

Fight attacks on unemployed workers coast to coast!

written by Scott Scheffer
July 3, 2021



Unemployed Workers Union protest in Annapolis, Md., June 19.

July 2 — Governors of 26 U.S. states have opted to reject federal benefits for unemployed workers that were enacted in March 2021 as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The move presages a crisis for millions of workers, and activists in Maryland's Unemployed Workers Union are building an organization to turn back the attack. Thousands have contacted the newly-formed organization to join in the fight.

As news of the corporate-backed assault on the unemployed started to make headlines in May, resistance began to appear in different states: a demonstration in Miami, a petition signed by thousands in Pennsylvania, and a lawsuit that currently has halted the cutoff of benefits in Indiana are all examples.

Activists from the Peoples Power Assembly in Baltimore, a group with a long history of fighting against police brutality and for justice for working-class people, helped form the Unemployed Workers Union. Many thousands of distraught and angry unemployed workers across Maryland have responded, as well as people inquiring about forming chapters in other states.

The conditions revealed by the work of UWU has surprised even these seasoned organizers. Even before the announcement of the cancellation of benefits and the launch of UWU, tens of thousands of workers had been struggling to resolve their unemployment claims.

Hours-long attempts to reach the state's unemployment office were spent on hold. Messages left went unanswered indefinitely. In the rare cases when callers reached a live person, they were sometimes assured they would be paid, and it simply never happened. There are reports of some people just being told to "find a job." Some claims were filed more than a year ago.

Many people have been evicted or are facing eviction; cars have been repossessed and credit records have been ruined. The severity of the crisis has only been

uncovered through the efforts of the UWU, and certainly is similar in all the states where unemployed workers are under attack.

On June 24, Alec Sommerfield, pro-bono attorney for the organization, announced a [class action lawsuit](#) challenging the state's refusal to dispense the federal unemployment supplement, and demanding benefits for countless workers who have been disqualified without explanation or whose cases have been pending for months.

Pickers carrying a hand-painted banner marched outside the courthouse. The group has created a grievance form that has been filled out by thousands, picketed Gov. Larry Hogan's office, and filed in court for a temporary restraining order.

At least 4 million denied

Based on data provided by the Century Foundation, as of now at least 4 million unemployed workers will be denied nearly \$11 billion in federal money that was intended to help them survive after the massive job losses from the pandemic.

The national unemployment rate is still double its official pre-pandemic rate, which is a woefully inadequate count. There are 8 million fewer jobs than before the pandemic, which is far from over as case rates and death rates are beginning to creep up due to variants of the virus and the general failure in the U.S. of efforts to end the outbreak.

Unemployment insurance was part of a package of measures enacted by the Franklin D. Roosevelt White House when a militant workers' movement rose up against the horrible conditions of the Great Depression.

The corporate ruling class was divided over how to react to the movement. Germany's response to the crisis was fascism, and there was support for going in that direction among the multi-millionaire U.S. bosses of the day.

The varied state unemployment programs that exist today — instead of a standardized federal program — can be traced to the 1935 act when Roosevelt conceded to the former confederate states, whose bought-and-paid-for politicians argued openly that unemployment insurance risked empowering Black workers.

Today, nine of the 11 states of the confederacy are part of the 26 states denying their workers benefits, but they have been joined by 17 others in this broadside attack.

A significant portion of the workforce in all of these states are hospitality workers, whose jobs are on the lower end of the national wage scale; unemployed gig workers not entitled to state unemployment payments and whose federal assistance is their entire income; and a disproportionate number of workers of color.

Racist propaganda campaign

Per a [fact sheet](#) posted online by the Century Foundation, in South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi, 50%, 54% and 66% of recipients respectively are Black workers – three times or more the national average. Black communities nationwide have endured nearly double the unemployment rates of white workers, as well as low COVID-19 vaccination rates.

Conditions for the population of Montana’s five Indigenous reservations mirror those statistics. Rural areas, including Indigenous reservations, will be hit hard.

Often when vital social services are slashed, the cuts are accompanied by a racist propaganda campaign by the dutiful big-business-oriented media. The best-known example is President Ronald Reagan’s disgusting “welfare queen” myth.

Today’s editorial columns and news articles are teeming with lies about a labor

shortage – the implication being that workers are being handed fat unemployment checks and don't want to go back to work.

Labor shortages always result in rising wages. To date, that's how all labor shortages have been resolved.

Today there is no overall rise in wages because there is no labor shortage. What is really happening now is a gambit by the profit-crazed billionaires to make yet another push backwards against already inadequate workers' wages as a whole — without provoking a workers' movement like the one in the 1930s.

The first wave of federal pandemic emergency measures included billions in forgivable, 1%-interest loans intended to help “mom and pop” businesses. Big banks were the administrators and steered those loans to big corporations. Small family-owned businesses were left out, and thousands of companies that reaped the benefits laid off workers anyway.

Some of those very companies made billions in profits during the pandemic. Not enough was said about this in the media – nothing like the current slander against unemployed workers.

Workers deserve a living wage, homes, quality medical care and accessible schools. None of that will be granted without an organized, determined struggle.

The work of the Unemployed Workers Union is an example of how we must carry that struggle out, from Florida to Alaska, from Montana to Texas. For more information, visit UnemployedWorkersUnion.org.

