless action is taken "soon."

Driving up the cost of food prices is a global fuel shortage that is affecting farmers and workers alike. In the United States on Tuesday, for the first time ever, the auto club AAA reported that the average price for a gallon of gas in the US was more than \$4 in all 50 states, with California leading the nation at an average of \$6.02 a gallon.

"High prices at the pump most profoundly affect lower-income families, as they spend a higher proportion of their earnings on gas and are less likely to drive electric vehicles," Mark Finley, a fellow at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, told *Bloomberg*.

There are many factors that are contributing to the rise in fuel and food prices, including the ongoing war in Ukraine. When it comes to wheat, Russia and Ukraine account for 30 percent of all global wheat exports. More than 26 countries, including Egypt and Somalia, rely on these two countries for between 50 and 100 percent of their wheat imports. Currently, some 4.5 million tons of wheat are sitting in Black Sea ports, unable to be shipped out due to ongoing hostilities.

Data from the International Food Policy Research Institute's food trade policy tracker shows that since the outbreak of the war, 23 countries have imposed export restrictions on food, affecting over 17 percent of the total calories traded on global markets. In addition to restricting staple foods, countries have placed restrictions on potash and nitrogen fertilizer, leading to increased prices. These price increases have in turn forced farmers globally to compensate by planting less crops, further driving down supply and increasing consumer prices.

While US President Joe Biden and the Democratic Party have attempted to pin rising food and gas prices on Russian President Vladimir Putin, repeatedly referring to inflation as "Putin's price hike," the reality is far different. The war in Ukraine has contributed to further increases, but, as any worker who has had to pay rent or buy groceries knows, prices were soaring long before February 2022.

In reality, the surge in prices and inflation is the outcome of bipartisan monetary policies pursued by both big business parties, particularly since the 2008 financial crisis, during

which President Barack Obama, through the Federal Reserve, printed up trillions of dollars to prop up the financial markets and guarantee the wealth of the super-rich.

In March 2020, the US government passed another massive bailout for the financial oligarchy in the form of the multitrillion-dollar CARES Act, which has led to a more than doubling of the Fed balance sheet, from \$4.1 trillion in February 2020 to over \$8.9 trillion as of May 2022.

The direct intervention of the US government to save the banks and stock prices of the ultra-wealthy has resulted in American billionaires increasing their wealth by 62 percent during the pandemic, while workers' nominal wages have risen by only 10 percent over that same period, according to an April report by Oxfam.

The ruling class is determined to make the working class pay for the bailouts of the rich and the cost of the war. While there is supposedly no money for COVID vaccines, child tax credits or pandemic-related unemployment programs, the two big business parties have provided the Ukrainian military with some \$53 billion this year.

The surging cost of living and the unavailability of basic goods have triggered mass protests around the world. This has been most vividly seen in the mass movement of workers in Sri Lanka. Similar large-scale protests against food and energy prices have also taken place in Tunisia and Peru.

These protests are coupled with a growing movement of the working class in the United States. Last week, in a powerful show of the power of rank-and-file health care workers, nurses organized independently of the unions to oppose the unjust persecution of Tennessee nurse RaDonda Vaught, forcing the judge to ignore prosecutors' demands for an outrageous six-year prison term and instead grant probation.

In Detroit, Michigan last week, 79 percent of Detroit Diesel workers overwhelmingly rejected a contract that would raise wages just 8 percent over the span of six years.

The soaring level of hunger, amid the vast and continual enrichment of the financial oligarchy, is a testament to the bankruptcy of the capitalist system. As workers enter into struggle all over the world, they must demand that the financial oligarchs, not the workers, pay for the crisis of capitalism and fight to replace this irrational social order with socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact