

# Feds' stimulus package doesn't do enough for workers

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI) — A \$150 billion economic stimulus package unveiled Jan. 24 after week-long talks between Democratic House leaders and the GOP Bush Administration lacks several key provisions that would help workers, national AFL-CIO President John Sweeney said.

Instead, those provisions — extending unemployment benefits, repaving roads, and expanding eligibility for food stamps — would be lumped into a second “stimulus” bill that would come up later this year and that would face rockier sledding on Capitol Hill, due to budget rules and the time crunch from the presidential campaign.

“The ... stimulus proposal simply is not enough to make a real difference for working families,” Sweeney said. “It is up to the Senate to extend unemployment benefits and increase food stamps to get money into the hands of those who will spend it quickest and need it most.”

The national AFL-CIO came up with a five-point stimulus package of its own, which it shared with congressional leaders before they met with the president. The five points political leaders were urged to include in any stimulus package included:

- Extension of unemployment benefits.
- Increased food stamp benefits.
- Tax rebates targeted to middle-income and lower-income taxpayers.
- Fiscal relief for state and local governments to avoid the economically depressing effect of tax increases and budget cuts.
- Acceleration of ready-to-go public investment in school renovations and bridge repair.

Sweeney said “anything less will not be sufficient to keep our economy

from diving headlong into recession.”

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), wasn't “totally pleased” by the proposed bill. “But I do know it'll stimulate the economy,” she said. “If it doesn't, there'll be more to come.”

The key item for workers is individual and family tax rebates, ranging up to \$600 per adult, \$1,200 per couple, and \$300 per child. But the package does not extend jobless benefits beyond 26 weeks, it does not help people who must turn to Medicaid for health care,

nor does it expand food stamps to more people.

“It's a step in the right direction, but simply doesn't go far enough in making a real difference for America's working families,” said Anna Burger, chair of the Change to Win labor federation. “It's time for the leaders in Washington to take bold and immediate action to restore the purchasing power of America's working families.”

Lawmakers and Bush are scrambling to inject money into workers' pockets as signs of a recession appear. Those signs include an 0.3 percent

jump in unemployment in December, to 5 percent; the largest decline in existing home sales in 25 years, and states facing budget deficits that force them to cut Medicaid money.

“New Medicaid regulations are about to shift more costs to the states at a time when they can barely afford to meet current needs,” said Gerald McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

Oregon Congressman Earl Blumenauer of Portland, a member of the Ways and Means and Budget committees, said the proposed stimulus package will provide “broad-based relief for lower and middle-income families.”

However, he was disappointed that it didn't contain food stamps or unemployment benefits. “Removing these provisions underlines the misplaced priorities of President Bush and his allies in Congress,” Blumenauer said. “By allowing the process to work and encouraging the public to weigh in, I would hope that we could make this package better.”

U.S. Rep. Brian Baird of Washington said he believes that people would rather have a job than a check.

“It is clear that this problem goes beyond cutting a one-time check or tax

cut,” he said. “We should take this opportunity to invest immediately in infrastructure projects that will better our country's future and provide jobs today. By investing in our roads, bridges, and highways, we will be creating jobs, helping workers put food on the table, and in the process, we will generate a lasting public good that will go beyond a few hundred dollars.”

An infusion of cash into the infrastructure is unlikely at this time, according to Senate Budget Committee Chairman Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.).

He said Congress' reaction overall is that infrastructure “should be part of the second stimulus package.” The same thing goes for extending jobless benefits beyond their current 26-week

limit.

Republicans and Democrats on the Senate Finance Committee are currently developing an economic stimulus package of their own. Republicans are concentrating on business tax cuts, although they and Bush have dropped their insistence that the bill should make his 2001 and 2003 tax cuts for the rich permanent. Those tax cuts are due to expire in 2010.

Lawmakers initially wanted to have a stimulus bill sent to the president by Feb. 15. That timeline has been moved up and a bill could be voted on this week. (A vote had not been taken in either the House or Senate as this issue of the NW Labor Press went to press).

***'The...stimulus proposal simply is not enough to make a real difference for working families.'***




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