

Jobless benefits cut off for a million US workers

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Inaction by the US Senate last week will result in the cutoff of extended unemployment benefits and COBRA health care coverage to more than one million workers. The cutoff, which began to take effect Sunday night, demonstrates the unbridgeable social gulf between the working class and the denizens of Capitol Hill, both Democrats and Republicans.

The bill to extend unemployment benefits and COBRA coverage was blocked by Republican Senator Jim Bunning, an arch-reactionary from Kentucky who took advantage of a Senate rule requiring unanimous consent to bring the legislation to a vote before the weekend.

Bunning, who is not running for reelection, was contemptuous of the suffering that he was helping inflict on more than one million workers, including an estimated 60,000 from his home state. He demanded that Senate Democrats agree to pay for the extended benefits without creating new debt, and declared that his actions were intended “to send a message to the American people.”

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Majority Whip Richard Durbin repeatedly called the bill up for a vote. Each time it was blocked by Bunning’s voiced objection. But the Democratic Senate leaders declined to declare his action a filibuster and invoke cloture, although the required 60-vote majority would have been easily attainable.

Under Senate rules, cloture would have led to 30 hours of debate on the bill, followed by a vote. This process would have avoided the cutoff of benefits, but would have caused senators to miss their flights home

for the weekend.

The Democratic leadership calculated that by allowing Bunning to block the extension they would be able to put the Republican minority in a bad light. Reid, Durbin and Vice President Joseph Biden issued hypocritical statements denouncing Bunning, but there was no move to invoke cloture.

Instead, the Democrats said they would bring the bill up again next week. Responding to the political embarrassment, Republican Whip Jon Kyl said Sunday that while he supported Bunning in principle, the Republicans would vote to approve a 30-day extension for the unemployment program while further negotiations were conducted on a bipartisan bill to extend the program for an entire year.

The expiration of the unemployment extension will have an enormous impact on working people, particularly in the states hardest hit by the collapse of manufacturing employment. Michigan, for instance, has 300,000 workers receiving extended benefits under the federal program that has been at least temporarily shut down.

An estimated 400,000 workers will lose their unemployment benefits during the first two weeks of March if the extension is not quickly approved. If congressional inaction continues, that number will grow exponentially to nearly three million workers by May, according to the Department of Labor.

Over 11 million workers are currently collecting unemployment compensation--the first 26 weeks from their state government, and thereafter from the federal

program of extended benefits.

Economic figures released last week point to a continuation of high unemployment rates for the foreseeable future. Among the data: new home sales plunged 11.2 percent in January from December, hitting the lowest level in 50 years; the February consumer confidence index fell to the lowest level since 1983; new jobless claims for the week ending February 19 shot up by 22,000, confounding forecasts of a decline.

At a minimum, the Senate is not expected to reach a final vote on the extended benefits until the week of March 8, meaning those receiving benefits will lose them for at least one week. Given the fragile household budgets of workers who have been jobless for six months or more, the loss of one benefit check can mean failure to make a utility or mortgage payment, and potentially the shutoff of utilities, in the middle of winter, or the beginning of foreclosure proceedings.

Even if the bill passes the Senate, it will only provide for an extension of benefits through April 5, meaning that jobless workers will face a new crisis deadline in little more than a month.

No senator, Republican or Democrat, will return home to a house that is facing foreclosure or lacking heat because of a utility shutoff. The majority of senators are millionaires, and all of them owe their allegiance to the financial aristocracy.

No parliamentary obstacles are allowed to stand in the way of serving the vital interests of Wall Street or the national-security apparatus which defends the profits of corporate America. A case in point: President Obama adjourned his televised health care summit Thursday so that the House members in attendance could march over to the Capitol and cast their votes in favor of the extension of the USA Patriot Act, which gives unprecedented spying powers to the National Security Agency, FBI and other federal security agencies.

No such priority was given to ensuring that the long-term unemployed would continue to receive the

pittance they are being provided under the extended benefits program.

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