

Unemployed in Michigan speak out

Tom Eley, Lawrence Porter
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At over 10.6 percent, the state of Michigan has the highest unemployment rate in the nation. The situation is particularly severe in metropolitan Detroit. The auto industry has purged tens of thousands of jobs, triggering a spiral of plant closures, layoffs, home foreclosures and bankruptcies throughout the region.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to laid-off workers at a state Unemployment Insurance Agency located in Detroit. In a twist of historical irony, the unemployment office is located in Cadillac Place, formerly known as the General Motors Building—the corporate headquarters of GM until 1996. The historic building, with its ornate vaulted ceilings and marble and granite interior, stands as a testament to the former wealth of the auto industry. When it was built in 1923, it was the second largest office building in the nation.

The Unemployment Insurance Agency occupies a small room on the structure's ground floor. In a sign of the times, the office has been supplemented by a cavernous "overflow" room directly across the hall, where those seeking assistance with their unemployment claims must first report to take a number and wait on one of hundreds of chairs.

Workers who spoke with the WSWWS expressed anger and sadness over the loss of their jobs and what they've seen around them in their neighborhoods. Workers did not blame themselves for their lost jobs and there was a real willingness to talk about their experiences. It was clear from their comments that they were thinking seriously about the scope of the mass suffering being inflicted as a result of the economic crisis.

Keith worked as a valet for an area hospital before being fired in December. Like many workers, he is facing difficulties receiving state unemployment insurance. He said he has been waiting for two months to receive a payment. "They say they're reviewing my case," he said. Keith said that he personally knows

many people who have lost their jobs, have been forced to declare bankruptcy, or who have had their homes foreclosed.

The WSWWS spoke with Len, who was a steelworker at Great Lakes Steel in Detroit before being laid off in early December, and his wife Pam. He is still waiting to receive unemployment payments from the state of Michigan, because, the agency says, his Social Security number was incorrect in his initial application.

Len and Pam said they have seen 10 foreclosures on their street this year. When asked where these families have gone, Ken said sadly, "away from here." "Sometimes they leave just abandoning their things in the house or in the yard," said Pam. "It's sad. You know these people." Len expressed outrage over the bailout of Wall Street, calling the banking executives "a bunch of criminals." "I've worked hard my whole life, and now I can hardly get unemployment insurance. These guys ruined the country, and they're getting everything they want."

Jesse Jones, 28, worked at ArvinMeritor for over seven years before being laid off intermittently over the past year. Jesse said, "The way they did it, I worked for three weeks and I was off for three weeks. Work for three weeks and off for three weeks. I didn't know if I would come in or not. Just waited for a call."

"It's a great problem getting your benefits," Jesse continued. "A lot of people are complaining about renewing their benefits because they have been laid off for such a long period of time. I have to admit, there were times I went without a paycheck because it is so hard to get through to an operator."

Jesse also said his benefits dropped from \$720 every two weeks to \$540, making it hard to make ends meet. "To be honest, I feel lucky that I purchased a foreclosed house for \$3,000 that was furnished and needed nothing to fix." He added that the neighborhood where he lives resembles a war-torn area because so many people are

moving out.

"That's how bad the economic situation is," added Jesse. "It was a bad neighborhood before, but even now the people in good homes are leaving. But you know, I go to the suburbs and, believe it or not, I see some of the same things going on."

Eartha Stewart worked at Great Lakes Steel for 35 years. Since she was laid off on December 7 she has received only one unemployment benefit check. Eartha said that workers have been told that the plant may reopen in March, but "none of us believe that." When asked about the mood among people she knows in Detroit, she responded simply: "Fear."

Derek and Greg are two young autoworkers who had been laid off along with about 2,000 others by a local auto parts firm called Cadence Innovation, based in Troy, Michigan. The two left the office angry. Both were denied benefits because they had not worked long enough for Cadence prior to being laid off. Derek said he was \$100 short of meeting the minimum amount paid into the unemployment insurance system required to collect benefits.

It was clear from those in the unemployment office that the crisis is affecting broad sections of the population. White and black workers were there in about equal numbers, as well as immigrant workers. Men in business suits were also present.

The WSWs spoke with Al, who was employed as a manager by a local auto parts supplier until the factory shut down most of its operations on November 1. Since then Al has been caught in a "bureaucratic nightmare," he said, trying to realize unemployment benefits from the state of Michigan.

"It really gets you," he said. "I've been paying into unemployment for how long? And now I need it, and I can't get it." Al's payments have been waylaid by an incorrect pass code for online forms, and he has been unable to speak on the phone with agency employees for assistance. "They've got thousands of people calling in. You're just on hold forever."

Al was pessimistic about his job prospects. "There's nothing out there for me," he said. "What few jobs there are, they want people with really specialized credentials."

World Socialist Web Site reporters asked laid-off workers their opinion on whether or not Barack Obama would do anything to alleviate the social crisis. There

was a general feeling that Obama should be given time, and several workers were prepared to offer excuses for the new president. However, when discussion turned to the Wall Street bailout and Obama's role in supporting it, workers expressed anger.

February 12 meeting in Ann Arbor, Michigan: "The world economic crisis and the return of history"



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