

Workers on unemployment stunned as Arizona abruptly cuts off payments

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Multiple workers receiving unemployment payments through the state of Arizona were stunned on Saturday to learn that their unemployment payment accounts, accessible via debit cards provided by Bank of America, had been closed without warning, withdrawing funds from their accounts and cutting off their access to much needed funds.

The rescinding of payments by the Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES) has affected workers who live out of state but had been employed in Arizona. The agency has not confirmed how many workers had their accounts closed over the weekend.

In response to worried and now destitute workers calls for answers, the DES said on Twitter “As part of its increased fraud detection efforts, DES closed accounts with suspicious account information and activity located out of state. The majority of claims identified are believed to be fraudulent.” Closed in this instance means that all the funds that were already received and still in workers’ bank accounts had been clawed back by the state.

While the state claims fraud is rampant in the system, it is notoriously difficult to obtain unemployment in Arizona in the first place, with many workers having to wait for payments for two months. Furthermore, payments are capped at a meager \$240 dollars a week, which is less than half what someone would make working for minimum wage in Arizona.

The legality of what the state is doing is questionable at best. The DES’s claim that the majority of claims that they closed are “believed to be fraudulent” has not been backed up by any evidence. Given the massive loss of jobs during the pandemic this could be a matter of life or death for many workers.

Since March, when measures were implemented across the US in an effort to limit the spread of the

coronavirus pandemic, more than 768,000 workers have filed an initial unemployment claim in Arizona, with less than half—just under 323,000—receiving payments as of July 4.

Despite the real possibility that the state’s supposed effort to root out fraud is condemning many to destitution, and maybe even death, there is not even the notion of due process, with the unemployment agency instead operating under the notion of “guilty until proven innocent.” Putting the burden of proof on workers and requiring them to prove their continued eligibility, the DES stated, “Impacted cardholders who believe they are eligible for benefits should contact DES directly.”

Those who reached out to the help line were given non answers, told to wait 2 weeks, or simply ignored. The payment system has been fraught with glitches and errors that have delayed payments to workers. Angry workers took to Twitter to denounce the DES’s action and blatant indifference to claimants survival. Jake Brown said “Stop messing with our livelihoods. This is the third time in a month you’ve messed up our payments and wait hours and hours to provide any information.”

Speaking directly against the gas-lighting, Erin Reed said “This is ridiculous! We are a real, it wasn’t fraud your system messed up and now we are the ones [that] have to pay for it... You stole our money!!! You knew who I was when you were taking my unemployment tax out of my checks!!

Caren Kolb, talking to ABC15, stated “My money was zeroed out, I had zero dollars in my account... I was just kind of panicked. How did this evaporate? Who has authorization to take it?” Kolb lost \$4,100 to the closing of her account.

Paul Rodriguez-Bigby, a former Arizona school

worker now living in California told the *Arizona Republic* that he had \$2,100 withdrawn from his bank account and that it would take the DES 21 business days to address his claim for reinstatement.

“I don’t know how I’ll be surviving the pandemic now,” Rodriguez-Bigby told the *Republic*. “I’m not sure where that money went. Here’s the kicker, I was trying my hardest not to spend that money because I knew I wasn’t going to get it forever.”

As of publication, Doug Ducey, the Republican Governor of Arizona, had not made a single mention, let alone released a statement, on the social crime that is being perpetrated by the DES.

State governments across the US, along with the federal government, have made sure that unemployment benefits are exceedingly difficult to access, with an April survey published by the Economic Policy Institute noting that for every 10 workers who applied and received benefits, 3 or 4 would not receive benefits. This is not unintentional, but rather part of a deliberate policy.

The goal of making workers jump through various hoops and putting through repeated ordeals under the guise of combating fraud, is to remove them from the unemployment rolls and limit payments, forcing workers back on the job, even as the coronavirus pandemic explodes out of control in the United States. Cases have erupted in Arizona since June, when the lifting of all economic restrictions—pushed by President Donald Trump and supported by Ducey began in earnest. There are now more than 128,000 confirmed infections and 2,337 deaths from COVID-19 in Arizona as of Tuesday.



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