# 50,000 line up for housing aid in Detroit

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An estimated 50,000 residents of Detroit filed into Cobo Hall convention center on Wednesday seeking assistance to pay utility bills and keep from being evicted from their homes. City officials, who expected around 3,000 people to apply for the aid, were overwhelmed by the turnout.

In a scene reminiscent of the crowds of jobless workers who lined up for free soup during the Great Depression, a queue of tens of thousands of workers and unemployed people wound around the downtown arena. Young mothers pushing baby carriages, disabled workers in wheelchairs, senior citizens and throngs of young workers and youth stood for hours waiting. Many had slept on the streets the previous evening to be the first served.

Several people fainted during the wait and were treated by medical personnel on the scene. By 11:30 a.m., Detroit's mayor, David Bing, made a public appeal for citizens to stop coming to Cobo Hall. Hundreds of police, including officers from Detroit's special Gang Unit, stood guard at the entrances to hold back the crowd.

Several people were reportedly injured in the rush to enter the building after the police finally opened the doors around noon. Those in line were funneled through the glass doors and quickly sped toward a table where they were handed applications and told they had to fill them out and deposit them in boxes before a 2 p.m. deadline.

Wednesday was the last day for residents to apply for the city's Homeless Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program (HPRP). The program, funded by a $15.2 million grant from the Obama administration's stimulus program, will provide assistance to only about 3,400 people, according to Constance Bell, a spokesperson for the program. In addition to the 50,000 applications given out Wednesday, an additional 30,000 were distributed previously, Bell said. This means that only about one out of 23 people who applied will see any money.

The large turnout was based on fast-spreading rumors that the city was providing $3,000 to low-income families in need of aid. Such is the level of economic desperation in the city—where the official jobless rate is 29 percent and more than one-third of the population lives below the official poverty line—that tens of thousands showed up.

The vast majority will not qualify for the aid, the city spokesperson admitted. The HPRP program only provides temporary assistance to pay utility bills for those who are already homeless or facing pending evictions or foreclosures. Moreover, it will be paid only to those who are able to keep up their housing payments after receiving the aid. No money will be used to make mortgage payments.

Rather than informing those who showed up that their efforts were likely to be in vain, city officials continued to hand out and collect applications for the program. Their overwhelming concern was to prevent an angry outburst from people who had suffered the indignity of waiting for hours and being manhandled by the cops.

The lack of preparation and disorganization at the event is an indication of how distant government officials are from the reality confronting the working class and the extent of the social crisis. The 80,000 households that applied for assistance represent roughly a third of the city's population.

The real jobless rate in Detroit is much higher than the official figure of 29 percent, due to the tens of thousands who have given up looking for nonexistent jobs. This crisis has been exacerbated by the forced bankruptcies and restructuring of General Motors and Chrysler by the Obama administration, which, with the support of the United Auto Workers, destroyed thousands of jobs and slashed the wages and benefits of auto workers and retirees.

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Particularly striking were the thousands of young workers lining up for assistance. Thirty years ago, a large number of these young people would have been employed in city's many auto factories. Since 1970, however, the city has lost three-quarters of its manufacturing jobs, wiping out the jobs of 250,000 workers. Today, there is nothing but low-paying jobs for young workers, without the slightest economic security.

Last month, tens of thousands of workers lined up at the state fair grounds in Detroit after the regional gas and electric company, DTE Energy, announced it was offering help to distressed homeowners and renters. According to a report last month in the *Detroit News*, Michigan's two largest power companies, DTE Energy and Consumers Energy, last year cut off heating to a total of 181,000 customers. DTE has already shut off energy to 115,000 households, a pace that will far surpass last year's 142,000 cutoffs.

Detroit—which used to boast one of the highest rates of home ownership in the nation--had the top home foreclosure rate in 2006 and 2007, and still ranks among the highest in the US.

Detroit's economic decline has been long in the making. The living standards won by auto workers gave the Motor City the highest per capita income in the nation in the 1950s. The last three decades, beginning with the Chrysler bailout of 1979-80, has seen an unrelenting assault on the working class by big business and the government, culminating in Obama's restructuring of GM and Chrysler. The deindustrialization of Detroit was symbolic of the shift by American capitalism from manufacturing to the most parasitic forms of financial speculation.

At 15.2 percent, the state of Michigan has the highest unemployment rate in the US. Over the past decade, as the auto industry was downsized, Michigan lost 870,000 jobs. The number is expected to rise to one million by late next year.

Even as the demand for social services increases, state and city governments are slashing spending for housing, education and health care to cope with large budget deficits. The Obama administration, which handed trillions to Wall Street, has offered no similar bailout to the states or the estimated 15 million people who are now unemployed.

The state of Michigan—facing a $2.8 billion deficit—is slashing programs across the board. On the same day that thousands lined up for housing assistance, Detroit's Democratic Mayor David Bing, a multi-millionaire businessman, announced a "turnaround" plan to cut $500 million over the next two years by permanently shrinking city government, selling off public assets, privatizing and cutting services, and laying off more than 1,000 city workers.

The economic crisis is bringing much of the rest of the country to similar straits as in Detroit and Michigan. Scenes of economic desperation are increasingly common throughout the country, with free clinics attracting crowds of thousands in California, Texas and other states, and thousands of people lining up for a handful of available jobs.

The US is experiencing a social crisis unparalleled since the 1930s. In the face of this crisis, the Obama administration is offering no serious relief to the tens of millions of working people who face economic ruin.

The tragic scene that unfolded Wednesday in Detroit underscores the derisory character of Obama's so-called "stimulus" and "recovery" schemes. The White House has rejected out of hand any public works program to put the unemployed to work. Instead, all of its policies—from the Wall Street bailout, to the attack on auto workers, to its plans to slash health care costs—are designed to protect the wealth and power of the financial elite.

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