

March 23, 2020

Via Email

Majority Leader Mitch McConnell
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20515

Speaker Nancy Pelosi
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Minority Leader Charles Schumer
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20515

Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

RE: United Steelworkers supports providing economic aid to U.S. workers affected by this pandemic and economic crisis

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leader McCarthy:

As the nation and the world faces a global COVID-19 pandemic and an ever-expanding economic crisis, the 850,000 members of the United Steelworkers (USW) are aggressively fighting to avert the worst outcomes in this health crisis, and help prepare the country for economic recovery. The country's leaders must stand behind all workers in this time of need and that is why our union calls on Congress and the Administration to provide immediate aid that ensures recovery is fairly distributed and provides economic justice and support for all working people.

Immediate help is required. Our union represents workers in almost every segment of the economy and their field reports are dire. The impact that is being felt across the globe currently will last for years, and if current estimates are correct, the U.S. economy's gross domestic product (GDP) is set to contract at a 24 percent annual rate between April and June of this year. If this estimate holds, the impact is three times more devastating than that of the single worst quarter of the Great Recession (8.4 percent).

Now is not the time for legislators to shy away from changing the economy for the better. As Congress develops and advances economic aid measures to address the impacts of COVID-19, we urge that the following items be included:

- The USW represents over 50,000 frontline workers in healthcare, emergency response and other essential industries. We must do everything we can to allow these workers to focus on the crisis at hand. Congress must require OSHA to issue an emergency temporary standard and increase funding for OSHA to enforce a new infectious disease standard. Congress must do everything it can to provide fiscal relief, while at the same time rapidly deploy personal protective equipment (PPE) to those caring for the sick. Congress should also remove exemptions that leave large categories of workers, like healthcare providers and emergency responders, out of important paid leave requirements passed in earlier aid packages.

- Impacted workers across the country should not have to worry about items like mortgage or rent payments, student loans, utility bills, or negative credit reports as our nation responds to this pandemic. Congress must ensure households across the country can sustain themselves by providing relief on these items and by increasing funding for existing programs like SNAP, WIC, CHIP, and TANF. The federal government should also provide full funding of COBRA benefits for workers temporarily laid off during this COVID-19 outbreak and investigate long-term solutions as the contours of this recession are further understood. All workers must have access to paid sick leave and issue a moratorium on foreclosures, evictions, student loan defaults, and access to the healthcare system.

- Federal funds for unemployment insurance should be expansive, like never before. Also, Congress should not allow for arbitrary government definitions of “employee” to prevent workers from getting the fiscal and healthcare assistance they need. We must dramatically expand unemployment eligibility to ensure that all workers impacted by this pandemic are covered. This includes workers who made the democratic choice to withhold their labor in a strike prior to this epidemic. They should not be denied benefits that they paid into as we try to stabilize the economy.

- As the largest manufacturing union in North America, it is vital that we do everything possible to maintain a sector of the economy that is close to twelve percent of our country’s economic output. Every manufacturer will be impacted, but how the country responds could either allow manufacturers to rebound, or be undercut by foreign competition. For example, it is estimated that finished and semi-finished steel inventories in China are close to 100 million tons, which is the equivalent of total U.S. yearly production. Without multi-lateral solutions on industrial overcapacity, it is vital for national and economic security that the country maintains current tariffs on non-COVID-19 essential goods.

- Manufacturers will need Congress to invest in our economy to supercharge our exit out of a recession. Major investments in the economy must not only include direct federal aid to employers but also resources to rebuild the country’s infrastructure and create immediate demand for manufactured products.

- Federal assistance to firms must prioritize not just fiscal liquidity but ensure funds are conditioned so that there is no outsourcing of production, stock buybacks, or lavishing bonuses on CEO's. Federal funds should provide workers the opportunity to have a voice on the job, and firms who take fiscal assistance should be required to honor existing collective bargaining agreements and remain neutral if workers want to join a union. The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) was passed in the depths of the Great Depression. The 74th Congress knew that empowering workers to improve wages and working conditions would aid in economic recovery and the 116th Congress should follow the lead of their predecessors and improve on the NLRA by including the PRO Act in any measure.

- In combination with Federal liquidity aid and proper worker protections, Congress must not only reauthorize basic infrastructure packages, like the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) and the Surface Transportation Act, but authorize at least another trillion dollars in infrastructure spending. These investments should include domestic procurement standards that ensure taxpayer dollars are maximized domestically and prevents foreign State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) from undercutting private investment. Congress should look broadly to expand resources into sectors undercut by foreign subsidies like shipbuilding, medicine production, and domestic broadband manufacturing.

- Retirees and workers covered by pension funds, including multi-employer pensions, should be protected. For years, USW has supported federal assistance to multi-employer pension funds that were unable to recover from the Great Recession. We cannot allow retirees and their spouses to worry about their income security while we provide hundreds of billions to corporations. Congress should include the Butch Lewis Act in any aid measure and provide at least \$10 billion a year to the Pension Benefit Guarantee Corporation (PBGC) to provide aid to plans in need.

- States and localities are facing overwhelming requests for help as well. Federal funds should quickly pass to states and local governments to ensure continued operations of services. The likely dramatic decrease in state revenue collected and increase in spending for pandemic response must be federally supplemented as local governments work to maintain safe and healthy communities.

Our union urges grand, swift action to not only reverse the economic hemorrhaging, but also to protect and defend workers. Defending the American worker requires a broader, more comprehensive definition of assistance. This pandemic and related economic collapse is unprecedented in modern times and a Twenty-First Century solution is needed, which allows workers to emerge with as stable a footing as possible. The USW stands ready to aid and if Congress makes the right choices, we will not just persevere but rebuild a stronger and more secure economy for America's workers.

Sincerely,

Thomas Conway
Thomas Conway
International President

cc: United States Senators
United States House of Representatives