

Republican house speaker rejects US Senate deal to restore long-term unemployment benefits

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The Republican speaker of the US House of Representatives, John Boehner, on Wednesday rejected a deal worked out in the Senate to restore federal emergency jobless benefits, further reducing the likelihood that any extension of benefits for the long-term unemployed will be enacted.

Some 1.3 million people lost their unemployment benefits on December 28, and an additional 73,000 have been cut off every week since then. The number of long-term unemployed who have lost their benefits has reached 2.13 million, according to the National Employment Law Project (NELP).

This is a catastrophe for the laid-off workers and their families, in many cases stripping them of all cash assistance. The Obama administration and congressional Democrats allowed the program to expire last December by refusing to make its extension a condition for reaching a budget agreement with the Republicans. Since the program's expiration, the White House, while occasionally expressing regret over its demise, has done nothing serious to push for its restoration.

Last week, Senate negotiators announced a bipartisan agreement to restore the benefits for five months, to be paid for through cuts in pension funding by corporations and increased user fees for air travel. If passed, the agreement would retroactively pay out benefits accrued in the two-and-a-half months since the cutoff, leaving only one or two months of additional benefits before the program once again lapsed.

In addition to cutting pension funding, the Senate agreement would implement means-testing and require recipients to attend job training programs.

Boehner said his objections to the agreement were

based on a letter by the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA), which raised concerns over the difficulty states would have in implementing the Senate deal, whose additional restrictions impose added administrative costs on state agencies.

In reality, Boehner is using the letter by the NASWA to continue his policy, and that of most congressional Republicans, of opposing a restoration of benefits for the long-term unemployed—whose number is at near-record highs. The Republicans openly express the prevailing position of big business, which welcomes the scourge of long-term unemployment and uses it to blackmail workers into accepting lower pay and benefits and harsher working conditions.

Obama and the Democrats are in practice carrying out the same class-war policy, but seeking to mask it with demagoguery and maneuvering. They see the issue of unemployment benefits as something they can exploit to posture as pro-“middle class” and improve their chances in this year's midterm elections, without actually doing anything to help the millions being driven into poverty by the policies of both big business parties.



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