

The US Congress and the unemployed

Patrick Martin
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The US Congress resumes its lame-duck session Monday with only one day remaining to take action before unemployment benefits begin expiring for two million jobless workers. It is more and more likely that nothing will be done, while congressmen and senators focus instead on negotiations about extending tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans.

Federal extended unemployment benefits are set to expire November 30, when the latest temporary extension adopted by Congress earlier this year runs out. More than 800,000 workers currently receiving extended benefits will lose them immediately because their states automatically cut off extended benefits when full federal funding expires. Another 400,000 workers will exhaust their regular 26-week state benefits in December and will not have access to the federal plan. And a further 815,000 workers will lose extended federal benefits in the course of the month, based on other provisions in their state plans.

In every recession since the end of World War II, Congress has retained extended unemployment benefits at least until the jobless rate fell below 7.2 percent. Today that rate is 9.6 percent, and real unemployment is much higher. As so many of the jobless know already, there are simply no jobs available in many areas. The staggering official statistic is that there are nearly six jobless workers for every unfilled job.

According to the National Employment Law Project, unemployment benefits account for about half the basic living expenses of the average family receiving them: about \$1,257 in monthly jobless benefits, out of a typical monthly budget of \$2,577 (this comes to just over \$30,000 a year, less than 60 percent of the average annual income, and not much above the official poverty line).

The group found that 410,000 jobless workers would face a cutoff in California alone, followed by New York, with 160,000 losing benefits; Pennsylvania, 133,000; Texas, 128,000; Illinois 128,000; Florida, 108,000; Michigan, 92,000; Georgia, 90,000; and Ohio, 89,000.

It might be thought that the plight of two million

workers on the verge of destitution—with millions more in their immediate families, including many children—would be a major topic of public concern. But the American political establishment is virtually ignoring the issue.

In his Saturday radio and Internet speech, President Barack Obama said nothing about the impending expiration of benefits for the jobless. His remarks touched on the usual Thanksgiving bromides, including the obligatory salute to US soldiers deployed in overseas battlefields. He appealed for the cooperation of the Republican Party, which will control a majority in the incoming House of Representatives, in advance of a November 30 meeting at the White House. There is no indication that the topic of extended unemployment benefits will even be on the agenda of that meeting, which takes place as the deadline passes for a bill to fund an extension.

That topic was mentioned only in passing on the Sunday television talk shows. Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois, the Senate Majority Whip, said on NBC's "Meet the Press" that the negotiations over extending the Bush-era tax cuts for the wealthy could address extended unemployment benefits as well. His Republican counterpart, Minority Whip Jon Kyl, suggested that an extension of unemployment benefits together with the tax cuts would be a viable combination. "I think this is an opportunity for us to sit down and negotiate a compromise on this," Kyl said.

Extension of the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy would put another \$70 billion a year into the pockets of the super-rich and the most privileged layers of the middle class. Extended unemployment benefits would cost the federal government an equivalent amount, divided among a much larger group, the long-term unemployed.

The juxtaposition of the two extensions—one for the financial elite, the other for the working class—has caused some uneasiness in liberal circles, reflected in the *New York Times*, which published a column Saturday by Bob Herbert and an editorial Sunday devoted to the subject. Both commentaries are revealing.

Herbert's column carries the unusually direct headline, "Winning the Class War," and he denounces the wealthy for unseemly profiteering during a time of deepening economic misery. "Recessions are for the little people, not for the corporate chiefs and the titans of Wall Street who are at the heart of the American aristocracy," he writes. "They have waged economic warfare against everybody else and are winning big time. The ranks of the poor may be swelling and families forced out of their foreclosed homes may be enduring a nightmarish holiday season, but American companies have just experienced their most profitable quarter ever."

While expressing concern over the growth of social distress, Herbert also warns that "extreme economic inequality is a recipe for social instability... Societal conflicts metastasize as resentments fester and scapegoats are sought. Demagogues inevitably emerge to feast on the poisonous stew of such an environment. The rich may think that the public won't ever turn against them. But to hold that belief, you have to ignore the turbulent history of the 1930s."

The *Times* editorial is headlined, "The Unemployed Held Hostage, Again." It is notable mainly because the editors seek, despite everything, to revive illusions in the Obama administration, after the debacle for the Democratic Party earlier this month. After outlining the transparently false arguments being advanced by the Republicans and many Democrats for showering tax breaks on the wealthy while cutting off jobless benefits for the unemployed, the *Times* denounces the proposed linkage of the two extensions.

They conclude: "President Obama should pound the table for a clean, yearlong extension of unemployment benefits, and should excoriate phony deficit hawks — in both parties — who say that jobless benefits are too costly, even as they pass vastly more expensive tax cuts for the rich."

Who do they think they're kidding? This president doesn't pound on the table when it comes to the financial aristocracy: he is their servant, not their adversary. He doesn't "excoriate" right-wing politicians of any stripe, but appeals for them to join him in enacting their program (that's the real meaning of "bipartisanship").

According to a recent poll, 73 percent of voters want Congress to keep the program for the jobless in place until the recession is over, agreeing overwhelmingly with the proposition that "it is too early to start cutting back benefits for workers who lost their jobs." The poll showed far more public concern about the plight of the

unemployed than about the federal budget deficit. Only 24 percent of those polled agreed that, "With the federal deficit over one trillion dollars, it is time for the government to start cutting back on unemployment benefits for the unemployed." Large majorities of Democrats, Republicans and independents backed extended benefits.

Thus, it would actually be highly popular for Obama to take up the cudgel for extended unemployment benefits. His refusal to do so demonstrates the actual class forces that the Obama administration and both the Democratic and Republican parties represent. The entire official political structure defends the interests of "the corporate chiefs and titans of Wall Street who are at the heart of the American aristocracy," to use Herbert's language.

Far from taking measures to alleviate the impact of mass unemployment, let alone provide jobs for those who desperately want them, the Obama administration and the American corporate elite as a whole are using mass unemployment to impoverish the working class and drive down wages throughout the country.

At the same time, Obama is pushing for a bipartisan consensus to gut all government spending—including health care and Social Security—that does not directly benefit the wealthy. The deficit reduction commission selected by Obama is to file its recommendations this week on budget cuts and consumption taxes. The same liberal editorialists at the *New York Times* who urge Obama to "pound the table" on attacks on the unemployed are in full-throated support of his efforts to slash spending for the elderly, the sick and the poor.

Working people can defend their own class interests only by breaking free of the political straitjacket of the two-party system and pro-business politics, and building an independent mass political party of the working class, based on a socialist and anti-imperialist program.

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