

Thousands of Detroit-area unemployed attend “over 50” job fair

A WSWS reporting team
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Thousands of unemployed workers attended a job fair August 25 in Southfield, Michigan that was sponsored by employmentguide.com, a job search web site, and the American Association for Retired People (AARP).

The event, billed as an “over 50” job fair, attracted a wide cross-section of people, testifying to the depth of the employment crisis in Michigan. The state suffers the second highest unemployment rate in the US. Some 5,000 people are estimated to have attended.

According to the AARP, unemployment among those over age 50 is higher than at any time in the past 60 years. The number of workers over age 50 who have been unemployed for 12 months or more is 50 percent higher now than in 2009. This marks the largest annual increase for any age group.

Wednesday’s event featured AARP workshops teaching job-seekers how to “brand themselves.” However, there were only a handful of employers with job openings, and most of those required advanced training and experience. From the private sector, a few companies were looking for telemarketers. These were mostly debt collection agencies, especially consumer debt collectors.

There were some government agencies present, including the Department of Homeland Security and the US Border Patrol, several police agencies, and the state of Michigan, which was largely seeking registered nurses.

The WSWS interviewed unemployed workers attending the job fair. Their stories reflect the dire situation facing older workers in the Detroit area almost two years into the recession.

Cheryl, a former Ford Motor office worker, told the

WSWS, “I was laid off during the last downsizing. For five years I was a Kelly services temp at Ford and never was hired in as a regular employee. Before that I worked for Comerica Bank, but was laid off during their downsizing.

“I have been working a part-time job at IKEA, but I can’t make ends meet with that. That is because I have been working mostly only 12 hours a week for the past four years,” she explained.

“I have been regularly coming to these job fairs. But at all the job fairs I have been going to there are mostly schools trying to get you to take courses. I am only four classes away from my bachelor’s degree in interior design, but I just have no way to finish.

“Recently I got a notice saying I owe \$50,000 for my school loans. They calculate that my monthly payment right now would be \$650 a month. There is absolutely no way I can pay that. If I get what is called an abeyance, the interest is just going to keep building up, making that monthly payment even higher.”

“I really opposed the bailout of the banks,” Cheryl stated. “I thought, ‘Why should they bail out the banks when people are losing houses and families can’t make ends meet?’ I have been unable to find a full-time job for eight years. I don’t think it will get better. They say it is getting better, but it is really getting worse and worse every year, month after month.”

Sharon Johnigan, a laid-off auto parts worker, came to the job fair along with her husband Al. She told the WSWS, “I was a seat builder with Lear Corporation. I don’t have a really good education. Most of the jobs at the fair are nothing I am qualified for—health care, AARP, Comcast.

“They just started calling people back at Lear this week,” she added. “Hopefully I’ll be one of the ones called back.”

But even if Sharon returns to her position at Lear, the terms of her employment will likely be much worse than before, she said.

“We are fighting right now to keep our money. Lear is outsourcing a lot of jobs. From hearsay at our union meeting, the company and the UAW are in negotiations to make us take a pay cut and to pay for our own health care, which is free now,” she explained.

Joyce has been out of work since 2007 when she was laid off as an administrative assistant at a plumbing company. She told the WSWS, “I was just widowed from my husband of 34 years. He got lung cancer and it went to his brain. I want to make it clear to everyone that I have not been able to receive one penny from all these government programs that are supposed to help people out.”

She said her husband applied for Social Security benefits when he became ill and was awarded them last September. However, the government told her that there would be a six-month waiting period before he could receive any money.

“I only received a total of \$155 from Social Security for my husband’s death,” Joyce explained, “Because he passed away before the six-month waiting period was up and before we had received any money, they told me I was entitled to nothing as a widow until I reach age 60.”

She said she had tried applying for disability benefits, but was turned down. “Even though I have had several orthopedic surgeries I was deemed ‘borderline disabled’ and denied benefits.”

Joyce spoke about her struggle to hold on to her home.

“We live in a nice home on an acre of land in Clarkston. We were underwater on the mortgage, so with my husband ill, we got a loan modification through the Obama mortgage program. It was a trial loan modification and we were able to keep up with the payment every month. But even with the modification, the loan payment was \$3,000 a month.

“But now, I don’t get \$3,000 a month. My current

income is \$1,200 a month from unemployment and \$1,300 a month from my husband’s disability check. And now the mortgage company is stalling on making the temporary loan modification permanent because my husband passed away. They are saying that since I don’t have a job they can’t sustain the modification and the payment will go back up.

“And I can’t get help with the health insurance subsidy for laid-off workers that was supposed to be in Obama’s stimulus program. They say I am not eligible for the COBRA assistance [for health insurance] because my husband left the company by death. I have to come up with \$659 a month for health care coverage on my own.”

Cynthia Seabrooks was laid off from a small auto parts manufacturer. She told the WSWS, “I exhausted all my unemployment compensation in May. I have bills and it is hard if you can’t find a job and no one is helping. What can you do? Every job at the fair requires some kind of training, even for a security guard. If it wasn’t for my dad, right now I would be on the street with my kids.”



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