

Discrimination against the Unemployed

Written by Bill Fletcher, Jr.

Wednesday, 22 May 2013 00:00



It will strike many of you as counter-intuitive, but there has been a rising phenomenon of unemployed workers suffering discrimination when they have sought work because...they have been unemployed. This is not an exaggeration.

In fact, the situation is so serious that the City Council of New York passed an order prohibiting discrimination against the unemployed, an order that was vetoed by the mayor, but was then overridden by the Council.

Since the beginning of the Great Recession, the problem of discrimination against the unemployed has been gaining attention. It was so odd that few people actually took it seriously. After all, an unemployed person looking for work is what one would expect, right?

What has happened is something that is quite common within our economic system—capitalism. When there is an economic downturn, the labor market gets flooded with people who are looking for work. In that situation, employers often have the upper hand and start to cherry-pick from that available pool of workers. Instead of treating someone who has been out of work for a long time but has been seeking work as a committed and diligent worker, many employers treat them with suspicion, acting as if there was something wrong with the worker that kept them out of work. Instead of appreciating that there have been and are millions of workers who have been displaced, either due to temporary downturns or, as has been the case with many Black workers, as a result of structural changes in the economy, too many employers are prepared to write off the long-term unemployed as nonredeemable.

Most employers will not acknowledge that they are biased against the long-term unemployed when they deny someone a job. Instead, the job-seeker may not get an interview or may be

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politely dismissed. If you add onto that other factors, such as age, race, and gender, a long-term unemployed person can find themselves moved into the category of the permanently unemployed, with little chance of getting work.

Younger workers face the challenge of discrimination for being unemployed, but it plays itself out differently. A younger worker who has been the victim of long-term unemployment is frequently viewed as not serious and not willing to make sacrifices. I had a discussion with a wealthy businessman some time ago who was bemoaning what he saw as too many younger workers taking advantage of unemployment insurance in order to avoid starting at the bottom and working their way up. This sort of prejudice appears to be very common among many employers.

New York City took the right step in banning discrimination against the unemployed. Hopefully, other jurisdictions will do likewise. But at the end of the day, government intervention in another way will be essential. We not only need laws prohibiting discrimination against the unemployed; we need jobs for the unemployed. Government should be committed to both steps.

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