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Fight attacks on unemployed workers coast to coast

By Scott Scheffer

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 Sommerfeld, 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.



Baltimore protest demands relief for unemployed

On July 6, the Unemployed Workers Union (UWU) picketed the Maryland Labor Department office in Baltimore, demanding an emergency meeting with Secretary of Labor Tiffany Robinson. "We've heard from people all across the state who are literally losing every single thing — their homes, their apartments, their belongings, their cars, everything," said UWU organizer Sharon Black. "It's a state of emergency and Secretary Robinson has to hear our pleas."

In response to a class-action lawsuit by the UWU, Baltimore Circuit Court Judge Lawrence Fletcher-Hill issued a temporary restraining order against Maryland Gov. Larry's Hogan's plan to end enhanced federal unemployment benefits early. The July 3 ruling came just hours before the \$300 weekly payments

were scheduled to be cut off.

Most affected Maryland residents are only receiving payments from the federal program. The lawsuit is also pushing for people who have filed state unemployment claims but have not yet received payments to get their benefits. A follow-up hearing was scheduled for July 12.

"The class-action suit is very important to us, and we hope that the courts do the right thing, but we know that our fight has to continue regardless of what takes place inside or outside the courts," Black said. "That means that we will not rest until every single unemployed Marylander gets their benefits."

On the weekend of July 10-11, unemployed workers' speak-outs are planned in cities across Maryland. For info on the campaign, visit UnemployedWorkersUnion.org.

adequate 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

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