

As pandemic continues and nearly 500,000 file for unemployment, US states seek to blackmail workers back on the job

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6 May 2021

As part of the bipartisan assault by the ruling class to blackmail workers back into accepting low-paying, dangerous work in crowded factories and dangerous face-to-face service, retail and hospitality industries, moves are being made to eliminate any COVID-19-related health, safety and social assistance, including extended weekly unemployment payments.

The latest attacks on the health and well-being of the working class come even as the coronavirus continues to spread throughout the country, with nearly 5,000 reported deaths in the last week alone and over 590,000 since February 2020, a figure which has been shown to be a vast undercount.

According to the US Department of Labor (DOL), nearly 500,000 Americans filed for first-time unemployment benefits last week, which is double the pre-pandemic average. Despite the DOL reporting over 16 million claims filed across all unemployment programs, and an increase in continuing state claims, states such as Montana are moving to eliminate CARES Act created programs, such as the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) and the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) programs, in order to force workers into competing for part-time and low-paying work.

The DOL reported that for the week ending May 1, 6.8 million Americans were enrolled in PUA, 4.9 million in PEUC, and nearly 3.7 million through traditional state unemployment systems.

In announcing on Tuesday that Montana would no longer participate in the federal programs, consigning some 25,000 Montanans currently receiving unemployment benefits to destitution, Republican Governor Greg Gianforte claimed, “Montana is open

for business again,” while blaming “a labor shortage” on “the vast expansion of federal unemployment benefits ... now doing more harm than good.”

In a move that is sure to be replicated by Republican and Democratic-run states across the country, Gianforte announced that effective June 27, unemployed workers who had exhausted their state benefits but were claiming benefits through PEUC or PUA would no longer be eligible for said benefits. The state will also end the miserly Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation \$300 weekly payments, which is already half of the previous \$600 payments that were in effect through July of last year.

Previous to Gianforte’s announcement, eligible jobless workers in Montana, if they were able to navigate the unemployment bureaucracy, could possibly receive between \$151 and \$510 per week from the state program, meaning that the federal boost raised the weekly pay to between \$451 and \$810. This is equivalent to yearly wages of between \$23,452 and \$42,120—in other words, enough to maintain a worker with a family in poverty.

Gianforte gives voice to the parasitic demands of Wall Street speculators and capitalist owners who, unburdened with having to work and risk their health and wellbeing in crowded kitchens, dilapidated factories and run-down schools, are ready to move on from the pandemic and resume the exploitation of the working class in order to make real the artificial inflation of the stock market through the extraction of surplus value from the working class.

In a recent article that appeared in *Crain’s Detroit Business*, Gianforte’s fears that unemployment benefits were stifling the reopening of the economy were

echoed by Susan Houseman, vice president and director of research at the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research in Kalamazoo. Houseman mused that “generous benefits” during the pandemic have “put pressure on employers to raise wages.”

In the same article, Mark Garrett, president and CEO of Morrell Group, lamented that workers have “so many options” and are “ghosting” on interviews or “applying and acting interested in roles then not following through,” in order, in his opinion, to oblige requirements by state unemployment systems which require jobless workers apply for work in order to remain eligible.

In an interview with NPR, small business owner Amy Ward said she does not think there should be “extra incentives to stay home right now.” Ward was particularly incensed that her employer contribution payments toward unemployment had increased in the previous year, telling NPR she was “frustrated that I am paying for all these people to be on unemployment, especially when I need people to work.”

There are no doubt many workers who are refusing to return to work—given the ongoing spread of the virus, poor pay, family obligations, and the demeaning character of low-wage jobs. However, there is the fact that thousands of workers in hyper-exploited essential industries, such as agriculture, food service and transportation have died in the last year due to the herd immunity policies that have been enacted by Republican and Democratic governments alike in the name of preserving profits above all else.

As reported by the *World Socialist Web Site* in February, a preprint server medRxiv study conducted in California found that the reopening of non-essential businesses, coupled with failing to provide these workers adequate safety and medical protection led to a “39% increase in mortality among food/agriculture workers, 28% among transportation/logistics workers, 27% among facilities workers, and 23% among manufacturing workers.”

Reporting figures from the study, the WSWS wrote: “Among the most lethal jobs were hand laborers (2,550 deaths), truck drivers (1,962 deaths) and construction laborers (1,587 deaths). At least 1,360 line cooks and head cooks lost their lives during this time, as did 562 customer service representatives and 378 house cleaners. Even jobs one might consider less dangerous

because workers are often outside, such as grounds maintenance workers, suffered 712 deaths, 40 percent more than average.”

As the WSWS has maintained since the beginning of the crisis, the pandemic is above all a political issue, not a medical or biological one. The tools and resources exist to not only eliminate the coronavirus by closing down non-essential operations and schools with full compensation for workers until the population is fully vaccinated, but to provide housing, food, health care and well-paying work to all. The primary task remains building an independent socialist movement of the working class against the existing political, social and economic set-up, which has proven incapable and unwilling to safeguard the lives and well-being of millions of people in the US and globally.



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