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**Alleviating poverty**

Recently, the administration of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris announced that, three years after Trump withdrew the country from the UN Human Rights Council, it would rejoin as an observer, with the goal of eventually being voted back to full membership. That move, like Biden’s decision to rejoin the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization, as well as his intention to reengage with UNESCO and the Iran nuclear deal, undoubtedly reflects his interest in refortifying America’s international position in the post-Trump era. If he really wants to be an international leader and not just an observer when it comes to human rights, however, undoing the nightmare of the Trump years will only be part of the job that lies ahead.

There will be the continuing fight to ensure that Covid-19 relief is not disastrously watered down by false arguments about balanced budgets and deficits. The costs of inaction – a still-soaring death toll of 480,000 and counting and an estimated 460,000 extra deaths over the next decade thanks to pandemic-related unemployment and its costs – far outweigh the price of decisive action now. The deficits that should truly concern Americans are those in people’s paychecks, the lack of food in their refrigerators, and the grim unemployment numbers that make life a misery. Biden and the Democratic leadership have the presidency and a majority in both houses of Congress. Now is the time to move immediately on life-saving measures like raising the minimum wage to $15 (including for tipped workers).

And genuine Covid-19 relief that buoyed our beleaguered nation long enough for vaccines to be widely distributed would just be a start. After all, before the pandemic hit, Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health estimated that 250,000 Americans were dying annually from rising hunger, homelessness, and inequality, conditions that have only deepened over the last year. If the recovery from the 2007-2008 Great Recession is any indication, expect difficult years ahead, even when the pandemic eases. After all, that proved to be a low-wage recovery that disproportionately shifted women and people of color into temporary and precarious jobs. Not surprisingly then, in the decade after that recession, savings were spent down and household debt was on the rise – and only then did Covid-19 hit.

Shouldn’t the administration’s response to this crisis and the underlying fissures in our society (so badly exacerbated in the Trump years) be held to a genuine human-rights standard? In December, the Poor People’s Campaign, which I co-chair, released a set of 14 policy priorities for Joe Biden’s first 100 days in office, including not just temporary protections meant to weather the present storm, but permanent guarantees around jobs and income, housing, healthcare, and so much else. Such building blocks for a vibrant democracy and a life free of poverty should be treated as inalienable human rights. Grassroots organizers – whether the Nonviolent Medicaid Army fighting for healthcare as a human right, the Border Network for Human Rights struggling for a just immigration system, or the Homes Guarantee project demanding housing as a right, not a commodity – have been making this point for years.

A new social contract built on human rights requires a fundamentally different approach to foreign policy and rampant American militarism as well. President Biden’s recent decision to scale back engagement in the human-rights catastrophe in Yemen is encouraging, though its results remain to be seen. It’s obviously time as well to end this country’s twenty-first-century forever wars, as well as the suffocating economic sanctions imposed on countries like Venezuela and Iran.

It’s morally indefensible that the U.S. spends 53 percent of every federal discretionary dollar on the Pentagon and that it has more than 800 military bases around the world; that the Pentagon itself is a giant greenhouse-gas emitter; and that this country is not only the largest arms dealer on the planet by far, but continues to ‘export’ weapons of war to our police departments nationwide through the Pentagon’s 1033 program. Washington’s eternally militarized posture has led to countless human rights violations abroad, while only adding to a loss of human rights at home, as vital resources continue to be siphoned from our schools and hospitals into the military.

A governing agenda that wishes to protect the right not to be poor would at some point also have to reckon with a system that, even amid a pandemic, produced record numbers of billionaires. Last year, as unemployment rates reached historic heights, America’s billionaires gained more than $1 trillion in wealth.

Excerpted: ‘We Must Put Human Life Before Corporate Profits’

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