

Blacks and Joblessness: the Toll of Racism

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U.S. unemployment rates Estimates do not include those who are underemployed and those who have given up searching for work. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov). The U.S. economic upheaval — the worst since the Great Depression that began in 1929 — is destroying jobs, housing, retirement plans, healthcare, education and social services at every level. And once again, Black Americans are the most vulnerable.

As Louis Armstrong sang, “My only sin ... is in my skin. What did I do — to be so black and blue?”

Meltdown. In the last year, the U.S. underwent its fastest annual drop in the employment rate in 54 years. Since December 2007, 3.6 million jobs have been lost, and thus far in 2009, over 700,000 more jobs disappear each month.

Official statistics put the February 2009 unemployment rate for all workers at 8.1 percent and moving rapidly to 10 percent and higher. Nearly thirteen and a half percent of Black workers are among them, almost twice the rate of white workers at 7.3 percent.

Counting workers whose hours were cut and those who can find only part-time jobs, an estimated 21.7 million workers — one in seven — are either unemployed or underemployed in the U.S.A. Nearly 42 percent of the jobless have been out of work for at least 15 weeks, and 23 percent for at least six months. With four applicants for every job opening, over one million people have given up looking.

The struggle for good jobs. In the 1930s, huge numbers of Blacks broke free of the segregationist, anti-union South and migrated north for jobs. Many found work in the auto industry, organized by the United Auto Workers (UAW). Unlike many unions at the time, the UAW did not bar Blacks from membership.

Fighting beside other autoworkers, African Americans won improved wages, pensions, and other benefits. They created a “Black middle class” that could afford homes, cars, and higher education for their children.

When the auto industry began to decline, so did the situation for Black workers, who for decades had found both more jobs and better jobs there. The heavy layoffs accompanying the current depression are having a devastating impact.

Except in Chicago and Detroit, Blacks who work in manufacturing have been restricted to the worst jobs. Meanwhile, their share of jobs in manufacturing has gone down from 23.9 percent in 1979 to 9.8 percent in 2007.

Conservatives, and many labor officials as well, explain the manufacturing slump by saying

these jobs have been “outsourced to other countries.” This helps bosses fan divisive anti-foreign sentiments among workers, but it is far from the whole truth. Technological advances and increased productivity have played a big role, and so has the relocation of many union manufacturing jobs to companies in anti-union regions inside the U.S.

The manufacturing slump, combined with affirmative action in employment won by the civil rights and feminist movements, means that most Blacks today work in public service jobs — primarily in government, education, and healthcare. Black women especially have benefited from opportunities for decent-paying white-collar jobs. They have consistently accounted for 15 to 18 percent of all women in unions, while Black workers in general are the most likely to be union members.

Unionization in the public sector is rising; 38.6 percent of union jobs are now in this sphere. Militant Black workers and other workers of color have played a crucial role in this development.

Nevertheless, Black workers are still clustered in lower-paying jobs. Case in point: in proportion to their numbers in the labor force, Black men work twice as often as white men in human services, the most poorly paid of the white-collar professions.

Racism still at large. Long since the abolition of slavery and passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, economic racism still flourishes. In 2007, the median family income of whites was 62 percent higher than that of Blacks.

This relentless inequality is no longer based on law. But ongoing racist processes, exacerbated by the whittling away of affirmative action, combine to perpetuate poverty. Black children born to parents in the bottom fourth of the income distribution have a 66 percent chance of staying there the rest of their lives. As conditions worsen, the majority of children of all colors face a grim future.

Attempts to make change are hamstrung by lies about poverty’s extent, causes, and effects. For example, official U.S. statistics use a grossly flawed 50-year-old method to measure poverty.

Last year the government declared that a family of four with an income of \$21,200 was below the poverty level. This supposedly was the status of 25 percent of Blacks as compared to 8.2 percent of whites.

A more accurate gauge is the family budget measure recommended by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI). Its yardstick includes the costs of housing, food, childcare, transportation, healthcare and medical emergencies, retirement savings, and college. These are the real things a household must pay for to be financially secure.

The result? EPI placed the 2008 poverty line far upward, at an average of \$48,778 for a family of four. This calculation shows that 50 percent of Black families have insufficient incomes, as compared to 20 percent of whites (a horrifying figure in its own right).

Home ownership also reflects racism: 47.2 percent of Blacks own homes compared to 75.2 percent of whites. Blacks and Latinos seeking to buy homes were 30 percent more likely than whites to receive subprime mortgages with interest rates that jumped to double digits after two years. Studies prove that this was not primarily because of bad credit on the

buyers' part, but because of racial discrimination.

In the area of education, Blacks have fought hard to better the odds for their children. In 1970, 56 percent of working Blacks lacked a high school diploma; by 2008, this had dropped to 10 percent. During the same period, the proportion of Black workers with a bachelor's degree or higher jumped from 16 to 56 percent.

But the racial concentration of poverty takes its toll on the quality of schools Black children attend, while gains in higher education are being eroded by the determined rightwing crusade against affirmative action.

Nowhere to go but up. The profit system depends on the exploitation of all workers and the super-exploitation of many. What's needed is revolutionary change. History teaches that the first to push for that will be those who need it most: Black workers. For that very reason, they are in a position to continue leading the defense of their entire class.

Capitalism's solution for workers with few economic prospects is either prison garb or a soldier's uniform. Today, one in every 31 adults in the U.S. is in prison or on parole or probation. For Blacks, the ratio is one in every 11.

The situation is dire. Below are some reforms worth fighting hard for, reforms that would make immediate improvements in millions of Black lives. (A comprehensive program to answer the current crisis is on page five.)

- Reinstate and expand affirmative action!
- Create a massive public-sector jobs program at union wages, with training apprenticeships built in for people of color, women, and young people.
- Reduce the normal workweek to 30 hours, with no cut in pay, to produce full employment.
- Provide a guaranteed annual income for those unable to work.
- Raise the minimum wage to reflect household budget needs.
- Restore Aid to Families with Dependent Children.
- Stop building prisons; unions and union wages for incarcerated workers.
- End home foreclosures; no evictions of tenants; end discrimination in renting and home loans.

The rise of Black Americans to true equality has the power to lift us all.

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