

Florida residents speak on poverty, unemployment benefit cuts

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The bipartisan budget deal given final passage Wednesday in the US Senate will likely spell the end of emergency unemployment benefits for 1.3 million workers after the week of December 28. This number includes 75,000 jobless workers residing in Florida. Workers in Florida, however, explain that they are already feeling the pangs of poverty that will be further exacerbated by this attack on their living standards.

According to data collected from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, between May and October of 2013, the number of unemployed workers in Florida decreased by 48,000, but the number of employed only increased by 14,300. This means that 33,700 workers left Florida's civilian workforce within that five-month period, more than twice the number who found employment. Some may have relocated to other geographical regions, but most remain unemployed in Florida, even though their growing numbers are not reflected in the misleading unemployment figures.

Roberto Beltran, a chef working in Tampa, explained that he was denied unemployment benefits in 2006 due to being injured from a bicycle accident. "I was riding my bicycle to work late one night up by USF [University of South Florida]. It was very dark, and my handlebars got caught in a series of wires which were attached to a light pole, driving that part of the bicycle into my side and causing severe internal bleeding."

Beltran, unable to work with his injury and unable to afford the surgery necessary to fix problems resulting from the injury, applied for unemployment benefits. However, he was denied benefits due to a requirement that applicants be "able to work."

Beltran continued, "I had to go back to work, and I wasn't able to get the surgery until an entire year later. I had to accept the fact that this is something that's going to hurt for the rest of my life. According to

doctors, I'm not supposed to lift more than 15 pounds, but to maintain employment I regularly have to lift upwards of 60 or even 70 pounds of ingredients. No one knows the pain I'm going through."

Bob O'Donnell, a former contractor struggling to find work in Tampa, was denied unemployment benefits in May due to another restriction—that self-employed contractors may not receive benefits. O'Donnell and his wife, who have since experienced devastating marital strife, were forced to close their flooring business due to economic hardship. O'Donnell explains, "I had no backing, nothing to fall back on. When the hardships came, we were forced to close everything down."

Like Beltran, O'Donnell has also suffered due to the inability to obtain needed medical treatment. "I survive off of Social Security, but I have no health insurance. I've needed a knee replacement for many years, but it costs \$53,000, which I obviously can't afford. My wife's doing even worse than I am; she's disabled due to multiple car accidents."

"I'm able to eat because I get food stamps," he added, "but these have also been cut recently, and now I'm being forced to look into getting health insurance that I can't afford due to the new legislation [the Affordable Care Act]. I tried to apply for unemployment benefits back in May, but there's nothing there for me. I'm living with my sister while I look for work every day, so I'm a little more fortunate than others out here."

Younbloski, a young mother who was waiting at a bus stop near downtown Tampa with her daughter, spoke passionately about the struggles she faces every day. "Do I work?" she asked while laughing. "Yeah, I have a little job, but it's more like slavery. I clean up rich people's trash at the stadium for minimum wage,

which is only \$7.79 an hour. Minimum wage is not enough money for anybody to live on.

“Most employers here would rather hire an illegal immigrant for \$5.50 than pay someone like me \$7.79. We can barely find jobs, and when we do, we have no kind of job security at all. I have a baby here to take care of, and it’s extremely difficult here in Florida to do that.”

The new budget deal is only the latest in a barrage of attacks suffered by workers in Florida. Governor Rick Scott and other lawmakers have systematically reduced weeks of state benefits and added work search and skills test requirements as conditions for receiving benefits. Now that the official unemployment rate has fallen below 7 percent, non-emergency state benefits will be decreased even further.

Florida’s exhaustion rate, the number of individuals who have exhausted their benefits divided by the number of new claimants, reached 74 percent in the second quarter of 2013, the highest of any US state. The average weekly unemployment benefit of \$232.60 is also 25 percent lower than the US average of \$308.31.

Receiving an unemployment check in Florida has become especially difficult over the past several months, due to a slew of problems with the state’s new computer system, “CONNECT,” which was fully implemented in October. CONNECT is the result of state legislation passed in 2011 that requires anyone wishing to collect unemployment benefits to register online. However, the new computer system has caused delays in the distribution of benefits to thousands of workers since its implementation.

When asked for a reaction to recent criticisms of the system, the governor’s office has merely placed the blame on the system’s contractor, Deloitte Consulting, which was recently fined \$1.5 million due to the faulty system, accepting no responsibility for its own legislation. State spokespeople have offered no explanation for the fine or the actual issues with the computer system.



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