

OUR New York

Organizing for Unemployment Reform in New York

March 2007

Dear Legislator,

A top priority in Albany is making sure that New York's economy is revitalized and raises the standard of living of New Yorkers throughout the state. A strong **unemployment insurance** program is crucial to reaching this goal. Unemployment benefits are the state's first responder to economic problems, and when the program works it boosts communities and families and empowers the redeployment of New York's workforce into good jobs.

But because of major shortcomings, New York is getting a badly diminished economic charge out of the unemployment program. For example, New York's unemployment benefits rank 48th out of 50 states in protecting New Yorkers against the financial impact of job loss. And that's for the minority of workers who are even able to collect--only 41 percent of the jobless receive benefits, with hundreds of thousands left out each year.

The good news is that a new report--*Down But Not Out: Reviving the Promise of Unemployment Insurance in New York State*, outlines the major changes needed to fix the program. We are writing to express our shared concern about the need for unemployment insurance reform and invite you or a member of your staff to an issue briefing: **Tuesday March 20th, 1pm** at New York State AFL-CIO, 100 South Swan Street Lower Level (details attached). We hope that the Legislature, the new Governor and Labor Commissioner will take on the following key issues:

- *Meaningful income support for temporarily unemployed families:* New York's maximum unemployment benefit has been frozen at \$405 since 1998. The maximum benefit needs to be increased and indexed - with the goal of providing the average worker with half of their prior weekly wage. The benefit levels for lower-wage workers need to be brought up to par with nearby states as well.
- *Increase UI Access to Part-Time and Part-Year Workers:* The Legislature should reverse the patently unfair denial of unemployment benefits to nonprofessional educational workers (maintenance, food service, etc.) who are laid off between school terms. This is just one example of part-time workers (such as adjunct professors) who are excluded even though they have earned enough to qualify.
- *Provide opportunities for jobless workers to complete job training.* In 1988, The Legislature enacted reforms to section 599 of the UI law to provide workers approved for training with an extension of unemployment benefits. However, in 2005, 70 percent of 599 applications were denied. Funding for extended benefits needs to be increased beyond the long-standing \$20 million cap and the approval rules need to be rewritten so more deserving workers can qualify.
- *Improve access to immigrant workers.* Non-English speakers face barriers at every level of the system, from calling in for benefits, filling out forms to defending their rights at hearings. DOL must keep its promises to provide adequate translation services to immigrant workers seeking UI.
- *Fairly Administer the Unemployment Insurance Law:* Workers are almost twice as likely to be denied UI benefits when their claims are contested, compared to twelve years ago. DOL needs to re-examine its procedures for deciding claims, and the UI Appeal Board needs to take action to provide fair hearings in order to achieve fair results.

With the help of a new coalition, OUR New York (Organizing for Unemployment Reform in New York), we look forward to raising the issue of unemployment insurance reform with you this year. If you have any questions or comments please contact Andrew Stettner (212-285-3025) at the National Employment Law Project or Tosh Anderson of the New York Unemployment Project (212-625-0288 x 5653).

Signed,

Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund
Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law
Buffalo Building and Construction Trades Council
Buffalo Central Labor Council
Cattaraugus-Alleghany Central Labor Council
Catholic Charities of Tompkins/Tioga
Citizen Action New York
Communication Workers of America – District 1
Community Legal Resource Network, CUNY School of Law
Cornell Organization for Labor Action
Cornell Police Union
Cornell Tzedek: Jewish Social Justice
Cortland Workers' Rights Board
Dunkirk Central Labor Council
Education Support Professionals/Ithaca (Paraprofessionals)
Empire Justice Center
Farmworker Legal Services of New York
Ithaca Catholic Worker
Ithaca Democratic Socialists of America
Ithaca Health Alliance
Fiscal Policy Institute
Jamestown Central Labor Council
Justice For All
Kol Haverim: the Finger Lakes Community for Humanistic Judaism
Make the Road By Walking
Mason Tenders District Council of Greater New York

Midstate Central Labor Council
National Employment Law Project
New York Jobs with Justice
New York City Employment and Training Coalition
New York Immigration Coalition
New York State AFL-CIO
New York State Episcopal Public Policy Network
New York Unemployment Project
Niagara-Orleans Central Labor Council
Office and Professional Employees International Union 277
Public Housing Residents of the Lower East Side
Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund
Queens Federation of Churches
Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union (RWDSU)
Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy
Social Justice Council of the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca
Tompkins-Cortland Building and Construction Trades Council
Tompkins County Health Care Task Force
Tompkins County Workers Center
United Auto Workers Region 9
United Auto Workers Region 9A
United Auto Workers Local 2300
Unemployment Action Center
West New York American Labor Federation
Workers Rights Law Center of New York
YKASEC – Empowering the Korean American Community