

Detroit area jobless speak out

“If the recession is over, show me”

Shannon Jones
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Thousands of job seekers turned out Wednesday in the Detroit enclave of Hamtramck for the third annual Back to Work Job Fair. The event was sponsored by the Arab American and Chaldean Council (ACC) and Hamtramck Jobs Education and Training (JET) Program, in partnership with governmental agencies.

Hundreds were already waiting in line long before the official 10 a.m. start. By the time the event began the lineup stretched around the block. Police had to block several lanes of Joseph Campau Avenue to make room for the crowd.

There were about 40 employers participating. Low wage employers including Walmart and McDonald's had tables, along with several local banks and hospitals. Military and police recruiters were also on hand.

The huge turnout highlights the desperate conditions facing the unemployed in the Detroit Metropolitan area. Despite the claims of an economic recovery, mass joblessness persists in wide areas of the country. Michigan's official unemployment rate was 10.3 percent in March, the most recent month for which figures are available. Real unemployment is much higher, as much as 50 percent in the city of Detroit, by some estimates.

The WSWS spoke to participants about their experiences. Many workers said they had exhausted their unemployment benefits after searching in vain for work for months.

Frank Edwards, an unemployed autoworker, worked at American Axle for 13 years, from 1994-2007, before being laid off. He has worked intermittently the past

year as a temporary worker at Ford Motor.

“We worked in a pool, and they would call you when they needed you,” stated Edwards. “I did this for four months. But they don't want you to become a permanent worker because they don't want to pay the benefits. It's horrible. You work 89 days then they lay you off. Again, 89 days, then they lay you off. That's how they treat you these days.

“I saw on the news that GM, Ford and Chrysler will be hiring,” continued Edwards. “People will be lined up around the block to get those jobs, because things are so difficult.

“People are fighting to get \$8 an hour jobs.”

Ahmed Al-Ammari of the American Chaldean Council, the event's sponsor, told the WSWS, “We have about 44 employers here, but we are not talking about more than a couple hundred jobs. But you see the number of job seekers, there are four or five thousand who are here now. A lot of employers require some kind of certificate. But there are a lot of people in our area who don't even have a high school diploma. A large percentage of employers demand a minimum of a high school diploma.

“The situation for job seekers is very tough. It is like fishing a sea with only three or four fish.

“When you look at the official unemployment rate, that only counts people receiving unemployment. At least 80 percent of the people here today are not even receiving unemployment. They say the unemployment rate has dropped to nine percent. But are the people not receiving unemployment being counted? Are they included in that nine percent? In my opinion the real unemployment rate in Michigan is double or triple the

official rate.

“These cuts that are coming through from the federal government and the state are going to make things difficult for those who are already suffering. They have lost their unemployment and they could lose their DHS (Department of Human Services) support. People are getting sick because of depression. And what are the politicians doing? Cutting taxes for the rich and cutting assistance for the poor. They are making the gap between the upper class and the lower class bigger. They say they are cutting taxes for the rich to create jobs. But it is not working. It hasn’t worked for the last six years, so why is it going to work now?”

Yvonne, whose unemployment benefits are almost exhausted, said, “People are going to fight. I’m tired of being unemployed. I’m tired of the politicians taking my money, taxing my dollars.

“All these people losing their homes. It’s hard. It’s hard to survive out here. I’m lucky right now. My unemployment is about to run out and I have no idea where I’m going to go. I have family, you know, but half of them don’t even have work.”

Joseph Carr said he had been out of work for several years. “My factory closed. They bought two machines and closed within six months. I was making \$12.25 an hour with benefits, and all of a sudden they closed, and I lost everything.

“Being out of work sucks. There is nothing out here. You’re overqualified—they are not hiring. You’re not qualified enough—they are not hiring. I am fed up.

“Right now, without the help of the state of Michigan, we would be on the street. I get food stamps and a little money to pay my bills.”

Another older job seeker said he had been without dental care for five years. “I lost my job due to medical reasons, but now trying to find a job is just incredible. I am looking for anything at this point. I used to go in gung-ho, but now I can’t help going with negative thoughts creeping up. Look at all the people, you get lost in a sea of resumes.

“That trickle-down theory is not working. I still see people being foreclosed on. That is incredible.”

Abdul Kashem, an immigrant from Bangladesh said, “I was a textile worker in my country. Then I moved to

New York. I was working for six months, but the housing cost was too high, \$1,600 a month. I couldn’t afford to support my family. So I moved to Michigan. Here the housing costs are less, but I can’t find work. I haven’t been working since December. There have been no prospects.”

Erika Hicks an unemployed nurse said, “I am looking for work as a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN). I have been looking for about a year, ever since I got laid off from a company that was sold to Oakwood Hospital.

“There are a million other people applying for the same job. It is hard. Then you will get a response saying ‘we have found someone who is more qualified.’ How? I’ve been doing this for 13 years.

“There used to be a high demand for nurses. When I first got a job it was easy to get work through a temporary agency. Now, not even the temp agencies are hiring. I called yesterday, and she told me it is a real drought.

“If the recession is over, show me. All these people out here don’t have jobs. They cut my benefits...80 or 90 dollars in January. I don’t have health insurance. I have to use free clinics.”



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