

White House hunger conference offers only token “solutions” to a mounting social crisis

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The White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition and Health, held Wednesday by the Biden administration, was an event that reveals the bankruptcy of American capitalism. In the richest country in the world, which exports more food than any other, there are millions who go hungry, not because of inadequate supplies, but because they are poor.

According to one recent study, the US is the world's largest producer of corn, the fourth-largest producer of wheat, the fifth-largest producer of potatoes, the tenth-largest producer of sugarcane and the twelfth-largest producer of rice. US agriculture is heavily mechanized and extremely efficient, with the result that this enormous output is produced by only 1 percent of the population who work in agriculture.

The Biden administration conference did not, of course, address the contradiction between massive food output and millions going hungry and malnourished, nor did Biden himself in his brief and banal remarks to the conference Wednesday.

The figures on that score are daunting. Biden was compelled to admit that “one in 10 American households still do not have access to enough food. One in 10.” He gave no explanation of the causes of this tidal wave of deprivation, which based on that figure would come to 33 million people.

The conference was the first such event convened by a US president in 53 years, since Republican President Richard Nixon—hardly a figure one would associate with humanitarian concerns—summoned the first conference on hunger, in an effort to control the political pressures generated by the upsurge of working people and youth in the 1960s.

It is noteworthy that groups fighting against hunger and malnutrition had sought the convening of a conference under the Obama administration, but

Obama and his top aides were never willing to do so. Biden, of course, was vice president for the eight years of that administration.

The White House conference was significant mainly for what it did not offer: any major federal initiative to attack the root cause of mass hunger, poverty and social inequality.

Instead, Biden trumpeted an additional \$8 billion in new spending on various initiatives to increase access to food, educate consumers on how to eat healthier, promote exercise and other healthy habits and encourage research into nutrition and the consequences of food insecurity.

Every dime of these new funds came from corporations, trade associations, foundations and charitable organizations, with nothing from the federal government. Biden touted the supposed achievements of last year's Economic Recovery Act and infrastructure legislation, as well as this year's Inflation Reduction Act, boasting that child poverty had been cut by 50 percent through the expansion of the Child Tax Credit.

He did not note that the child poverty rate soared by a similar amount after the tax credit expired December 31 because of opposition to its extension by Democratic Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia (one of the poorest states) and all 50 Senate Republicans, the same Republicans that Biden invoked several times in his remarks as political partners in fighting against hunger and malnutrition.

The donors of the \$8 billion ranged from such notoriously abusive employers as Tyson Foods, Dole, Google, InstaCart and DoorDash, to supermarket chains like Albertson's, HyVee, Meijer and Publix, to trade groups like the National Restaurant Association, to foundations and charities like the Rockefeller

Foundation and the YWCA.

Almost as an afterthought—and not included in the long programmatic document issued by the White House the day before the conference—Biden called for an expansion of food stamps and the school lunch program, including making 9 million more children eligible for free meals over the next 10 years.

Even this minimal proposal has not the slightest chance of enactment by Congress, especially if, as now expected, the Republican Party wins control of the House of Representatives in the November midterm election.

Given both the intransigent opposition of the Republicans and considerable resistance among many Democrats to any expansion of federal social programs, virtually all the measures proposed in the White House blueprint for combating hunger consisted of voluntary actions and appeals to charity.

Significantly, the White House gave its backing to the creation of pilot programs for promoting better meals for the elderly receiving Medicare, based not on the federal agency overseeing the program, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), but based on programs developed in privately run Medicare Advantage plans. These plans, which operate on a for-profit basis, now enroll as many as a third of all Medicare recipients.

Similarly, rules for the food industry to discourage the marketing of unhealthy foods to children and to the poor would be voluntary, enforced only by having the Department of Defense, as a large food purchaser, limit such marketing at military dining facilities.

Most importantly, the conference did not address either the supply chain crisis which has had a significant impact on the availability of baby formula, or the skyrocketing inflation which has put many food products out of reach of consumers, particularly those on low incomes.

Biden's remarks were noteworthy in only one respect. The 79-year-old president seemed more disoriented than usual, perhaps because the subject was not one, like the war in Ukraine, in which he is deeply interested. At one point he called out for praise, as an example of bipartisan support for his plan, Republican Rep. Jackie Walorski of Indiana.

"Representative Jackie, are you here? Where's Jackie?" he asked. "I didn't think she was—she wasn't

going to be here—to help make this a reality." Walorski actually died in a car crash on August 3, 2022, along with three other people, including two aides. The tragedy was widely reported in Washington circles, and White House aides were at pains to claim that Biden was well aware of Walorski's death and had not forgotten it.



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