

US jobless claims top 684,000, just below pre-pandemic record high, as millions remain out of work and at risk of eviction

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The release of the latest Department of Labor jobless claims report showed 684,000 claims filed for the week ending March 20, the lowest number in over a year, but nearly equivalent to the October 1982 record of 695,000 claims. The reported figure is the first time state claims have been below 700,000 since the pandemic began.

While the report was hailed in the bourgeois press as a positive sign demonstrating a recovering economy, the fact is the number is three times the pre-pandemic average of 225,000 claims, and under any other circumstances would be considered catastrophic.

Over a year into the pandemic, some 10 million jobs have yet to return and nearly 101 million people are not in the labor force, which is nearly 6 million more compared to February 2020 just before pandemic restrictions were implemented.

In addition to state claims, federal claims made under the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) exceeded 241,000, bringing the combined total of state and federal claims to roughly 926,000. Should the figure remain after adjustments are calculated in the coming days, it would be the first time in over a year combined claims did not exceed 1 million.

Testifying to the persistent character of the economic and social crisis, the report revealed that for the first time, more Americans are claiming long-term unemployment benefits on the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) program, 5.6 million, compared to regular state unemployment, which was recorded at 4.5 million. Overall, nearly 19 million workers are receiving some form of unemployment, an increase of over 733,000 from the week prior.

The PUA and PEUC programs were both created under the CARES Act passed last March and are set to expire on September 5 of this year without congressional action.

The PUA program was created for so-called “gig” and contract workers who would normally be ineligible for benefits under traditional state programs, while PEUC was created for workers who had exceeded the term of their state benefits. The elimination of both of these programs would leave millions of workers either with nothing or at the mercy of underfunded state unemployment programs, of which 10 states offer less than 26 weeks of benefits, with six states paying a maximum weekly benefit of less than \$300.

The administration of vaccines—surpassing 100 million doses—coupled with the deadly reopening of schools and non-essential businesses in states across the US, was cited by bourgeois economists as reasons for the decline of roughly 97,000 state claims compared to the prior week.

Unemployment rates across the country continued to decline with Pennsylvania, the Virgin Islands and Nevada leading the way at 5.8, 5.6 and 5.4 percent unemployment rate, respectively. However, the dip below 6 percent is more a function of workers dropping out of the labor force and no longer being counted in official statistics as opposed to finding work.

The profit-driven reopening of schools, spearheaded by the Democratic Party and President Joe Biden with the assistance of the trade unions, has already led to a four percent rise in COVID-19 cases nationally compared to the previous week, as preventable COVID-19 fatalities continue to hover around an average of 1,000 deaths a day.

The reopening of schools has exacerbated the spread of the deadly B.1.1.7 variant of the virus which is now dominant in Florida and Michigan, which has seen a major surge in infections in recent days. Overall, there have been over 30 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the US with nearly 560,000 deaths—both figures are the

highest in the world.

While some economists have pointed to the relaxing of public health measures to explain the decline in claims, another factor has been the imposition of new “security” measures in states such as California and Nevada designed to combat supposedly “fraudulent” unemployment claims.

In Nevada, the implementation of an identification system called ID.me which requires jobless workers to submit a photo along with a government identification card and a social security card has led to thousands of workers being denied their weekly benefits. Workers have reported the system kicking back their cell phone pictures, forcing them to upload a photo from a webcam on a computer, something to which many do not have access.

As one frustrated worker, Vick, said in a social media group for unemployed workers in Nevada, “We could have used this time to find jobs instead. I am afraid to leave my computer now and I just canceled my doctor’s visit just for this. You know what, it seems it does not matter UI/PUA tried to do to prevent fraud, I only feel us, the actual claimants have to suffer through this and fraudulents (sic) got away without caught or having to deal with what we are dealing with.”

Another exasperated worker, Val agreed, “exactly they make the actual claimant go through loophole after loophole just to get money that’s owed to us, it’s stressful and people are getting fed up.” Gregg added that it took him, “three attempts and a total of 12 hours to get ‘verified.’ Sort of helpful hint: refresh your browser every 4 mins 30 secs. The world in which we live becomes more Orwellian/Dystopian every day. Pathetic.”

Speaking to the *Washington Post* on the issue of the long-term unemployed workers waiting weeks for benefits, Martin Wegbreit, director of litigation at the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society in Richmond, Virginia, said he had, “never seen the level of frustration and desperation that I’ve seen in the last year. And part of it is the whole system is overwhelmed and near total collapse. What used to take three or four weeks to get decided is now taking three or four months to be decided. The system was never designed for people on unemployment to have to wait that long.”

As jobless workers continue to try and navigate broken unemployment systems, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell on Thursday confirmed that for the time being, the monthly Fed purchase of \$120 billion in Treasury bonds and mortgage-backed securities would continue. However, the markets reacted negatively when

Powell said that the current program was “unsustainable” in the long term and that “gradually over time and with great transparency, when the economy has all but fully recovered, we will be pulling back the support that we provided during emergency times.”

While Powell did not give a firm date for when the Wall Street program would wind down, for millions of renters, the expiration of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention eviction moratorium in less than a week has left them unsure if they will have a home in the coming days.

While the moratorium has kept millions in their homes, hundreds of thousands have still been evicted during the pandemic, leading to thousands of unnecessary deaths. A tracker created by the Eviction Lab at Princeton University which monitors evictions in 27 US cities has recorded 278,376 evictions during the pandemic with 5,195 evictions filed for the week ending March 20.

In Nevada, where a statewide eviction moratorium is slated to expire next week, thousands of renters are desperately trying to access rental assistance funds. Abby Quinn, chief communications officer for HELP of Southern Nevada, told the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* their non-profit was working with more than 1,000 families to help secure money for rent.

“There’s a huge need right now for rental assistance and a lot of the people we talk to, some of their rents that they owe are still from 2020, so you’re still talking about a lot of back rent,” Quinn said. “It’s not really someone just needing one or two months of rent, so we are concerned and we’re getting prepared.”

“That’s when we’ll see a lot more people on the streets and coming in because they’re living in their cars and so we do anticipate an influx, again, of people once that moratorium is up,” she added.



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