

US jobless claims spike to 853,000 while Congress stalls further aid

Jacob Crosse
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Historic job losses continued in the US with the latest initial unemployment claims from the Department of Labor revealing 853,000 first-time claims for the week ending Dec. 5, a week-to-week increase of 137,000 from last week's revised total of 716,000.

In addition to state claims, 427,609 initial claims were filed for the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program, once again bringing the total claims between state and federal programs to nearly 1.3 million. Since March 21, combined state and federal claims have exceeded 1 million every week.

Overall, 70 million claims have been filed since mid-March, nearly seven times all the claims filed in 2019, a staggering figure that has no historical equivalent since the Labor Department began tracking initial unemployment claims in January 1967. The 853,000 claims this week exceeded bourgeois economists' expectations and are the highest since the week of Sept. 18, disabusing delusional assertions of a "recovering" job market.

A significant data point in the report was the increase in continuing claims, which measures people collecting state unemployment benefits. The increase, which brought the total above 5.76 million, was the first since August.

Speaking to the Associated Press, Ann Elizabeth Konkel, an economist for the job listing website Indeed, indicated that the increase in continuing claims is a sign that hiring is slowing, portending more layoffs. "Today's report is the first overt signal of a backward slide," Konkel said. "It's evident that the labor market is still in crisis."

The economic and social crisis shows no signs of abating with over 19 million people claiming some form of unemployment benefit according to the report, a decrease of 1.12 million from the previous week. In addition to the 8.55 million claiming PUA benefits, another 4.53 million are claiming Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation benefits. Without congressional action, both CARES Act programs will expire on Dec. 26, leaving some 13 million people with nothing.

Along with the expiration of state unemployment benefits

and a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention eviction moratorium at the end of the month, previously allocated funds through the CARES Act to supplement food banks and farmers have also expired. The \$4.5 billion Farmers to Families Food Box program, launched in May, ran out of funds this month, leaving food banks across the country to scramble for food, or outright cancel their weekly food drives.

"The needs are beyond what we can comprehend," Lawdia Kennedy, founder of the Queen Material Community Center in Buford, Georgia, told the *Washington Post*. "We had three truckloads scheduled for Saturday and they just vanished. Six states are right now being told there will be no food, right before Christmas. It's hard to put into words what this means for the families I serve."

"I've been telling people that [the food drive] is postponed and might happen next weekend, but that hope is turning a lie," she said.

Leaders from both big businesses parties showed little interest in alleviating the suffering of millions of people. On Thursday, Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi voiced her support for the bipartisan \$908 billion relief proposal, which at this point is not an actual bill, but a six-page summary that doesn't include specific language on a proposed business liability shield or aid to state and local governments, two alleged points of contention between the parties.

It has been nearly six months since extended unemployment benefits expired, eliminating the \$600 weekly federal supplement, leading to widespread hunger, evictions and mounting debt and death among the working class. But at her Thursday press conference, Pelosi thanked her colleagues for the "great progress" made on negotiations up to this point. She hailed the framework, which doesn't include \$1,200 stimulus checks and offers only \$300 a week, half the previous federal supplemental jobless benefit, as something that reflects bipartisan "values and priorities" and "what we need to do right away."

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, the fact

that unemployment benefits theoretically exist doesn't mean workers get them or can keep the money if they do. In Iowa, 84-year-old bladder, breast, skin and colon cancer survivor Audrey Birdsell has been ordered by Iowa Workforce Development to repay \$3,530 she received through the PUA program earlier this year.

"I don't think it's quite right," Birdsell told the *Des Moines Register*. Birdsell, at the behest of her family, took a leave of absence from her job at the Kwik Star convenience store when the pandemic emerged. "I really feel bad," Birdsell continued. "I wouldn't mind giving some back. But I wish I could have some, at least. I made an effort to stay home from work. And then they're going to take it away when they promised they wouldn't."

A sample of 525 cases from late July reviewed by the newspaper found that more than 100 workers have been ordered to repay previously received funds, with an average of \$6,713 to be recouped.

As has been the case throughout the entire pandemic, Wall Street brushed aside the dismal report, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average rallying above 30,000 before a brief dip at the market's closing bell ended the trading day at 29,996.26. The stock market was buoyed by promises of unlimited "quantitative easing" via the Federal Reserve and assurances from President-elect Joe Biden that he would reopen the majority of schools within the first 100 days of his administration—a key to forcing workers back to their jobs.

The artificial inflation of the stock market has boosted the wealth of US billionaires by over \$1 trillion since the pandemic began, according to a Dec. 9 report from the Institute for Policy Studies and Americans for Tax Fairness. The report notes that the "total net worth of the nation's 651 billionaires rose from \$2.95 trillion March 18... to \$4.01 trillion on December 7, a leap of 36 percent..."

Topping the list is Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, whose wealth grew by 63.2 percent over that time, from \$113 billion to \$184 billion. Tesla CEO Elon Musk saw the largest percentage growth, a monstrous 481.7 percent, from \$24.6 billion in March to \$143 billion in December, for an increase of \$118 billion.

The report notes that the \$1 trillion hoarded by 651 people in the last nine months would be more than enough to send stimulus checks of \$3,000 to all 330 million people in America, adults and children alike, providing a family of four with \$12,000.

Contrasted to the euphoria of the markets and their "pandemic profiteers" is the unchecked spread of the coronavirus throughout workplaces and schools, leading to a record 3,124 deaths on Wednesday, per John Hopkins University.

In comments made during a virtual event hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Robert Redfield warned that "for the next 60 to 90 days we're going to have more deaths per day than we had at 9/11 or we had at Pearl Harbor."

Asked why the US had a world-leading case and death total, Redfield didn't acknowledge the abandonment of lockdowns and the implementation of a de facto "herd immunity" policy that has been enacted by Democratic and Republican politicians alike at the behest of their oligarchic benefactors. Nor did he explain that millions of workers have been blackmailed into working in virus-ridden factories and schools, leading to unchecked community spread.

He made no mention of debilitating supply chain issues, a result of the anarchy of capitalist production and the lack of scientifically coordinated global planning, which to this day has crippled US testing capacity, rendering contact tracing meaningless, and left doctors and nurses to fend for themselves in regards to personal protective equipment.

Instead, Redfield covered up for the ruling class and blamed the American people for the current wave of mass death. Redfield cited high rates of comorbidities such as obesity and diabetes as well as the "culture."

"Different cultures have embraced public health recommendations with different degrees of rigor," he said. Redfield didn't elaborate if this "culture" included President-elect Biden falsely claiming that schools can be reopened safely so parents can be forced back to work, or Trump instructing the population to inject bleach and avoid masks.



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