

South Dakota governor first to reject unemployment aid from Trump executive order

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South Dakota Republican Governor Kristi Noem became the first governor to publicly decline the federal unemployment aid US President Donald Trump announced on August 8 as part of a series of legally suspect executive orders following Congress' refusal to come to terms on a fifth coronavirus relief bill.

Passed as part of the CARES Act at the end of March, the \$600-a-week federally enhanced unemployment benefit, for workers who were lucky enough to receive it, was a life-saver allowing millions to remain fed and housed during the pandemic even after losing their jobs through no fault of their own.

The expiration of enhanced benefits at the end of July, along with a partial federal moratorium on evictions, has left an estimated 39 million people at risk of eviction by the end of the year. In a Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted last week and released on Wednesday, three out of every 10 US workers who lost work during the pandemic reported having “a very difficult time meeting basic needs,” including trouble paying for food or housing.

The starving and homeless are of little concern to Noem and the ruling class. In a statement released August 14 titled, “Governor Noem Grateful for President Trump’s Continued Leadership on Covid-19 Recovery,” Noem thanked Trump for the “additional flexibility that this effort would have provided, but South Dakota is in the fortunate position of not needing to accept it.” Noem proudly declared that due to “having never been shut down,” the state has “recovered nearly 80% of our job losses,” and remains “open for business—that applies to our business owners and their employees.”

South Dakota’s unemployment rate, while lower than

the national average, is still more than double what it was at the beginning of March 2020, sitting at roughly 7.2 percent currently.

Approximately 20,000 people in the state are currently collecting benefits, which top out at a maximum \$345 a week, or approximately \$8.63 an hour if one were to work a 40 hour week. According to apartments.com the average rent for a one bedroom apartment in Rapid City, South Dakota, is currently \$853 a month, or roughly 2.5 unemployment checks, leaving unemployed workers with pennies to pay for food and medicine, much less “extras” such as cell phone bills or car payments.

Noem failed to mention in her statement if she spoke to any of the 20,000 jobless in South Dakota regarding their current financial “flexibility.”

As her statement and actions throughout the pandemic made clear, Noem, like Trump, is willing to sacrifice thousands of workers’ lives in order to keep businesses open and profits flowing even as the virus continues to spread throughout the state and country. South Dakota, a large, sparsely populated state, continues to suffer from COVID-19, with 150 fatalities and over 10,000 positive cases recorded as of Sunday according to the South Dakota Department of Health.

The political leadership in the state, in defiance of medical advice and the wishes of the local population, recently held a motorcycle rally in which an estimated 250,000 people from all over the country flooded into the small town of Sturgis. In a Fox News interview prior to the rally Noem spelled out her chief concern, “We hope people come, our economy benefits when people come and visit us.”

Speaking to the *Rapid City Journal* on a probable

spike in cases given the mass of people congregated without a mask mandate, Sturgis City Manager Daniel Ainslie opted for a “wait and see” approach, remarking, “of course we’ll have to see as we continue to finish up the rally in the days that follow if there has been a significant transmission of the virus.”

While Noem, a Trump acolyte, has declared that the funds aren’t necessary for the thousands of jobless workers in her state struggling to survive, several governors, such as Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf, have also signaled that they won’t be able to or are unwilling to implement the needed adjustments to their outdated unemployment systems in order to facilitate the delivery of funds.

In a letter addressed to the Pennsylvanian congressional delegation on August 13, Wolf characterized Trump’s executive order proposal as “convoluted and short-lived” and noted that, “many states, including Pennsylvania, are still reeling from rapidly setting up Pandemic Unemployment Assistance systems...”

Meanwhile on August 15, FEMA Administrator Pete Gaynor approved four states, Arizona, Iowa, Louisiana and New Mexico, to begin receiving the FEMA grants under the new, constitutionally illegal program. While it is unclear when unemployed workers can expect to start receiving aid, if any, Deputy Press Secretary Brett Bezio of the Arizona Department of Economic Security told *Forbes*: “Arizona has received approval on its application to FEMA for Lost Wages Assistance (LWA) funding. The Department has implemented these changes to its system, and funds will be issued to claimants starting this week.”

While the two parties continue to dither over what meager benefits jobless workers may receive, reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* continue to interview workers such as Ashley, an entertainment industry worker in Hollywood. Ashley has been unemployed since March when she first contracted the virus.

“I’ve been extremely frustrated during these months of unemployment. I lost work in March, basically since the lockdown. Then I got the virus, which I suspect happened on a job where singers shared the same microphone. We all got it.”

Ashley applied for unemployment shortly thereafter, which as millions of workers can attest has been its own unique hardship. “On April 26 I received the

unemployment application confirmation number, then I received a letter denying that I was entitled to benefits, then one requesting proof of identity. Of course, on May 27 I sent in such proof.

“Never received anything else. I waited, talked to other people in the same condition, I learned about tricks of what numbers to call and how to reach the right person. Many offices were not even open. One day I logged 150 calls.

“Finally I got through and waited on hold for 30 minutes. I did this 4 different times and was never given a proper answer: that I needed to keep waiting and not to reapply. In late June, I finally got an account number. So I logged in, it said I’m getting \$0 in unemployment benefits. I just kept logging in every day.

“Then literally today I just got through to someone. They received proof of identity and just started processing on Aug 5. To this day, I still don’t know what kind of benefits I’m getting. I don’t even know how unemployment works. I’ve had to live off my savings and a small business loan, which is the only thing that has helped me through this unemployment mess.

“To see trillions of dollars being given to banks while I cannot even get my unemployment benefits is super unfair. Meanwhile last week they ended the \$600 unemployment supplement.”

Ashley thought the decision by both parties to reopen the schools is “horrible.” She continued, “There’s going to be a spike. People feel like they have to reopen because they need money, with no alternative. My sister-in-law is an aide at a school.”

“She’s stressed out, wants to go back to work because she’s ineligible for unemployment since she’s considered an independent contractor. In addition, I lost a dear friend of ours, [who] left behind an 18-year-old daughter. Many victims had no underlying conditions, yet they died. [Broadway actor] Nick Cordero [who died from COVID-19 on July 5, 2020] didn’t have any such condition.”



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