

# Unemployment benefits running out for over 3 million US jobless

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Over three million unemployed workers in the US have either exhausted their unemployment insurance (UI) or face cutoff in the coming months, according to a report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. As of September, 1.5 million workers had run out of both their regular and extended unemployment benefits. 860,000 of these workers remain unemployed.

Another 610,000 jobless workers will run out of benefits by the end of this year. On December 28, 820,000 unemployed who are receiving extended benefits will be cut off when the federal Temporary Emergency Unemployment Compensation Program, passed by Congress in March of this year, ends. During January and February of 2003, another 810,000 workers will exhaust their regular 26 weeks of UI benefits, but will be ineligible for a 13-week extension because it will no longer exist.

New York has the highest number of workers, 114,100, who have currently exhausted their benefits but are still out of work. A total of 319,900 jobless in New York will lose their benefits by the end of February without finding work. California has the largest number of workers, 404,000, who have or will run out of benefits before finding another job. There are 10 states where more than 100,000 unemployed will have lost their benefits within the next few months.

More workers are exhausting their UI benefits today than during previous recent recessions because unemployment is lasting longer on average and benefit levels have been reduced. One in five jobless have been unemployed more than six months and, on average, workers are remaining unemployed 17.8 weeks.

Unemployment benefits are also at an historic low. Because of the manner in which Congress wrote the Temporary Emergency Unemployment Compensation Program, workers in only two states, Washington and

Oregon, qualify for the full 26 weeks of extended benefits. Workers in the remaining 48 states can at best receive only a 13-week extension.

In comparison, during the 1990-94 period additional benefits for the unemployed in 16 states lasted 33 weeks, while unemployed workers in the other 34 other states received 26 weeks of extended benefits. Moreover, the program lasted 30 months compared to the 9½ months of extended benefits provided today.

While both the present number of workers losing their jobs and the increase in the unemployment rate match that of previous recessions, Congress—which has approved billions in bailouts for the airline industry and \$1.35 trillion in tax cuts for the wealthy—has refused to enact any measures to continue the extended unemployment benefits past the December 28 cutoff. In the Senate, the Democratic leadership is blocking the introduction of a motion to extend benefits for the unemployed.

Even these figures do not give a full picture of the situation confronting millions of the unemployed. Less than 40 percent of jobless workers qualify for UI benefits, and a large proportion of those who qualify do not receive the full 26 weeks of benefits. In most states people working in part-time, temporary, low-wage jobs or as independent contractors do not receive benefits or receive them at a reduced level.

For instance, 31 states exclude benefits to part-time workers. This particularly affects women, who make up 70 percent of the part-time labor force, often taking part-time work because of childcare responsibilities.

In addition, since the Labor Department only counts as unemployed people who have actively sought work during the previous four weeks, there are millions of workers who have been jobless so long they have given up looking for work and thus are no longer counted as

unemployed.

The WSWS interviewed unemployed workers at the Pennsylvania Career Link office in McKeesport, Pennsylvania.

Bruce Roberts has not been able to collect unemployment benefits even though he lost his job in March of this year as a cook in a nursing home. “They said I was fired because I did not call off. But, I was in the hospital at the time and couldn’t call. I have worked as a technician on pulse power generators for the Navy and driving a truck, but I can’t find a job anywhere these days, nobody is hiring.”

Curtis Brown, a laid-off steelworker from McKeesport had worked 16½ years at US Steel’s National Tube works before he lost his job in the ’80s when the mill was being shut down. “Since then I have been working many different jobs,” Curtis said. His last full-time job was six years ago when he worked at Hills department store before it closed down. After that he worked a few months at a Tile City store before they went out of business.

“You can’t collect unemployment benefits unless you have had a full-time job and nobody is hiring full time any more,” Curtis said. “I have put in applications everywhere. I went downtown and put in applications at all the hotels. They say they will call you but they never do.

“I come to apply for benefits and they put me through all kinds of red tape. I have been paying into the system all these years and they want me to give them the record of the places I worked and how much I made. They have the computers, they should know how much I was getting paid and for how long so I can get my benefits.”

The cuts in welfare and food stamps also mean that many unemployed are no longer able to qualify for these programs, meaning further hardship.

Joe Lunz worked on air conditioning and heating systems for eight years until March of last year when he hurt his back. He said, “I was off work for three months. When I went back, I tried to work but after two months my back started hurting again. I’m 36 years old and I didn’t want to ruin my back for the rest of my life, so I quit.

Joe has been working temporary jobs two or three days a week. “There are no regular jobs around here,” he added. “The best you can get is a laborer’s job

paying \$6 an hour. Nobody can live on that. When I went to apply for food stamps, I had to bring in a printout that showed how much I worked in the last three months. Then they said I earned too much for food stamps and said I couldn’t get welfare because I own my own house.

“I am really worried about December and January—that is when things really slow down and I won’t even be able to work. This system is like apartheid. There are people who don’t have to worry about anything, but there are millions of people who are struggling every day and it seems like we can never get a break.”



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