

As negotiations stall on federal coronavirus relief bill

Florida governor admits state unemployment system purposefully designed to pay out “least number of claims”

By Jacob Crosse
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Admitting what thousands of jobless workers in Florida, and millions of unemployed around the country already know to be true, Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, in a Tuesday interview with CBS Miami, acknowledged that the state’s unemployment system was designed to frustrate applicants by putting “as many kind[s] of pointless roadblocks along the way” to pay out the “least number of claims.”

DeSantis’s remarks came during an hour-long interview in which the governor agreed with reporter Jim DeFede that the “animating philosophy” of the system was to discourage distributing benefits to eligible workers. Roughly 1.5 million workers in Florida remain out of work and according to the state’s own claim dashboard over 100,000 eligible claimants have yet to be paid.

Florida’s unemployment system has been plagued, purposefully, with website crashes, technical glitches and system errors which have only been exacerbated as hundreds of thousands of jobless workers began applying in March. Users reported having to enter their personal information dozens of times only for their profile to disappear or the page to crash. It is not an exaggeration to state that collectively, millions of hours have been wasted by thousands of desperate workers trying to access their funds while millions of dollars and thousands of hours in manpower has likewise been wasted trying to operate a system that was designed not to work.

Unable to navigate the broken website, applicants were told to utilize the phone lines instead. In the last week of March only 1 percent of the 864,000 calls placed were answered. The state and DeSantis hurriedly signed off on and awarded \$150 million worth of no-bid contracts to

call center and technology companies which did little to actually resolve systematic problems.

Jobless workers were forced to endure hours-long lines in order to receive paper copies of documentation that couldn’t be accessed on the website, dubbed CONNECT, which had been created by Deloitte Consulting at the cost of nearly \$78 million to Florida taxpayers in 2013. On Monday *Politico* reported that Deloitte was also awarded a state Medicaid modernization contract worth at least \$135 million. The contract was signed by the head of the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration, Mary Mayhew, a DeSantis appointee.

Of the over 1 million Floridians who had applied for the miserly \$275 weekly benefit in mid-March, a Pew Research Center study conducted at the end of April found that only 8 percent had received it. Approximately 40 percent of eligible Floridians who had applied for unemployment were denied and forced to reapply again, affecting some 268,000 people.

DeSantis sought to blame the jobless for being unable to navigate the purposefully broken system and for filling out “incomplete forms.” When pushed by reporters during a May press conference as to why thousands of March unemployment filers had yet to receive their funds, DeSantis scoffed at the idea that they existed, claiming, without evidence, that “99.99 percent of those folks have been paid.”

Using Tuesday’s interview to obfuscate his role in this crime against the working class, DeSantis meekly vowed “some type of accountability” against those responsible for the system’s implementation pending the release of an ongoing Inspector General report. However, when DeFede pointed out that a 2019 audit of the Department

of Economic Opportunity had already been conducted and had identified the same flaws that DeSantis was now openly admitting were baked into the system, DeSantis demurred from all talk of accountability, countering that, “Nothing ever reached my desk,” and “I was not asked to do anything.”

Continuing the theme of not doing anything, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows concluded another day of talks Wednesday in which no concrete proposals were agreed upon and no date set for a vote on a new coronavirus pandemic relief bill which would extend federal unemployment benefits, previously set at \$600 per week, as well as an eviction moratorium for those living in properties with federally backed mortgages.

Meadows vowed that if a deal was not reached by Friday that Trump would take executive action to extend benefits, end the payroll tax and extend the federal moratorium on evictions on his own. Speaking to reporters, Meadows commented, “I’ve been working around-the-clock to look at the options the president has at his disposal within the confines of his legal authority within the executive branch.”

After benefits expired last week, roughly 30 million workers have seen their incomes slashed between 60 and 80 percent and according to the Aspen Institute, 23 million are at risk of eviction. The Eviction Lab at Princeton University has found that roughly 30 state moratoriums have expired since May.

Courts have already resumed evictions in major cities such as Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which has seen a 21 percent increase in eviction filings since June, with nearly 1,500 submitted since May. Speaking to the Associated Press, Colleen Foley, the executive director of the Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee, remarked: “We are sort of a harbinger of what is to come in other places.”

Pelosi, who has already signaled her willingness to compromise on cutting unemployment benefits, claimed to see the “light at the end of the tunnel” in regards to a final proposal, however, “how long that tunnel is, remains to be seen.” While the millionaires in Congress and the billionaire in the White House have the luxury of time, for millions of food-insecure workers and their families the need is dire.

Data released this past Friday by the Bureau of Economic Analysis found that staple food prices continued to rise, some by double-digit percentages. Beef and veal have increased in price by 25.1 percent

compared to last year. The price of eggs is up 10.4 percent since February while poultry and pork are up 8.5 and 8.6 percent, respectively.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Leon, an unemployed service worker from Pennsylvania, on the expiration of his benefits.

“I’m infuriated that Congress wasn’t able to resolve this issue,” said Leon. “My situation with food and groceries is now in the air. I’m going to have to be very creative in order to survive.”

A former Starbucks employee, Leon was making over three times the income he made while working while on unemployment. “The CEO of Starbucks makes nearly \$20,000 an hour. That’s more than I made in a year,” he said. Leon responded to the claims being endlessly repeated by Democrats and Republicans that the pandemic benefits are a “disincentive” to work: “My immune system is compromised. I’m not returning to work, pay or no pay.”

“There are no places to go to work, even if I wanted to,” he said. “What’s available?”

Leon spoke about the political situation, which he had been following very closely as the pandemic benefits wound down. “Both Democrats and Republicans don’t care. I heard that Nancy Pelosi didn’t want to extend benefits for even another week, even though the Republicans and Trump did. Supposedly her reasoning was that the Democrats would rather end the benefits altogether than keep what we had going until there was an agreement in Congress. That makes no sense. It just proves that she hates poor people.”

“She’s actually making Trump and the Republicans look good in this, which is just horrifying,” he concluded.

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