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# Somehow, the Unemployed Became Invisible

By **CATHERINE RAMPELL**

GRIM number of the week: 14,087,000.

Fourteen million, in round numbers — that is how many Americans are now [officially out of work](#).

Word came Friday from the Labor Department that, despite all the optimistic talk of an economic recovery, [unemployment is going up](#), not down. The jobless rate rose to 9.2 percent in June.

What gives? And where, if anywhere, is the outrage?

The United States is in the grips of its gravest jobs crisis since Franklin D. Roosevelt was in the White House. Lose your job, and it will take roughly nine months to find a new one. That is off the charts. Many Americans have simply given up.

But unless you're one of those unhappy 14 million, you might not even notice the problem. The budget deficit, not jobs, has been dominating the conversation in Washington. Unlike the hard-pressed in, say, Greece or Spain, the jobless in America seem, well, subdued. The old fire has gone out.

In some ways, this boils down to math, both economic and political. Yes, 9.2 percent of the American work force is unemployed — but 90.8 percent of it is working. To elected officials, the unemployed are a relatively small constituency. And with apologies to Karl Marx, the workers

of the world, particularly the unemployed, are also no longer uniting.

Nor are they voting — or at least not as much as people with jobs. In 2010, some 46 percent of working Americans who were eligible to vote did so, compared with 35 percent of the unemployed, according to Michael McDonald, a political scientist at George Mason University. There was a similar turnout gap in the 2008 election.

No wonder policy makers don't fear unemployed Americans. The jobless are, politically speaking, more or less invisible.

It wasn't always so. During [the Great Depression](#), riots erupted on the bread lines. Even in the 1980s and 1990s, angry workers descended on Washington by the busload.

“There used to be a sense that unemployment was rich soil for radicalization and revolt,” says Nelson Lichtenstein, a professor of labor history at the University of California, Santa Barbara. “That was a motif in American history for a long time, but we don't seem to have that anymore.”

But why? It's partly because of the greater dispersion of the unemployed, and partly because of the weakening of the institutions that previously mobilized them.

Unemployment doesn't necessarily beget apathy, Mr. McDonald says. Rather, demographic groups that are more likely to be unemployed also happen to be the same groups that are less likely to vote to begin with, such as the poor and the low-skilled.

Even so, [numerous studies](#) have shown that unemployment leads to feelings of shame and a loss of self-worth. And that is not particularly conducive to political organizing. As Heather Boushey, an economist at the liberal Center for American Progress, puts it, rather bluntly: “Nobody wants to join the Lame Club.”

That's not to say that disillusionment about the economy will just fade away. But unless something changes, the unemployed seem unlikely to gain real political potency soon.

“There's an illusion that grass-roots activity just begins spontaneously, that people get mad and suddenly say, ‘I'm not going to take it anymore!’ ” says Michael Kazin, a historian at Georgetown University. “But that's not how it happens.”

Intellectuals used to play a big role in organizing labor. In the 1930s, Communists and socialists were a major force. Later, labor unions stepped in.

But today's unions are not set up to serve the unemployed; they generally organize around workplaces, after all.

Just ask Rick McHugh, who worked in Michigan as an employment lawyer for the United Automobile Workers from the 1980s through the 1990s. He represented workers who were appealing denials of unemployment insurance benefits. The union footed the bill for [people he represented](#) who were not, and had never been, U.A.W. members.

Today, however, many unions are fighting for their own survival. They no longer provide such support for nonmembers. "They just don't have the staff and the resources to support these programs and the recipients like they used to," says Mr. McHugh, now a staff attorney at the [National Employment Law Project](#).

Workers have also become suburbanized. Back in the 1960s or even the 1980s, the unemployed organized around welfare or unemployment offices. It was a fertile environment: people were anxious and tired and waiting for hours in line.

"We stood outside of these offices, with their huge lines, and passed out leaflets that said things like: 'If you're upset about what's happening to you, come to this meeting at this church basement in two weeks. We'll get together and do something about this,'" recalls Barney Oursler, a longtime community organizer and co-founder of the Mon Valley Unemployed Committee in the early 1980s. "The response just made your heart get big. 'Oh, my God,' they'd say, 'I thought I was alone.'"

The Mon Valley Unemployed Committee, which is based in Pittsburgh, helped organize workers in 26 cities across five states, simply by hanging around outside unemployment offices and harnessing the frustration.

Today, though, many unemployment offices have closed. Jobless benefits are often handled by phone or online rather than in person. An unemployment call center near Mr. Oursler, for instance, now sits behind two sets of locked doors and frosted windows.

In other countries, workers have mobilized online. Unions here, too, have reached out on the Web. They include groups like [Working America](#) (the community affiliate of the A.F.L.-C.I.O.) and [UCubed](#) (created by the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers).

But many Web sites geared toward the unemployed aren't about mobilizing workers. Many instead provide guidance about things like posting résumés online, or simply offer the comfort of an online community.

It's not clear why this is the case, when social networks have been so essential to organizing economic protests in places like Britain and Greece, not to mention political movements in the Middle East.

"You have to remember that technology is not independent of social structures, motivations and politics," Mr. Kazin says. "People can feel like they have their own community online, which is useful emotionally, but they also have to have the desire and demand to do something about their situation first before they start using that online presence to organize anything in person."

To the extent that frustrations are being channeled at all, they are being channeled largely through the [Tea Party](#). But the Tea Party is mostly against devoting government resources to helping the unemployed.

Tea Party activists, for example, are more likely to believe that [providing benefits to poor people](#) encourages them to stay poor, and to believe that [economic stimulus has made the economy worse](#).

Why populist anger over the poor economy is leaning right, rather than left, this time around is a bit of a mystery. Perhaps it is because Democrats, traditional friends of labor, control the White House and the Senate.

Mr. Lichtenstein, the historian, notes that it took awhile for the poor to mobilize in the Great Depression. Many initially saw President Roosevelt as an ally and only later became disillusioned. As Langston Hughes wrote in a 1934 poem, "[The Ballad of Roosevelt](#)":

The pot was empty,

The cupboard was bare.

I said, Papa,

What's the matter here?

I'm waitin' on Roosevelt, son,

Roosevelt, Roosevelt,

Waitin' on Roosevelt, son.

For the moment, jobless Americans are waiting on President Obama. If unemployment stays as high as many expect, and millions exhaust their benefits, they may just find their voice in 2012.