

## **New Jobs Bill Is Just a Start**

Over eight million Americans have lost jobs since the recession began in December 2007. Nearly 30 million either cannot find work or cannot find a full-time job. For African Americans, the jobless numbers are approaching those of the Great Depression of the 1930s. While the overall unemployment rate fell from 10 percent to 9.7 percent in January – admittedly not a steep decline – the rate for black men 20 or older was going the other way. It increased a full percentage point to 17.6 percent. Many laid off black workers have been looking for a job for so long that they have given up and are not even counted in the official tally.

For the past year, Washington has focused on the issue of health reform. The Obama administration has made the long sought goal of comprehensive health care, covering almost all Americans, priority number one. But the economy has not been ignored. The stimulus, passed last year, added 1.6 to 1.8 million jobs according to the Congressional Budget Office, an independent agency. Still, millions have been forced out of work, many losing employer-sponsored health care, and losing homes through foreclosure.

### **Focus on Jobs**

Now the President and Congress are focusing on legislation that would encourage the hiring of workers. Last week, the Senate passed a \$15 billion jobs bill. Sounds big? It's not. Last December, the House of Representatives passed a \$154 billion bill that included \$48 billion in infrastructure spending and \$79 billion in unemployment benefits. In comparison, the economic impact of the bill passed last week looks small. Several more job creation bills are planned by Senate leaders, focusing on small businesses, the infrastructure, and public sector employment. But, in this era of huge budget deficits, each will face a tough time getting approved.

The new bill's major provision is a \$13 billion hiring tax credit, granting employers an exemption from payroll taxes on new workers who have been jobless for at least two months. The bill also contains help for road and bridge building. Work on the federal highway program could create as many as a million jobs quickly. Now the bill must be approved by the House of Representatives.

Of course, any new infrastructure construction jobs would be good news for New York City, which has plenty of crumbling bridges, tunnels, and roadways. But who would be hired for these jobs? Historically, people of color have been systematically excluded from construction jobs in New York City. Unless the federal government and the city administration weigh in to prevent this type of discrimination from continuing, any new construction jobs are not likely to be filled by black or Latino workers.

Of course, for the bill to succeed, employers must see the need to add new workers. Federal aid to the states, which are cutting spending – especially in the areas of health care and education - in order to balance their budgets, would be a great help in saving many programs and promoting the need to hire workers.

Also, unemployment benefits for millions of Americans began running out as of last Sunday, the end of February. For a week, a single senator had held up a \$10 billion bill to extend

unemployment benefits. The bill finally passed on Tuesday, but rather than wrangle with extending benefits months by month, the Senate is considering another bill that would extend benefits for the rest of the year. In a jobless recovery – which is now what we are experiencing – unemployment benefits are crucial to the livelihood for millions.

### **Youths Shut Out**

Most of the focus on unemployment is on workers who have lost their jobs. But young people, who would just be entering the labor market, are being shut out at a crucial time in their lives. Entry-level jobs are being taken by older unemployed workers willing to take any job. More than one in four 18- and 19-year-olds is unemployed. Over 30 percent of young blacks, ages 16 to 24, are jobless. Unless there is a concerted drive for the better education and job training, this is liable to have long-term negative effects on this generation and on black communities across the country.

We need a focus on school to work transitions for young people not on a college track – especially a greater emphasis on career and technical education training - and subsidized jobs in the public and private sectors to give young people a second chance to connect with work. For those adults – long time workers who have lost jobs - transitional work is imperative. Workforce development programs are necessary to retool workers so they are prepared to move into new and expanding sectors of industry. This will take training programs with some sense of planning on the part of both government and the private sector.

The jobs bill passed by the Senate must be only a start. In the long run, we miss the boat if we just think about “jobs” and not “careers.” For careers, people need skills. Legislation to support real careers would support skills development, starting with basic skills and the General Educational Development diploma (GED). The country needs a concerted effort to promote skills training and targeted job opportunities, especially in communities of color which have been hardest hit by the economic collapse.

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