



SOLIDARITY

In The Sunshine

NEWSLETTER OF THE FLORIDA AFL-CIO

August/September 2011

VOL. XII ISSUE 5

Labor Day in the Sunshine State

There is no doubt that we are in a time of great struggle for working families as we deal with an economic system that has become dominated by the modern-day robber barons of Wall Street and the big banks. People are looking for work, home foreclosures are still rampant and the basic social safety net is under attack like never before. It is hard for many to see any light at the end of the tunnel as both state and federal governments have become mired in partisan bickering and entrenched special interests have dug in to protect the obscene wealth of the super-rich. In this difficult time it is important to remember the true meaning of Labor Day and draw hope and strength from this observance of the potential power and promise of Organized Labor. Labor Day was established to celebrate the achievements of organized labor and the role that working people, standing and working together, have had in solving the challenges inherent in building one of the greatest societies in history. Many forget that so many of the things that make our nation great did not happen easily, they are the culmination of years of struggle with women, men and even children placing their lives on the line.

In 2011, Florida's labor movement did not take Labor Day off nor did activism take a back seat to shopping malls and sales. Instead, Central Labor Councils and local unions organized dozens of events throughout the state to celebrate and honor working families and more importantly to remind us all that we have the power to solve the crises facing our nation. These events brought people together from all walks of life and professions to share the holiday in observance of the legacy built by working people who stood together. Many of these Labor Day picnics have been a staple in local communities as a yearly event that few miss. However, in some parts of the state their Labor Day celebrations took a new direction from their normal picnic of the past.

- In Tampa, the West Central Florida Federation of Labor did not have their usual Labor Day picnic but felt instead they should use that day as a time to give back, and help the less fortunate. Early in the morning on Monday, Tampa Bay Activists joined by AFL-CIO Executive Vice President, Arlene Holt Baker, volunteered at Pinellas HOPE, which is a Catholic Charity that works to help the homeless in Pinellas County by providing education, food and shelter. Cheryl Schroeder, Executive Director of the West Central Florida Federation of Labor said that activists were "motivated to give back and help working families by volunteering...Union members and partners helped by sorting donated clothing, landscaping, and building temporary shelters. At the end of the day, many of the volunteers were humbled by the stories shared by the residents." A press conference was held at Pinellas HOPE with AFL-CIO Executive Vice President, Arlene Holt Baker, to let the community know that Labor was giving back and that the needs of the homeless should not go unnoticed.
- A couple of hundred miles north of Tampa, in Gainesville, the local labor movement teamed up with students and progressives in the area to create a music festival called Labor Daze which they hope to turn into an annual event. This festival brought hundreds to Bo Diddly Park to hear live music, eat food and listen to speeches about jobs. David Schneider, a University of Florida senior saw Labor Daze as "tremendously successful in engaging the community because it focused on the one issue on everyone's mind - the need for good jobs. I think this rally demonstrates the growing bridge between labor and students in Florida."
- In Orlando, the Campaign for Job Creation was the main focus for this Labor Day, as the Central Florida AFL-CIO held their second annual "March for Jobs" in downtown Orlando. This action brought hundreds of activists from Central Florida together at Lake Eola Park to hear a few speeches, eat some food, but most importantly taking to the streets, unified, demanding that jobs become the priority for elected officials and the community this year. The Central Florida AFL-CIO was joined by their allies such as the Central Florida Jobs with Justice, Organize Now and the Pink Slip Rick Campaign. At the event, CLC President, Lorraine Tuliano spoke to the crowd stating "This Labor Day, we call on our elected leaders to listen to the voiceless, the jobless and the hopeless, not those with the biggest megaphones, the most money, the most power. Working people are the backbone of our economy, the caffeine of corporations, the fuel that keeps us strong. This Labor Day, we honor all who work—blue collar, white collar, no collar. Honor those who can't find work by creating good, family-supporting jobs."

These are just a few examples of the great work that Florida's Labor movement put into Labor Day festivities. Labor continues to mobilize our rank and file along with our growing list of allies across our communities. This year's Labor Day observance was absolutely critical. It was a day for all working families, union and non-union alike, to re-energize and recommit to the work ahead and the future we want for all working families in America.

Changes to Unemployment Insurance that Every Union Member Should Know About

By Dr. Richard Templin

The Florida AFL-CIO, Florida Legal Services, Florida New Majority and many other organizations have been pushing to modernize our 70-year old system for years so that it can be fully leveraged to serve as an economic development tool and stronger safety net program for workers. Unfortunately, the Legislature has resisted any significant changes, turned down almost a half-billion dollars in free federal aid and blocked any of the needed reforms. In fact, Florida is now only one of a dozen states that have not modernized their UI system. Unfortunately, earlier this year, the Florida Legislature did finally act, but they did the exact opposite of what experts have been saying and what the overwhelming majority of other states have done. The legislation they passed has been slammed by many economists and media outlets as the most draconian package of UI changes in the nation, perhaps since the program began in the 1930's. The majority of the nation's top economists agree that the unemployment insurance system is one of the most successful tools available to policy makers to stimulate the economy. The time tested theory is quite simple. In times of high unemployment, low consumer confidence or economic downturn, the demand for goods and services drops off. This lack of consumer activity forces more businesses to lay off workers which in turn leads to greater losses which in turn leads to more layoffs... creating a downward spiral of economic stagnation. The best way to stimulate the economy is to increase the purchasing power of those most likely to immediately pump money back into the economy; namely, low and moderate income working families. This is the major reason that the Unemployment Insurance system was created. Unfortunately, the new law passed by the Legislature reduces benefits for the unemployed, restricts access to newly unemployed workers and ultimately destroys the system's ability to function as intended, hurting the victims of the current recession and Florida's economy as a whole. All in the interest of forgiving the taxes that the big business lobby has refused to pay for three years and giving them more tax breaks in perpetuity...all paid for by taking food off the tables of unemployed workers and their families.

In 2008, as the Great Recession began taking its toll on Florida's workforce, hundreds of thousands of newly unemployed workers entered the system. These new claims drained the UI Trust Fund when the big business lobby convinced the Legislature to forgo nominal UI tax increases on businesses and instead used federal stimulus dollars (while simultaneously bashing the federal stimulus program for political gain) and other borrowed federal monies to prop up the fund. Each year, as the tax bill came due, the business lobby pushed the Legislature to "kick the can down the road" and give another irresponsible pass on the tax increase. Now, the fund is in crisis. Earlier this year, using this crisis they created as cover, the big business lobby pushed SB 728 and HB 7005. The goal was simple and two-fold; forever absolve Florida's biggest businesses from their current legal tax liability and forever reduce future tax rates (Florida's is already the lowest in the nation) by gutting Florida's UI system. SB 728, which passed largely on a party-line vote, places new barriers on workers entering the system (almost half of all workers won't ever qualify under the new law), cuts benefits by over 54%, makes it easier for employers to fire workers without providing benefits and changes legal presumptions in appeals of denied benefits to favor employers.

The passage of this legislation was a disaster for working families. Legislative leaders and Governor Rick Scott argued that unemployment benefits were a "disincentive to work" and that workers were not finding jobs because unemployment was a "lifestyle choice" fueled by benefit checks. They argued that the unemployed were lazy and the system must be reformed, benefits must be reduced if people were to ever return to work. They made these despicable comments even though their own data showed that it would take a minimum of 4 years and the creation of 900,000 jobs for the state to return to pre-recession levels. The loss of benefits means that tables will have no food, rent and utilities will not be paid, children won't have new shoes and school supplies. This is a disgusting trade for more tax cuts for the business community. It is also important to note the impact that this legislation will have on the economy and job creation. The Agency for Workforce Innovation has calculated that every dollar of unemployment benefits creates \$1.65 in economic activity. That's a 65% return on the investment meaning the huge loss of benefits represented by this legislation will cost Florida's economy millions and stifle jobs creation. The Florida AFL-CIO was joined by many allied organizations and thousands of activists across the state in the fight against these bills. We held the line in the Florida Senate until the last night of session when the pressure from the big business lobby finally prevailed. The law passed but we will not give up the fight. This legislation needs to be dismantled and we will be working in the months ahead to assemble an even larger coalition including small business advocates, local Chambers of Commerce and others to expose the truth about this law and its devastating impact on our struggling economy.

Frequently Asked Questions About the Changes in UI

Question: Do I have to file my unemployment claims online?

Answer: Yes, all new claims and returning claimants have to use the online system. The online portal to the system can be found here: <http://www.floridajobs.org/unemployment/>

Question: I am a union member who finds work through my union. Am I required to complete the “five-jobs” search and verification to receive my benefits?

Answer: Yes. However, the law ensures that working through your union and hiring hall or other work referral program counts as your jobs search, this is specified in law. We have communicated with the Agency for Workforce Innovation which has confirmed that your union hall can count for all five required job searches. You should ensure contact five times per week and enter that each time in the appropriate web form.

Question: Is there a new “skills assessment” I must complete to be eligible for benefits?

Answer: Yes. The new law requires that an online work readiness skills assessment must be completed BEFORE you may receive any benefits. Information on this assessment is available at the Agency for Workforce Innovation’s website when you apply for unemployment. Make sure you complete this online assessment right away.

Question: Has the number of weeks I can qualify for unemployment benefits been changed?

Answer: Yes, depending on your specific situation. The number of weeks an unemployed worker can qualify for benefits has been tied to the state unemployment rate. During times of high unemployment like now, the maximum number of weeks is 23 (down from 26). As the unemployment rate declines, so do the number of weeks. The next reduction will occur when (or if) the state unemployment rate drops to 10% when the maximum number will be 22 weeks. There is a one-week reduction for every .5% drop in the unemployment rate. Federal extended benefits are unaffected however, the Federal program will expire in next few months unless Congress acts.

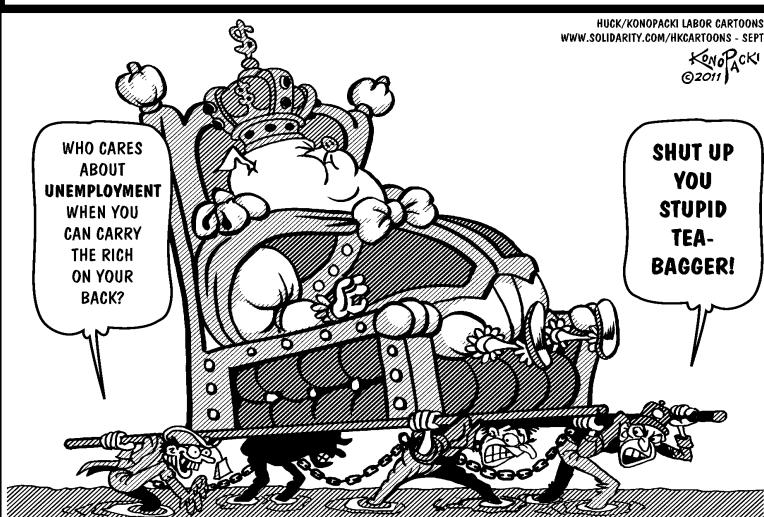
Question: Are there additional ways in which my eligibility for UI benefits can be denied?

Answer: Yes. The following language has been added in law regarding reasons for termination without eligibility for benefits: “Chronic absenteeism or tardiness in deliberate violation of a known policy of the employer or one or more unapproved absences following a written reprimand or warning relating to more than one unapproved absence” and “a willful and deliberate violation of a standard or regulation of this state by an employee of an employer licensed or certified by this state, which violation would cause the employer to be sanctioned or have its license or certification suspended by this state.” It is important to note that the Florida AFL-CIO can’t provide legal advice on your particular case. If you believe you have been denied benefits inappropriately, please seek out legal counsel.

Question: I qualify for severance pay. Will this impact my UI benefits?

Answer: Yes. Under the new law, you can’t draw unemployment benefits concurrently with your severance pay. Your benefits can’t start until your severance pay is completed and the time does count against the total number of weeks. Some employers have worked with employees that have been laid off through no fault of their own to ensure their severance package has the least impact on their ability to receive unemployment benefits.

The new law represents a sweeping overhaul of our unemployment system and there will be many who are negatively impacted. We will continue to explore all avenues available to minimize the harm to working families and will look to work with Legislators from both parties to address the fundamental injustices and negative economic consequences of this law.



Bigger and Bolder than Ever Before: The Working Families Lobby Corps 2.0

The 2011—2012 Working Families Lobby Corps program has been expanded to include Interim Committee Weeks. This expansion offers the Florida Labor Movement the opportunity to solidify OUR UNIFIED presence in Tallahassee during the Legislative and Redistricting process. After last year's successes at the Capitol and throughout Florida we must keep Labor in the forefront on all issues that affect working families in the state. All of our voices-TOGETHER- made the difference last year and will make the difference this year as well! We were able to push back on bad legislation through a daily presence at the Capitol. We need you there during Committee Weeks when initial decisions are being made about key issues. We need you there face to face with your District Senators and Representatives when they cast votes for or against us. We need you there when they cast votes for bills on final passage. Each one of you made the difference; they never forgot for a minute that Labor was in the House! We will never let them!

Interim Committee Weeks are: September 19-22, 2011, October 3-6, 2011, October 17-20, 2011, October 31-November 3, 2011, November 14-17, 2011 and December 5-8, 2011. Session runs the following weeks: January 10-12, 2012, January 16-19, 2012, January 23-26, 2012, January 30-February 2, 2012, February 6-9, 2012, February 13-16, 2012, February 20-23, 2012, February 27-March 1, 2012, March 4-8, 2012.

As the first committee week draws near, Activists should be in touch with their union leadership to let them know you would like to participate. Local union Leadership should be in touch with your CLC's to let them know you are sending someone and scheduling the best week for your Activists to attend. All Activist Information Forms should be completed and returned to CLC's with copies being emailed or faxed to the Florida AFL-CIO, ASAP..... If you have any questions or need an Activist Information Form, please contact your Central Labor Council or Phyllis Garrett, Florida AFL-CIO Legislative Political Coordinator, at 850-224-6926 or pgarrett@flaficio.org.

The Florida AFL-CIO 2011 Biennial Convention

The Florida AFL-CIO's Biennial Convention will be held October 9–12, 2011, at the Buena Vista Palace Resort and Spa, Lake Buena Vista, Florida. More information on the upcoming convention will be sent to you in the upcoming weeks. However, for more information on the Convention including special room rates, please contact Helen Parker at hparker@flaficio.org

One Last Thing Before You Go...

If you were a lucky person that got this newsletter from someone else and would like to be added to our mailing list so you too can receive "Solidarity in the Sunshine", then please email or call **Joshua Anijar** at janijar@flaficio.org or **850-228-9841**. Please title email "Sign-me up" and we will add you to our mailing list.



Published by the Florida AFL-CIO Public Relations Department for our affiliates only. Send address corrections Kellie Putnam, Solidarity in the Sunshine, 135 South Monroe Street, Tallahassee, FL 32301. Phone 850-224-6926, FAX 850-224-2266.

Mike Williams
President
Brian Dempsey
Secretary-Treasurer



135 South Monroe Street