

Hunger on the rise in America

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The number of Americans forced to rely on food banks and soup kitchens is rising, and the ranks of the hungry are being swelled by the growing population of working poor. These are the central facts that emerge from recent surveys on hunger in the US, the latest of which was released March 10 by Second Harvest, the largest charitable hunger-relief organization in the country.

Second Harvest reported that 26 million people received food and grocery supplies in 1997 through its network of food banks. This means that more than one in ten Americans turned to charity for emergency food assistance.

Requests for such aid are rising at a rapid rate, according to a separate report issued last December by the US Conference of Mayors. The mayors' Task Force on Hunger and Homelessness surveyed 29 cities and found that appeals for food increased by an average of 16 percent in 1997. They predicted that the crisis would worsen in 1998, as the full impact of legislation dismantling welfare and slashing food stamp benefits began to be felt.

Both reports indicate that hunger is not only affecting an increasing number of people, it is spreading to wider and more diverse sections of the population. Demand for food assistance is rising most rapidly not in the impoverished inner cities, but in the suburbs. A growing proportion of those needing help to feed themselves and their families are employed, many at full-time jobs. But their wages are so low, they must choose between paying the rent, taking care of medical emergencies or buying food. And the part of the work force that faces a daily struggle just to feed itself is being enlarged by the addition of welfare recipients forced to take jobs at poverty-level wages.

The Second Harvest study reported that 38.6 percent of all emergency client households had at least one member who was working. Of these, 49 percent contained at least one person working full time. This

means more than one in five of the households requiring emergency food assistance had a full-time worker.

Other statistics in the report highlight the tragic impact of hunger on the lives of millions in the US:

- * 38 percent of emergency food clients are children under 18.

- * 36 percent of those surveyed had to choose between food and rent.

- * 37 percent had to delay medical care, and 28 percent had to choose between medical care and food.

The impact of cutbacks in food stamps was reflected in the response of 39 percent of clients, who reported that their benefits had decreased in the course of the year. Another 11 percent said their benefits had been discontinued.

The increasing polarization of American society is exemplified in the indices of growing hunger released March 10 by the Food Bank of Oakland County, Michigan, an affiliate of Second Harvest. This county to the north of Detroit is one of the wealthiest in the country. Michigan, moreover, boasts of one of the lowest state jobless levels, recording an official unemployment rate of 4.1 percent for all of 1997.

Yet the Oakland Food Bank last year provided groceries or meals to 75,000 people on a monthly basis, and 28 percent of the clients served by local agencies were working. "More and more of the people we see are the working poor," said Executive Director Helen Kozlowski. She added that in the first two months of 1998 the amount of food shipped to local feeding centers was up 10 percent from the same period last year.

The US Conference of Mayors' study coincides with the findings of Second Harvest. The mayors found that 38 percent of the adults requesting food assistance were employed, and concluded: "Low-paying jobs lead the list of causes of hunger identified by the city officials."

The report listed other causes, in the order in which

they were cited by city officials, as “unemployment and other employment-related problems, food stamp cuts, high housing costs, poverty or lack of income, and low benefits in public assistance programs.”

In addition to the millions forced to turn to charity to stave off malnutrition, millions more work long hours of overtime or hold down multiple jobs, and are themselves only a paycheck or two away from homelessness and hunger. This is the side of the US economic “success story” that is ignored by the media and the big business politicians.

Indeed, Second Harvest released its grim findings just four days after the government announced that the official jobless rate had fallen to 4.6 percent in February, matching last November’s 24-year low. Bill Clinton boasted that these were “good times” for Americans, and the prominent corporate economist Allen Sinai declared, “It’s the closest thing to worker heaven that we’ve had in decades.”

The apparent anomaly of relatively low unemployment alongside stagnant or declining living standards for masses of working people, and worsening conditions of homelessness and undernourishment, is to be explained by two major factors. The first is the semi-fictional character of the government’s jobless figures, which exclude the long-term unemployed who have given up looking for a job, while counting as employed the millions who are forced to work on a part-time or temporary basis.

The second and more fundamental factor is the impact of a corporate/government assault on the working class that has been under way for nearly two decades and continues to this day. Under Democratic as well as Republican presidents, and Congresses controlled by either party, big business has systematically destroyed decent-paying jobs and employed mass layoffs, union busting and wage-cutting to create a climate in which millions are forced to work for poverty or near-poverty pay. At the same time, the so-called social safety net has been virtually dismantled, giving corporate America a further weapon in its drive to increase the exploitation of the working class.

The creation of an expanding supply of cheap labor has been the bedrock of the corporate profit bonanza and soaring stock market, which have brought untold wealth to a small minority at the top of the economic

ladder. Thus, behind the official image of prosperity and contentment lies a growing social chasm between the ruling class and the most privileged sections of the middle class on the one side, and the masses of working people on the other.

The growth of hunger in America stands as an indictment of the profit system. That the existing economic order is incapable of providing the basic necessities of life for tens of millions, at a time of booming profits and a vast accumulation of private wealth, demonstrates the incompatibility of capitalism with the needs of society as a whole. The problem is not a lack of resources, but rather a system that subordinates the human needs of the vast majority to the further enrichment of a tiny elite.

The social crisis that rages today will, moreover, pale in comparison to the catastrophe that must inevitably develop once the speculative bubble on Wall Street is punctured. The most pressing need is for the working class to establish its own, independent political party and hammer out a socialist program that articulates the needs of workers and advances the struggle for social equality against all forms of class privilege.



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