

The Powerball frenzy and the American Dream

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That 13 Westerville, Ohio factory workers won shares in a \$161.5 million Powerball lottery prize is proof, according to the media, that the American Dream is alive and well. However, the frenzy created by the multi-state lottery over the past week suggests the opposite.

The figures are staggering. The possibility of winning a prize of close to a third of a billion dollars paid out over a period of 25 years--the Ohio group decided in advance to take the smaller lump sum amount--generated nearly \$211 million in ticket sales in four days. Huge lines formed outside many of the 45,000 retailers selling the tickets in the 20 participating states, plus the District of Columbia, particularly those in towns bordering non-Powerball states.

Greenwich, Connecticut, just over the border from New York and New Jersey, was particularly affected. Some of the city's Powerball outlets had lines of 500 people and waits of up to six hours. City officials planned to submit a bill to the state government for more than \$80,000 to cover police and public works overtime and emergency medical expenses. Greenwich retailers, besieged by ticket buyers, longed for a return to normal. One storeowner told the press that her family was praying and 'saying the rosary' that there might be a winner, so the frenzy would let up. 'We're all so tired,' she added, after 10 days of frenetic Powerball sales. A cigar storeowner commented, 'Whoever has created this Powerball monster has to do something.'

9.3 million tickets were sold in Connecticut Monday and a total of 32 million in four days. On Tuesday the state averaged 15,000 Powerball wagers per minute, or about 1 million per hour. The demand was so great that Wednesday morning at 6:00 a.m. the computer system was still processing orders from the night before and

failed to operate for two and a half hours, fraying tempers. Other states also registered record ticket purchases.

The game originated in 1987 when a number of smaller states joined together to offer multimillion-dollar prizes by pooling the money bet in each state. The multi-state lottery, which did not at first arouse great interest, took the name Powerball in 1992. In an effort to increase lagging sales, officials in November 1997 raised the odds of picking the right numbers from one in 55 million to one in 80 million, thus making likely jackpots of at least \$100 million twice a year. An Illinois couple won \$195 million in May, setting the previous US lottery record.

Of the various factors that seem to be fueling the Powerball frenzy, none is very flattering to contemporary American society. Money is accounted for everything by those who control its affairs. The size of one's bank account or stock portfolio has never been so important. Getting one's hands on as much wealth as possible, at whatever cost, is identified as the goal of human existence and the key to happiness. Cultural and moral inhibitions within the general population against lusting after riches have been broken down by two decades of officially sanctioned worship of greed and ruthlessness.

After all, in wagering on Powerball millions of middle class and working class people are taking part in an activity not so dissimilar to the speculation engaged in by the Wall Street crowd. It doesn't take a great deal of insight to see that fabulous sums are being made on the stock market by people without extraordinary intelligence or skill.

The worship of wealth has gone hand in hand with a denigration of intellect, culture and non-profit-making activities in general. The Powerball craze did not

appear out of the blue. The void which money is intended to fill has been slowly accumulating. Now it is a gaping hole in people's lives. Many no doubt cannot imagine a world in which wealth is not the measure and justification of any given activity.

The Powerball buying spree says a great deal as well about the general level of discontent. We are told constantly that things have never been better, and yet tens of millions of people are desperate to change their conditions of life. Lottery operators profit from this. As one critic notes, 'Lotteries are pretty cynical social organizations when you think about it. It takes a long peer into the darkness of human misery to be able to harness the power of human uncertainty and hopelessness and turn it into a big profit.'

Nor can it be an indicator of a healthy society that millions are prepared to attach their hopes for happiness to the workings of blind chance, and remote chance at that. In what has the American Dream consisted? In the notion that by dint of ability and hard work one could make one's way, rise socially, provide comfort for oneself and one's family.

The American Dream has always been, in fact, an illusion. If past generations did elevate themselves and improve their conditions of life, within definite limits, it was not primarily as a result of individual initiative, but of mass social struggles and the work of movements whose principles were influenced by socialist and anti-capitalist ideas.

In any event, millions now know, from their own experience and from observing the great accumulators of wealth, that persistence and determination may not get you anywhere, whereas the proper connections and being at the right place at the right time may be just the trick.

Of course, there is a reflection of economic reality in the wild illusions surrounding Powerball. Wide layers of the population no longer feel certain that any institution or government body will help out if they are financially strapped. The relentless downsizing, the cutting of benefits, the destruction of social programs and the threat to social security have all no doubt contributed to an atmosphere in which each individual feels that he is entirely on his own in a very unstable and unpredictable world.

Indeed, the guiding principle of the universe in which Powerball frenzy reigns is Every Man for Himself. The

unbridled individualism that the media presents uncritically or even glorifies is, in fact, a very disturbing phenomenon. (There has been a marked increase in gambling and casino revenues in the US in recent years. In Connecticut, for example, casino operations provide 15,000 jobs and are the fourth-largest source of government revenue. More than *\$13 billion* were wagered at the state's two Indian-owned casinos during the past fiscal year, a total that exceeds the state budget of \$11 billion. In July and August slot machine players spend \$1 million an hour at the two casinos combined.)

The media have not created the lottery mania, but they have certainly done everything in their power to encourage it, as they do every instance of backward, retrograde and selfish behavior. They make much of the fact that a group of workers won the prize. But if working people drive hundreds of miles and spend thousands of dollars on an 80 million-to-one shot, their attention is clearly not focused on grasping the real character of contemporary society and bringing about serious change. That would require beginning from the standpoint that the fate of every worker is bound up with the fate of the class as a whole.

The collapse of any viable workers organization has a great deal to do with the current problems. The lottery frenzy is a passing phenomenon, a symptom of an ideologically and morally confusing time. The building up of a genuine, politically conscious working class opposition to the status quo will go a long way in undermining the sort of fantasies that feed the Powerball craze.

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