

Congress of millionaires robs the unemployed

3 August 2020

The refusal of the US Congress to take action, while supplemental federal unemployment benefits expired July 31 for as many as 30 million American workers, demonstrates the social interests that drive the corporate-controlled political system in the United States. A Congress whose average member is a millionaire has not the slightest concern for the mass suffering that the cutoff of benefits will inflict on the working class.

Tens of millions of workers and their families have already begun to experience the impact of this act of class savagery. Their weekly incomes will be cut by 60 to 90 percent, depending on the level of state unemployment benefits they may continue to receive. Nearly 20 million households will be unable to afford their monthly rent, under conditions where a limited moratorium on evictions was allowed to expire on the same day, Friday, July 31. Millions more will be unable to buy sufficient food, let alone afford health insurance and medical care under conditions of a nationwide COVID-19 pandemic.

The cutoff of supplemental benefits is not the byproduct of “gridlock” in Washington nor the unintended consequence of election-year conflicts between Democrats and the Trump administration, as the corporate media presents it. This is a deliberate policy. For all their mutual mudslinging and displays of partisan ferocity, the Democratic and Republican parties and the Trump administration serve the same class interests and are pursuing the same goal. They aim to use the threat of poverty, hunger and homelessness to force millions of workers to return to work producing profits for the capitalist class, regardless of the spreading danger from the coronavirus pandemic.

Appearing on Sunday television interview programs, after a three-hour negotiating session on Saturday, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (net worth \$120 million), speaking for the Democrats, and Treasury Secretary

Steven Mnuchin (net worth \$300 million), speaking for the Trump administration, agreed that the \$600-a-week supplemental benefit would not be renewed in its previous form.

On the ABC program “This Week,” Mnuchin flatly attacked the supplemental benefit, repeatedly describing jobless workers who received the \$600-a-week payment as “overpaid” and complaining that the payments had led to widespread refusal by workers to go back to their jobs when recalled after the end of state lockdowns imposed because of COVID-19.

When his interviewer expressed skepticism that an “extra \$600” was a disincentive to finding a job, Mnuchin replied, “There’s no question in certain cases where we’re paying people more to work—stay home than to work. That’s created issues in the entire economy.”

The former Hollywood financier, whose personal wealth would cover the cost of supplemental benefits for 10,000 workers *for an entire year*, was giving voice to the claims of Senate Republicans and of numerous corporate employers. They have argued that the \$600-a-week federal benefit made it difficult to induce workers to return to work at low-paying fast food, retail and sweatshop positions.

Speaking on the same program, Pelosi tried to make a display of sympathy for the unemployed, criticizing the Republicans for subjecting jobless workers to a greater degree of scrutiny than businessmen who collected tens of millions of dollars in federal payments under the misnamed Paycheck Protection Program.

But she embraced the suggestion of the second-ranking Democrat in the House, Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, who said last week that the supplemental benefit was negotiable, and that the Republican demand to reduce the weekly amount was “not a deal-breaker.”

Pelosi suggested a sliding scale of payments, as proposed by Senate Democratic Leader Charles

Schumer, in which “the amount of money that’s given as an enhancement for unemployment insurance should relate to the rate of unemployment. So, as that goes down, then you can consider something less than the \$600 ...”

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has set August 7 as the effective deadline for the ongoing negotiations, the day that the Senate will begin its August recess. The House and Senate could well begin their monthlong break—a period of lavishly-paid vacations far beyond the reach of most American workers—having either drastically cut benefits for the unemployed, or failed to restore them at all.

On the same day that federal supplemental benefits expired, the House of Representatives passed, on a near-party-line vote, a \$1.3 trillion bill to fund the Department of Defense, as well as the departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, Justice, Transportation, Energy and several other agencies.

The military component of that bill, close to \$750 billion, would by itself have paid for more than 40 weeks of supplemental unemployment benefits. This includes such items as \$70 billion—four weeks of supplemental benefits—for Overseas Contingency Operations, the slush fund which the Pentagon uses to cover expenses for wars in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, as well as drone missile strikes across a much wider area.

The most recent bill for a single weapons system, the F-36 fighter jet, at \$34 billion, would pay for two weeks of supplemental benefits. A single Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carrier (there are five on order, and 10 planned in total) comes to \$18 billion for research, development and construction—one week’s worth of supplemental unemployment benefits to keep 30 million American families alive.

There are other comparisons that can be made. GM CEO Mary Barra made \$21 million last year, or \$420,000 per week, enough to fund the unemployment benefits of 700 jobless workers.

The increase since March in the personal fortune of a single individual, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, comes to \$74 billion, enough to cover supplemental benefits for four weeks. Tesla CEO Elon Musk has gained more than \$50 billion during the same period. He could pay the benefit bill for an additional three weeks. American billionaires as whole have gained \$565 billion over the

past four months, enough to finance supplemental benefits until March 2021.

And that leaves out the rest of the Wall Street investor class, those of less than billionaire rank, for whom the four months since the passage of the CARES Act in late March have been the most lucrative period in the history of world capitalism.

Senator McConnell claimed that 15 to 20 members of his Republican caucus opposed any extension of supplemental benefits at all, and several of these diehards have been quoted bemoaning the colossal federal borrowing that has been carried out since the coronavirus pandemic forced the temporary lockdown of the US economy.

The figures cited above, however, demonstrate the lying character of the claims that “there is no money” to provide necessary support for workers, to allow them and their families to survive without being forced back into workplaces that would quickly become focal points of a deadly infectious disease.

Resources aplenty exist, created by the labor of workers. There could be no more fitting disposition of these resources than to confiscate them from the capitalists and put them to use to ensure the survival of the principal productive class in modern society, the proletariat.

To fight for such a perspective, workers must break with the two parties of big business, the Democrats and Republicans, and establish their political independence. The working class must build its own political party, based on a revolutionary socialist program aimed at putting an end to the profit system. This means joining and building the Socialist Equality Party.

Patrick Martin

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>