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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Barry Grey
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As US House returns to Washington, Democrats signal readiness to grant companies immunity for worker deaths

Amid scenes of disease, death and hunger not seen since the Great Depression, the Trump administration and Congress are, in Trump's words, "in no rush" to pass a "Phase IV" stimulus bill to provide aid to bankrupt state and city governments and relief to desperate working class families.

With today's reconvening of the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives, following that of the Republican-led Senate last Monday, the largely stage-managed political wrangling over a new stimulus bill begins in earnest. But it is already clear that any bill that emerges will further enrich the financial aristocracy at the expense of the jobs, the wages and the very lives of the working class.

At the end of March, Congress passed, in record time and by a near-unanimous vote, the biggest corporate bailout in world history. Since then, tens of millions of American workers have been laid off, bringing the number of unemployed and underemployed workers, according to Friday's Labor Department employment report, to at least 47 million, or nearly one-third of the labor force.



President Donald Trump speaks during a news conference about the coronavirus in the Rose Garden of the White House, March 13, 2020, in Washington [Credit: AP Photo/Evan Vucci]

Millions of those laid off during the lockdown have received neither jobless pay nor the one-time \$1,200 stipend promised by the government. Studies show that 40 percent of families with children are unable to buy enough food and mile-long food lines are springing up cross the country.

Despite rising coronavirus infections and death, concentrated in work locations such as meatpacking plants and logistics facilities (Amazon, the US Postal Service, UPS, etc.), the Trump administration and state governors, Democratic and well as Republican, are ordering workers back to work without any safety precautions and under pain of being cut off of jobless pay.

Meanwhile, the stock market, buoyed by the flood of cash from the US Treasury and the Federal Reserve, is roaring back and poised to surpass its record heights before the COVID-19 pandemic erupted in March.

On the Sunday interview shows, much attention was paid to disputes between the two parties over a new stimulus bill, while at most perfunctory mention was made of the plight of millions of people facing imminent homelessness and even starvation. As always, not one of the moderators, pundits, politicians, officials or academics mentioned, let alone questioned, the trillions handed over to the super-rich, with no strings attached. No one questioned why it was OK to transfer trillions in taxpayer funds to the corporate oligarchs, but impossible to provide relief for impoverished workers and their families.

Speaking on ABC's "This Week with George Stephanopoulos," Larry Kudlow, Trump's chief economic adviser, said it was time to "pause" before enacting further legislation to address the impact of the pandemic and indicated that nothing would be done before late May or the start of June at the earliest.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, appearing on "Fox News Sunday," boasted that Congress and the White House had already allocated some \$8 trillion to bail out businesses. He affirmed the position of Trump and Senate Republicans that any bill would have to include measures designed to boost the corporate bottom line and protect businesses from legal liability for causing the deaths of workers exposed to COVID-19 on the job.

Host Chris Wallace showed a clip of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell declaring that "if there is any red line" in a new stimulus bill, it is "litigation." By that he meant no measure would be passed by the Senate that did not provide businesses with immunity from lawsuits brought by workers for being forced to work under unsafe and potentially deadly conditions.

Why the insistence on this unprecedented legal license to maim and kill workers? Because the corporations know that forcing workers back on the job under the existing conditions will result in untold thousands of infections and deaths. But with the full backing of the government, they are doing it anyway. They therefore intend to strip workers of their democratic right to seek legal redress in order to shield themselves and their companies from any accountability.

In response to the video clip, Mnuchin, speaking for the administration, said, "We agree with that completely." He added, "We won't bail out poorly managed states."

Other provisions stipulated by Trump as preconditions for a new bill include:

- * Cutting the federal payroll tax. Since this joint tax on employers and workers funds the Social Security and Medicare systems, its suspension or reduction would severely cut the revenues on which the retiree and health benefits for tens of millions of workers depend. It would add billions more to the coffers of the rich while doing nothing for the tens of millions of unemployed workers.

- * Ending "sanctuary city" measures as a requirement for federal aid to states facing massive budget deficits. Trump has been carrying out a vendetta against states and localities, mostly Democratic-controlled, that have refused to allow their police agencies

to fully cooperate with federal immigration agencies conducting their Gestapo-like campaign of deportations and detentions of immigrant workers.

* Cutting or eliminating the capital gains tax. This tax, already far lower at 20 percent than federal income tax rates paid by most workers, applies to income derived from trading in stocks, bonds and other forms of speculation. The tax applies overwhelmingly to the richest five percent of the population, who monopolize ownership of stocks and bonds and therefore monopolize capital gains.

* Further deregulation of business.

In other words, Trump, acting on behalf of the financial aristocracy, is using the health and economic catastrophe triggered by the pandemic and compounded by the ruling elite's refusal to organize a serious fight to contain it, to pressure states and cities to carry out unprecedented cuts in education, health care, pensions and other basic social services and bludgeon workers to risk their health and their life to put food on the table.

As for the Democrats, not a single governor or mayor has so much as suggested raising taxes on the corporations and the rich to address gaping deficits resulting from the collapse of tax revenues. They have all warned that without federal aid, they are prepared to impose massive layoffs of teachers, close schools, close hospitals and gut public transit, sanitation and other basic services.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said last Thursday that she would introduce a bill in the House as early as this week to allocate an additional \$2 trillion to provide aid to the states and cities, increase funding for food stamps, provide aid to hospitals and the United States Postal Service, allocate billions for coronavirus testing, provide more cash stipends to working people and extend unemployment benefits. She said nothing about the demand for legal immunity for employers.

She is well aware that such a bill will never be passed by the Senate or signed into law by Trump. As such, it is a political maneuver designed to give the Democrats a measure of political cover as they continue to collaborate with Trump and the Republicans in exploiting the crisis to further enrich the financial oligarchy.

Speaking to reporters Thursday, Pelosi essentially admitted that the Democrats have no intention of fighting for the proposals contained in their own bill. "We have to start somewhere," she said. "And rather than starting in a way that does not meet the needs of

the American people, we want to set a standard. And, again, we need a presidential signature, so at some point we'll have to come to agreement.”

The silence on Republican demands for legal immunity for corporations signifies the agreement of the Democratic Party with the “back-to-work” drive of the Trump administration. This was spelled out by the Democratic-aligned *Washington Post*, owned by Amazon boss Jeff Bezos, which editorialized on Saturday in support of a “compromise” that would be “carefully tailored to the special risks posed by a pandemic.”

The *Post* is talking here not about the “special risks” to workers, but rather the potential liability of corporate CEOs like Bezos. The world’s richest individual has gained some \$25 billion since the beginning of the year by forcing his low-paid workers to slave away in his distribution centers and warehouses without any serious protection from the virus. According to activist organizations, 75 of the company’s 110 fulfillment centers in the US had confirmed at least one case of the disease at the end of April.

While the company refuses to release information on infections and deaths at its facilities, at least three Amazon workers in the US are known to have died of COVID-19. The most recent death occurred at the company’s JFK8 fulfillment center in Staten Island, New York, where workers walked out and protested unsafe conditions in March. One of the leaders of the protest was fired by the company, which has dismissed at least six workers involved in safety protests.

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