President Joseph R. Biden  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500  

Dear President Biden:

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed many cracks in our country’s unemployment insurance (UI) system. The problems go far beyond the administrative and technological challenges states have faced in paying out benefits. The system also fails to respond to economic downturns, to reach enough workers, or to provide adequate benefits. Workers of color are disproportionately affected by these failures.1 We urge you to include substantial and permanent UI reform in your Build Back Better plan so that UI will meet the needs of all workers who lose their jobs through no fault of their own.

First, benefit levels and duration must be increased to protect unemployed workers from financial devastation. In many states, UI benefits only replace around 40 percent of a worker’s prior wages, which is insufficient to provide financial security, especially for low-income workers. States slashed benefits after the Great Recession, and we have already seen several states make similar moves toward further cuts in recent weeks.2 We must implement federal benefit standards to prevent states from cutting benefits again.

Second, UI must reach more workers. In March 2020, Congress enacted the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) program to support workers not covered by UI during the pandemic. Over 16 million workers have received PUA over the course of the pandemic. As of March 27, around 40 percent of the total unemployment claims were from PUA, making it clear that without PUA, the UI system is not reaching all of the workers that it should. 3

Finally, the permanent-law Extended Benefits (EB) program must be reformed to better respond to economic downturns. EB is designed to provide additional weeks of benefits as unemployment rises, but the triggers are not as responsive to economic changes as they should be, nor do they provide sufficient weeks of benefits during recessions. As a result, Congress has had to pass legislation providing additional weeks of benefits during the last two recessions, leaving workers’ financial security contingent on arbitrary deadlines and Congressional action. A stronger EB program with more effective triggers would provide future unemployed workers with more certainty and better support.

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The CARES Act’s emergency programs must be extended to support jobless workers for the duration of the current economic downturn, but we must also fix the underlying problems facing our UI system so that it can provide economic security for all workers. We strongly encourage you to include comprehensive UI reform as part of your Build Back Better plan.

Sincerely,

Ron Wyden
United States Senator

Donald S. Beyer, Jr.
United States Representative

Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator

Suzan K. DelBene
United States Representative

/s/ Jack Reed

/s/ Dwight Evans

Jack Reed
United States Senator

Dwight Evans
United States Representative

/s/ Benjamin L. Cardin

/s/ Alan Lowenthal

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

Alan Lowenthal
United States Representative

/s/ Alex Padilla

/s/ James R. Langevin

Alex Padilla
United States Senator

James R. Langevin
United States Representative
Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

/s/ Sherrod Brown
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Sherrod Brown
United States Senator

/s/ Emanuel Cleaver, II
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Emanuel Cleaver, II
United States Representative

/s/ Bernard Sanders
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Bernard Sanders
United States Senator

/s/ Joe Neguse
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Joe Neguse
United States Representative

/s/ Richard Blumenthal
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Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

/s/ Jared Huffman
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Jared Huffman
United States Representative

/s/ Tammy Baldwin
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Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator

/s/ Bill Foster
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Bill Foster
United States Representative

/s/ Mazie K. Hirono
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Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator

/s/ Earl Blumenauer
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Earl Blumenauer
United States Representative

/s/ Chris Van Hollen
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Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator

/s/ Marilyn Strickland
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Marilyn Strickland
United States Representative

/s/ Gerald E. Connolly
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Gerald E. Connolly
United States Representative

/s/ Ed Perlmutter
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Ed Perlmutter
United States Representative
Jim Cooper
United States Representative

/s/ Jim Cooper
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Jim Cooper
United States Representative

/s/ Adam B. Schiff
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Adam B. Schiff
United States Representative

/s/ Zoe Lofgren
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Zoe Lofgren
United States Representative

/s/ Tom Malinowski
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Tom Malinowski
United States Representative

/s/ Eleanor Holmes Norton
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Eleanor Holmes Norton
United States Representative

/s/ Derek Kilmer
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Derek Kilmer
United States Representative

/s/ Mike Quigley
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Mike Quigley
United States Representative

/s/ Jimmy Panetta
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Jimmy Panetta
United States Representative

/s/ Suzanne Bonamici
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Suzanne Bonamici
United States Representative

/s/ Anthony G. Brown
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Anthony G. Brown
United States Representative

/s/ Peter A. DeFazio
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Peter A. DeFazio
United States Representative

/s/ Scott H. Peters
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Scott H. Peters
United States Representative

/s/ Lisa Blunt Rochester
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Lisa Blunt Rochester
United States Representative

/s/ Kim Schrier
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Kim Schrier
United States Representative