

Socialism and dignity: The right to retire

written by Stephen Millies
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Enock Benjamin

Seventy-year-old Enock Benjamin never got to retire. The United Food and Commercial Workers union steward died of COVID-19 on April 3.

Born in Haiti, Benjamin was one of many workers from other lands employed in food processing plants and farms. Without their labor we would starve to death.

President Trump called Haiti a “shithole country” and wants us to hate immigrant

workers like Enock Benjamin.

Why was Brother Benjamin still working at the JBS slaughterhouse in Souderton, Pa., just outside Philadelphia? Because he, like millions of older workers, couldn't afford to retire.

The average Social Security benefit is [just \\$1,503 per month](#). So half of all people getting Social Security have to get by with less than \$347 a week. That's below [what the minimum wage pays](#) for a 40-hour workweek in 22 states.

How can you pay rent or utilities on a sub-minimum wage and still have enough money left for food? Last year, 7.5 million seniors were unable to afford a medicine prescribed by their doctor, [according to a Gallup poll](#).



Kyle Cohen

Sixty-five-year-old Kyle Cohen told National Public Radio that she spends 79 percent of her Social Security benefit on rent. [NPR said](#) Cohen had “two hundred and forty-five dollars a month for everything else: utilities, cleaning supplies, transportation and food for her little dog, Penny.”



Veronica Bryant

Cohen's neighbor, 73-year-old Veronica Bryant, also uses most of her Social Security income for rent. Even with other sources of retirement income, she still has to go to food banks sometimes to eat.

While New York City is home to 105 billionaires, [elderly people can be seen in its neighborhoods collecting bottles and cans](#) for a nickel deposit each. Why are people who have worked their entire lives forced to do this?

Pensions are deferred wages. Yet Social Security benefits in the United States [average less than 40 percent of a worker's earnings](#). In Italy and Denmark they amount to more than 80 percent.

More profits by stealing pensions

Many retired workers also have pensions from their job. Millions of seniors don't and have to rely on Social Security for almost all of their income. They either worked in sweatshops and little businesses that didn't have a pension plan or they had been laid off before they qualified for one.

Almost half of Black retirees rely on Social Security for 90 percent or more of their income, [according to the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and](#)

[Medicare.](#)

Every company pension plan exists because of struggle. There were no pensions for those working 12 hours a day in Andrew Carnegie's steel mills in the 1880s.

Strikes won pensions for millions of union members. Nonunion corporations had to offer pensions just in order to fight union organizing drives.

This was how millions of workers won dental insurance. Members of the Teamsters, the United Auto Workers and the United Steelworkers fought to get it in their union contracts. Other unions followed.

Dental insurance became expected to be included in a wage package. Thousands of nonunion employers had to offer it too.

An important part of the anti-labor offensive since the 1970s is eliminating defined benefit pension plans. These are company plans, like Social Security, that promise a definite monthly payment depending upon your wages and years of employment.

Corporations have ditched these plans because it forces them to pay the promised benefits.

[From 1992 to 2010](#), the percentage of employees with defined benefit only pensions fell from 44 percent to 20 percent of the workforce. Shedding these pensions allowed corporations to make billions more in profit.

In their place, many companies [offer 401\(k\) plans](#), where workers contribute a tax deductible part of their wages. These 401(k) plans — named after a section of the 1978 Revenue Act passed by Congress — went into effect in 1980.

Companies can match their employees' contribution completely or partially. [But they don't have to](#) and 49 percent contribute nothing. Big firms, [including Ford and](#)

[Goodyear](#), have stopped putting any money at times into workers' accounts.

These 401(k) plans tie a worker's pension to the roller coaster ride of the stock market. It's gambling with retirement.

Even corporations that had defined benefit pensions often underfunded them. A notorious case was when the Studebaker automobile works in South Bend, Ind., shut down in 1963. Over 4,000 workers [lost all or most of their pensions](#).

Using deindustrialization to rip off retirees

The labor movement fought against these pension robberies. This led to Congress passing the Employment Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) in 1974.

ERISA set up the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, which was supposed to protect workers' pensions and health plans. But the PBGC is underfunded and [had a deficit in 2019 of \\$54 billion](#).

Corporations use bankruptcies to get rid of their union contracts and pension obligations. Between 2001 and 2004, four steel companies and Trans World Airlines went bankrupt, [robbing 256,200 retired workers of their pensions](#).

One of these outfits, Bethlehem Steel, [terminated health and life insurance benefits](#) for 95,000 retired workers and their family members in 2003. Vulture capitalist Wilbur Ross was the criminal in charge.

Ross made millions by [helping to destroy Bethlehem](#), which was the second largest U.S. steelmaker. He's now Trump's commerce secretary.

Detroit's bankruptcy in 2013 was used to drastically [cut the pensions of retired public workers](#). So was Puerto Rico's bankruptcy.

[Pension ripoffs continue](#) at the biggest corporations. General Electric froze its

pension plan for 20,000 salaried employees in 2019. GE is also offering lump sum payments to 100,000 former employees if they give up their pension rights.

Stealing pensions goes hand-in-hand with [illegal job discrimination](#) against older workers. IBM has pushed out or fired thousands of older employees.

IBM was able to do this because workers at the computer giant don't have a union.

Young and old unite and fight!

Capitalists want you to work until you drop. Between 1986 and 2016, the percentage of people over 65 still working rose from 10.6 to 18.6 percent. More [seniors are afraid](#) of running out of money than dying.

One of the great victories of the working-class upsurge of the 1930s was establishing Social Security on Aug. 14, 1935. Fifteen days later, the Railroad Retirement Board was founded.

Social Security didn't cover farmworkers and domestic workers at first. So nearly two-thirds of Black workers didn't qualify for retirement benefits at that time.

Many Indigenous and Latinx workers were also excluded. It wasn't until [1950 and 1954](#) that amendments were passed that farmworkers and domestic workers got some retirement pay.

The struggles of the 1960s included winning Medicare and Medicaid. They were established in 1965, the same year the Voting Rights Act was passed.

That wasn't accidental. The human rights demonstrators who were assaulted by club-wielding Alabama state troopers on March 7, 1965, in Selma, Ala., also helped win health insurance for tens of millions of people, most of whom were white.

Capitalist media mouthpieces have claimed for decades that Social Security is going

broke. Their solution has been cutbacks.

That's what racist Reagan did in the 1980s. Reagan's "social security reform" raised the retirement age in most cases to 67.

That's terrible. Forcing older workers to stay on the job means fewer jobs for young people.

In the socialist Soviet Union, the retirement age for men was 60 and for women it was 55. Coal miners and other workers in similar occupations could retire at 50.

That's another reason the capitalists hated the Soviet Union and worked to destroy it, just as they overthrew the Reconstruction governments in the U.S. South.

Young people need jobs and older workers need a decent retirement without any financial worry. The minimum Social Security monthly benefit should be at least \$2,600. Rent, utilities and all medicines for retired and disabled workers should be free.

The billionaires can pay for it. We can win if we fight for it.

