

Covid-19 and the Forgotten Working Class

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We hear a lot these days about providing benefits and income for the tens of millions of workers who are being laid off, required to 'stay in place' by government orders, or out of necessity have to stay home with young children now that schools have shut down. The recent passed CARES ACT provides some minimal and basic income and unemployment benefits for those without work.

But what about the working class that is still at work? Why are they being asked to sacrifice and get nothing in return but words of praise from politicians and media talking heads?

I'm talking about those workers who are required to continue essential work just in order to keep what's left of the economy going. Those whose work keeps our increasing tenuous social system from flying apart.

I'm talking about workers who are making sure essential utility services aren't cut off. Who are ensuring that food is available and delivered to stores and homes. Who continue to pick up our garbage in order to prevent a further health crisis. Who keep the pharmacies open so those who need essential medicines can still get them. I'm talking about all those warehouse workers at Amazon and elsewhere filling orders for food and other essentials. The firefighters who still call when emergencies happen. The workers still processing health insurance claims. The subway workers, bus drivers and railroad workers. The truck drivers, local and long haul. Postal workers who keep processing and delivering the mail. The assembly line workers still working their machines that produce the desperately needed PPE. And of course the nurses, technicians, doctors and administrative hospital staff. And let's not forget the volunteers of all kind, who keep delivering meals to grandma and grandpa, and checking in on them to help with basic physical needs. Forget them at your peril because there are limits to what they can be asked to do.

They are the combat troops at the front line. The rest of us are on leave behind the line and not facing imminent danger.

Politicians keep telling us they are heroes. Yeah, we know that. They're working in dangerous and hazardous and even life threatening conditions. But simply saying they're heroes doesn't cut it. It's not enough. Words are cheap.

My point is this: Why aren't we compensating and rewarding these folks too, just as we're protecting those losing their jobs with expanded unemployment benefits? Why isn't the 'still working working class' being properly rewarded for the hazardous jobs they're doing, the long hours, the unhealthy working conditions?

We're giving corporations and businesses trillions of dollars in grants, loans, and free money from the Federal Reserve bank. Why are we short-changing those workers who are the real

source of keeping the entire system from collapsing during this crisis, who are keeping the economy—or what's left of it—still running?

They are holding the entire economy and social system together in this crisis. Why isn't that properly recognized? And rewarded?

Here's what the politicians should be doing. Here's what should be included in Congress's next spending bill for those occupations who are now keeping the system itself from crashing during this crisis:

- Hazard pay at time and one-half base pay
- Time and one-half for all hours worked beyond 7 hours; double time beyond 10 hours
- Full health care coverage provided under an emergency new 'Part E' of Medicare
- 90 day moratorium on apartment rent or home mortgage payment
- Government reimbursement for minimum credit card interest charges for six months
- Government reimbursement for auto loan monthly payments
- Clothing allowance tax credit for costs of cleaning & PPE equipment purchases

There's an analogy here that's relevant. It's a strike. When workers go on strike, any decent union strike fund will pick up their mortgage or rent when it comes due. The strike fund covers the monthly auto payment. It provides for food on the table. Everyone in the union pays into the strike fund during good times, so that those in need during a strike can continue.

Isn't the country supposed to be a union? Don't we all pay taxes into the 'national strike fund' that is the government budget? Well it's time to use that budget to cover those in need. And that includes not just the unemployed but the employed as well—i.e. those who are keeping it all together during the crisis.

It's not just the unemployed who are in need. We should recognize all those still working who are risking their lives for the rest. Who are out there on the front lines, risking their health, working extended hours, often under terrible conditions, worried about their families at home. Managers, professionals, and other occupations may be able to work from home. Or telecommute. Or use videoconferencing to keep their companies afloat as the economy shuts down. But workers who are essential must continue to go out into the world and work, or else the entire economic edifice will come down around all our ears.

So why aren't we properly rewarding and compensating these folks who are keeping an even greater crisis and social collapse at bay?

Let's not forget the working class still at work.

Forget them at your peril. Forget them and there'll come a time, and maybe not too far off, when they just decide 'the hell with this, it's not worth it', and just walk off the job in protest or disgust or just decide to take care of their own instead of all of us. And no nice words by politicians about being 'heroes' will bring them back.

Then you'll see how important workers are to the economy and even to what we call civilization itself!

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