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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Patrick Martin
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Congress adjourns for month-long vacation without action on US unemployment crisis

In an action that demonstrates the bipartisan contempt of both corporate parties, Democrats and Republicans, for the interests of the vast majority of working people, the US Congress went into a month-long recess Thursday, taking no action to alleviate the worst economic and public health crisis in a century.

The Democratic-controlled House of Representatives began its August recess last weekend, while the Republican-controlled Senate held brief daily sessions until Thursday before taking its own recess. The Senate is not scheduled to return until Tuesday, September 8, the day after the Labor Day holiday, while the House will be on vacation even longer, until Monday, September 14.

Under the terms of the Senate recess, even if there were to be an agreement between the two sides which have been negotiating, the congressional Democratic leadership and the Trump administration, any individual senator can block consideration of the deal until the full Senate reconvenes. That means that no action will be taken to address the unemployment crisis until some time next month.



House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) talks with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) as Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) talks with House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) and House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) (Erin Schaff/Pool via AP)

As a result of the deadlock in talks between the Democrats and the Trump administration, the \$600-a-week federal extended unemployment benefits expired on July 31, as well as a ban on evictions in properties insured or partially financed through federal agencies, about 40 percent of the total.

The congressional recess means that nearly 20 million unemployed workers who have depended on the extended federal benefits will now have to live without them for another four weeks, added to the two weeks' worth of payments they have already lost.

The congressional recess will include the nominating convention of the Democratic Party, August 17-20, followed by the Republican convention August 24-27. Former Vice President Joe Biden and Senator Kamala Harris, then Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, will take part in lengthy and stage-managed coronations, which would have been scenes of endless partying and fund-raising, but for the COVID-19 pandemic, which has prevented thousands of delegates from physically assembling at the convention sites.

The scale of the money flow is demonstrated by the report that the Biden campaign raised a record \$26 million in the 24 hours after Biden announced his selection of Harris as his running mate. There are numerous reports of the gusher of money from Wall Street into the coffers of the Democratic campaign. Trump, of course, will rake in similar support from millionaires and billionaires reveling in his tax cut for the wealthy and his continual boosting of the stock market.

While the two parties of big business stage their celebrations, the working class faces a grim reality of rising death tolls from the coronavirus pandemic and a million new applications for unemployment insurance every week of this summer.

Despite the colossal impact on the living standards of millions of workers, it does not appear that the sticking point in the talks was the level of unemployment benefits. Neither party favored continuation of the \$600-a-week payment, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other leading Democrats had repeatedly indicated their willingness to compromise at a lower level, perhaps as little as the \$400-a-week Trump signaled support for in the executive order he signed this week.

The most important issue, according to leaks to the press carried out by both sides, was the question of federal aid to crisis-stricken state and city governments, devastated by the economic collapse that has driven down tax revenues, but compelled by state constitutions to balance their budgets, which will require massive across-the-board cuts in all public services.

According to Pelosi, the Democrats were seeking \$915 billion in federal aid to cities and states, while the White House offered only \$150 billion, plus some additional flexibility in repurposing funds previously allotted to the states in the CARES Act passed in late March.

The White House apparently insisted, according to Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, that any money to aid the states would come with severe restrictions. “You can’t use that money to bail out pensions,” he said.

Pelosi responded in kind, claiming that she would not resume talks until the White House agreed to split the difference between the \$3.5 trillion bill passed by the House in May, and the \$1.2 trillion bill offered by Senate Republicans last month. “Until they’re ready to do that, it’s no use sitting in a room and let them tell us that states should go bankrupt,” she said.

Other issues included increased funding for election security and for the US Postal Service, to enable it to handle the flood of mail ballots expected because of coronavirus restrictions on in-person voting. Trump has been adamant that he will not sign any legislation that allows the USPS to handle a surge of mail ballots.

The two sides characterized their positions with mock intransigence, as though they were fighting a titanic battle over principle. The truth is that deadlock and delay serve the purposes of both sides.

Trump is using his executive orders, issued Saturday without a shred of constitutional legality, to posture as the defender of the workers thrown out of their jobs by the pandemic. Pelosi adopts the same pretense, warning that “people will die” if there is no deal struck on extending benefits.

While they engage in this supposed battle from the opposite sides of phony barricades erected on Pennsylvania Avenue, both factions in Washington represent the interests of the same class, the financial aristocracy and its military-police apparatus.

This is apparent from the fact that in March they reached agreement in a matter of hours when it was a question of bailing out Wall Street and corporate America in the CARES Act. Similarly, both parties have rubber-stamped massive Pentagon funding bills—most recently topping \$750 billion—ensuring that the military arm of US imperialism never misses a meal.

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