



U.S. jobs crisis has plenty of solutions

Rep. Frederica Wilson and Rep. John Conyers
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Editor's note: Congresswoman Frederica Wilson represents Florida's 24th District and is a member of the House Education and Workforce Committee. Congressman John Conyers, the Dean of the Congressional Black Caucus, represents Michigan's 13th District and serves as Ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee. The views expressed are their own.

With all the attention on President Barack Obama's primetime Syria address, there has been little or no mention of another primetime televised presidential address on another urgent national crisis exactly two years ago this week. That topic was unemployment.

Over the past two years, discussions of the jobs crisis and the plan that President Obama presented – the American Jobs Act – have been drowned out by debates over fiscal cliffs, border security, Benghazi, the IRS, the National Security Agency, the Justice Department, and now another conflict in the Middle East.

But the jobs crisis remains as real as ever. And serious solutions remain available – if only Congress would care to notice.

While many politicians and much of the financial media give the impression that the Great Recession is long gone, it's a different story when you look at the black community (13 percent unemployment), the Hispanic community (9.3 percent unemployment), or the youngest workers (22 percent unemployment). Across the country, more than four million people have been unemployed for six months or longer. More than eleven million workers are actively looking for jobs. Seven million have given up looking for work altogether.

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This isn't about statistics – it's about human stories. Each of the tens of millions of people who struggle with unemployment faces levels of anxiety and insecurity that translate into worse mental and physical health. Unemployment means lower lifelong earnings not only for workers, but also for their children. It means a loss of dignity that's impossible to quantify.

For our country as a whole, years of mass unemployment mean a withered base of technical skills and weaker demand for goods and services. Years of mass unemployment mean a loss of

competitiveness in the global marketplace, downward pressure on wages, and increased government spending on safety net programs like Medicaid.

Yet there are sensible and cost-effective ways to end this emergency right now.

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One of us, Congresswoman Wilson, has introduced an updated version of the president's American Jobs Act for the 113th Congress that creates new opportunities for teachers and first responders, public-private partnerships to meet urgent infrastructure needs, and tax credits for small businesses that hire the long-term unemployed.

The other, Congressman Conyers, has introduced the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment and Training Act to create work and training programs in construction, infrastructure repair, energy efficiency, education, health care, and neighborhood renovation for any person in need of work.

Together, we've proposed to simply and immediately cancel the sequester cuts that are slated to eliminate upwards of 1.4 million jobs in coming years.

Other important proposals – like House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer’s “Make It in America” agenda – present proven and effective strategies to bring high-paying manufacturing jobs back to our shores.

These proposals are all fully-funded through sensible measures including cuts to corporate subsidies, tax reforms, or fees on financial speculators. Ultimately, these proposals would improve our long-term fiscal outlook simply by creating jobs: The only responsible way to reduce our deficits is to get people trained, working, and contributing to the tax base. So why has Congress failed to even consider these policies?

The short answer is ideology: Republicans in Congress continue to repeat their claims that government policies are themselves the cause of unemployment.

But the policy prescriptions that follow from this thinking – massive across-the-board spending cuts – have been tried extensively both here in and in Europe since 2010. And the results are not pretty. Even the International Monetary Fund, a notoriously hardline free-market institution, has acknowledged that its calls for sequester-style budget cuts were counterproductive, causing job losses and lower growth.

Ultimately, the problem is not just ideology, but interests. Some continue to believe that they actually benefit from the status quo because high unemployment makes it harder for workers to organize and bargain for higher wages. But this is mistaken. What American businesses need most are customers, and they can only win more customers if more Americans are earning a steady paycheck.

While even the Obama administration has admitted that there are no good options for dealing with the crisis in Syria, there are plenty of good options for addressing the continuing crisis here at home.

It’s time to pick one.