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**Op-Ed Columnist**

## **Does Obama Get It?**

By **BOB HERBERT**

The big question on the domestic front right now is whether President Obama understands the gravity of the employment crisis facing the country. Does he get it? The signals coming out of the White House have not been encouraging.

The Beltway crowd and the Einsteins of high finance who never saw this economic collapse coming are now telling us with their usual breezy arrogance that the Great Recession is probably over. Their focus, of course, is on data, abstractions like the gross domestic product, not the continued suffering of living, breathing human beings struggling with the nightmare of joblessness.

Even Mr. Obama, in an interview with The Times, gave short shrift to the idea of an additional economic stimulus package, telling John Harwood a few weeks ago that the economy had likely turned a corner. “As you know,” the president said, “jobs tend to be a lagging indicator; they come last.”

The view of most American families is somewhat less blasé. Faced with the relentless monthly costs of housing, transportation, food, clothing, education and so forth, they have precious little time to wait for this lagging indicator to come creeping across the finish line.

Americans need jobs now, and if the economy on its own is incapable of putting people back to work — which appears to be the case — then the government needs to step in with aggressive job-creation efforts.

Nearly one in four American families has suffered a job loss over the past year, according to a survey released by the Economic Policy Institute. Nearly 1 in 10 Americans is officially unemployed, and the real-world jobless rate is worse.

We're running on a treadmill that is carrying us backward. Something approaching 10 million new jobs would have to be created just to get back to where we were when the recession began in December 2007. There is nothing currently in the works to jump-start job creation on that scale.

A massive long-term campaign to rebuild the nation's infrastructure — which would put large numbers of people to work establishing the essential industrial platform for a truly 21st-century American economy — has not seriously been considered. Large-scale public-works programs that would reach deep into the inner cities and out to hard-pressed suburban and rural areas have been dismissed as the residue of an ancient, unsophisticated era.

We seem to be waiting for some mythical rebound to come rolling in, magically equipped with robust job creation, a long-term bull market and paradise regained for consumers.

It ain't happening.

While the data mavens were talking about green shoots in September, employers in the real world were letting another 263,000 of their workers go, bringing the jobless rate to 9.8 percent, the highest in more than a quarter of a century. It would have been higher still but

571,000 people dropped out of the labor market. They're jobless but not counted as unemployed. The number of people officially unemployed — 15.1 million — is, as The Wall Street Journal noted, greater than the population of 46 of the 50 states.

The Obama administration seems hamstrung by the unemployment crisis. No big ideas have emerged. No dramatically creative initiatives. While devoting enormous amounts of energy to health care, and trying now to decide what to do about Afghanistan, the president has not even conveyed the sense of urgency that the crisis in employment warrants.

If that does not change, these staggering levels of joblessness have the potential to cripple not just the well-being of millions of American families, but any real prospects for sustained economic recovery and the political prospects of the president as well. An unemployed electorate is an unhappy electorate.

The survey for the Economic Policy Institute was conducted in September by Hart Research Associates. Respondents said that they had more faith in President Obama's ability to handle the economy than Congressional Republicans. The tally was 43 percent to 32 percent. But when asked who had been helped most by government stimulus efforts, substantial majorities said "large banks" and "Wall Street investment companies."

When asked how "average working people" or "you and your family" had benefited, very small percentages, in a range of 10 percent to 13 percent, said they had fared well.

The word now, in the wake of last week's demoralizing jobless numbers, is that the administration is looking more closely at its job creation options. Whether anything dramatic emerges remains to be seen.

The master in this area, of course, was Franklin Roosevelt. His first Inaugural Address was famous for the phrase: “The only thing we have to fear. ...” But he also said in that speech: “Our greatest primary task is to put people to work.” And he said the country should treat that task “as we would treat the emergency of a war.”

Now that’s the sense of urgency we need.

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