Another 900,000 file for unemployment, record jobless claims continue amid mass death from pandemic

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Weekly adjusted unemployment claims topped 900,000, according to the latest weekly jobs report from the Department of Labor, the last such report of Donald Trump's presidency. This was a slight reduction from the previous week's revised total of 926,000, but still nearly four times the pre-pandemic average of 225,000. The actual number of unadjusted claims, not based on seasonal fluctuations, totaled 960,668 for the week ending January 16.

In addition to state claims, 47 states reported 423,734 unemployment claims made under the federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program, which was created as part of the CARES Act for so-called "gig workers," contractors, the self-employed and others not typically covered under traditional unemployment. Overall, the total number of jobless claims was 1.4 million, one of the highest totals recorded since August. Overall, nearly 16 million Americans are on some form of unemployment.

More job losses are likely in the coming weeks. The Department of Labor report revealed that combined PUA and initial claims increased by 113,000 compared to the week prior, signifying that no "recovery" has begun for the estimated 26.8 million workers (15.8 percent of the workforce) who have lost work, dropped out of the labor force or had their hours reduced since the pandemic, according to figures from the Economic Policy Institute.

The ongoing record unemployment claims point to the fact that large companies and small businesses alike are continuing with layoffs amidst the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19. The day of President Joe Biden's inauguration, which saw the Dow Jones Industrial Average rise to over 31,000, some 4,200 people died from the coronavirus. Overall, the death toll in the US is fast approaching 420,000.

Due to the delay in the passage and signing of the $900 billion December "relief" bill, which extended federal supplemental jobless benefits for only 11 additional weeks until March 14, 2021, several states' unemployment programs had to be reconfigured, causing further delays for the millions of workers attempting to file for benefits.

This delay meant that only 47 states reported PUA claims in the last DOL report, with states such as Florida and Arkansas not reporting any claims filed. As has been common throughout the pandemic, desperate jobless workers attempting to file for unemployment have been met with website errors, circular phone trees, unanswered questions and contradictory solutions, leaving them frustrated and without the money they are owed.

In Arkansas, jobless workers have been trying since the beginning of the year to access the website in order to file their claims but have yet to get through. Thousands of workers have reported that no PUA claims have been paid out since the signing of the last relief bill on December 27. The official Arkansas Division of Workforce Services Twitter account informed jobless workers on January 19 that they are "currently updating the PUA system" and that it should be back up by "mid-February."

Summing up the state of affairs millions of jobless find themselves in, one worker replied, "Now mid-February? People won't survive until then, running on fumes now."

A similar situation is unfolding in Virginia. The Virginia Employment Commission (VEC) announced on January 13 that workers will not be able to file PUA and PEUC claims until January 29. In an online petition demanding VEC be held accountable, one unemployed worker wrote that she was still waiting for benefits since filing in July 2020. However, even after reaching out to multiple state representatives who told her that "someone" would contact her within three businesses days, they still "haven't called or emailed."

Speaking to Vox, Elizabeth Pancotti, a policy adviser at Employ America, remarked that "there are probably millions of families waiting on two, three, four weeks of unemployment checks that aren't getting them."

The delays, disruptions and errors that are common to state unemployment systems are the result of deliberate policy decisions by Democratic and Republican governors alike as part of the drive by the ruling class to extract as much surplus value from the working class as possible. The archaic and outdated systems, which vary from state to state, are specifically designed to discourage jobless workers from trying to file for unemployment in the first place.

A recent article in the *New York Times* revealed that in 2019 on average, only 27 percent of unemployed workers received any benefits after applying. For those who managed to receive what is owed to them, the amount itself has been whittled down over the years as well. The *Times* notes that in 2019, on average, state unemployment systems only paid about 33 percent of prior wages, which represents about eight percentage points less than what unemployment paid in the 1940s.

The *Times*' analysis also showed that the nation's highest rate at which applicants received benefits was only 58 percent, in New Jersey. On the other end of the spectrum, only nine percent of North Carolinians received payments. This was followed closely by Florida at 11 percent, while South Dakota, Mississippi and Louisiana only accepted about 12 percent of applicants.

Despite the winnowing of benefits and uptick in states denying applicants, the unending drive by the ruling class to maximize their wealth above all other considerations has plunged several states' unemployment systems into debt. The *Times* notes that currently 19 states owe the Treasury Department a total of $47 billion, or about a quarter of the wealth currently hoarded by the world's richest man, Tesla CEO Elon Musk.

The release of the DOL report prompted Biden's National Economic Council Director Brian Deese to issue a statement on Wednesday that the sky-high jobless claims were "another stark reminder" that more help for the economy is needed. "We must act now to get this virus under control, stabilize the economy, and reduce the long-term scarring that will only worsen if bold action isn't taken," he added.

Despite Deese's claims of urgent action being needed, Punchbowl News reported yesterday that the Democrats do not expect to have a relief bill on Biden's desk until early March, despite controlling both chambers of Congress and the presidency.

Biden had previously unveiled a $1.9 trillion stimulus plan that raised unemployment benefits to a meager $400 per week from the present $300, included $1,400 stimulus checks, which is $600 less than the $2,000 many workers had been expecting based on campaign rhetoric in this month's Senate election run-offs in Georgia from winning Democratic candidates Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff.

On Thursday, two of Biden's "Republican colleagues," Maine Senator Susan Collins and Louisiana Senator Bill Cassidy, came out in opposition to Biden's proposal. Collins told Business Insider reporter Joseph Zeballos-Roig, "It's hard for me to see when we just passed $900 billion of assistance why we would have a package that big." Cassidy likewise said he would support more "targeted" aid and would need to hear the "justification" for additional spending. Right-wing Democratic Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia has also stated that he is opposed to any new stimulus measures.