

As US Department of Labor reports 896,000 combined unemployment claims last week, states move to impose new restrictions

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The US Department of Labor reported historically high job losses for the 55th week in a row as another 744,000 people filed first-time state unemployment claims last week, an increase of 16,000 from the week prior. The report also showed an additional 152,000 claims filed under the federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program.

The nearly 900,000 combined claims between state and federal programs are nearly four times the pre-pandemic average and demonstrate the reality of economic conditions for millions of workers across the United States.

The total number of people receiving some form of unemployment benefit remained unchanged from the week prior, with a reported 18.2 million continuing claims filed across all programs. A majority of unemployment benefits are being paid through the federal programs with more than 13 million enrolled in either the CARES Act-created PUA, designed for self-employed, contract or “gig” workers, or the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) program, created for workers who have exhausted their state benefits. Pending legislation, both programs will expire in less than five months, on September 6, 2021.

While bourgeois economists and the Biden administration hailed the release of last month’s jobs report, which showed that employment overall rose by 916,000 in March, the fact is a majority of the low-wage jobs created were in sectors that rely heavily on high COVID-19-risk face-to-face interactions, with some 280,000 of the returning jobs concentrated in the leisure and hospitality sector. The second largest industry that showed significant job growth was in the similarly low-paying, and highly prone to infection, bars and restaurant sector, which added 176,000 jobs.

What the report also revealed was that over 4.2 million people have been out of work for at least six months, representing 43.4 percent of all the unemployed. Even more significant is the fact that nearly 2.4 million Americans have remained unemployed for at least a year.

This number is likely an under-count, since the department

does not factor into its calculations workers who have left the labor force entirely and are not looking for a new job, possibly due to well-founded fears of getting infected or after accepting an “early retirement” or buyout from their employer. Since the report is based on figures from mid-March, it is possible that the number of long-term unemployed will rise even more dramatically next month.

While Democratic and Republican governors alike eschew any restrictions on economic activity in order to halt the unchecked spread of the more contagious and deadlier B.1.17 variant of the virus, which is spreading like wildfire throughout Michigan and has become the dominant strain in the US, millions of workers and their families continue to practice social distancing by abstaining from returning to deadly work sites, avoiding public gatherings and travel.

Reticence by millions of workers to sacrifice their health and well-being for menial, low-paid, and dangerous work has bolstered calls from politicians to impose work-search requirements for those claiming unemployment in an effort to blackmail workers back on the job.

This week, the Virginia Employment Commission announced the resumption of work-search requirements with commissioner Ellen Marie Hess stating that “increased vaccination access...workplace safety regulations, and a robust demand for workers from businesses” means that “Virginia will resume collecting and reviewing work search activity of customers in the near future.”

Nearly 10,500 people have died from COVID-19 in Virginia. Despite demanding that workers return to work, only those with an underlying health condition and people over 65 are currently eligible for the vaccine in Virginia.

In Tennessee, lawmakers are considering legislation that would eviscerate the already poverty-level unemployment benefits offered by the state, reducing the number of weeks a jobless worker would be eligible from the current 26 weeks down to only 12 weeks. Tennessee’s miserly weekly benefit, capped at \$275 a week, or roughly \$1,100 a month,

is already the fourth lowest in the country.

As states impose new restrictions for thousands of unemployed workers, the struggle just to get benefits that are owed has continued more than a year into the pandemic. In Wisconsin, an emotional Toni Matis of West Bend told *TMJ4* that she had been “dealing with unemployment for 11 months now and have not received a nickel.”

In an experience that is being felt by millions of jobless workers, Matis said through tears that her “mental health has completely diminished. This is the most devastating thing I have ever gone through. I’m behind on my rent, I’m behind on my car payment, I can’t pay my electric bill.”

Matis is one of the estimated 10 million people in the US who are behind on rent according to the last estimate from Moodys Analytics. While the Biden administration at the last minute renewed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) eviction moratorium in March through June 30, it refused to update the language in the order. This allowed known loopholes to remain, setting the stage for mass evictions, and death, in the coming weeks.

Demonstrating the Swiss-cheese-sized legal holes in the moratorium, Palmer Heenan, an attorney with the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, told the *Washington Post* that “almost 11,700 actual eviction judgements were made across Virginia just between September 2020 and December 2020.”

“I think a lot of tenants say, ‘Oh there’s a moratorium, that means they can’t evict me right now,’ but the reality is far more complicated,” said Heenan.

As with the previous order signed under former President Donald Trump, the renewed moratorium still allows for eviction for reasons other than non-payment. Dipti Pidikiti-Smith, director of advocacy at Legal Services of Northern Virginia, told the *Post* that her office has seen a rise in eviction cases in which the landlord is simply choosing not to renew the leases.

“They are using the lease expiration as a pretext. So if a tenant owes a balance, instead of giving a 14-day failure-to-pay-rent notice, which requires landlords to help apply for rent relief, they are just giving a 30-day notice that the lease is expired,” said Pidikiti-Smith.

In Texas, legal aid attorney Mark Melton recently told NPR that he expects “tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of Texans becoming homeless in relatively short order.” Melton leads a team of 175 pro bono volunteer lawyers in Dallas.

The expected wave of evictions is due to the March 31 expiration of an emergency order that had previously been issued by the Texas Supreme Court. The order had required judges to enforce the CDC moratorium. However, after the Court refused to extend the directive, an advisory body to

the Texas courts, the Texas Justice Court Training Center, NPR reported, “issued guidance essentially telling judges it’s not their job to enforce the CDC’s order.”

“Courts are no longer authorized by the Texas Supreme Court to abate (put on hold) cases based on the CDC eviction moratorium,” the directive reads. While landlords could still technically face fines for violating the CDC’s rules, Melton told NPR that there has been “virtually no enforcement” for landlords who violate the order.

“In essence, the Texas Supreme Court and the state’s leaders are abdicating their powers and moral obligation to protect renters from homelessness. Meanwhile, the \$1.3 billion state-run rental assistance program has stumbled. As of less than two weeks ago, fewer than 130 payments had been made,” said Christina Rosales, deputy director of the advocacy group Texas Housers, in a statement reported by the *Texas Tribune*.

“I think we just stepped off a cliff that we really didn’t want to step off,” added Melton.

The more-than-year-long mass jobless crisis, like the housing crisis and the ongoing spread of the coronavirus, is not primarily an economic, material or biological problem, but a political problem. At every step of the way, the profit interests of the capitalist ruling class stymie readily knowable and available, scientific solutions. The only way to end poverty, the pandemic and inequality requires the independent intervention of the working class based on a socialist program that prioritizes the health and safety of all rather than that of a privileged few.



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