

Workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, speak on jobs crisis

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Lawrence is among the poorest cities in Massachusetts, with an official jobless rate of over 18 percent. Once a thriving mill town, the city now stands on the brink of bankruptcy. The city's fiscal year 2012 budget includes deep cuts to spending on services for city residents.

Last year, the public works department budget, which includes sanitation services as well as building, vehicle, parks and street maintenance, was cut by 10 percent—more than \$1 million. Only \$250,000 of this is restored in the 2012 budget.

From 2009 to 2011, the library budget was cut by 11.4 percent, or \$113,000, and the 2012 budget will restore only \$13,000. The cemetery budget will also see a 10 percent cut in 2012. City workers are facing a 22.6 percent cut to their non-contributory pensions after a 15 percent cut the previous year.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers and young people in Lawrence about the unemployment crisis in the city and the continuing attacks on jobs and social conditions taking place under the Obama administration.

Hector Gonzales attends Hudson College in Salem and was recently laid off from UPS. Hector told the WSWWS, "I was working at UPS part-time while I was going to college. They laid a lot of people off during peak season. There are no jobs out there. Everyone is looking for a job. People have two jobs and there are others struggling to look for one.

"I don't know how I am going to end up paying for college because I'm taking loans right now. Obama gave everyone false hopes saying he was going to change everything, but it was just lies."

Lawrence Massachusetts is known as the "Immigrant City." It traces its roots to 1840 as one of the nation's first planned industrial cities, becoming a magnet for workers from around the world. The waves of immigrants coming to Lawrence to work in the mills began with the Irish, followed by French Canadians, the English, and

Germans in the late 1800s.

At the turn of the century and the early 1900s, Italians, Poles, Lithuanians, and Syrians arrived. Immigrants from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic began to arrive in the mid- to late 1900s, with the newest arrivals coming from Vietnam and Cambodia. Today, the population of around 70,000 is predominantly Hispanic.

The once bustling downtown area of the city is now dotted with shuttered businesses. In virtually every direction, one sees mills that once employed thousands now standing idle and in various states of disrepair.

Jorge Santana is a social worker who has worked with young people in the area. He told the WSWWS, "It's worrisome. The economy is definitely eroding any hope of us getting back on track, or where we should be.

"When you look at the growth in disparity and the gap in wages—certain parts of our economy are growing, but they are just very small parts. For the top 1 percent it is growing, so they are buying more and more stuff, which tells me that there are resources being created but they are just not being distributed."

Asked if he felt Obama was doing anything to help the situation, he said, "With the rollback that he did on the whole green thing, it actually really worries me in the sense that there could have been job creations in the green market. Just like cars and television, that's going to be the next new thing. So for me, you are cutting back and shifting costs back to the individuals who can't afford it. You are making it cheaper for companies and individuals who already have lots of wealth to just make more wealth.

"I think that Obama is just getting bullied around, and he is trying play the role of peacemaker too much. My opinion is that as long as you have one person who is willing to take advantage or kick you in the back while you are down, you can't really play by those rules because that person is always going to have an advantage. So the more he keeps giving in to it, the more they are

going to want. It comes to a point where you need to make a stand—whether you’re right or wrong, you need to make a stand.”

Referring to the Depression of the 1930s and the measures taken by Roosevelt, Jorge said, “I think back to a place where we did get back on track, things like the Perkins loans, we built dams all over the country; those are real investments. You are putting money back into local communities, not these huge corporations that are very clustered and send their money away anyway.”

He explained how he had become disillusioned while working as a social worker dealing with young people. “I was specifically focused on working with adolescents, so I would see a hundred adolescents in a year, all dealing with the same issues, and my job was just to put band-aids on. The next kid would come in—different past, different family, different set of situations—but all dealing with the same issues systemically. It just got really frustrating because it comes to a point where it doesn’t work.

“A professor once gave me an analogy where you are on a river with a boat, a child comes floating by, you pick it out and put it in the boat, a couple of minutes later along comes another, you do the same. After a while the boat’s filled so what you need to do is jump in the river and figure out where all the kids are coming from.”

Discussing the jobs crisis with area residents, WSWs reporters pointed to the Program of the Socialist Equality Party, particularly the demand for jobs as one of the basic socialist rights of the working class.

Syisha Garcia, 21, said she hadn’t had a job in three years. “I was working at a collection agency,” she told us. “They let me go after six months. I was pregnant and they didn’t want to give me six weeks off. Now I’m collecting benefits, but I would much rather be working. I get about \$200 each two weeks, and out of that I have to pay for food, clothes, everything.

“A lot of my friends are in the same situation. There are so many possibilities of things that need to be done as far as jobs go, but they’re not being picked up. They always say you’re not qualified. I’ve been to these jobs fairs. You put in six or so applications and you never hear anything back.

“When Obama came in, I thought things would be different—that he would understand minorities, etc. But I haven’t seen anything change. I still see so many people living from check to check.

“I graduated from high school, did some college, but I can’t find anything. I think there is discrimination against young mothers. There are a lot of women here in

Lawrence who are single mothers, and they can’t find jobs.

“When I go to apply for a job—and I’ve tried fast-food places, everything—they ask: do you have a babysitter, do you have a reliable ride to work? It’s ridiculous. I wouldn’t be applying for the job if I didn’t have these things.

“I think having a job is a definite right. It’s everyone’s right to earn decent money and a living. You’d think in a town like this, near Boston, things would have picked up. But if you look around on this street, about a quarter of the businesses are closed, empty. There are opportunities to put people to work right here, but it’s not being done.”

Luis Martinez has had a series of heart attacks and strokes and is currently disabled.

“In 1969, when I came here from Puerto Rico with my mother, there were plenty of jobs,” he said. “In the 1970s here, if you were walking down the street past the mills they would grab you off the streets to see if you could work in the mill.

“I’m disabled now, and can’t work, so I volunteer helping people find jobs. But there’s really nothing here since the mills closed down. People need to be retrained.

“When I first came here, this place was always busy. You would see workers everywhere downtown. There was a Filene’s department store; there were jewelry stores. It used to be nice.

“Now I don’t leave my house after 9 p.m. because the area is so dangerous because of the poverty. People smash windows and take things because they don’t have the money to pay their bills. They are even breaking into the churches.

“But they are cutting everything—fuel assistance, WIC, lead poisoning prevention. The government should stop going overseas and starting wars and then spending billions of dollars to rebuild these countries after they’ve destroyed them. They should be giving people jobs.”



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