

Thousands line up at Detroit job fair

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Thousands of unemployed people attended a job fair held at Cobo Hall in downtown Detroit Thursday, hoping to put in their applications for the handful of jobs on offer.

While nominally an education and career development expo, the event attracted thousands of unemployed workers. Colleges advertising adult education programs and small-business consultants took up most of the showroom floor, but these tables had almost no clients. Inside the convention hall, however, workers stood in long lines in front of temp agencies, waiting to fill out applications.

Those at the start of the line had arrived four hours in advance. When the event opened, the line reached all the way through the thousand-foot facility. By noon the line had snaked halfway through the building again. Kecia Garlin, the event's organizer, said she had expected as many as 7,000 to attend, up from 4,000 last year. As many as 10,000 showed.

Michigan has an unemployment rate of 11.6 percent, the highest in the US. The crisis is sharper still in Detroit. The city has been devastated by the closure of factories and the systematic destruction of workers' wages and benefits.

The Ford Dealership where **Jamie Miller** used to work went from selling 300 to 600 cars per month down to 100. She's heard rumors that they will close. "My whole family works at Ford; we're all losing our jobs," she said. "I've worked every day since I was a kid. I've never known what it's like not to have a job. It feels weird to be unemployed; life is hard and everything gets boring. Every day is the same; you send out resumes, go to job fairs, and everybody turns you down. I never thought it would be like this. I would have never imagined myself here."

"We've known each other a long time," **William Philips** said. "We got laid off together, and now we're here looking for work.... We worked together at Johnson Controls, building parts for Chrysler. So when Chrysler had layoffs, so did we. It was four months ago, or maybe five, right around Thanksgiving."

Asked what the UAW had done to defend jobs, William responded "Not much of anything."

"The union sucks," Lyle Place interrupted. "They're fighting against us, not with us."

Philips continued: "Being out of work isn't easy. You go around factories and see big signs: 'Do not hand in resumes.' When you have a family, you can't just get a job at McDonald's. I've got two kids; up till now they don't really understand that things have changed. But I won't be able to keep it up forever."

Lyle interjected, "But for now we have unemployment payments, at least. It's not like *The Jungle*," he said, referring to Upton Sinclair's famous book about working class conditions in the early 20th century.

"But what if the economy gets worse; what happens when people's unemployment runs out?" a WSWS reporter asked.

"Well, then it will be like *The Jungle*. And people aren't going to stand for it."

Charles Dixon was near the front of the line waiting to enter the convention hall. He had been an employee of Digitron Packaging before he was let go.

"I have a house and four children, and all I have to live on is unemployment. Now what am I supposed to do when the unemployment checks stop coming? I just want to tell the people who run the show, 'Give me a job. I'm out here looking.' I don't have a college diploma, I know, but I can work, can't I?"

Frank Zak, a Vietnam veteran, said he lost his home and car after losing his job as a drug counselor in September 2007. "The program lost its funds, and they just let me go." He said he's temporarily living at the veterans' center.

Frank continued, "The rich have gotten richer and the poor have gotten poorer. Everybody should have a right to a job, free healthcare and education. But instead we have to stand in unemployment lines. It's the banks and big business that are responsible, but we're the ones that have to pay for it. But really this is a world problem; Japan's economy has been falling even faster than that of the US."

Mary arrived at the Cobo center around 6:30 a.m., three-and-a-half hours before the fair began. "I worked for Farmer Jack here in Detroit, it was going to be 30 years," she explained. "In July they closed down. I was laid off with 5,000 other people." She got a job in Lake Orion, approximately 45 minutes from her home, but got laid off there as well. "My son lost his job at Delphi. My godson is

unemployed. I've been to several of these jobs fairs. They're just not productive."

Mary said that she can't get a housing subsidy because she's unemployed. "I've never been late on a mortgage payment. I think the bank understands, but I'll probably lose my home."

Timothy Melson has been unemployed for three years and pays his rent through service or pick-up jobs wherever he can find them. "I've worked in security, detailing and assembly positions. I lost my job as a meat cutter at Kelamis in Eastern Market when they closed down and haven't worked a real job since."

"My brother, who worked at GM for 25 years, has been laid off. Now he has no health insurance. He's afraid to even step outside in case something happens to him."

"The homeless situation in this city makes you want to cry," he continued. "I've been in this city 35 years. Once you—everybody—could go to the factory and get a job."

"Now I see people everywhere sleeping on doorsteps and street corners. I pass them and give them money even when I don't have any, thinking that maybe they'll have some hope for the future. I met a homeless man on the bus the other day and invited him to live with me, and I'm struggling to pay my own rent."

Angelo Lawler is a college student who has been looking for part-time work. "I've searched in retail stores, malls, everywhere. I gave out 14 resumes here. I don't hear anything back. And my mom was just laid off after 16 years with DHL."

Angelo's friend **Germany Bennett** has moved in with his parents to stay off the street. "Detroit's an automobile city. Our grandparents moved up from the South to find jobs, but there are none now. I have family with businesses, and they can't afford to hire me."

Nakyia Cox works for a security company, but has been seeking another job for over a year. "I've given out several tons of applications, trying to find a job with more benefits and stability."

"I'm doing better than others in my family, though. My brother and sister worked in the auto industry; they're both laid off. My mom lost her job at GM after working there 15 years."

"Everywhere you look," she added, "you see homeless shelters filling up. Friends and family moving in together, not finding jobs. Without jobs, without credit, people can't pay their bills."

Joy Williams had worked as a personal banker until a few months ago. "I saw this starting while working at the bank. People would start accounts with less money, and started overdrawing all the time. Families started moving in together."

"Now," said Joy, "people are homeless, and starving. Unemployment is high in Detroit, and especially among African-Americans. I totally disagree with the bank bailouts. There are too many hungry and too many homeless; they should be bailing out the people, not the banks."

"My husband had taken a buyout from GM one year before I met him. When Countrywide raised our interest rates to 11 percent, we had to walk away from the home where we met each other, and had our first child."

Aaron McKee lost his sales position when the furniture company he worked for went out of business. "Furniture's a high ticket item: with credit rough, sales dropped right off."

"I have ten years of experience in sales and marketing," said Aaron. "I can't even count the job applications I've submitted." He's been unemployed eight months. "My wife works in the auto industry. We've had to budget and sacrifice, going from two incomes to one. I just hope when she comes home every day that she still has a job."

Kecia Garlin, an organizer of the career fair, works for the Detroit Workforce Development Department (DWDD). "We have a lot of homeless people coming in with foreclosure situations," she said. "I try hard to find them housing. The city's developing houses, but nobody can afford them. People are taking toilets, plumbing, all kinds of things out of these buildings because they are just sitting empty."

Kecia also noted that she's seeing more homeless teenagers and children, often without parents. "Our office is right across the street from Chandler Park. We see 5 to 10 new kids every day, and 25 to 30 every week come into our office. The parents are out looking for work. The Detroit public school system is going to close another 52 schools. The problem's a lot larger than we realize or recognize."

Layoffs have decimated Kecia's own department. It once had 25 people and now they are down to 13. The city changed their workweek from five days to six to make up for the cuts. "We've lost half the people in our office, even though need is through the roof," she explained. "Most of us are contracted and we don't have health care benefits. As a contractor for the city, I do better than most, but I've got a mortgage, insurance, bills and two kids in college. I'm lucky, my husband provides healthcare."



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