

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 13, 2013 at 7:48am

Forgetting the Long-Term Unemployed

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Last night, the House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed the budget deal negotiated by Congressman Paul Ryan and Senator Patty Murray. They also passed a defense bill and a one month extension of the farm bill. Not a word or a vote about extending unemployment benefits for those who have been without work for an extended period of time.

In this morning's Washington Post, there is a long article about the budget deal, especially the growing rift between House Speaker John Boehner and outside conservative groups that sought to sabotage the budget deal. There is an article on the execution of a senior leader in North Korea. There is an article about the Hubble telescope discovering evidence of geysers on one of Jupiter's moons. There are dozens of article in the A section, but not one on Congress' unwillingness or inability to provide for the long-term unemployed, whose benefits expire on December 28. Nor is there any indication that Boehner et al., will be getting a visit from the Ghost of Christmas Past anytime soon.

This is profoundly depressing, not only because more than a million fellow Americans will soon be destitute, but because no one seems to care. At the last minute, an amendment was inserted into the budget deal providing a "doc fix" so that doctors will not see cuts in their reimbursement rates from Medicare. The "doc fix" is a good idea under current circumstances and it will not only help doctors, it will help seniors by guaranteeing more doctors are willing to see Medicare clients. Of course, every doctor's office I know has one or more staffers who only work on billing, and if our nation was to adopt a single payer system, the billing would be so simple it could be done by the receptionist in his off-time. But, the disturbing thing about the "doc fix" is that it was so easily accomplished. It mattered to members

of Congress. The unemployed, not so much.

Over the weekend, Senator Rand Paul displayed a strange variety of noblesse oblige by suggesting the long-term unemployment benefits were not really helping the long-term unemployed because they create a disincentive to work. Here is the libertarian hero at his most Darwinian: Those who are unemployed will adapt only if they have to, and if only the fittest survive, so be it. Of course, it is not the unemployed who need to adapt. It is the economy, and Sen. Paul's austerity agenda is a large part of the reason why the economy has not recovered more quickly. I invite the senator to visit a newly constructed hotel or large retail outlet in the weeks before opening. He will see the lines of people waiting to apply for work. The long-term unemployed are not lazy, there just aren't enough jobs.

Sen. Paul and his libertarian allies like to complain about the slowness of the economic recovery. They blame President Obama's policies, especially the Affordable Care Act, for that slowness. I am not an economist, but I read enough of them to recognize that the 2008 recession was not like previous recessions. It was deeper and more dangerous, so we should not be surprised that it is taking the country longer to rebound.

We should also recognize that the "rules of the market" have allowed the stock market to rebound just fine. AIG, which received a huge bailout from the feds, is now running ads touting its recovery. Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac delivered large checks into the federal Treasury this year because of the rebounding housing market. The short-term unemployed are not having a great deal of trouble finding work. But, the long-term unemployed, for a variety of reasons and assumptions, are still suffering. Even if a few of them really enjoyed not working and living off the benefits, which I am not willing to stipulate, surely most of them would take a job if they could find one. Unlucky for them, they are not too big to fail, they have no effective lobby on K Street, the Republicans view them as beyond their concern and the Democrats are unwilling to go to the mat for them.

As Congress heads home for the holidays, I hope they get an earful from those who will lose their benefits, and from their friends, their neighbors and, especially, their pastors. In some states the unemployment rate is stubbornly high, and that rate does not recognize any red/blue partisan divisions. Maybe some Republicans, enough Republicans, will come back to DC in the new year determined to extend those benefits. It will be difficult, not least because the budget deal that passed last night gobbled up all the low hanging revenue fruit that could be used to off-set an extension of benefits.

In his World Day of Peace message, released yesterday, the Holy Father said:

Globalization, as Benedict XVI pointed out, makes us neighbours, but does not make us brothers.[1] The many situations of inequality, poverty and injustice, are signs not only of a profound lack of fraternity, but also of the absence of a culture of solidarity. New ideologies, characterized by rampant individualism, egocentrism and materialistic consumerism, weaken social bonds, fuelling that "throw away" mentality which leads to contempt for, and the abandonment of, the weakest and those considered "useless". In this way human coexistence increasingly tends to resemble a mere do ut des which is both pragmatic and selfish.

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Pope Benedict XVI, in last year's World Day of Peace message, said:

It is alarming to see hotbeds of tension and conflict caused by growing instances of inequality between rich and poor, by the prevalence of a selfish and individualistic mindset which also finds expression in an unregulated financial capitalism.

Selfish? Individualistic? Materialistic consumerism? A profound lack of fraternity? I cannot think of a better description of today's Republican Party. To the degree the Democrats, the newspapers and the rest of us are complicit in this attitude as it pertains to the long-term unemployed, shame on us too. We need to find our voice, and two popes in a row have pointed the way. It is the way to Bethlehem, to the stable, to Him who cloaked Himself in poverty of flesh to identify with the downtrodden of the world. Jesus is still poor. Jesus is present in the lives and the sorrows of those who will soon have to explain to their families that they may not have enough money for the rent, or the food, or the medicines. In this affluent country, with the stock market hovering near 16,000 points, with so many people who are literally filthy rich, where is the sense of fraternity?

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