

30,000 line up for housing aid in Georgia

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Some 30,000 people lined up in sweltering heat in a working class suburb of Atlanta, Georgia on Wednesday seeking applications for a few hundred subsidized housing slots. The massive turnout in the town of East Point, whose entire population is only 40,000, surprised and overwhelmed local authorities, who called in police in riot gear to control the angry crowd.

Sixty-two were injured and at least 20 were hospitalized, mostly from heat exhaustion, including a baby who went into a seizure. Two children were reportedly trampled. No arrests were reported, although witnesses say police used Taser electrical “stun guns” on the crowd.

The events in East Point reveal the chasm between the scale of social distress in the US and the pittance of aid on offer from the government, as well as social tensions that are at the breaking point across the nation. A similar scene took place ten months ago when 50,000 Detroit-area residents lined up based on rumors of assistance in housing bills. (See: “50,000 line up for housing aid in Detroit”.)

Television footage captured images reminiscent of the soup lines of the Great Depression, or even the bread riots that led to the Russian Revolution. In one scene, a local housing worker stood on a car to hand out applications. He was immediately surrounded by the crowd, hundreds of pleading arms outstretched toward him for applications.

“It was crazy,” Marissa White told the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*. “It was a sight to see.” She said that police put up barricades, but the crowd “knocked them down in 30 minutes.”

“People are desperate. They need housing,” resident Sharon Owens told a local news station. “This provides somebody with a last hope. If they can get their name on the waiting list, it’s a last sliver of hope.”

People began to gather two days earlier for Section 8

housing applications, a federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) program that helps low-income families make rent and mortgage payments in the private market.

In all about 13,000 applications were distributed. These began to be returned on Thursday from residents of Georgia—and even other states. “People are driving here from all over the country,” an astonished CNN correspondent noted. “There are people here from New York, from Chicago.”

Accepted applications will be placed on a waiting list for only about 655 units of subsidized housing. For the entire state of Georgia, population 10 million, only 15,000 households are currently receiving Section 8 assistance. To be eligible, a household must earn less than \$16,000 per year.

East Point announced the applications not because it has new public housing available, but because its waiting list had grown short. Officials with the local housing authority said that it would be at least six months before any vacancies emerge and that individuals could spend more than a decade on the waiting list.

East Point is a largely African American suburb of Atlanta. The median household income in 2000 was just under \$32,000, about \$20,000 lower than for the US as a whole. According to one news account, however, the crowd was comprised primarily of the “working poor”—those who have jobs but do not earn enough to cover basic expenses, including housing.

Georgia has been one of the states hardest hit by the housing crisis, which was set into motion by the predatory lending practices pushed by the major Wall Street banks. This has resulted in tens of millions of homeowners owing far more on their mortgages than their homes’ value. Unemployment and stagnating wages mean that homeowners can no longer afford these payments. But while the Obama administration

has handed over trillions to cover the bankers' bad debts dollar for dollar, it has done nothing to address the housing crisis.

The situation has been exacerbated by the shutdown of public housing over the last three decades. Like subprime mortgages, the promotion of Section 8—which primarily benefits private landlords and the banking industry—was used as a “market” means of addressing the housing crisis. It has failed miserably.

According to the *Journal-Constitution*: “At the same time the recession has pushed many middle-class families out of their homes, the closure of several large public housing projects—Grady, Bowen and Capital Homes [in Atlanta]—during the last decade has left many lower-income families with few housing options as well, elevating vouchers to something akin to lottery winnings.” East Point is itself in the process of shutting down three of its five public housing operations. (See: “Atlanta homeless shelters strain under economic crisis”.)

The events in East Point expose the claims put forward by the White House that this has been a “summer of recovery.” The opposite is the case. The level of social misery in the US has reached a point where any hint of social assistance will result in crowds gathering, the threat of police violence, and the possibility of open revolt.

The austerity policies of the Obama administration and Congress will only aggravate the situation. At every level of government, programs that in any way provide for the social needs of the population have been targeted for cuts or elimination.

The buildup of social misery in cities and towns across the US is the necessary byproduct of the vast accumulation of wealth by the financial aristocracy, a process overseen by both major political parties.

“Atlanta is an economically polarized city,” the BBC notes. “[I]t has the fastest growing number of millionaires in the US but also has the third-highest proportion of people living below 50 percent of the poverty line.” Similar conditions prevail in countless major urban centers in the US.

With a few exceptions, the American news media did not report on the events in East Point. Most national television networks did not cover it on Wednesday, and the major US dailies—the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*—had not

written on it as of Thursday evening.

Ignoring what took place in East Point will not make the conditions that produced it go away.

Everywhere similar social conditions predominate: massive joblessness, the foreclosure crisis, hunger, and the daily humiliations of want, on the one side, and, on the other, the amassing of staggering personal fortunes. These are the preconditions for a social explosion.



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