

Soaring food prices drive hunger around the world

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The 2021 Global Hunger Index (GHI), published on Thursday, revealed soaring levels of hunger among the poor and working populations around the globe.

The foreword, written by the heads of Welthungerhilfe and Concern Worldwide, the organizations responsible for the GHI, stated that the report “points to a dire hunger situation, a result of the toxic cocktail of the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and increasingly severe and protracted conflicts.”

Rising food prices are a critical contributing factor in the growth of world hunger over the past year. Rapidly mounting inflation and the disruption of the supply chain networks of global capitalism are driving up the prices of all basic consumer goods. The U.S. Energy Information Authority reported that nearly half of all US households who use natural gas to heat their homes will pay an average of 30 to 50 percent more this winter for heating than last year.

Real hourly earnings for American workers have fallen 1.9 percent since January. Workers in countries around the globe confront a similar situation, one that has become unlivable. Increasingly unable to pay rent, purchase adequate food, obtain fuel, they are being driven into struggle.

They confront a social system, capitalism, that exploits them, overworks them, and then leaves them without the basic necessities of life. The producers of the world’s goods find themselves without the means of survival. Nowhere is this more palpable than with the skyrocketing levels of world hunger.

The GHI report on hunger appears a week after the United Nations held a high-level event, Action in Support of Preventing and Ending Famine Now. Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) Director-General Qu Dongyu told the assembly, “Today we face

unprecedented food crises on multiple fronts. Starvation and hunger-related deaths are a present reality. ... As we near the end of 2021, the situation has continued to deteriorate.”

The report stated that hunger remained at “serious, alarming, or extremely alarming levels in nearly 50 countries” and noted that “after decades of decline, the global prevalence of undernourishment ... is increasing.”

Three factors, according to the GHI, drive the rising levels of world hunger, which have driven 41 million people to “the very edge of famine”—“conflict, climate change, and the economic devastation brought on by Covid-19.”

Fueled by inflation and the economic dislocation caused by the pandemic, world food prices are soaring. The FAO Food Price Index (FFPI), which measures change in international prices of a basket of food commodities, reported in September that prices were 32.8 percent higher than they had been a year prior. The prices of the most basic staples rose even more sharply; wheat was up 41 percent and maize 38 percent from September 2020.

These figures contain immense misery. According to an article published in *Nature Food* in July, three billion people could not afford a healthy diet before the pandemic. Soaring food prices, and rising prices of consumer goods generally, have markedly worsened the situation. While 43 percent of the world’s population could not afford a healthy diet prior to COVID-19, by the end of 2020 the numbers had risen to 50 percent.

A 32 percent rise in the price of food has a profound impact on the poor. In underdeveloped countries, a majority of the population will spend somewhere from 40 to 60 percent of household income on food. The

poorest 20 percent of the population in the United States spent from 30 to 40 percent of household income on food. Rising prices either mean an inability to pay rent and other expenses or cuts in the quality and overall calories of the food consumed.

The mass hunger and malnutrition confronting a substantial portion of the world's working class is a social catastrophe, not a natural one. It is an immense crime which has been committed by the capitalist class around the globe.

The three factors driving world hunger identified by the GHI—conflict, the economic dislocation of the pandemic and climate change—are all the results of the irrational and rapacious character of capitalism.

The sharp rise in world hunger over the past year is above all a result of the criminal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic by capitalist governments around the globe. The FAO cited “food price spikes, movement restrictions that limit market and pastoralist activities alike, rising inflation, decreased purchasing power” among the economic effects of the pandemic on world food consumption.

There are now 2.37 billion people in the category of “food insecure.” Most subsist on one or two small meals a day of inadequate nutrition, often simply a grain extended with a meager source of fat and a vegetable.

Around the world, working parents go hungry to ensure that there is food on their children's plates. They invent ways of extending their food. They find ways to cook scraps. They dull hunger pains with instant coffee. They eat rice with a pinch of fish paste and a smear of vegetable oil.

Basic necessities in much of the world are sold in small units as it is all that most can afford. Rice is purchased by the cup; oil in a small tied-off plastic bag.

The problems of malnutrition and hunger confront the working class in even the richest country in the world. American inner cities are food deserts, where the nearest source of healthy food is often miles away and inaccessible by public transit. All that is available at a nearby liquor store are Spam and Frosted Flakes. Lines form outside food banks often stretching for a block. One in five Americans relied on food bank assistance in 2020.

Every day more than seven hundred million people, 8.8 percent of the world's population, go to bed on an

empty stomach, according to the UN World Food Programme (WFP). Hunger and malnutrition mean shortened life expectancies, stunted mental development, the premature death of loved ones; it means widows and orphans and childless parents.

The crisis of the pandemic, the drive of the capitalist class to force workers back into the factories, and the soaring cost of food and other basic goods are fueling an explosive growth in the global class struggle. Workers around the world are beginning to move, in opposition to the capitalist class and in defiance of the corporatist trade unions that have for decades strangled their struggles. They are engaged in a fight for their lives in a struggle over how society's resources will be allocated.

The vast wealth of humanity, the product of our collective labor, is enough to feed, clothe, shelter and provide a rich and meaningful life to every human on this planet.

These immense resources, however, are controlled by a handful of billionaires and the super-rich, who have parasitically profited off the exploitation of the world's working class and who squander this wealth. They have grown richer in the pandemic. Over the course of 2020, the world's billionaires brought in an additional \$5.5 trillion in personal wealth.

Elon Musk, Richard Branson and Jeff Bezos compete with each other to take vanity flights to space, while a majority of the world's population cannot afford a healthy diet. Society can afford to feed everyone on earth, but it cannot afford the billionaires.



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