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As the oligarchs make trillions, Congress offers a pittance for the jobless

The most important fact about the \$900 billion coronavirus relief bill that was adopted by the US Congress Monday night is that it is grossly inadequate to meet the vast social needs exposed by the pandemic. Once again, the corporate-controlled two-party political system has revealed its indifference to mass suffering.

Millions of workers thrown out of their jobs by the coronavirus pandemic last spring were cut off federal supplemental unemployment benefits of \$600 a week on July 31, under provisions of the CARES Act adopted near-unanimously by Democrats and Republicans in Congress. This cutoff was carried out to enforce the back-to-work drive by big business, which demanded that workers return to their jobs producing profits for the capitalists, regardless of the COVID-19 threat to their health and lives.



People line up during a food distribution event by Food Rescue US, Monday, Nov. 30, 2020, at Rosie's at Copper Door B&B in the Overtown neighborhood of Miami [Credit: AP Photo/Wilfredo Lee]

While workers were forced back to factories and workplaces, there are 10 million fewer jobs today than at the start of the year. Now, after nearly five months of no benefits, which have wiped out their savings, driven them into poverty and put many in danger of homelessness, longterm unemployed workers will receive \$300 a week, limited to 11 weeks, expiring by the

middle of March. This pitiful sum will barely keep food on the table, let alone pay the bills that have accumulated since the summer.

Added to that is the \$600-per-person one-time check to be sent out to most working people, as well as their children—half the \$1,200 checks that were issued by the Treasury last spring and less than the average rent in most American cities. The sum total of these checks, \$166 billion, is less than the \$190 billion that Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and Tesla CEO Elon Musk have gained between them since March.

Two billionaires have added more to their personal wealth than the US government sees fit to pay out to all working people in the country, combined, in the midst of the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression. What a demonstration of the fact that America is a dictatorship of, by and for the billionaires! And to this class reality must be added the fact that Bezos and Musk have enriched themselves from a social catastrophe, a pandemic that has killed 320,000 Americans and 1.7 million people around the world.

The Democrats and Republicans agreed on a \$900 billion limit to the “relief” bill. This figure is less than the \$1 trillion accumulated by America’s billionaires since March. And it is less than the nearly \$1 trillion the federal government is spending on the military and nuclear weaponry, including a record \$741 billion budget for the Pentagon alone, passed through Congress by huge margins in both parties.

Compare the colossal sums available to the superrich and the military to the penny-pinching treatment of jobless workers. Two pandemic-related unemployment benefits programs, scheduled to expire next Monday, will now be extended for a mere 11 weeks. The moratorium on evictions, established as a public health measure by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, will be extended for a month. A pitiful \$25 billion is assigned to the relief of renters and homeowners facing foreclosure—another drop in the bucket.

The Democrats and Republicans in Congress have aimed not to save the lives or livelihoods of American working people, but to safeguard the vast fortunes of the financial aristocracy. The coronavirus relief bill seeks to stave off, for a month or so, an economic collapse that would trigger a massive social upheaval and threaten the existence of the capitalist system as a whole.

It is notable that in her remarks Monday introducing the legislation, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi cited the deadline of December 26 for the expiration of pandemic-related unemployment assistance, calling that “vital.” Politicians of both capitalist parties were concerned that such a cutoff for 12 million people the day after Christmas would trigger widespread outrage in the working class.

The Republicans took their stand on blocking any financial aid for city and state governments that have been devastated by the economic slump accompanying the pandemic and have already eliminated 1.3 million jobs of public employees. Caught in the vise between legal requirements that they balance their budgets and plunging revenues, virtually every major city and most states project even more massive job cuts unless there is emergency federal aid. Democrats abandoned a proposed \$1 trillion for the cities and states in favor of minimal aid for schools and public health services.

However sharp their tactical and short-term differences—large numbers of congressional Republicans still refuse to acknowledge the election victory of President-elect Joe Biden—both parties share a common class loyalty. They uphold the interests of the financial oligarchy, for which the coronavirus pandemic has been a money-making opportunity, not a historic calamity.

This was demonstrated in one critical incident in the weekend drive to put together a final version of the relief bill. When Republican Senator Pat Toomey proposed an amendment that would bar the Federal Reserve from reviving lending operations to companies and

government agencies authorized under the CARES Act but phased out by the Trump administration, the Democrats rose up in rebellion.

They would not fight for the unemployed, the destitute or those facing eviction and foreclosure. They could care less about the 320,000 dead from COVID-19, or the 400,000 more facing death before widespread vaccinations take place. But when it came to a threat to slow the flow of credit and subsidies to big business, every Senate Democrat rushed to the barricades. Toomey's proposal was sidetracked, and the Fed's lending powers remained unimpaired.

Even in the "relief" bill itself, more money goes to business interests than to workers, including \$284 billion in loans for the misnamed Paycheck Protection Program (a slush fund for corporations masquerading as small businesses), \$20 billion in emergency grants to businesses, \$15 billion for the airline industry and \$15 billion for the movie theater chains. There is even a provision expanding the tax deduction for the "three-martini lunches" enjoyed by corporate executives.

The *New York Times*, the main media voice of the Democratic Party, praised the bipartisan congressional bill, headlining its editorial, "This Deal Is Good Enough." The Democrats and their media mouthpieces portray the bill as a temporary stopgap until the Biden administration takes office January 20, 2021. But Biden has no plans to alleviate the social conditions of masses of workers facing hunger, poverty, homelessness, disease and death in a winter that is likely to be the worst in living memory. He has flatly rejected a lockdown of nonessential businesses and the closure of schools, the only measures that can prevent a tidal wave of death before vaccinations are widely available to the American population.

Working people should not place their hopes in any section of the corporate elite, including the Democratic Party and the Biden administration. The only force that will defend workers' interests is the working class itself, organized as an independent political movement, fighting to enforce the closure of nonessential workplaces, with full income protection for affected workers and small businesses, until the pandemic is under control, and prepare a nationwide political general strike on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program.

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