

Time running out on jobless benefits again

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By T. Shawn Taylor

The second extension of federal unemployment insurance benefits is due to expire on May 31, cutting off aid to an estimated 2.1 million out-of-work Americans who will exhaust their state benefits over the next six months.

In Washington, talk of extending federal benefits a third time can only be described as *deja vu*.

Opinion about whether another extension is even necessary is divided along party lines, as it was last fall when Congress adjourned and allowed the first extension passed in March 2002 to run out just days after Christmas. In January, Congress passed a 13-week extension in a compromise package after receiving last-minute backing from President Bush.

For the past few weeks, Democrats in both houses have been pushing companion bills that would not only extend the current 13-week program, but would provide an additional 26 weeks of benefits to those who exhaust their regular state benefits through November, as well as to 1.1 million people whose federal benefits ran out long ago.

In Illinois, where the unemployment rate is 6.6 percent, the Democrats' plan would extend benefits to 102,100 jobless workers who exhaust state benefits and to another 85,000 who have already exhausted their federal extension but remain jobless.

But efforts to attach the plan to the Bush stimulus package failed and the clock is ticking. Congress is set to adjourn May 23--a week before the extension expires.

Jobless workers who begin collecting federal benefits before May 31 will still be eligible to receive the full 13 weeks under the current program. But those who run out of state benefits

after May 31 are on their own.

That's a scary thought to Allan Ross, 62, a project manager who was laid off from WorldCom in December.

"Even now, I have to take money out of my [retirement] savings. I can't go on like this forever," said Ross, of Skokie.

Ross joined Illinois Democrats, including Sen. Dick Durbin and U.S. Reps. Jan Schakowsky, Danny Davis and Rahm Emanuel, as well as other politicians and labor leaders, at a news conference Monday to rally support for an extension.

It's going to be an uphill battle. Republicans have yet to offer a compromise bill of any kind, and the White House has expressed no support for a third extension.

Meanwhile, anger is building among supporters of an extension who plan to stage a rally on Wednesday afternoon outside the Department of Labor in Washington.

"They're playing games," said Maurice Emsellem, public policy director of the National Employment Law Project (NELP), which recently published a survey of 413 unemployed workers in which more than 80 percent expressed little confidence that they can find work soon.

"There needs to be leadership from the White House to show support for an extension," Emsellem said.

NELP has established a Web site with updates on the unemployment extension at http://www.house.gov/htbin/leave_site?ln_url=http://www.unemployedworkers.org