

LEFT BEHIND:

RACISM AND ACCESS ISSUES IN LOUISIANA'S BROKEN UNEMPLOYMENT SYSTEM

PREPARED BY

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Published February 2021

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SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS



Over the past ten months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Step Up Louisiana has organized and fought for justice for unemployed workers in our state alongside our allies and community partners. The economic impact of the pandemic on our economy is exacerbating racial and gender inequality in our state, and our broken unemployment system is failing our communities during this time of great need.

SOME OF THE MOST TROUBLING REALITIES LOUISIANA FACES DURING THIS PANDEMIC INCLUDE:

- Black workers are 2.7 times more likely to be unemployed during the pandemic than White workers in Louisiana.[1]
- Louisiana consistently has the lowest average unemployment weekly benefit payout of any state between $180-$210 since March 2020. [2]
- The decimation of leisure and hospitality, the hardest hit sector in the US economy, has had a profound impact on New Orleans, where 16% of workers work in hospitality.[3]

1 The Century Foundation. (2021). Unemployment Insurance Data Dashboard: Demographics of UI Claimants. Retrieved February 05, 2021, from https://public.tableau.com/views/TCFUIDashboards_16020979271400/_3_1_demographics?%3Alanguage=en&%3Aembed=y&%3Aembed_code_version=3&%3AloadOrderID=0&%3Adisplay_count=y&%3Aorigin=viz_share_link

2 U.S. Department of Labor. (2021). Monthly program and financial data, employment and training administration. Retrieved February 12, 2021, from https://oui.doleta.gov/unemploy/claimssum.asp

3 Habans, R., & Plyer, A. (2018, December). Benchmarking New Orleans' Tourism Economy: Hotel and Full-Service Restaurant Jobs. Retrieved February 12, 2021, from https://s3.amazonaws.com/gnocdc/reports/benchmarking-tourism-brief-habans-et-al.pdf

- Nationally mothers with school-age children have been four times more likely to leave the workforce because of childcare issues as compared to fathers.[4]
- Employment rates for low-wage workers in Louisiana have plummeted 19.1% since February 2020, while high-wage workers remain unimpacted with a drop of only 0.1% in employment.
- 1 in 5 people in Louisiana are hungry compared to 1 in 10 nationally during the pandemic. This is the worst of anywhere in the country,[5] and a clear result of our failed unemployment system.

We know that effective public policy solutions at every level of government could improve equity in the system and support unemployed people. Now is the time for urgent collective action from policymakers to support our communities during this recession.



D'Anna South, Step Up Louisiana member

"I think it's important that we fight for policies to be implemented to help during this pandemic. It's important there is accountability on multiple levels. We need the federal government to pass another stimulus bill. We need the state government to raise the unemployment benefit amounts here in our state and fix the processes for getting it. We also need businesses that are continuing to profit during this pandemic to pay their workers fairly."

INTRODUCTION

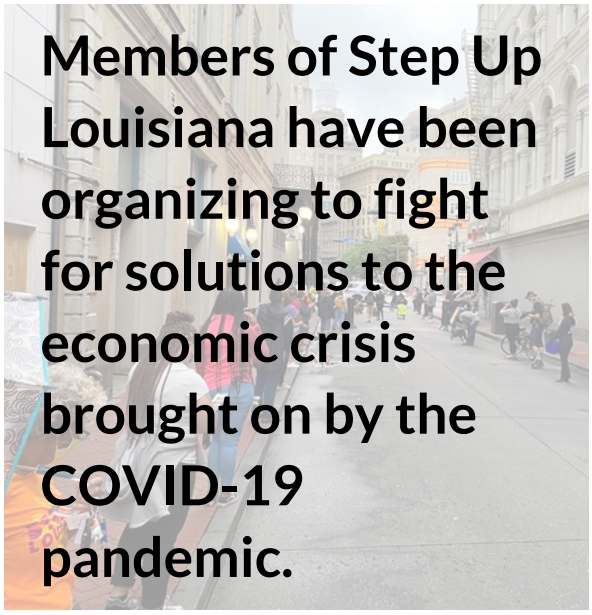
As the COVID-19 pandemic has devastated communities around the world, it has simultaneously highlighted the structural racism and economic inequality in our country and, even more so, in the state of Louisiana. Unemployment has skyrocketed, with Black workers, women, and hospitality workers taking the brunt of the impact.

4 Tedeschi, E. (2020, October 29). The mystery of how many mothers have left work because of school closings. Retrieved February 04, 2021, from https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/upshot/mothers-leaving-jobs-pandemic.html

5 Household pulse survey- US Census. (2021). Retrieved February 04, 2021, from https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?measures=FIR&mapPeriodSelector=21&barChartPeriodSelector=21&s_state=00022

One in four workers have filed for unemployment benefits during the pandemic across the country,[6] and our communities have been left with inadequate support. As we mourn the many members of our community that we have lost since March 2020, Step Up Louisiana members are also leading the fight to end the government-created economic hardship of COVID-19.

Step Up Louisiana is a community-based organization committed to building power to win education and economic justice for all. We work with multiracial and intergenerational Louisianans to "Step Up" by campaigning, organizing from a racial justice perspective, and holding public officials accountable. We organize with parents, workers, students, and community members to disrupt systemic oppression in our schools and workplaces through voter education, advocacy, and action.



Unemployed workers have shown leadership and resilience, demanding financial assistance for unemployed workers, simplification of unemployment insurance (UI) processes, an end to evictions, and an end to the structural racism the pandemic has highlighted. **We hope that this report inspires policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels to listen to our stories, better understand the hardships facing Louisianans, and take the bold actions needed to end the unnecessary economic suffering that has been created through lack of government action.**

UNEMPLOYMENT UNDER COVID-19

As COVID-19 hit the US in March 2020 and local and state governments around the country began to issue stay-at-home orders to limit the spread of the disease, millions of workers across the country found themselves promptly unemployed and scrambling to make ends meet. In the immediate aftermath of the stay-at-home orders, employment nationally plummeted 24% by April 20, 2020, and 38% for low-income workers (those who make less than $27,000 annually) compared to January 2020 levels.[7]

Louise Francis, a leader with Step Up Louisiana and a 20-year banquet server at the Sheraton Hotel, recounts what

6 Anneken Tappe, "1 in 4 American workers have filed for unemployment benefits during the pandemic," CNN, May 28, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/28/economy/unemployment-benefits-coronavirus/index.html

7 Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Hendren, N., Stepner, M., & O. (2020, November). The Economic Impacts of COVID-19: Evidence from a New Public Database Built Using Private Sector Data- The economic tracker. Retrieved February 04, 2021, from https://www.tracktherecovery.org/?fdw7y

this was like when the Sheraton Hotel furloughed her and her coworkers on March 23, 2020. “I’ve been at that job for almost twenty-some years, and the only thing they gave us was disaster pay for 40 hours,” Ms. Francis lamented. “This is all we get?” she asked. “We didn’t ask for this. Our livelihoods were taken away from us.” This motivated Ms. Francis to start organizing to improve the unemployment system. “I had a hard time getting my unemployment, trying to apply for it. I had to get my story out there to see if it can help someone else.”



Louise Francis, Step Up Louisiana leader, 20-year banquet server at the Sheraton Hotel

Since April, the economy began a slow recovery, with employment gradually increasing across the country to -6% by mid-December for all workers and -21% compared to last year for low-wage workers; however, December quickly reversed that improvement. Nationally an additional 140,000 jobs were lost in December alone.[8] According to an analysis by CNN, all jobs lost in December were lost by Women of Color with white men and white women’s employment staying stable or slightly growing. Jamyra Alexander discusses her experience trying to find work in New Orleans in this economic environment.



Jamyra Alexander, Step Up Louisiana and UNITE HERE member, New Orleans based hospitality professional

“I'm putting in almost twenty applications a week. I try to do five per day, but I'm not getting anywhere. I was making $30 an hour before the pandemic, and now I can't find anything paying anywhere near that rate.” Ms. Alexander says, “As a Black woman in the hospitality industry in New Orleans, I feel like I am definitely affected by the pandemic."

As 2020 came to a close, 26.8 million workers—15.8% of the workforce—were being directly hurt by the coronavirus crisis, according to EPI’s analysis of the Bureau of

8 Cox, J. (2021, January 08). Economy sees job loss in December for the first time in eight months as SURGING virus takes toll. Retrieved February 04, 2021, from https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/08/jobs-report-december-2020.html

14%

Difference in percentage between drop in overall employment vs. employment for low income workers.

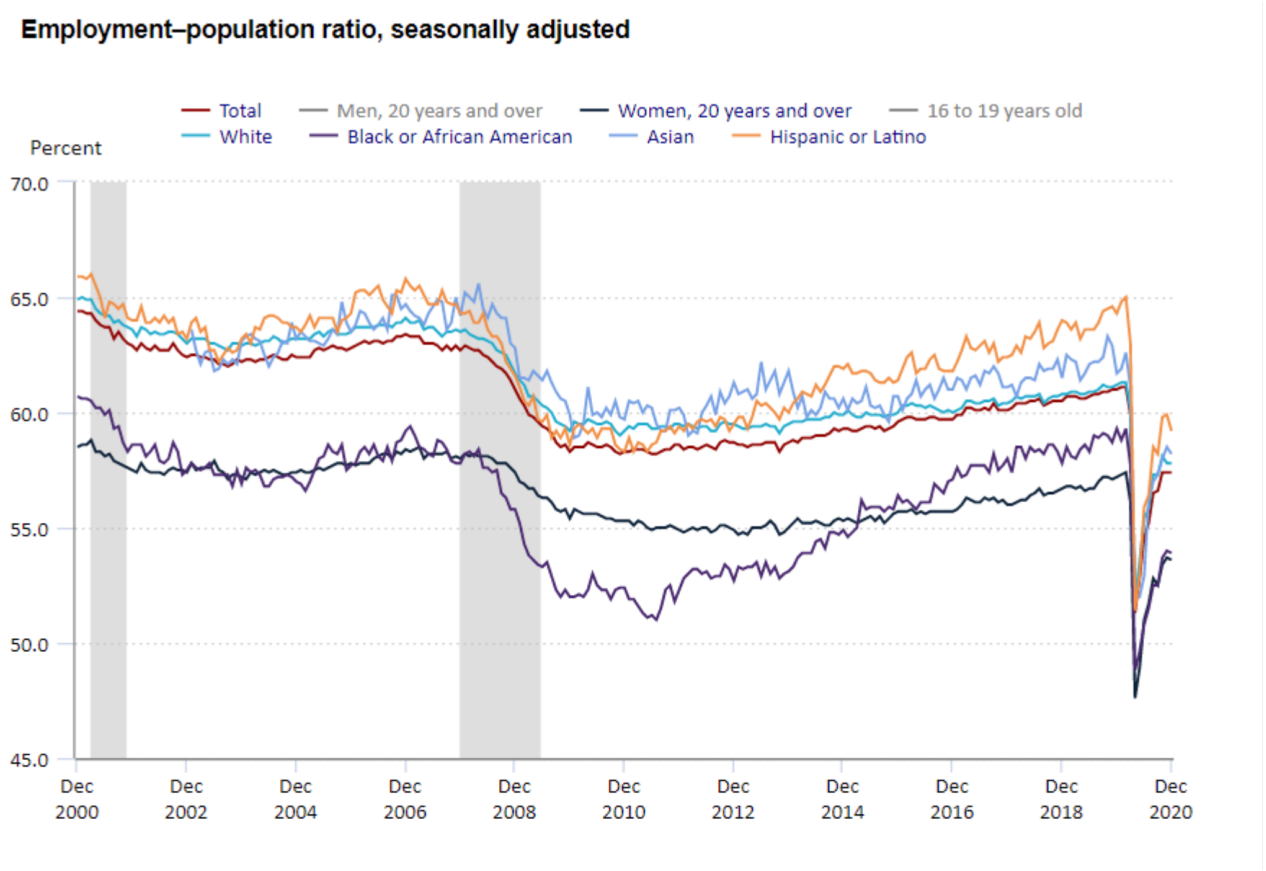
140K

Number of additional jobs lost in December 2020.

15.8%

Percentage of the work force directly hurt by the coronavirus crisis by the end of 2020.

Labor Statistics data,[9] and it is clear that economic recovery will be slow going. "I know for a fact that jobs are not coming back yet, and we still have to wait and try to get by on unemployment," says Ms. Francis. December employment was only 57% nationally and only 54% for Black workers, lower than the worst of the Great Recession.[10] A decisive government response is desperately needed to improve conditions for unemployed workers around the country.



Note: Shaded area represents recession, as determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research.
Persons whose ethnicity is identified as Hispanic or Latino may be of any race.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

11

9 Shierholz, H. (2021, January 8). The economy President-elect Biden is inheriting. Retrieved February 04, 2021, from https://www.epi.org/blog/the-economy-president-elect-biden-is-inheriting-26-8-million-workers-15-8-of-the-workforce-are-being-directly-hurt-by-the-coronavirus-crisis/

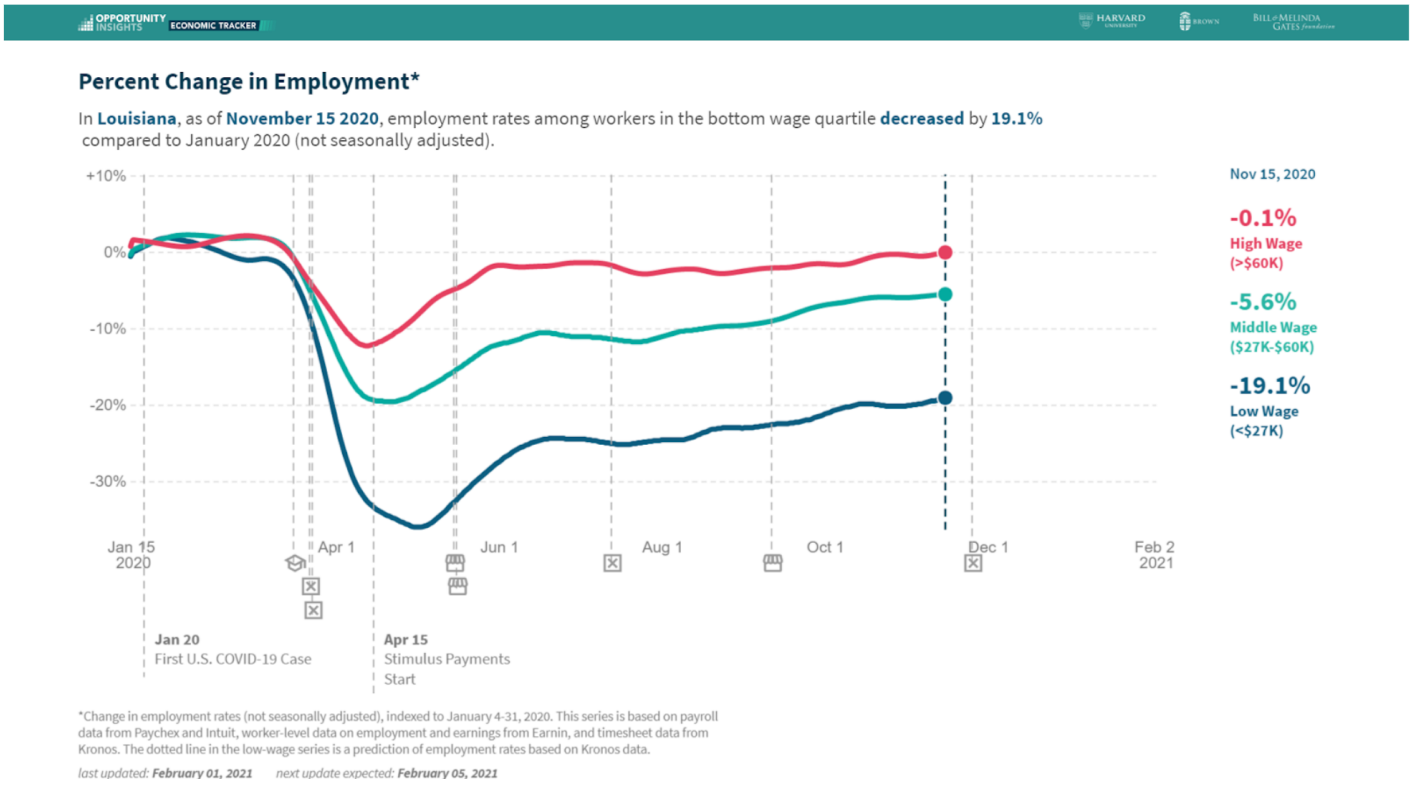
10 Ross, D., Plyer, A., Laackman, E., & Coates, J. (2021, January 21). Pandemic to Prosperity: Chronicling the Path from Response to Recovery. Retrieved from National Conference on Citizenship website: https://ncoc.org/P2P

11 Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021). Employment Situation Summary. Retrieved February 05, 2021, from https://www.bls.gov/charts/employment-situation/employment-population-ratio.htm

LOUISIANA'S UNEMPLOYMENT CRISIS

While the economic losses of the COVID-19 pandemic have been devastating to communities around the country, Louisiana and Orleans Parish specifically, have been particularly hard hit. As of November 15, 2020, employment rates nationally among workers in the bottom wage quartile decreased by 19.1% compared to January 2020 (not seasonally adjusted),[12] and New Orleans has fared even worse. Orleans Parish employment had decreased by 30.6% as of April and has been slow to recover since. As of November 15, 2020, Orleans Parish employment rates were down 14.9% compared to pre-pandemic levels, and 25% for low-wage workers.[13]

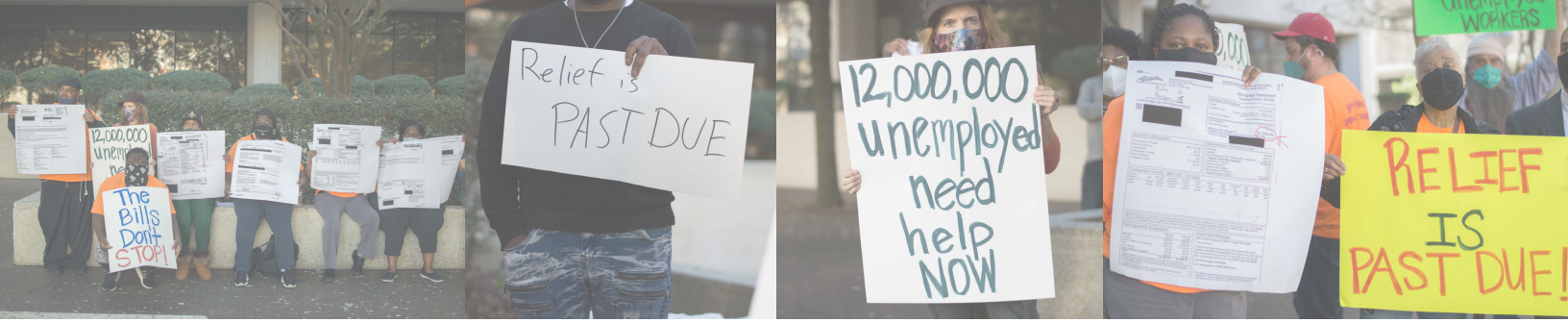
Louisiana's unemployment crisis



Through November 30, 2020, 969,847 initial unemployment claims were made in Louisiana and only 50% of those received their first unemployment insurance

12 Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Hendren, N., Stepner, M., & O. (2020, November). The Economic Impacts of COVID-19: Evidence from a New Public Database Built Using Private Sector Data- The economic tracker. Retrieved February 04, 2021, from https://www.tracktherecovery.org/?fdw7y

13 Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Hendren, N., Stepner, M., & O. (2020, November). The Economic Impacts of COVID-19: Evidence from a New Public Database Built Using Private Sector Data- The economic tracker. Retrieved February 04, 2021, from https://www.tracktherecovery.org/?fdw7y



payment,[14] a number that will only continue to grow as the pandemic persists.

The average weekly state unemployment benefit amount in Louisiana is between $180 and 210 per week over the course of the pandemic, the lowest in the nation, according to an analysis conducted by the Century Foundation.[15] Workers across Louisiana report struggling to survive on unemployment insurance.

Montrell McGraw, a 26-year-old cook in New Orleans who lost his job in March due to the pandemic, has been struggling to subsist on the limited unemployment insurance benefit he is able to collect. When he was receiving the $600 weekly supplemental federal benefits earlier in the pandemic, he was able to stay afloat, but shares that after that ran out and his benefit was reduced to an after-tax total of $494 per week (the maximum $247 benefit amount in Louisiana plus $300 in federal aid), he had to let go of his car insurance.

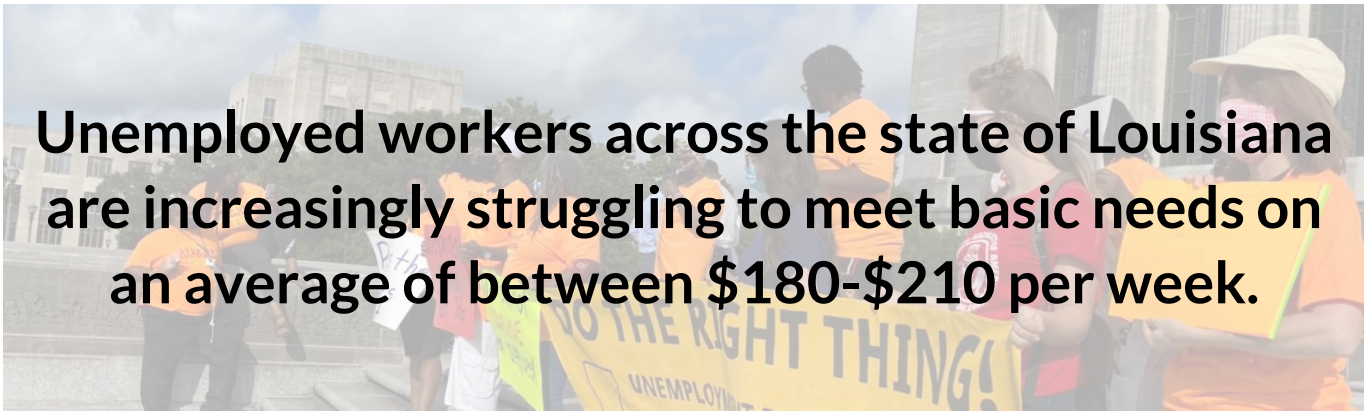


Montrell McGraw, Step Up Louisiana and UNITE HERE member, 26-year-old cook in New Orleans

"I couldn't afford my car insurance anymore, and I had to make a lot of sacrifices, either paying for the light bill, paying for the water bill. It was a lot. We have the right to live comfortably and provide for our families. We shouldn't have to worry about how we are going to pay our bills or feed our children during this pandemic."

14 The Century Foundation. (2021). Unemployment Insurance Data Dashboard: Initial Claims Being Paid State Benefits. Retrieved February 05, 2021, from https://public.tableau.com/views/TCFUIDashboards_16020979271400/_1_1_initial_claims_paid?:language=en&:embed=y&:embed_code_version=3&:loadOrderID=0&:display_count=y&:origin=viz_share_link

15 The Century Foundation. (2021). Unemployment Insurance Data Dashboard: Demographics of UI Claimants. Retrieved February 05, 2021, from https://public.tableau.com/views/TCFUIDashboards_16020979271400/_3_1_demographics?%3Alanguage=en&%3Aembed=y&%3Aembed_code_version=3&%3AloadOrderID=0&%3Adisplay_count=y&%3Aorigin=viz_share_link



Unemployed workers across the state of Louisiana are increasingly struggling to meet basic needs on an average of between $180-$210 per week.

According to Census data, one in five adults in Louisiana report not having enough to eat in their household in the past 7 days.[16] LaTonya Howard, who has worked at the New Orleans Convention Center for over twenty-three years, discusses the experience:



"There are weeks when I have to decide between buying medicine or buying groceries to feed my family. I've been to food pantries. With Step Up Louisiana, I spoke in front of the state legislature, and it's been really a slap in the face for me, after working 23 years, to have to fight to get money that I feel I'm rightfully entitled to. I've paid into the system. I've done everything that I was supposed to do. And as a tax-payer, it hurts to have to fight so hard to get my government to give me $600 to take care of me and my family. I shouldn't have to be, at almost 50 years old, struggling and figuring out how to start over again."

In Louisiana, the devastation caused by unemployment during the coronavirus pandemic has often been related to the challenges of rebuilding the economy after Hurricane Katrina. Many leaders of the unemployed workers organizing committee have related the

16 Household pulse survey- US Census. (2021). Retrieved February 04, 2021, from https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/hhp/#/?measures=FIR&mapPeriodSelector=21&barChartPeriodSelector=21&s_state=00022

personal, economic, political, and structural damage of this time to the Katrina days. Step Up Louisiana member Louise Francis said it best:

"I had to rebuild my life after Katrina, I don't want to have to do that again."

LOUISIANA'S HOSPITALITY DRIVEN ECONOMY

The leisure and hospitality sector of the economy has undeniably experienced the most devastation during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a loss of 3.9 million jobs,[17] Nationally, the leisure and hospitality sector saw employment fall 54.7% from January 2020 to April 20, 2020. While there has been some gradual improvement, as of November 15, 2020, employment rates in leisure and hospitality in the United States had still decreased by 22.1% compared to January 2020 (not seasonally adjusted).[18] Nowhere is this devastation more evident than in Louisiana and New Orleans.

According to Bureau of Labor Statistics Data, in April 2020, employment in leisure and hospitality in the Greater New Orleans Metropolitan Area plummeted 60.2% relative to April 2019. In December 2020, employment



in the leisure and hospitality sector remains down more than 20% compared to the previous year. In the Greater New Orleans Metropolitan Area, where leisure and hospitality jobs accounted for 93,700 jobs in 2019 and 16% of the economy, the impacts of the pandemic can be felt throughout the community.

17 Gould, E. (2021, February 5). Jobs and unemployment. Retrieved February 12, 2021, from https://www.epi.org/indicators/unemployment/#:~:text=The%20report%20showed%20that%20jobs,state%20of%20the%20economic%20recovery.&text=Employment%20declined%20in%20leisure%20and,before%20the%20pandemic%20recession%20hit

18 Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Hendren, N., Stepner, M., & O. (2020, November). The Economic Impacts of COVID-19: Evidence from a New Public Database Built Using Private Sector Data- The economic tracker. Retrieved February 04, 2021, from https://www.tracktherecovery.org/?fdw7y

60.2%

Percentage decrease of employment rate in New Orleans leisure and hospitality industry April 2019 vs. April 2020

93.7K

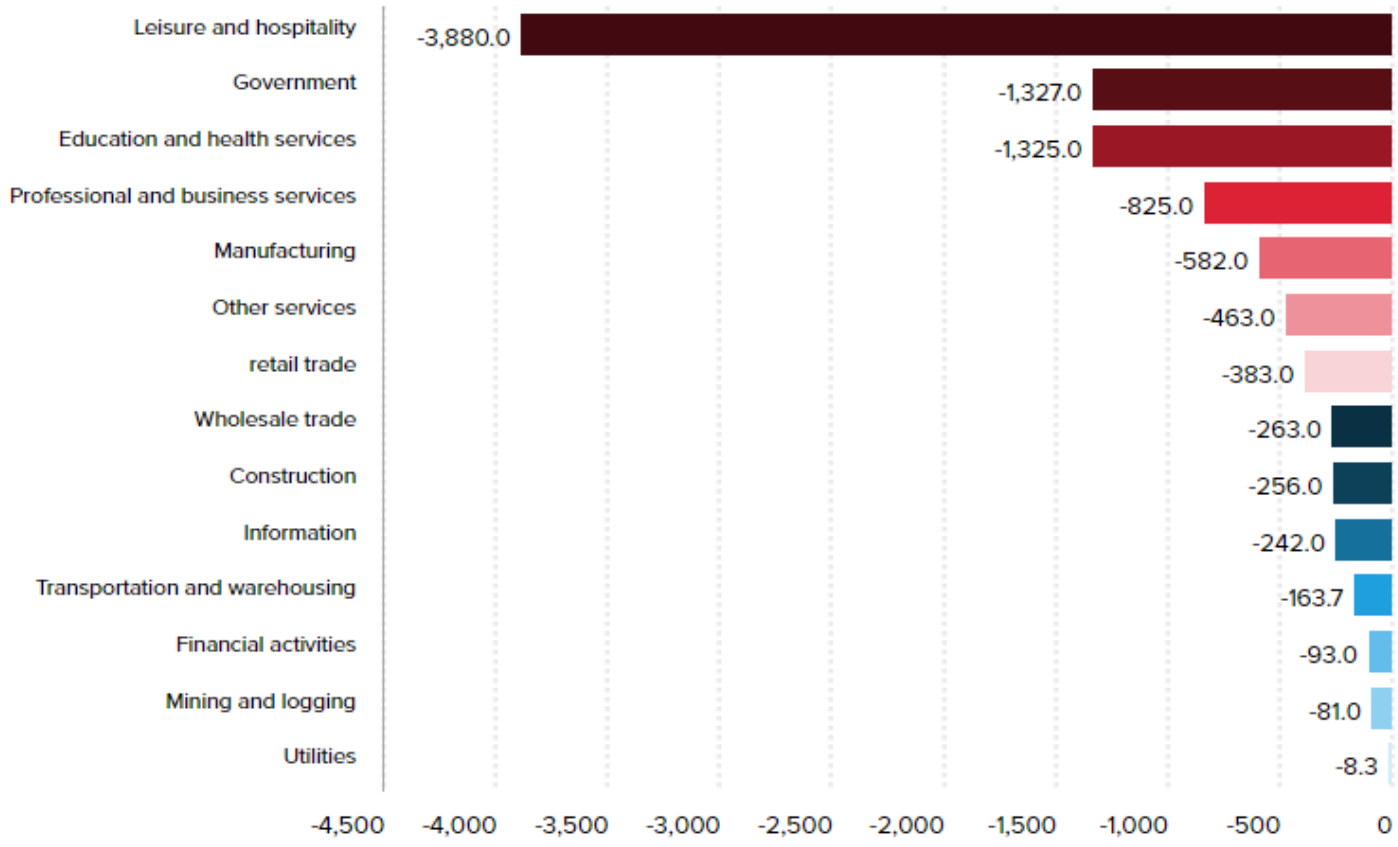
Number of leisure and hospitality jobs in Greater New Orleans in 2019 (16% of the economy).

>20%

Percentage decrease of employment in leisure and hospitality jobs in December 2020 compared to December 2019.

Employment change by industry, 12–month net change

All employees (thousands), seasonally adjusted, January 2021



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics' (BLS) Current Employment Statistics, Establishment Survey (CES) public data series.

Economic Policy Institute

Dora Whitfield, who has spent her career working in the hospitality sector in New Orleans, speaks about this saying, "I feel like it's really hard after you work for twenty years and have to go find another job and start over. You worked for twenty years to get the wages that you had, and you just can't find the wages that you were making at a new company. I'm afraid of starting over. I'm going out looking for something similar to my previous job, but no restaurants are hiring waiters and waitresses right now. The hospitality sector is basically gone."



Dora Whitfield, Step Up Louisiana and UNITE HERE member, 20+ year hospitality professional

Louisiana bartender, Will Walker, comments, "We need our legislators to pass policies around unemployment that work for us."

RACIAL DISPARITIES IN UNEMPLOYMENT

In Louisiana, Black workers have been disproportionately impacted by layoffs due to the pandemic. Black workers have been the first to be laid off and the slowest to be hired back. Analysis from the Century Foundation shows that while thirty percent of Louisiana's workforce identify as Black, 49.5% of unemployment insurance claimants since March 2020 identify as Black.[19] By comparison, white workers in

30%

Percentage of Louisiana workforce self-identified as Black.



49.5%

Percentage of unemployment insurance claimants since March 2020 self-identified as Black.

19 The Century Foundation. (2021). Unemployment Insurance Data Dashboard: Demographics of UI Claimants. Retrieved February 05, 2021, from https://public.tableau.com/views/TCFUIDashboards_16020979271400/_3_1_demographics?%3Alanguage=en&%3Aembed=y&%3Aembed_code_version=3&%3AloadOrderID=0&%3Adisplay_count=y&%3Aorigin=viz_share_link

Louisiana constitute 65.7% of the workforce, but only 40.3% of unemployment claimants during the pandemic.[20]

Black workers have seen an unemployment rate almost double that of white workers throughout the pandemic. In investigating the persistent gap in unemployment between Black and White workers in the US, ProPublica reporting found that there is only one plausible explanation for this persistent disparity. "It's racial discrimination," said Valerie Wilson, Director of the Economic Policy Institute's Program on Race, Ethnicity, and the Economy. "We see [the disparity] at different age cohorts, we see it all across the country, we see it at every level of education."[21]



GENDERED IMPACT

Across the US, the recession incited by the coronavirus pandemic has disproportionately affected women. The crisis has hit sectors of the economy that predominantly employ women, including restaurants, hospitality, and healthcare. When schools and daycare centers shut down, it became much more difficult for women with children to continue working. Nationally, women with school-age children have been four times more likely to leave the workforce because of childcare issues as compared to men with young children.[22] Additionally, women have

20 The Century Foundation. (2021). Unemployment Insurance Data Dashboard: Demographics of UI Claimants. Retrieved February 05, 2021, from https://public.tableau.com/views/TCFUIDashboards_16020979271400/_3_1_demographics?%3Alanguage=en&%3Aembed=y&%3Aembed_code_version=3&%3AloadOrderID=0&%3Adisplay_count=y&%3Aorigin=viz_share_link

21 Groeger, L. V. (2020, July 20). What coronavirus job losses reveal about racism in America. ProPublica. https://projects.propublica.org/coronavirus-unemployment/

22 Tedeschi, E. (2020, October 29). The mystery of how many mothers have left work because of school closings. Retrieved February 04, 2021, from https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/upshot/mothers-leaving-jobs-pandemic.html

been found to be less likely than men to work jobs that allow them to work from home. **Only** 22% of women workers compared to 28% of men workers hold a job that allows them to telecommute.[23] Therefore, they are more likely to be laid off or forced to leave the workforce to provide childcare.

The evidence of this disproportionate impact on women, especially Women of Color has become exceedingly clear in recent months. In December 2020, 156,000 women lost their jobs,[24] all of the jobs were lost by Women of Color.[25] Job losses for Women of Color accounted for nearly the entirety of job losses in the US economy reported that month. Among women nationally, Latina women currently have the highest unemployment rate at 9.1%, followed by Black women at 8.4%, and white women at 5.7%.[26]

We see this disparate impact on women play out in Louisiana, where women are receiving unemployment at higher rates than men. In Louisiana, 54% of unemployment claimants identified as women, even though women make up 48.4% of the workforce.

LaTonya Howard, who has worked at the New Orleans Convention Center for over 23 years says “I found out on March 13th that we were losing our jobs due to COVID. The Convention Center employs over 600 people in our food service department. The majority of us, 90%, are Women of Color, and the majority of us are also single parents." The

54%

Percentage of unemployment claimants, self-identified as women in Louisiana.

48.4%

Percentage of workforce, self-identified as women in Louisiana.

23 Karageorgem E, Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2020, September). COVID-19 recession is tougher on women. Retrieved February 05, 2021, from https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2020/beyond-bls/covid-19-recession-is-tougher-on-women.htm

24 Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021). Employment of women on nonfarm payrolls by industry sector, seasonally adjusted. Retrieved February 05, 2021, from https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t21.htm

25 Kurtz, A. (2021, January 09). The US economy Lost 140,000 jobs in December. all of them were held by women. Retrieved February 05, 2021, from https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/08/economy/women-job-losses-pandemic/index.html

26 Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021). Employment of women on nonfarm payrolls by industry sector, seasonally adjusted. Retrieved February 05, 2021, from https://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t21.htm










LaTonya Howard, Step Up Louisiana and UNITE HERE member, 23+ year employee at the New Orleans Convention Center

economic impact of the pandemic on Black women in Louisiana has been particularly severe. Ms. Howard adds, “None of us asked to be put in this situation, and I feel we are being punished because of it.'

> ***"I work in the hospitality industry with thousands of other women, and the majority of the people who work in hospitality are women and Women of Color. And I feel that we are at a disadvantage right now.”***

UNEMPLOYMENT ACCESS IN LOUISIANA

Beginning in March 2020, one of the most prevalent and consistent complaints from unemployed workers has been the issue of access to unemployment funds. Wanda Pore, an unemployed hospitality worker, said,

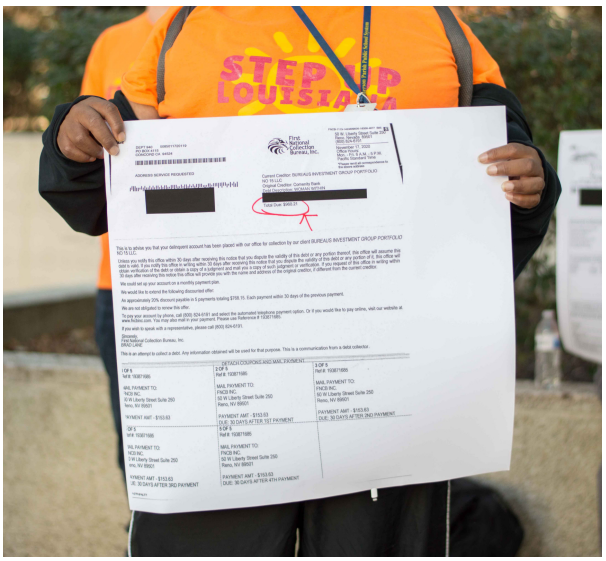
> ***“Unemployment insurance was such a disappointment because, every time you turn around, there is a problem with the system. When you finally get someone on the phone, they just tell you to call another number. The money I’m applying to get is my money. I paid into the system, and I deserve to get this money.”***



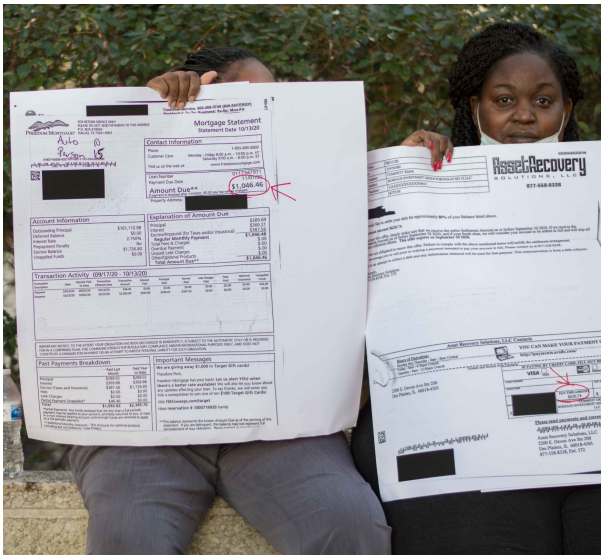
Wanda Pore, Step Up Louisiana and UNITE HERE member, unemployed hospitality professional

Statewide Facebook groups aimed at helping share information and navigating the complicated system popped up, including “Louisiana Coronavirus Unemployment Legal Advice Group” (over 10,000 members), “Unemployment Louisiana Information and Help” (over 11,900 members), and “New Orleans Unemployment and Federal

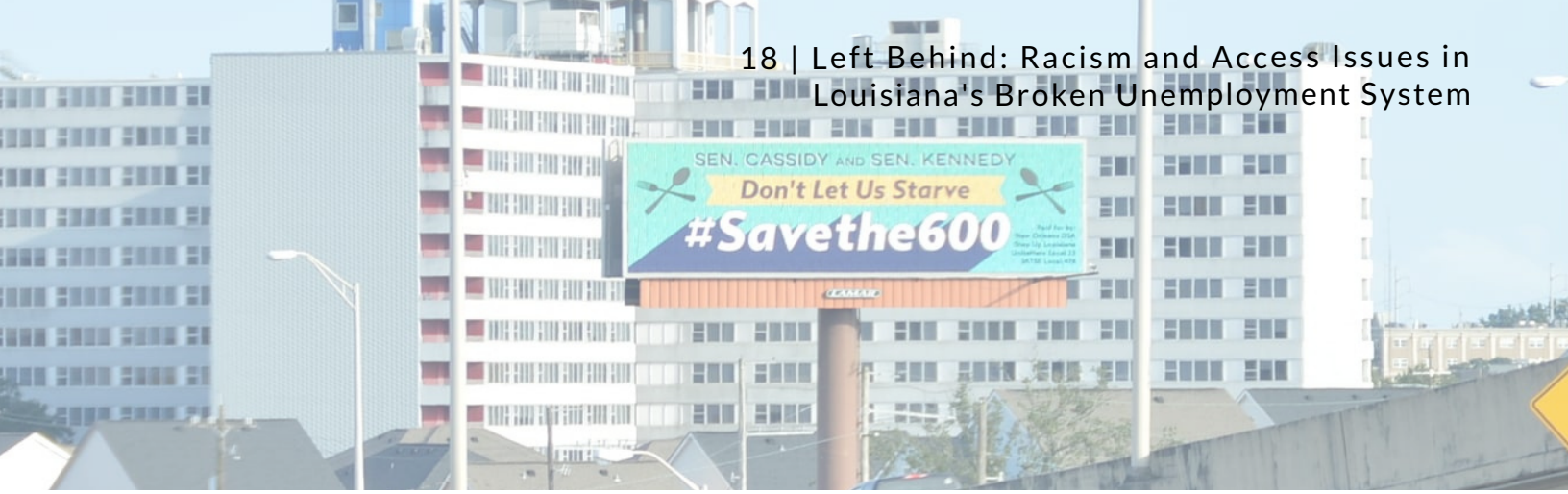
Aid Info" (over 4,900 members). As emergency federal programs (including PUA, PEUC, extended benefits, and others) rolled out to provide essential and much-needed additional assistance, these programs also added additional complexity to an already overtaxed, complicated system.



A core challenge that unemployed workers have reported has been their efforts to reach the Louisiana Workforce Commission (LWC) by phone. The state agency has done an impressive job distributing billions of dollars of federal and state unemployment assistance to unemployed workers during the pandemic, but the strained system has struggled to keep up with the volume of calls. Unemployed people, seeking to resolve their claims, have reported that they wait on hold for hours a day to be able to speak with someone. Many times, workers were only able to reach a recorded message stating that call volume was too high. The LWC increased staffing levels at the beginning of the pandemic to try to handle the high volume of calls. However, every surge of the virus is followed by a surge in unemployment claims, causing extreme delays.



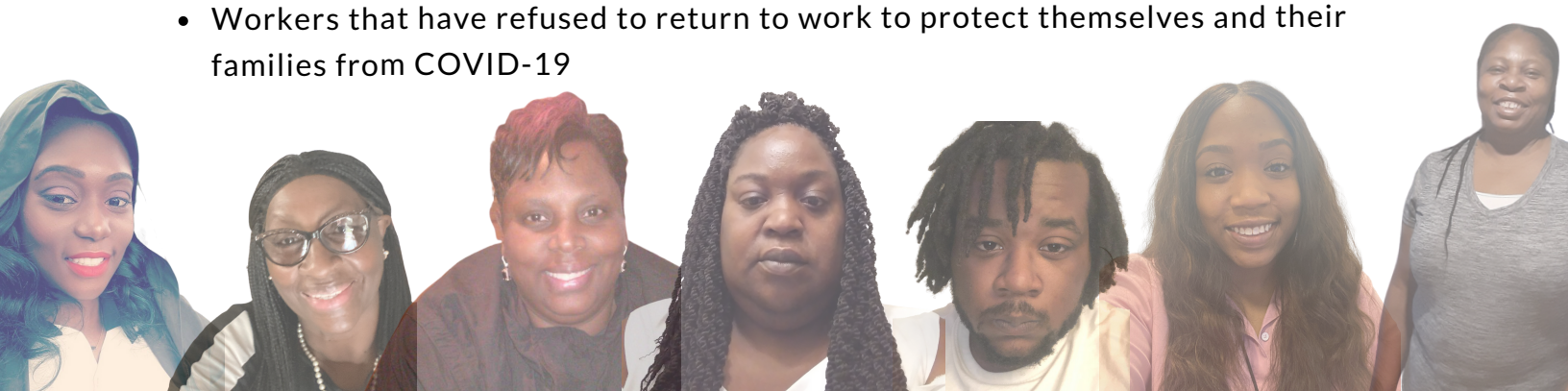
As the federal government has failed to respond to this crisis in a timely manner, political roadblocks to relief have created havoc for unemployed workers and overburdened the LWC. Montrell McGraw described his frustration accessing unemployment insurance. "I've been waiting on my unemployment since December 26, 2020," says McGraw, when the extended benefits he had been receiving ran out. "This has caused me to get behind on my bills. I'm just at the point where I have to take it one day at a time, keep my prayers up, and hope for the best."



The expiration of the $600 in supplemental federal assistance, the FEMA $300 checks, and the passing of the second stimulus after the December 26, 2020 benefits exhaustion deadline have let folks, in particular Black people, women, and hospitality workers, including many of our members, fall through the cracks as the state agencies try to pick up the pieces. Wanda Pore expressed her frustration, saying, “My son stopped receiving any unemployment insurance in December, and he is just now, in February, starting to get payments again.” As of February 4, 2021, the majority of unemployed members of Step Up Louisiana are still not receiving the extended benefits included in the most recent stimulus package.

Beyond the challenges for eligible unemployed workers to access the system, thousands of Louisiana residents have been completely left out of the unemployment system. The current unemployment system disproportionately excludes:

- Immigrants
- People who spent time in prison or jail during the base period
- People who did not earn enough to be eligible for state benefits
- People who were out of work during the base period
- People who did not work during the base period due to pregnancy or parental leave
- People who are unable to navigate the website, due to technology access or language barriers
- Women with school-aged children who have had to leave the workforce to manage virtual school and childcare responsibilities
- Workers that have refused to return to work to protect themselves and their families from COVID-19



Navigating the LWC website to meet the eligibility requirements, including work search and fraud prevention, has been a nightmare for many unemployed workers. The state agency now requires that workers upload photos and identification through the unemployment portal, adding additional technology barriers to accessing unemployment payments. Workers have reported experiencing glitches in the under-resourced and outdated state portal and significant barriers to navigating the website. With in-person unemployment offices closed due to COVID-19 and long wait times for call centers, unemployed workers are struggling to resolve their claims and losing critical benefit payments in the interim.



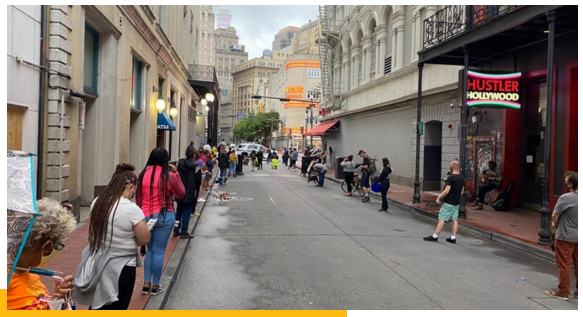
STEP UP LOUISIANA UNEMPLOYED WORKERS ORGANIZE FOR JUSTICE

Step Up Louisiana, in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, saw dozens of our members lose their jobs with no end in sight. These unemployed workers became the base for an impactful organizing campaign that has over 3,000 Louisianans signed up and engaged online and through text. Our dynamic Unemployed Worker Committee has been leading this fight. The committee has won $1 million in funding for New Orleans hospitality workers, has passed state legislation, and is a leading organization in the national effort to save the $600 federal unemployment benefit.

Step Up worked in a deep coalition with many organizations to get this work done. Some of our most critical partners are Power Coalition for Equity and Justice, the Center for Popular Democracy/CPD Action, UNITE HERE Local 23, IATSE local 478, the Renters Rights Assembly, the Louisiana Budget Project, Southeast Louisiana Legal Services, the Coalition to Create a Fair Fund for Hospitality Workers, New Orleans DSA, the Workplace Justice Project, and other labor unions and community organizations.

March 23, 2020

Statewide Stay-At-Home Order



April 2020

Step Up helped organize a Coalition for a Fair Fund for Hospitality Workers, organizing activities which included an online rally with over 250 attendees, an online faith action with 12 faith leaders, and a socially distanced protest on Bourbon Street. This campaign helped win $1 million in cash assistance for hospitality workers from the Morial Convention Center.

June 18, 2020

After months of campaigning, Step Up met with Louisiana Workforce Commission (LWC) Secretary Ava Dejoie and her deputy in charge of the Unemployment System. Step Up utilized this opportunity to express concerns about the current system and learn what progress the LWC had made. Through this connection, Step Up was able to establish a direct line to LWC for Unemployment Insurance issues that seemed previously unsolvable. Newly organized Step Up member Louise Wheeler's case was solved in the room that day - she received a lump sum payment for almost 4 months of back-paid weekly unemployment insurance checks she had not received.

Juneteenth 2020

Step Up organized a petition drive advocating for unemployment payments, expanded eligibility, and lower wait times that garnered **over 825 signatures.** The petition was delivered to Governor Edwards after the Juneteenth celebration on the Governor's Mansion's lawn.



July 2020

Unemployed Step Up members Travis Smith appeared on CBS This Morning and Louise Wheeler on a National Town Hall respectively, receiving both national and local press exposure. A profile was done on Louise Francis in the New York Times, detailing her experience. Kim Robinson, another Step Up member, spoke on NPR about her personal experience during the pandemic. In mid-July, Step Up also organized a Virtual Town Hall for unemployed workers and elected officials to discuss the predicaments facing unemployed workers in Louisiana.

The New York Times



With the $600 federal supplement to unemployment payments ending, Louise Francis will have to get by on $247 a week in state benefits. L. Kasimu Harris for The New York Times

July 30, 2020

As the $600 in unemployment was set to expire, Step Up organized the Statewide Day of Action (#SaveThe600) in 10 cities across Louisiana at all of the US Senate offices in the state. Leading up to July 30th, Step Up also co-organized a 100+ person Car Caravan with UNITE HERE to circle Senators Cassidy and Kennedy's offices, demanding they save the $600. Later on in the summer, Step Up also led the #CancelWorkSearchLA initiative, which advocated to end the job search

requirement which qualified people for unemployment. Over 1200 people signed the petition in under a week, culminating in a powerful petition delivery to the Louisiana Workforce Commission headquarters and a reporter asking about the petition at Governor Edwards' press conference. Governor's Mansion's lawn.



Step Up went to the capitol in Baton Rouge on multiple occasions to testify to try to improve the state unemployment system. Step Up member and unemployed convention center worker, Will Walker, said,

"When we went to the state capitol to tell our stories, the state legislators looked at us, listened to us pour our hearts out, heard our testimony, and just--they just said no."

Step Up Louisiana was asking the state to conduct a study about expanding the state unemployment relief efforts. "They refused to do anything. That felt like a slap in the face," said Mr. Walker.



September 1, 2020

Step Up members participated in Civil Disobedience for National Day of Action, where 10 unemployed workers were arrested, along with the organizers as they sat in the middle of Poydras Street. Over 100 participants from a coalition of New Orleans advocacy organizations participated in the nonviolent direct action to call attention to the unemployment crisis.





October 2020

Step Up organized a rally at City Hall after unsuccessful attempts to get the state and the federal government to help unemployed workers, demanding that local leaders do everything in their power to help unemployed workers. Additionally, Step Up led a 2nd special session policy push and rally with unemployed workers and elected officials at the State Capitol, pushing for an additional $100 a week in unemployment benefits, misclassification penalties, and workshare.

Throughout the pandemic, Mutual Aid has been a hallmark of Step Up's grassroots advocacy. This includes the distribution of over 1,500 masks and 250 PPE kits back in May to unemployed and frontline workers at Dollar Stores, an effort done in collaboration with Masks for America, Pagoda Café, and local distilleries. Additionally, with help from a national funder, Step Up was able to help distribute $25,000 in resources to families hurting from the economic crisis. Step Up also created a resource guide for parents which included information on accessing technology for distance learning.





CONCLUSIONS & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The widespread impact of COVID-19 on our communities demands urgent action from our policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels. Through our work organizing with parents, workers, students, and community members to disrupt systemic oppression throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, our unemployed worker committee has generated the following policy suggestions.

FEDERALIZE THE UNEMPLOYMENT SYSTEM

As we reflect on the catastrophic recession created by the COVID-19 pandemic, we clearly need a unified, federalized unemployment system. The challenges Louisiana faces in this pandemic cannot be adequately addressed through our state system. With the lowest average weekly benefit in the country, Louisiana's unemployment system is exacerbating racial and gender inequality. Our state, and New Orleans in particular, is disproportionately reliant on the tourism and hospitality sector which has been profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue to suffer in future recessions. With insufficient resources to address the major access issues in the state system, we need to federalize unemployment insurance. We see this as a core priority in order to:

1. Remove state variations in eligibility and benefits, raise the floor, and extend the benefit period
2. Stop penalizing workers who move across states
3. Undo the expensive patchwork of outdated IT systems in order to use federal buying power for preferential rates and better technology for all

4. End the race-to-the-bottom among states to have lower tax rates
5. Create a true safety net for workers currently failed by the current state UI system

As we build toward a more equitable federalized system, in the spirit of harm reduction, Step Up Louisiana also has concluded that there are concrete policy changes at every level of government in the interim that can improve the lives of unemployed people and the economy of our state.

FEDERAL POLICIES - RELIEF AND REFORM

1. **Restore** the $600 enhanced federal unemployment benefits retroactive to September 2020 as unemployment is high.
2. **Extend** PUA and PEUC for as long as unemployment is high, rather than an arbitrary cut-off date.
3. **Overhaul** our racist, unequal, unresponsive 50-state UI system that leaves Louisiana workers last by creating one efficient federal system for the whole country.

LOUISIANA STATE LEVEL POLICIES [27]

1. **Increase** the state maximum benefit by at least $100 per week to put us more in line with the regional averages (Maximums TX- $535, AR- $451).
2. **Improve access** to unemployment insurance including:
   a. Ensuring that the maximum phone wait time for help to deal with a claim is 45 minutes.
   b. Increasing the income disregard and create a state-level workshare program to allow more workers to work part-time without losing their unemployment insurance.
   c. Expanding worker unemployment state eligibility to include part-time workers, immigrant workers, gig economy workers, and low-paid educational contract employees like adjuncts and paraeducators.
3. **Develop** sensible automatic stabilizers including:
   a. Increasing benefits during recessions.
   b. Lowering employer taxes during recessions.

27 These state policies that should be pushed forward as harm reduction on the road towards a federal overhaul

c. Increasing funding for the Louisiana Workforce Commission for call center workers and adjudicators to improve access during moments of high unemployment.

LOUISIANA LOCAL PARISH AND MUNICIPAL LEVEL

1. **Shut** down eviction court.
2. **Use** $100 million of the convention center rainy day fund for tourism and hospitality workers.
3. **Fund** unemployment navigator programs through community organizations to improve access.

UI - Unemployment Insurance

PEUC - Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation

PUA - Pandemic Unemployment Assistance

LWC - Louisiana Workforce Commission

Income disregard - Allows qualified individuals and families to keep more of their earned income without losing their unemployment insurance

Workshare - a program that encourages employers to temporarily reduce the hours of their employees rather than lay them off during an economic downturn

Automatic stabilizers - Economic features that offset fluctuations in economic activity without direct intervention by policymakers

FEMA - Federal Emergency Management Agency

PPE - Personal Protective Equipment

Gig economy - A system in which temporary positions are common and organizations hire independent workers for short-term jobs

Base period - An amount of time used to determine whether laid-off workers have earned enough wages to qualify for unemployment insurance benefits (usually 1 year)

Adjudicators - People who make formal judgments or decisions about problems or disputed matters

Rainy day fund - a reserved amount of money to be used in times when regular income is disrupted or decreased, in order for typical operations to continue

Navigator - An individual or organization that's trained and able to help individuals and families as they seek unemployment insurance

SPECIAL THANKS

We would like to give special thanks to the individuals and organizations who have supported our campaign and contributed to this report, including Meaghan Perkins, who wrote this report; Step Up Louisiana staff: Ben Zucker, Gabriel Bolden Shaw, and Caleb Holmes; key contributors Sophia Rosenblatt and Lauren Flowers; our national thought partners, especially Andrew Stettner of The Century Foundation, Rachel Deutsch and Francisco Diez with the Center for Popular Democracy, Michelle Evermore of the National Employment Law Project, and Liz Pancotti of Employ America; Donald Rhodes; Step Up Louisiana Unemployed Workers Committee, many of whom are featured in this report; herWARD Consulting, for designing this report; the Power Coalition for Equity and Justice; Center for Popular Democracy and CPD Action; the Ford Foundation; UNITE HERE Local 23; IATSE local 478; Renters Rights Assembly; Louisiana Budget Project; Southeast Louisiana Legal Services; Coalition to Create a Fair Fund for Hospitality Workers; New Orleans and SW Louisiana Democratic Socialists of America; Workplace Justice Project; LiUNA Local 99; Black Voters Matter; IUPAT District Council 80; Southeast Louisiana Building and Construction Trades Council; Unemployed Action; and Ironworkers Union Local 623.







