

# US Social Crisis: 25 Million Unemployed and Underemployed

Making No Effective Protest, Economist Says

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Although America's 25 million unemployed and underemployed could be a powerful force for social change, they aren't combining in any effective way to protest, an eminent business authority writes.

"Activism has given way to acquiescence," writes Louis Uchitelle, even though "unemployment is once again stubbornly high in the aftermath of a recession that has left the economy persistently weak."

Worse for the jobless, unemployment is no longer seen as "a failure of the nation's employers to generate enough demand for workers. That was and still is the reason, but it failed as an explanation and as a prod to action," Uchitelle writes. Instead, "the unemployed are persistently blamed for their own unemployment, which eases pressure on government to help them."

Uchitelle, who covers economics for The New York Times, writes that the commonly held belief about unsuccessful job-seekers today is "if only they acquired enough education and skill" they would be hired.

Writing in the November 28th issue of The Nation, Uchitelle recalled that in Sept., 1981, 260,000 people marched on Washington to protest President Ronald Reagan's mass dismissal of the nation's air traffic controllers the previous month because they failed to heed his order to end a strike. Today, he says, the unemployed don't think in terms of mass protests.

Edward Wolff, a labor economist at New York University, says, "It is remarkable how passive the American people are about unemployment." Wolff and others blame this attitude on the decline of union power and the failure of the air traffic controllers' strike "which undermined the sympathy toward organized labor that had been characteristic of Americans since the '30s."

"People don't cooperate with each other," adds Richard Sennett, a New York University

sociologist. “They’ve lost the desire to do s and te skill that cooperation requires, so when things fall apart, they react as if it were their individual failure and are passive about it.”

Heather Boushey, a senior economist at the Center for American Progress, asks, “Why aren’t people angry about unemployment? Well, really, why aren’t people angry about declining living standards?”

The passivity of the jobless can be laid in part at the feet of President Obama who is plugging the vague American Jobs Act, which the public hopes will bring relief. “Obama has done an extraordinary job of dampening potential unrest,” says Richard Freeman, a Harvard labor economist. “The unemployed have been unwilling so far to go against the president, and he is living on that, above the fray.”

Uchitelle notes that unrest has been dampened by the disbursement of Federal disability benefits that go to more than 10 million people and the rise in the number of young people living at home, as well as house-sharing.

He suggests that the Occupy Wall Street movement might spur the unemployed “to finally speak out forcefully in their own behalf.” Uchitelle notes, however, that extended jobless pay benefits—currently a maximum of 53 weeks compared to the standard 26 weeks—“helps to relieve the hardship and to silence the recipients, some of whom fear that the extra monthly checks might be cut off if they speak out.”

A Democratic president seeking to follow in the footsteps of Franklin Roosevelt, which Obama is not, might figure that FDR’s New Deal approach worked once and likely will work again. He might call for a massive public works build-up, as the AFL-CIO currently is urging, seconded at their last parley by the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Mr. Obama might even tear a page out of President Reagan’s book and ask private sector employers to step up hiring. He might call for government to team up with the private, vocational training professionals to teach the jobless new skills for talent-short industries, expanding vocational training to new millions. Instead, Obama is spending billions to expand CIA and Pentagon military ops to chase terrorists in Africa as well as in the Middle East, just what the nation’s 25 million unemployed and underemployed don’t need and, I daresay, don’t give a damn about.

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