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Obama poses as opponent of inequality ahead of State of the Union address

By Andre Damon

25 January 2014

After presiding over the slashing of food stamp benefits, the ending of emergency jobless pay and the imposition of sequester budget cuts in the past year, President Barack Obama plans to make the question of economic inequality the centerpiece of his State of the Union address Tuesday.

In his annual address, Obama plans to call on congressional Republicans to pass an extension of federal jobless benefits for the 1.3 million long-term unemployed who lost them at the end of last year.

In fact, the responsibility for failing to extend jobless benefits lies primarily with the White House and congressional Democrats. They ensured that jobless benefits would expire for the long-term unemployed when they decided to exclude an extension of the program in the budget deal they worked out with the Republicans last month.

For all their rhetoric, the Democrats have made no serious effort to revive the long-term jobless benefits program. Evincing sheer cynicism and contempt for the working class, they calculate

that the longer they can posture as defenders of the unemployed and blame the Republicans for blocking a revival of benefits, the better their chances in this year's mid-term elections.

Joel Benenson, Obama's lead pollster, told the *New York Times*: "The State of the Union is an opportunity for the president...to lay out his agenda for the coming year." Making clear that calling for supposedly "progressive" policies is more important to the White House than actually getting them passed, the *Times* noted, "Although Republicans are certain to oppose much of what Mr. Obama proposes, Mr. Benenson said the debate was important."

Benenson added, "You want a debate over the minimum wage, over paying women fairly, over unemployment insurance, over expanding pre-K... You want to put a marker down that we are going to have those debates, and we're going to take our case to the American people to get as much of that done as we can."

Even if they were passed, these measures would do virtually nothing to alter the historically unprecedented levels of inequality in the United States. For the past five years, the Obama administration has handed trillions of dollars to the banks, leading to a record rise in the stock market as well as corporate profits and the wealth of the top one percent. Meanwhile, wages have steadily declined and nothing has been done to address the greatest social crisis since the Great Depression.

The main purpose of the administration's talk of inequality is to provide political cover for its liberal and pseudo-left apologists, who are using the populist rhetoric to try to bolster flagging support for the Democrats. This was exemplified by *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman, who wrote Thursday: "If, as has been widely reported, President Obama devotes much of his State of the Union address to inequality, everyone should be cheering him on."

In close coordination with the administration, the trade unions and their political allies initiated a campaign last month for an increase in the federal minimum wage. This was timed to correspond with a speech by Obama giving his stamp of approval to a proposal by congressional Democrats to raise the minimum wage to \$10.10, lower in real terms than it was in 1968.

In the midst of this fraudulent campaign, the spending cuts that they have implemented by the Democrats and Republicans are having an ever-more disastrous impact on the poor and the unemployed.

In addition to the 1.3 million people who lost their unemployment benefits on December 28 as a result of the lapse in federal benefits, 3.6 million more unemployed people will exhaust their cash benefits in the course of 2014. An average of two additional family members are supported by each recipient of jobless aid, bringing to nearly 15 million the number of people potentially affected by the expiration of federal jobless benefits—almost five percent of the population.

The Democrats have already made clear, moreover, that any extension of jobless pay will be offset by slashing spending for other social programs. It will also be conditioned on further reductions in the duration of the jobless benefits.

Meanwhile, a growing number of state governments are scaling back the duration of jobless benefits financed at the state level. Michigan and Missouri have cut the maximum duration of state benefits from 26 weeks to 20 weeks, and other states such as North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia have scaled back the program even more drastically.

The expiration of federal jobless pay, moreover, follows a \$5 billion cut in food stamp benefits that took effect on November 1. This was the first nationwide reduction in food stamp benefits in US history. As a result of those cuts, a family of three lost nearly \$30 per month in food assistance, amounting to twenty or more meals, according to Feeding America. A family of four lost \$36, or 23 meals.

The food stamp cuts are the result of the expiration of the 2009 Recovery Act's temporary increase in food stamp assistance. The expiration was not scheduled to take place until 2015, when food stamp benefits are slated to increase. But congressional Democrats used \$14 billion that was set aside for food stamps to fund other programs. In 2010, the Democrats promised to restore the funding before the increase in benefits expired, but never did so.

According to a recent survey by the Food Bank for New York City, 85 percent of the city's food pantries experienced increased demand for food assistances as a result of the cut, and 23 percent of emergency food assistance providers have had to reduce the number of meals they provide. Over half of the city's food banks reported that need increased by 26 percent or more.

The number of people receiving food assistance from food pantries and soup kitchens has gone up by fifty percent, according to Feeding America.

Last year's cut to food stamps is only the beginning. According to newspaper reports, congressional Democrats have already agreed to slash an additional \$9 billion in food stamp spending on top of the \$5 billion cut implemented last year.

Behind the Obama administration's empty rhetoric about inequality, the reality is an unprecedented attack on the social conditions of working people.