

Trump's illegal power grab and the specter of American Bonapartism

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On Saturday, US President Donald Trump announced a series of measures ostensibly targeting the cutoff of federal unemployment benefits that mark a new stage in his effort to abolish all constitutional restraints on the power of the president.

Trump announced a deferral of the federal payroll tax, which would defund Social Security, and the extension of federal unemployment benefits at a much lower level.

Congress allowed federal extended unemployment benefits to expire more than two weeks ago, plunging the 16 million unemployed workers in the US and their families into poverty. The expiration of federal jobless aid of \$600 a week means that the weekly payments have fallen to the level of state benefits, which can be less than \$300.

Trump's measures constitute an illegal imposition on the powers of Congress, as spelled out in the Constitution, which declares that "Congress shall have Power To lay and collect Taxes... and provide for the... general Welfare of the United States."

Trump's usurpation of the congressional prerogative to tax and spend is the latest act in a series of unconstitutional actions. In February of last year, Trump declared a State of Emergency to misappropriate Pentagon funds, in defiance of Congress, to build up his apparatus of repression on the Southern border.

In June, amid mass protests against police violence, Trump threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act and deploy the military throughout the country. When sections of the military resisted this attempted coup, fearing it was not adequately prepared and would create a social explosion, Trump instead dispatched federal border agents to Portland, Oregon, where they beat demonstrators and snatched protesters into unmarked vehicles.

In announcing the new measures, Trump presented himself as the arbiter of a logjam in Congress. "Political games that harm American lives are unacceptable,

especially during a global pandemic, and therefore I am taking action to provide financial security to Americans," Trump said. Asked if he was "trying to set a new precedent that the president can go around Congress," Trump replied, "Congress has obstructed... people from getting desperately needed money."

Trump's actions have the character of Bonapartism. The term is derived from the historical example of the famous French general who ruled France for 15 years as a dictator. In its modern usage, it denotes a political situation that arises in a period acute social tension, when the traditional norms of bourgeois democracy become dysfunctional. The executive of the capitalist state—in the US, the president—exploits the impasse to augment its power.

The Bonapartist appears to rise above classes or the contending political factions through which bourgeois politics, in accordance with constitutional provisions, normally proceeds. Relying increasingly on the repressive forces of the state—the military, the police, intelligence agencies and, if necessary, paramilitary forces—the president asserts himself as the super-arbiter of conflict between factions and classes. In fact, however, he speaks for definite class interests.

Writing about the phenomenon of Bonapartist dictatorships in Europe that came to power prior to the rise of fascism, Trotsky wrote:

Raising itself politically above the classes, Bonapartism, like its predecessor Caesarism, for that matter, represents in the social sense, always and at all epochs, the government of the strongest and firmest part of the exploiters; consequently, present-day Bonapartism can be nothing else than the government of finance capital which directs, inspires, and corrupts the summits of the bureaucracy, the police, the officers' caste, and the

press.

Trump has not yet created a dictatorship. The real estate and casino con artist—without military conquests to brag of—has limited credentials to posture as a modern-day Bonaparte. But all his actions are directed toward creating such a dictatorship.

Trump's power grab is facilitated by the mendacious and two-faced character of his opposition in the Democratic Party. The Democrats present themselves as sympathetic to the plight of unemployed workers, while in reality representing the interests of a corporate and financial oligarchy which materially benefits from cutting unemployment benefits—the same interests for whom Trump speaks.

On the one hand, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has repeatedly said that she is seeking a full extension of the federal unemployment benefits. On the other hand, Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer last month introduced a bill that would cut extended unemployment benefits “by \$100 when the rate fell below 11 percent [in a given state], and by another \$100 each time the rate dropped by another percentage point,” according to the *New York Times*. Given that the official US unemployment rate is already at 10.2 percent, Schumer's proposal would mean a cut in jobless benefits for the vast majority of unemployed workers in the US.

The *New York Times*, the main newspaper associated with the Democratic Party, called Schumer's bill “a smarter way to provide workers with necessary and timely aid.”

The *Washington Post*, the other major US newspaper aligned with the Democratic Party, called for a “renewal of unemployment benefits at an elevated rate without disincentives to work.” The term “disincentive” is a backhanded euphemism for cutting unemployment benefits, which supposedly discourage workers from returning to workplaces.

In an op-ed published in the *Washington Post* last month, former Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers Jason Furman and former Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, both under Obama, declared that “extending the \$600 weekly unemployment insurance benefit enacted at the start of the shutdown does not make sense now.”

The basic reality is that the Democrats, Congressional Republicans and Trump, despite the different political roles that they play, support the same fundamental,

bipartisan policy of the ruling class in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In mid-March, when the pandemic threatened to cause a major financial crisis for overindebted US banks and corporations, the Democrats and Republicans united nearly unanimously to pass the so-called CARES Act, which sanctioned the multi-trillion dollar bailout of Wall Street and the rich. When it came to handing money to the rich, the “gridlock” in Washington suddenly disappeared.

Once the massive corporate bailout was passed, the US ruling class immediately adopted the mantra that “the cure can't be worse than the disease,” demanding that workers get back on the job.

Both the federal government and the states quickly abandoned even the most minimal efforts to contain the pandemic, with more than half of governors reopening businesses in defiance of the CDC's own guidelines, including the Democratic governors of Maine, North Carolina, Kansas and Colorado.

The premature reopening of businesses has fueled a massive resurgence of the pandemic, with more than 1,000 people dying every day.

The cutting of unemployment benefits is critical in forcing workers back on the job through a form of economic conscription, aimed at driving down labor costs and boosting the profits of major corporations by sacrificing the lives of workers and their family members.

It is entirely possible that Democratic and Republican members of Congress will come to an agreement on a plan to extend unemployment benefits, using Trump's proposal as a baseline to reach a deal that cuts benefits, which they all agree is necessary. This, however, will resolve nothing.

Capitalism is incompatible with the needs of society, as it is incompatible with democratic forms of rule. Any resolution on a progressive basis to the catastrophe of the spreading pandemic and the social catastrophe engulfing the United States depends upon the independent intervention of the working class on the basis of a revolutionary and socialist program.

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