

Hunger in Detroit area on the rise

More than 1,000 at holiday dinner

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On December 20, more than 1,000 people, including some 700 children, attended the Third Annual Forgotten Harvest Holiday Dinner at the Detroit Marriott Hotel.

Forgotten Harvest is a Detroit-based nonprofit organization that specializes in the recovery of surplus or discarded food that it donates to food pantries, homeless shelters, soup kitchens and other community organizations.

The large turnout at the event testifies to the growth of hunger in the Detroit metropolitan area, which has been devastated by the economic crisis. From being a temporary condition, hunger has become a pervasive everyday fact in the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in the Detroit area, and indeed throughout the US. Reflecting the growth in hunger, Forgotten Harvest said it has tripled its food deliveries over the past three years, but is still far from being able to meet the needs of area residents.

The recent cutoff by the state of Michigan of cash welfare assistance to 41,000 residents and the imposition of means testing for food stamps has added to the hardship of families struggling under conditions of mass unemployment in an area devastated by the collapse of the auto industry. Detroit itself is the poorest big city in the United States, with a real unemployment rate near 50 percent and a child poverty rate of 47 percent.

According to a summary compiled by Forgotten Harvest, 4 million households in the state of Michigan live at risk of hunger. In the three-county metropolitan Detroit area, 500,000 people, including 200,000 children, live in poverty. The number of individual emergency food recipients who receive food on a daily basis increased 78 percent between 2006 and 2010.

World Socialist Web Site spoke to a number of those attending the holiday dinner at the Detroit Marriott.

Preston Jackson came to the dinner at the urging of his girlfriend. He told the WSWS:

“There are times we can’t make ends meet with the food stamps. We have to go to food banks, Capuchin [soup kitchen]. And a lot of people can’t get to the services that are out there, even where they are giving out free food, because they don’t have transportation. The church I go to actually provides transportation so that people can get to locations where they are giving out food so that they have something to eat for Christmas.”

Preston said he had been unemployed for over one year and had no cash income.

“How many times did I go to food banks? Maybe 10 times this year. By the middle of the month it gets hard, especially with five kids. My girlfriend was cut off welfare in October, so it is really, really tight. And we have a newborn who is 3 months old.

“Before she gave birth, my girlfriend was working for a temporary agency. But everybody is cutting and laying people off. They even cut Focus Hope, who provided training and jobs for people. It is really bad out here.”

Jeff Jones, an unemployed roofer from Detroit told the WSWS, “I am basically self-employed. I’m a contractor. Once the roofing season is over, I don’t have a job. It is hard for me to find work even though I have my own business. What are you supposed to do when you run out of food? \$200 worth of food stamps will not go very far.

“I think this program is a wonderful thing. Things like this should happen more often. Plenty of times we have run out of food and have had to go to the Matrix

to use their food pantry. We have had to go to many food pantries. That is not what I like to do, but I have had to take advantage of it.

“They need to reinstate people on food stamps and cash assistance. They are hurting too many people. All the people out of work, who don’t have money to feed their kids or support themselves, what are they supposed to do? They are basically saying ‘go out and rob somebody.’ That is the situation they put people in. It shouldn’t be tolerated.

“We need more jobs. If you look at the state’s unemployment rate, it is outrageous. Should the state have to go through this? No. The country shouldn’t have to go through this. We need more jobs for the people of Detroit and the state of Michigan.”

Martin Valdez came to the event with his wife and three children. He said, “We have to get food assistance. There are no jobs. I work for a day, sometimes for a week. I do all kinds of jobs: demolition, landscaping, and carpentry. I work maybe 20 to 25 hours a week, but I need 40 hours. I am trying to make enough money to keep the family together.”

Ericka Howard said, “I think this is a great thing to help the underprivileged. I get food stamps, but they are not enough really to get through the month. I am just grateful that we have someone in the community to go to.”

Ericka said she had recently been cut off cash assistance welfare benefits by the state of Michigan. “How can you pay the rent if you don’t have money? I have two kids at home and a grandchild. Everything is up in the air. I am trying to find a job, but it is hard. There are no jobs in the city right now. I don’t know what I am going to do.

“It is not just food I am worried about. I am worried about utilities and rent now that we are heading toward winter. All the shelters are full.”

Claudia Alvizo has three children ages 15, 10 and 9. She told the WSWS, through her daughter, “I feel that the government is wasting money on two wars, making bombs and all of the nuclear material and the money spent for troops. Instead, they should use the money to feed the children. We should be spending our money trying to help people instead of trying to kill people.”

Claudia is a recent divorcee and said it is very difficult making ends meet. For child support, she gets \$200 per month for two kids.

“It is very hard to keep food on the table. I’m working, but the job doesn’t pay enough. After an increase in pay I’m making \$9 an hour. It’s either I pay the bills or buy food. You can’t do both.” Claudia said she couldn’t take her kids out to dinner any longer, so she comes to events like this one.

She lamented about the Christmas period. “I buy what I can for the kids. It is not what they always want, but that is the best I can do.”

The WSWS spoke to Nikita Garrison and Carlos Hudson Sr. She said she came because of the growth of poverty. “I think it is very unfortunate for so many kids to be homeless and not have food, especially at this time of the year.”

Commenting on the budget cuts and the layoffs threatened by the city of Detroit, Nikita said she felt more should be done to help people. “Really, I think the mayor should be providing activities of this sort for the citizens of Detroit. He is constantly taking away. With the cost of living, we need things to be provided to make it easier for the people of Detroit.

“I see that housing and the cost of living has gone up. The property taxes have gone up. Everything is going up.

“I don’t see a lot of people who are wealthy that are giving back. Not from my perspective. I don’t know if they are just holding on to what they have or don’t have a heart, but there are a lot of people in need.”



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