

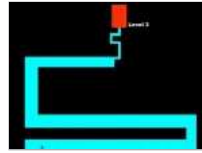
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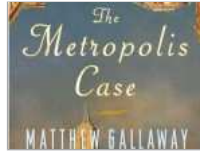
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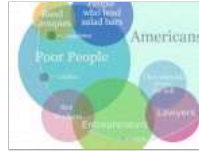
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THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

## The 99ers May Be the New Tea Party

by Abe Sauer on January 5th, 2011



In the coming days of the shiny new 112th Congress you may see the term "99er" thrown around a lot. Not everyone knows what a 99er is. So, just so we're all up to speed, a 99er is a term for the Americans who have reached the 99th week of unemployment benefits and extensions and face complete financial abandonment. There are probably at least 6 million 99ers and, with job creation flat, more on the way.

Unemployment benefits work a little like the 5-tier opposite of the armed forces defense readiness condition (DEFCON). Whereas DEFCON 5 is the lowest state of alarm, a Tier 5 extension of unemployment benefits means the economic shit has hit the fan. In fact, Tier 5 exists only in theory. And Obama probably just squandered the only chance 99ers had.

But 99ers are organizing and beginning to look a lot like the Tea Party did so many moons ago.

In case the new Congress doesn't fully understand this, being unemployed is not like some giant line at Shake Shack, where you get in the back and, eventually after a lot of waiting, you get your burger. The irony of not having a job for nearly two years is that it becomes increasingly difficult to find a job the longer one is unemployed. Department of Labor data shows that people who have been unemployed fewer than five weeks face a re-employment rate of 31 percent. Unemployed for more than a year? There's just a 9 percent chance you'll find work. Of course, part of the reason for this is that not all jobs and employees are equal, with, say, construction workers being out of work longer and thus faced with a more difficult work search. (All the more reason for promoting employment training along with a benefits extension.)

Another insulting reality of being a 99er is that your very existence was erased after the 99th week. Only beginning Jan. 1 did the Bureau of Labor Statistics begin counting the unemployed whose benefits have



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expired. The BLS site explains "Starting with data for January 2011, respondents will be able to report unemployment durations of up to 5 years," adding, one assumes dryly, "This change will likely affect estimates of average (mean) duration of unemployment."

The Cato Institute tank thinker Michael Tanner captured objections to a Tier 5 extension earlier this year when he summarized the situation thus: "Workers are less likely to look for work, or accept less-than-ideal jobs, as long as they are protected from the full consequences of being unemployed." Of course the humor in Tanner's summary is that the jobs 99ers lost were somehow "ideal."

To concede to Tanner, with the average weekly unemployment benefit \$303, who wouldn't bask in all the protection from unemployment a King's ransom like that can buy?

Tanner might call internet access an unnecessary expense and extravagance for the unemployed, but message boards and comment sections are filled with soul-crushing pleas from 99ers:

"I have one month left to live in my now small apt. WOW after 27 years of being on top. Homeless at 57."

"lost everything already worked and paid into UI for over 40 years were is the money i paid in. HELP!!!!!!"

"i worked since i been 8years old and never asked for much help . i am a 99er but how do we pay our bills i cut all fat or waste and now what be on the street my question why did congress stop the money just befroe christmas . and know obama in hawaii al congrees all home snuggled in for a vaction rest and us 99weeks . we have no christmas my daughter is 14 honor student and in a band she get nothing for christmas so my wife and our 4 year old neice what did they do wrong . and oh for christmas dinner were having a no brand pizza, boy i feel the conges like playing the christmas story them being scrooge but where our happy ending out on the street they ruined the last hoiday i ever like as a child i hope there happy i so depressed because i have to look into childrens eyes"

What a bunch of lazy handout seekers, *amiright?*



In the lame duck session, Reps Barbara Lee (D-CA) and Bobby Scott (D-VA) introduced immediately doomed bill HR-6556 which, instead of adding a Tier 5, would have extended 14 weeks of benefits for 99ers. But the real late year opportunity to extend assistance to 99ers was squandered when the Obama administration quickly caved to Republican demands to extend tax cuts.

With the tax cut extension leverage gone, and a new Congress that's damn near poor-people-hostile and laser focused only on repealing health care reform and cutting \$100 billion in federal spending (on poor people), 99ers are probably sunk. HuffPo's Michael Thornton, who's "unemployment beat" has to be the most depressing in journalism, points out the fat man's ballet that was ABC's Jake Taper's questioning of Press Secretary Gibbs on the matter. [The transcript](#) of the former's meatball question and the latter twisting in the wind:

TAPPER: And, then, lastly, as you know, there is a group of unemployed who have called themselves the 99ers...

GIBBS: Sure.



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TAPPER: ... they're individuals who have been — who's unemployment insurance has run out. They were not included in the deal, the tax deal that the president signed with Mr. McConnell, the Republicans and others. Is there anything that the president can do for them?

GIBBS: Well, I think the best thing that we can do as a country is to get — get a fragile economy more stable, and one that creates more jobs. I think that's — that's why I think, you know, economists said that they would reorient their growth estimates based on the agreement that the president signed. And obviously, the best thing we can do for them is to create an environment where businesses are hiring. Look, we have — what you've heard me say on a number of occasions, that one of the great benefits of the agreement was taking the politics out of — out of unemployment insurance. We — we — we have — it's been a contentious battle just to get unemployment insurance to continue up to 99 weeks. It's not — it's not in any way been easy. And this takes the politics out of that throughout 2011 and hopefully we can focus — continue to focus on getting the economy moving again and providing — providing those guys with a helping hand with a job.

That answer undoubtedly filled 99ers with confidence.

For the record, the battle to get wildly rich and irresponsible financial institutions bailed out? Easy and immediate. The battle to get a few more weeks of unemployment benefits for a few million people during the worst economic landscape since the Great Depression? "Contentious" and "not in any way been easy."

Regarding economists and politics, Gibbs and crew may want to look to Mark Zandi, an econ expert who recently testified to Congress that every \$1 in unemployment benefits produces \$1.61 of economic activity (whereas every \$1 of extended tax cuts returns \$0.32). Gibbs might counter that Zandi is "political." True. He was appointed to John McCain's advisory committee of economists by John McCain himself.

It might also behoove the politicians involved to remember that, despite common misconceptions, homeless people can vote. And if there is an answer to the political power, and camera-friendly anger, of the Tea Party, it may be the 99ers. Many in this population have already begun to loosely organize, mostly online, but also off line. [The American 99ers Union](#) already boasts a host of Tea-Party-like badges growing under its umbrella, including 99ersUnited, The Layoff List, Jobless Unite, Unemployed Workers Action Group, United, Angry, Voters and the Philadelphia Unemployment Project, amongst others. In their grassroots amateurishness, stars and stripes iconography, anti-DC posturing and angry American rhetoric, the sites look exactly like their Tea Party counterparts.

The movement already has a snappy, media-friendly name.

*Photo of the Pennsylvania unemployed via [Pennsylvania Unemployed](#). You can probably recreate the McDonald's job openings photo at your nearest McDonald's.*

*Abe Sauer is writing a book about North Dakota. Email him at [abesauer \[at\] gmail.com](mailto:abesauer[at]gmail.com).*

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