

US jobless claims and hunger spike as Congress goes on vacation

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The latest weekly report from the Department of Labor on new claims for state unemployment benefits, released Wednesday, showed the first back-to-back increase in five weeks, with 778,000 seasonally adjusted claims for the week ending Nov. 21. The figure represents an increase of 30,000 from last week's revised total of 748,000.

The report also revealed that an additional 311,000 people applied for unemployment benefits through the federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program.

The total number of people claiming benefits in all programs for the week ending Nov. 7 was over 20,400,000, an increase of more than 135,000 from the previous week. There were about 1,488,000 people claiming benefits in all programs in the comparable week in 2019. This means that nearly 14 times as many people are claiming jobless benefits this month as in the same month last year.

Since mid-March, there has yet to be a single week in which combined state and federal unemployment claims have not topped 1 million. Overall, nearly 69 million jobless claims have been filed since March, an unprecedented figure nearly six times the average yearly amount in the span of roughly eight months.

The staggering level of weekly job losses, more than triple the pre-pandemic average of 225,000 claims per week, shows no signs of relenting. Thousands of small businesses, cut off from government stimulus or private loans, are shutting their doors forever amid disorganized partial lockdowns and curfews imposed on a state or local level.

Despite the unchecked spread of the virus in "superspreader" worksites, factories and schools, governors and mayors, Democratic and Republican alike, have vowed to keep businesses and schools open.

For its part, the US Congress adjourned for its Thanksgiving recess without any movement towards the passage of a relief bill.

The Trump administration's open promotion of "herd immunity," combined with congressional inaction and indifference, have left millions of workers and students at risk of infection and death and millions more without the means to pay for necessities or plan for the immediate future.

PUA benefits, along with the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) program and the Centers for Disease for Control and Prevention eviction moratorium, are set to expire after Christmas, leaving over 12 million workers currently receiving payments with nothing, while an estimated 6,471,000 people will be facing eviction beginning in January.

Already, massive food lines are springing up across the country, as working class families deprived of employment and relief turn to food banks and charities in scenes reminiscent of the darkest days of the Great Depression. A US Census survey conducted between the last week of October and early November indicated that nearly 26 million adults either "sometimes" or "often" did not have enough food to eat over the prior seven days, accounting for nearly 12 percent of all US adults.

The same census report indicated that 16 percent of children do not have enough to eat. Throughout the US, about 25 percent of those with children who reported being out-of-work said they did not have enough to eat.

In the fifth largest city in the US, Houston, one in five adults reported going hungry recently, including three in 10 adults in households with children. The Houston food bank, the largest in the country, distributed 20.6 million pounds of food in October, over 45 percent more than the amount it distributed during the same

period last year.

An estimated 42 million students with a federal loan will be hit with massive interest payments when Trump's executive order granting forbearance on loan payments expires at the end of the year. An October report from student financial aid expert Mark Kantrowitz estimated that only 11 percent of borrowers were making loan payments at that time.

This week's Labor Department report reveals a continuing trend of more people taking advantage of federal unemployment benefits as state unemployment aid expires. Approximately 6.1 million are receiving traditional state unemployment benefits, an increase of roughly 4.4 million from the year prior.

The situation for the working class is disastrous and getting worse. But the financial elite has never had it so good.

On Tuesday, the Dow Jones Industrial Average closed above 30,000 for the first time ever. On the same day, the US recorded the highest one-day total for COVID-19 fatalities since May, with over 2,200 deaths.

These deaths are the direct result of the homicidal ruling class policy of "herd immunity," that is, allowing the virus to spread unchecked in order to ensure the uninterrupted operation of the factories and worksites and the continued flow of corporate profits.

This has led to weekly case averages exceeding 170,000 in the US, with over 88,000 hospitalized for COVID-19 and over 260,000 deaths as of this writing. Speaking to CNN on Wednesday, Dr. Joseph Varon, chief of staff of United Memorial Medical Center in Houston, warned that "America is going to see the darkest days in modern American medical history."

While hundreds of thousands of workers are seeing their benefits expire, or have yet to receive any, there are thousands more who, having received money, are now being ordered to repay all or part of it. This reporter spoke with an education worker who described the "absolute nightmare" experience he's had trying to claim unemployment benefits, and the subsequent attempts by the state to claw back previously dispensed funds.

Sean worked for a small business for nearly two years before recently relocating to the Midwest and starting a new job that allows remote work. Prior to moving, a second summer job for the local school district fell

through, forcing Sean to try to make up the hours by working from home.

However, it became apparent that there was little remote work to be done and his hours were insufficient to keep pace with bills. His employer told Sean he could make up the hours in store, which, according to him, involved sharing a "poorly ventilated indoor space with employees who were in contact with customers."

Sean, who has a preexisting lung condition that places him in a CDC-recognized "high-risk" category, was unwilling to risk his life for \$12 an hour. He decided to file for unemployment benefits.

After spending months going through the application process and being rejected by the state, he was approved for PUA benefits. However, after he received his first payment, his employer appealed his claim, leading to a remote court hearing at which the judge ruled that an "overpayment" had occurred and ordered Sean to pay back the funds.

Despite the fact Sean had claimed a "recognizable hardship" due to his medical condition, the judge stated he "did not convincingly show he was at high risk of serious complications from COVID-19 if he worked outside the home."

"Thankfully, I have a salary and can pay them back," Sean said. "However, for people who don't, it's tough. It's dangerous for the working class."



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