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Capitalism and baby formula

The following article was posted on Black Agenda Report on May 25.



The baby formula shortage is not a glitch in the system. It actually exemplifies everything that goes wrong when the profit motive rules. Capitalism can't ensure a food supply or anything else that humans need.

“Socialism doesn't work” is repeated like a mantra. We're told endlessly that capitalism provides jobs, housing, food and health care in this country, when it does a very bad job of

doing all these things. The United States is said to be “the richest country in the world,” a strange statement which implies that the people are prosperous even though they aren’t.

Gig work, housing insecurity, medical debt and student loan debt are all common experiences for people in the U.S. Now, to add insult to injury, the system said to be so superior can’t even keep little babies fed.

There is an historic shortage of baby formula. There are parts of the country where food for infants simply can’t be found at any price. This headline is the most honest about the situation. “America is running out of baby formula because three companies control the market and babies aren’t that profitable.” (tinyurl.com/23sxtxhv)

There are only three baby formula manufacturers; and one of them, Abbott, had to shut down its plant after a whistleblower revealed their product was contaminated. Two infant deaths may be related to the contamination, which went undiscovered despite Food and Drug Administration regulatory authority. (tinyurl.com/2p82s8e9)

The Biden administration has invoked the Defense Production Act to increase the supply and now allows formula from foreign countries to be imported. They are making quite a show of their late-in-the-day response to a situation that should have been addressed sooner. But the stopgaps to resolve a temporary crisis should not allow a bigger problem to go unmentioned.

Capitalism is the problem. Transportation Secretary and onetime presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg admitted as much, even as he tried to defend the failed state. “But let’s be very clear. This is a capitalist country. The government does not make baby formula, nor should it. Companies make formulas.”

In a better society, a socialist society, baby formula wouldn’t be sold by private interests. It would be provided free of charge to every family, and yes, the government would make it. The “market forces,” which we are told solve every problem, actually create very serious ones. In this country even the effort to provide infant formula to all, regardless of income, is yet another means of supporting monopoly capital.

The Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program provides exclusive contracts with just two companies in exchange for discounts. The handful of companies providing formulas

get rich, but the market does not do a good job of caring for kids. Formula doesn't provide a big enough profit margin to be of interest to corporations. This market we're told to believe in with semireligious fervor doesn't provide for other needs very well either. Only public outcry from desperate parents got the needed response after months of shortages.

Even cynical politicians eventually pay attention when babies' lives are at risk, but this problem is not unique. Higher education should be free or at the very least inexpensive, as it was before neoliberalism turned the country into a failed state. Health care should also be free, but the one promise Biden has kept is to make sure that doesn't happen. The very term "medical debt" is an abomination, yet it is the reason for most personal bankruptcies. It seems that baby formula is the canary in the failed-state coal mine.

This time the crisis is about feeding babies, but there are more to come. Food shortages and rising prices, gasoline prices and voracious hedge funds snapping up houses are all symptoms of a very big problem.

Of course, capitalism creates all these crises, but levels of indoctrination are so high that very few people make the connections. While all fingers should be pointed at the market forces which create so much misery, some people prefer to shame women who don't breastfeed. Others are angry that babies in immigration detention get the formula that the law requires them to have.

Pete Buttigieg isn't alone in cutting off any discussion of alternatives. The "socialism doesn't work" trope is quite effective. Even as the quality of life diminishes in a myriad of ways, there is little improvement in the willingness to reject American exceptionalism and its many lies. The cognitive dissonance required to face these many predicaments is too great for many people to experience, even as their expectations of basics such as a steady supply of infant formula crumble around them.

This particular crisis will ease, but it will be followed by more. There is still \$1.9 trillion in student loan debt incurred by people who only wanted to improve their lives. After allocating \$30 billion for policing, the Biden administration is telling states and localities to use unspent COVID-19 stimulus funding for the police, who apparently can't get enough public money. COVID-19 hasn't disappeared, and neither have any other health

care needs that could sorely use this funding. Of course, the Ukraine cash cow has to be milked to the tune of an additional \$40 billion.

When the next calamity hits the fan, the true villain has to be named. Regardless of other symptoms, it is capitalism that causes our problems.

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