

The unemployed stare into the abyss. Republicans look away.

By Paul Krugman

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In case you haven't noticed, the coronavirus is still very much with us. Around a thousand Americans are dying from Covid-19 each day, 10 times the rate in the European Union. Thanks to our failure to control the pandemic, we're still suffering from Great Depression levels of unemployment; a brief recovery driven by premature attempts to resume business as usual appears to have petered out as states pause or reverse their opening.

Yet enhanced unemployment benefits, a crucial lifeline for tens of millions of Americans, have expired. And negotiations over how — or even whether — to restore aid appear to be stalled.

You sometimes see headlines describing this crisis as a result of “congressional dysfunction.” Such headlines reveal a severe case of bothsidesism — the almost pathological aversion of some in the media to placing blame where it belongs.

For House Democrats passed a bill specifically designed to deal with this mess *two and a half months ago*. The Trump administration and Senate Republicans had plenty of time to propose an alternative. Instead, they didn't even focus on the issue until days before the benefits ended. And even now they're refusing to offer anything that might significantly alleviate workers' plight.

This is an astonishing failure of governance, right up there with the mishandling of the pandemic itself. But what explains it?

Well, I'm of two minds. Was it ignorant malevolence, or malevolent ignorance?

Let's talk first about the ignorance.

The Covid recession that began in February may have been the simplest, most comprehensible business downturn in history. Much of the U.S. economy was put on hold to contain a pandemic. Job losses were concentrated in services that were either inessential or could be postponed, and were highly likely to spread the coronavirus: restaurants, air travel, dentists' visits.

The main goal of economic policy was to make this temporary lockdown tolerable, sustaining the incomes of those unable to work.

Republicans, however, have shown no sign of understanding any of this. The policy proposals being floated by White House aides and advisers are almost surreal in their disconnect from reality. Cutting payroll taxes on workers who can't work? Letting businesspeople deduct the full cost of three-martini lunches they can't eat?

They don't even seem to understand the mechanics of how unemployment checks are paid out. They proposed continuing benefits for a brief period while negotiations continue — but this literally can't be done, because the state offices that disburse unemployment aid couldn't handle the necessary reprogramming.

Above all, Republicans seem obsessed with the idea that unemployment benefits are making workers lazy and unwilling to accept jobs.

This would be a bizarre claim even if unemployment benefits really were reducing the incentive to seek work. After all, there are more than 30 million workers receiving benefits, but only five million job openings. No matter how harshly you treat the

unemployed, they can't take jobs that don't exist.

It's almost a secondary concern to note that there's almost no evidence that unemployment benefits are, in fact, discouraging workers from taking jobs. Multiple studies find no significant incentive effect.

And unemployment benefits didn't prevent the U.S. from adding seven million jobs, most of them for low-wage workers — that is, precisely the workers often receiving more in unemployment than from their normal jobs — during the abortive spring recovery.

By the way, a great majority of economists believe that unemployment benefits have helped sustain the economy as a whole, by supporting consumer spending.

So the attack on unemployment aid is rooted in deep ignorance. But there's also a strong element of malice.

Republicans have a long history of suggesting that the jobless are moral failures — that they'd rather sit home watching TV than work. And the Trump years have been marked by a relentless assault on programs that help the less fortunate, from Obamacare to food stamps.

One indicator of G.O.P. disingenuousness is the sudden re-emergence of “deficit hawks” claiming that helping the unemployed will add too much to the national debt. I use the scare quotes because as far as I can tell not one of the politicians claiming that we can't afford to help the unemployed raised any objections to Donald Trump's \$2 trillion tax cut for corporations and the wealthy.

Nor was disdain for the unlucky the only reason the G.O.P. didn't want to help Americans in need. The recent Vanity Fair report about why we don't have a national testing strategy fits with a lot of evidence that Republicans spent months believing that Covid-19 was a blue-state problem, not relevant to people they cared about. By the time they realized that the pandemic was exploding in the Sun Belt, it was too late to avoid disaster.

At this point, then, it's hard to see how we avoid another gratuitous catastrophe. The fecklessness of the Trump administration and its allies means that millions of Americans will soon be in dire financial straits.