

More than 400,000 Californians could lose unemployment benefits

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In the discussion on the so-called “fiscal cliff,” very little attention has been devoted by the political establishment and media to the imminent expiration of extended federal unemployment benefits. If these benefits are allowed to expire, some 2 million people throughout the US, including 400,000 in California, will be immediately cut off from this limited form of cash assistance.

Amidst the worst jobs crisis in the US since the Great Depression, the Democrats and Republicans have cited the official fall in unemployment rates as a justification for cutting the duration of benefits in many states. In fact, the drop in unemployment is due largely to the departure of millions of people from the labor force because they have given up hope of finding a job. The overall employment-population ratio remains close to the lows reached in 2009, and long-term unemployment remains near record highs.

California has already sent out letters to recipients informing them that their benefits are set to run out. The letters provided no formal recourse, except information on how to apply for food stamps and other services. The expiration of federal benefits will mean that many workers will lose their homes and be forced to live with relatives, if they can. For many of the unemployed, the benefits, up to \$450 a week, are the only way they can pay for vital necessities like gas, food, and medicine.

According to California’s Employment Development Department (EDD), as of October, 35 percent of California’s 2 million unemployed were out of work for 52 weeks or more. In the same month, California’s jobless rate declined to 10.1 percent, compared to 11.5 percent a year earlier. Real unemployment, including those who have stopped looking for work, is much higher. California has the

third highest rate of unemployment in the US, after Nevada and Rhode Island.

The end of payments for the unemployed is a deliberate policy of the ruling class to force workers to compete for poverty-level jobs with no benefits. The claim that there is no money to finance these programs is a lie. The estimated cost to extend benefits, \$30 billion, is small change compared to the hundreds of billions the US government has spent on the last decade of neocolonial wars, bank bailouts, and tax cuts for the rich.

Whether or not the benefits are allowed to expire, the ruling class, led by the Obama administration, is committed to make the working class pay for the economic crisis.

The WSWS spoke with unemployed workers at a job center in Temecula, California. Temecula is part of an area called the “inland empire” which includes Riverside and San Bernardino counties. According to the EDD, more than 44,000 Californians in this area could see their benefits expire. The jobless rate in the region is more than 11.3 percent.

Two of the workers interviewed are from Hemet, a city that has a 16 percent official unemployment rate. The number of people living below the poverty level in Hemet is 19.4 percent, compared to 14.4 percent in the state as a whole. Hemet’s median household income is \$34,273, as compared to the state median of \$61,632.

Mike, a construction worker for over 20 years, commented, “They’re cutting off 400,000 from unemployment. There’s going to be a lot of crime. People will use their survival skills to stay alive.”

He added, “I think it’s wrong. How are people going to live? Everyone’s depending on that money. If they cut it off it’s going to cause a lot of chaos. There’s money for other stuff, but when it comes to people

living, they don't give a s__t. This is America, they should help us out.”

The WSWS pointed out the trillions expended to finance wars and the bank bailout. Mike noted, “That should go towards unemployment, we should be helping each other. Banks don't need bailing out. If they don't make it let them fail. [Utility company] Edison was going bankrupt, and now they've tripled the rates. Stabbing the lower and middle class in the back. They are taking from those who can't afford anything.”

When asked about how the cut-off of benefits will affect him, Mike said, “I'm not going to be able to pay my rent if I can't find a job soon enough. It's going to be a bad thing. Right now I'm struggling. I've got a car that's falling apart. I'm trying to get another car so I have a dependable car to get to work. Every little bit I have is going to have to go to surviving, rather than finding a dependable car. It's going to make it hard to try and find work.

“I've been calling unemployment for the past two weeks and haven't been able to get a hold of anyone. After fifteen minutes of punching numbers and menus, you're told ‘We are receiving too many calls. Go online or call back later.’”

Wendy, a waitress for three years at a restaurant in Hemet that closed down, told the WSWS about the city, “Hemet is a hard place for restaurants to stay open. There isn't enough business.”

When asked what she felt about benefits being cut off, she replied, “They're already so hard to get. My benefits were cut off because I missed my phone interview. My phone was lost or stolen, and when I did get a new phone, I couldn't get through to anyone. I kept calling and it would say ‘We are receiving a high volume of calls, call back later.’”

Paula is a single mother and former administrative worker in Thousand Oaks who has been unemployed for 13 months. She said, “I moved to Thousand Oaks for this job. Because of the economy they started letting people go. I was one of the newer ones, so I was let go. I lost my apartment because I couldn't keep up with my rent, and then I lost my car because I couldn't keep up with the payments.

“They told me that if I started school, they would cut off my benefits. That's the thing that I don't understand, why we can't go to school and collect unemployment? How am I supposed to get a better job?

“My son is 4 years old and is going to start school next year. I want him to have everything he needs. I want to be on my feet before then.”

Arnaldo has been working and living in the US for 25 years. His green card just expired, and he cannot renew it because he has no proof of employment. He can be deported at any moment. “It's impossible to find work,” he said. “I've been unemployed since August of 2011 and have been looking all over for a job. I'm in Perris, but I'll go anywhere there's work—Riverside, Temecula, wherever.”

“The unemployment benefits aren't enough for daily life,” he added. “You get 50 percent, 60 percent of what you were making in benefits and you find yourself borrowing money, taking loans or else just not able to pay for your car or your bills.”



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