

Workers and students in Los Angeles speak to the WSWS

“I’ve never experienced a worse economy”

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The official unemployment rate in California is now more than 10 percent (see "As unemployment hits double digits, California lurches towards depression"). Wide layers of the population are already suffering.

A team of WSWS reporters visited a Los Angeles County social service agency, CalWorks, in Norwalk, a suburb southeast of Los Angeles and spoke with people applying for food stamps and other benefits.

"There are going to be a lot of mad people ..."

Derek, an 18-year-old community college student who lives with his mother and his siblings, described how the crisis has affected his family:

"Everything's going down, basically. Effectively, it's harder to find jobs now; everybody's getting laid off, everybody's getting fired from jobs."

"In my house it's harder to pay the bills now because my brother just got laid off ... he was stocking boxes for a grocery store. My mother and sister are still working. We all come together to help each other out. If one of us falls off, we all fall off. Everybody's income is important. We just have to hope for the best and hope we get through it.

"I believe we're going to be in a crisis for a while. There's going to be a lot of mad people. Say, if you got fired or laid off today and your family depended on your income. You got a whole house full of angry people now. So imagine the whole world, everybody's getting laid off, you got a whole lot of mad people.

"I think it's crazy to continue bailing out the banks; it's going to cause more problems. The banks are losing money, some banks are closing, and everybody's worried about their money. If you can't depend on your bank, who can you depend on? I know a lot of people are taking money out of their banks and moving them to a bank that they think is better, one that somebody referred them to ... I don't think the bank bailout is fair at all. A lot of regular people have no banks; the regular people keep the banks in business."

"They won't put us in a home because you only qualify for emergency assistance once in a lifetime"

Ronnie has been living in his car with his wife and two daughters for several months. A few days before the interview with the WSWS, Ronnie was arrested while buying some clothes and trying to pay with a check that lacked sufficient funds. His wife paid his bail with the last money they had. She was appealing to CalWorks for emergency help.

"My wife and I have been homeless since November of 2008. Job-wise it has been real hard... being fired really puts an impact on people's lives. I have my wife and I have two children, a one-year-old and a two-year-old. My two-year-old here is temporarily disabled; she had surgery on her hip and was in a body cast for about eight months.

"Being homeless is a real struggle. We ran out of money and now the social service is only helping so much. They won't put us into a home because you only qualify for emergency assistance once in a lifetime; in fact how many times do people go through a crisis? They go through a crisis every year regardless of how the economy is, good or bad. My wife and I have been struggling a lot. That same day I got arrested my wife bailed me out with all the money that we had left, and now we're left with nothing, and not knowing where my kids are going to stay tonight, it's real heartbreaking.

"My wife's dropping off a quarterly report at CalWorks; you have to report your income. They give us \$500 a month. And how is that helping us? I mean it is helping at the time that we get it, but it goes within days. It is county money and my wife and I have both been to college- we both went to Cerritos College. Things all took a downfall because of the working environment, because nobody's hiring. I was laid off from the Conservation Corps in Long Beach, it's a nonprofit organization. Things with the economy are real bad now and I know the government should be able to help us more than they are.

"I didn't even vote for Barack Obama, or for anybody else, because in actuality life has its own take. Life is what it is. Everybody says it's good to vote because your vote can make a difference, when in actuality they're all fighting for the same thing. Once they [the politicians] get the job... there's always somebody higher than them. There's always somebody that tells somebody what to do.

"Regardless of what you say in the campaigns... 'I can promise you all kinds of things because I'm running and really from my heart want to do them,' but once you get voted in, and now you're the president, there's somebody above you- nobody knows who it is- telling you, no, you're going to do it this way, whether you like it or not. It's the power of the United States, which is money and greed. They don't want to help you; they don't want to lower the costs of things.

"My wife and I have college educations, but no one is hiring. We can't find a job because we can't find help to get into a home, a stable home for our kids. You know for my daughter to get her therapy and all that, you can't do that, they don't take that into consideration."

"I never experienced a worse economy"

"It all started with the Clinton administration"

Maria, 53, currently has a Department of Defense job in Germany. She was at CalWorks with her daughter.

"Less than a year ago I stopped working for Wal-Mart. First of all, they treat their employees terribly, no medical insurance, and, well, I'm sure you've heard about Wal-Mart. When I started a year ago, people were still buying regular goods, things like perfume, stuff like that. Towards the end of the year that I was there, people were purchasing nothing but food and medicine. No luxuries, I've seen it, they would spend two or three hundred dollars just on food items alone, and only those things that were on special.

"And you had a lot of small business people that would go there, because in the morning we'd bring in all the items that we were going to get rid of, and so they'd sell for below market value. Big bottles of Crisco oil would sell for 30 cents, and you saw lots of small businesses going in there and buying cases so that they could benefit themselves. The point is though, you see a lot of people—and I'm not talking about just lower class, I'm talking about middle class—they're just going in there and they're literally just surviving. And they would always talk about how bad things were going, and people had lost their jobs.

"It was really sad to see because, especially during Christmas, that should be a time when people are happy, but people were pretty moody. A lot of people were worried; they were in a bad mood because they couldn't give their kids what they wanted to give them. You know it affects people in every way, psychologically, spiritually, in every way. They were letting go of workers left and right.

"I just came here from Germany a month ago—I'm here to get some surgery done—and it was even hitting home over there, a lot of Germans are feeling the crunch too.

"I've been going back and forth because my daughter's husband is stationed there. I saw this coming a long time ago, so I decided to apply for a job over there with the Department of Defense.

"I graduated from college. I'm 53 years old, so I'm from the generation where the women would stay home and raise their families and the husband would go out and work. When I had my kids, I had no job skills; I had no computer skills. I didn't know what it was like to work at a job, so that's when I decided it's time for me to get out there and get into the real world and learn how to do a couple of things. So that's when I was told, 'If you can work at Wal-Mart, you can work anywhere.'

"Frankly, I don't see it getting better. I think it will take years before we come out of this mess. Well, you see the trend, the real estate prices; we haven't seen the worst of that yet. They're coming up with this stimulus package plan, but, wow, I don't know. I don't see how it's going to benefit anybody except the big companies. You see what happened with the money that was given to Wall Street and they didn't even know where all those millions went.

"I did not vote for President Obama. Actually, Obama is stuck in the middle of it all. And I honestly think that even Bush was kind of stuck in the middle of it. But he didn't help it either. He just made it worse, I think. I think it all started way back in the Clinton administration. But that's just my opinion."

Eduardo emigrated from Mexico 40 years ago. Now he and his wife are being threatened with the foreclosure of their home. He works as a janitor in a local supermarket and earns \$9.00 an hour. He lives in Norwalk with his wife, an adult daughter and a teenage relative. He is the sole wage earner for the household.

"The state of this economy is affecting everyone. People either have no jobs or earn very little. I know quite a few people that have lost their jobs, including in my family. That is why I am in danger of losing our home. My wife is not working right now; she is recovering from a hernia operation, and we cannot afford the mortgage any more.

"We became involved in a subprime loan. When the payments reset, our mortgage more than doubled from \$900 to \$2000 a month. I told the bank that the most that I could afford right now is \$1000, but they want the entire amount. My weekly take home check is \$333 a week, so you can imagine what my family and I are going through. I am sixty years old. I should be preparing to retire in five years.

"I came to the US forty years ago. I became a citizen in 1975. In all that time, I've never experienced a worse economy. It was always possible to get a job. Things are very different now, and many Mexican immigrants are returning to Mexico, even though the economic conditions in Mexico are worse in some ways. Anyway, this is not just a Latino issue; it is a white issue and a black problem. All people are being hit by this economy.

"I don't think that the government plan to help home owners applies to me. People that I know comment on how unjust all this is. Money flows into the banks, but nobody knows what the banks have done with all that money. I think it has gone to all the big people.

"I have some hope that President Obama will improve the economy. He said he would change things. Right now I am just waiting to see how things develop."



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