

# The cynical charade of Obama's campaign for jobless benefits

Andre Damon  
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The maneuvering in Washington over the possible extension of federal jobless benefits for the long-term unemployed presents an odious spectacle of cynicism and lies. Having ensured that jobless benefits expire for over a million people by not including the provision in a budget deal worked out last month with the Republicans, the White House is now attempting to posture as the defender of the unemployed, urging Congress to pass a three-month extension of the program.

The US Senate voted Tuesday morning to take up debate on the measure, with six Republicans joining 54 Democrats to reach the 60-vote total required for moving the bill forward.

The vote, however, only sets the stage for new demands for social spending cuts. Republicans who voted in favor of opening debate on the bill subsequently made clear they would not approve it in its present form, and demanded the \$6.5 billion cost of the temporary extension be offset by spending cuts elsewhere.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid indicated the Democrats would be open to tying the extension to further cuts, saying if the Republicans "come with something that's serious, I'll talk to them."

Republicans responded favorably to Reid's comments. "I understand the majority leader said he was open to discussing the issue of paying for an extension of unemployment insurance. I hear the administration is open to discussing paying for it, as well. There may be a way forward here," Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell told the *Hill*.

The Democrats are cynically using the fate of 1.3 million jobless people and their families as a part of their electoral calculations, seeking to pin the blame for the expiration of jobless benefits on the Republicans.

The Democrats are doing little to conceal the fact that they are focusing on jobless benefits for electoral purposes. "If the Republicans refuse to pass unemployment insurance and cling to their opposition to increasing the minimum wage, these will be bookend issues for 2014," Representative Steve Israel of New York, chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, told the *New York Times*.

Even the *Times*, politically allied with the Democrats, is remarkably frank that the proposal is an attempt to divert the public's attention from the increasingly unpopular Affordable Care Act. "Getting the Senate on to the bill was a victory for President Obama and Democratic leaders, who have tried for weeks to steer away from health care and budget wrangling and onto pocketbook issues, which they say they will use to try to frame the 2014 elections," the newspaper reported, quoting Democratic Senator Charles Schumer who called the debate over jobless benefits a shift in "the tectonic plates of our politics."

The fact that the Democrats have made extending jobless benefits for three months a political banner underscores just how right-wing the policies of both parties really are. Previously, the extension of jobless benefits with unemployment at this level was considered automatic; and federal jobless benefits have never been cut off at a time when long-term joblessness was anywhere near the present level.

Some 1.3 million people lost their federal unemployment benefits on December 28, and an additional 3.6 million people will be cut off from income support this year if the benefits are not extended. Millions more, including family members dependent on such benefits, will be impacted.

Since the initiation of the Emergency Unemployment Compensation program in 2008, Congress has renewed

it eleven times. Beginning in 2011, however, the duration of jobless benefits began to be pared back with almost every subsequent extension, leading to a significant growth in the number of people who are unemployed but do not receive benefits. In 2010, about two thirds of long-term unemployed people received benefits. That number had fallen to 54 percent by 2011, 45 percent in 2012, and stood at about one third by 2013, before benefits lapsed for all long-term jobless people last month.

In a televised speech from the White House Tuesday afternoon, Obama called on congressional Republicans to extend jobless benefits, saying, “We have got to get this across the finish line without obstruction or delay and we need the House of Representatives to be able to vote for it as well.”

The Democrats have sought to make the call for a three-month extension of jobless benefits the center of their rhetorical pivot to focus on the question of social inequality in the new year, a shift outlined by Obama in a speech last month in which he called income inequality the “defining challenge of our time” and declared that “over the course of the next year, and for the rest of my presidency” his administration would “focus all our efforts” on narrowing the gap between rich and poor.

Other leading Democrats have taken up this pose, with Reid opening Monday’s Senate session by proclaiming, “The rich keep getting richer, the poor keep getting poorer, and the middle class are under siege.”

This rhetoric is entirely divorced from reality. The Democrats’ talk about inequality comes after they agreed to a budget deal last month that makes permanent over a trillion dollars in “sequester” budget cuts, increases federal employee pension contributions, establishes new consumption fees, and makes nearly \$30 billion in additional cuts in Medicare reimbursements.

Everything the administration has done since coming to office—from the bank bailouts, to wage-cutting in the auto industry, to Obamacare and social spending cuts—has been aimed at affecting a massive transfer of wealth from the working class to the richest segments of the population.

Reid made his comments about inequality the same day that Senate Democrats voted overwhelmingly to

confirm Janet Yellen, a vocal supporter of the Federal Reserve’s unprecedented money-printing operation known as “quantitative easing,” as the new chairman of the Fed. Through this program, the central bank has purchased hundreds of billions of dollars of worthless financial assets, fueling a stock market bubble and vastly increasing the wealth of the super-rich.

The approval of Yellen without a hitch, even as jobless benefits were allowed to expire, is the clearest expression of the social character of the Obama administration and the Democrats, who, no less than the Republicans, are tools of the corporate and financial elite that rules America.



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