Heroes Act: Critical Solutions for Working Families

On May 14, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 6800, the Heroes Act. This critical legislation would benefit CWA members and our brothers and sisters across the nation. However, to become law, the bill still needs to pass the Senate, where Republican Leader Mitch McConnell has said that he opposes core provisions of the bill like extended unemployment protections and aid for state and local governments, and then needs to be signed by President Trump. Below are some key provisions of the bill that would benefit working people.

PAID LEAVE

- The Heroes Act would close many loopholes included in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act that prevented tens of millions of workers from accessing paid sick and emergency leave.
- Eliminates the exemption that allowed large employers with more than 500 employees to escape the mandate to provide paid sick and emergency leave
- Eliminates the health care provider and emergency responder exclusions that also allowed those employers to get out of providing paid leave
- Expands emergency paid leave to cover the same purposes as emergency paid sick days
- Expands caregiving & medical reasons for taking leave, including to allow leave in the event of a public order for self-isolation
- Ensures that emergency FMLA leave does not count against your regular FMLA entitlement
- Clarifies that non-profit employees are covered
- Allows local governments and government entities to benefit from offsetting tax credits
- The bill stops short of enacting permanent change, but extends the paid leave protections through December 31, 2021.

STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT RELIEF

- Provides $500 billion to assist state governments
- Provides $375 billion to assist local governments
- Provides $20 billion to assist governments of the Territories
- Funding is in the form of flexible direct grants that governments can use to replace forgone revenues or respond to COVID-19 related economic harm, and applies that same flexibility to the $150 billion in state and local grants enacted in the CARES Act.
- Also provides $90 billion in funding directly for K-12 and higher education.
- These changes would make it much easier for state and local governments to continue providing services and keep workers on payroll, even as they face huge revenue losses and cost increases as the result of COVID-19.

WORKPLACE PROTECTIONS

- Includes the COVID–19 Every Worker Protection Act of 2020, which requires OSHA to issue a strong, enforceable standard within seven days to require all workplaces to develop and implement infection control plans based on CDC expertise
- Mandates government tracking and investigation of work-related COVID-19 infections
- Prevents employers from retaliating against workers who report problems that put workers at risk of contracting COVID-19

PPE

- Expands the use and oversight of Defense Production Act (DPA) authorities:
    - Clarifies the definition of critical assets to include critical medical supplies and equipment to increase the production and supply
    - Requires a study within 7 days of what supplies are needed and where, and directs the government to then develop immediate plans to produce those supplies
    - Amends the DPA to direct the President to utilize the Act to procure critical medical supplies when needed
    - Requires a study on establishing a secure supply chain for necessary medical supplies

PREMIUM PAY

- Authorizes $13/hour premium pay for many essential workers--including workers in telecom, health care, aviation, journalism, and more--on top of regular wages of up to $10,000 per essential worker. This would apply to everyone in these sectors and is not dependent on working for a private/public employer or having a SSN.
- Eligibility for payment begins retroactive to January 27, 2020, and lasts until 60 days after the last day of the ongoing COVID–19 Public Health Emergency.

ELECTIONS ASSISTANCE

- Provides $3.6 billion for grants to States for contingency planning, preparation, and resilience of elections for Federal office
- Requires states to create safety contingency plans to enable voting in federal elections during a public health or national emergency
- Guarantees vote-by-mail for the November 2020 elections and all future elections
- Require at least 15 consecutive days of early voting for all federal elections, with polls open for at least 10 hours a day
- Allows for same day and online voter registration in all states
- Provides the USPS with $25 billion to ensure continued operations so that vote-by-mail and other critical services provided by the USPS can continue

CONTINUED CONNECTIVITY/BROADBAND

- Establishes benefits for low-income and COVID-19 impacted households to receive $50 monthly to put toward the price of internet service during the pandemic, which will both increase broadband installations and address the digital divide
- Requires that Lifeline providers make unlimited minutes and unlimited data available to those that rely on the Lifeline program
- Prohibits broadband and telephone providers from terminating service or imposing late fees due to a customer's inability to pay their bill of financial hardships caused by the pandemic
- Prohibits broadband providers from employing data caps or charging customers from going over data caps

DIRECT RELIEF

- Additional one-time $1,200 payment per individual (up to $6,000 per household) with expanded eligibility
    - Increase from $500 per dependent in CARES Act to $1,200 per dependent
- Retroactively expands CARES Act payments to include ITIN tax filers, adult dependents, and full-time students below age 24

UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

- Provides $15 million for federal administration and $925 million to assist states in processing UI claims to address claims backlogs.
- Extends the emergency pandemic UI provisions (including the $600/week supplement, expanded eligibility, additional 13 weeks of benefits, and no waiting week to become eligible) through January 31, 2021

STUDENT DEBT RELIEF

- Provides $10,000 in student debt cancellation for both federal and private student loans of economically distressed (in default, deferral, forbearance, or at $0 income-based repayment as of March 12, 2020)
- Extends suspension of payments and interest accrual to all federal student loan through September 30, 2021, with 30-day transition period
- Extends suspension of interest accrual to all federal student loan through September 30, 2021, with automatic extension if economy has yet to show initial signs of recovery

IMPROVEMENTS TO KEEP WORKERS ON PAYROLLS

- Extends Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) through December 31, 2020
- Expands PPP eligibility to all 501(c) organizations with up to 500 employees, so that union locals facing revenue drops could be eligible for funding
- Clarifies the inclusion of small, local news media entities in the PPP, so that TNG and NABET employers will be able to access funding to help keep workers on payroll
- Greatly enhances an employee retention tax credit established in the CARES Act, so employers would get a tax credit of 80% on up to the first $60,000 of an employee's wages if they keep an employee who isn't working on payroll. This would become an important incentive for companies to keep workers on payrolls.
- The CARES Act required airlines receiving grant funds to keep workers on payroll through September 2020. This would extend the requirement to September or however long it takes the airline to use up its grant funds to pay workers, whichever is longer. This could keep CWA members in the aviation industry on payroll for months longer if the sector remains dormant.

FEDERAL CONTRACTORS

- Mandates that agencies allow contractor personnel to telework during the pandemic if their work can be conducted remotely and to provide periodic reports to Congress.
- Workers at call center contractor Maximus who are trying to organize with CWA had great difficulty in securing the ability to work-from-home and the equipment they need to be able to do so, so this provision will keep pressure on the company to treat workers fairly.

Even if this bill passes the Senate and is signed into law by President Trump, more will still need to be done to address this public health and economic crisis. But, this bill goes a long way to keeping workers safe, on payrolls, and able to make ends meet. The Senate should pass it ASAP!