For-profit company hosts “job fair” in Detroit area

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A job fair held December 29 attracted hundreds of people seeking work from the Detroit Metro area. The occasion, dubbed “New Year, New Job” and sponsored by JobFairGiant.com, was promoted as a career opportunity for the region’s substantial jobless population, but actually offered very few positions.

The event provided a snapshot of the plight of the unemployed, who not only face the highest levels of joblessness since the Great Depression, but the decimation of any social infrastructure to help them. The event was held at a hotel in Southfield, near Detroit, where unemployment unofficially stands at 50 percent.

Despite its appearance, JobFairGiant.com, the event’s sponsor, is not a public service organization, but a small for-profit operation run by Caree Eason, a Detroit entrepreneur. Eason’s company holds regular job fairs in the Detroit Metro area and sets up speaking engagements.

The firm sells services to the unemployed, in part through promoting the notion that people are unemployed because they lack proper job-hunting skills. For a fee, Eason sells resume assistance and repair, posts jobs on her web site, and runs a radio advice show where, as “Dear Job Doctor,” she gives advice to the unemployed.

Historically, job services and retraining were provided as a public service by the State of Michigan as well as the federal government. In 2007, however, the state permanently shuttered its nine branch offices, axing more than 8,500 workers. Contact with Michigan’s Unemployment Insurance Agency is now limited to the Internet and telephone. Job seekers essentially have been left to their own devices.

The only governmental agency that remains to aid jobseekers in the state, where the official unemployment rate is 9.8 percent, is the “Michigan Works!” program. This organization is administered by businessmen, nominated by their local Chamber of Commerce, and offers very little actual support to the unemployed.

All “workforce development” is now funded federally through the Workforce Investment Act, established in 2000, the mandate for which extends only to mass layoffs as a result of permanent business closures or natural disasters. National funding of workforce development programs has decreased by $2.722 billion since 1984.

Many job seekers found Thursday’s job fair another bitter disappointment. Organizers of the event claimed that 200 to 250 jobs were available from the nearly 30 participating organizations, schools and companies, but most likely the real number was far lower.

In line with the mission of the event’s sponsor, JobFairGiant, many of the companies at the fair weren’t even offering jobs, but instead used the opportunity to try to sell the unemployed their services. For example, Grad2Pro.com appealed to unemployed college graduates about the need for “a comprehensive solution significantly enhancing a graduate’s ability to find job opportunities and do well in interviews.”

Moreover, a number of the booths appeared to be looking for students who could be convinced to take out loans, rather than offering them jobs. Online Trading Academy describes itself as “The world leader in professional education for traders who want to succeed in any market, and any asset class.” The school promises to show “how to use the same tools and professional trading techniques as the professional traders on Wall Street.”

Another company at the fair was Sears. This week, Sears Holdings, the nation’s fourth largest broadline

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retailer, announced that 100-120 Sears and Kmart stores will close; six of these are in Michigan. The job position offered by Sears was for a "Residential Home Improvement Outside Sales Professional," which requires the worker to provide his own vehicle for in-home customer presentations, with the slim hope of a sales-based commission.

Other companies accepting resumes were Citigroup Mortgage, Comcast Cablevision, the Customs and Border Patrol, Boy Scouts of America, HiredinMichigan.com, Dorsey Schools , Aflac Insurance, and MichiganInternJobs.com.

One of those attending the event was 22-year-old Felton Jones. He told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he has been out of work since November. He attended a local community college after high school, he explained, but lost his financial aid.

Felton has worked at two different Family Dollar stores in Detroit. "I was robbed at both of them," he said. "It was dangerous, and besides, it took me three hours each way on the bus to get to work, my pay was $8.25 an hour and I usually worked only 20 hours a week."

It is worth noting that the CEO of Family Dollar, Howard Levine, hauled in a $5.38 million compensation package in 2010—over 600 times the annual income of Felton Jones.

Felton said of Family Dollar, "Most of the customers who came in were disenfranchised. The management treated all of us as though we were less than human."

He said that while he got a few leads from the day's job fair, most of the positions required college degrees. "I stopped by the Dorsey Schools table and they were only interested in trying to enroll me. I had to ask them if they had any jobs available; the few openings required a degree and prior experience in admissions. It seems that these schools are not about providing education, but about making money."

Felton said that several of those attending today's event told him "they had to show up today in order to be able to continue receiving unemployment compensation." He continued: "It's a trek out here under conditions where there are just a few job offerings and most require college degrees. I don't receive any unemployment benefits, because I never accumulated enough hours."

"A lot of my friends have been signing up to join the Navy, the Army and the Marines in order to get the benefits because they cannot find jobs," Felton explained. "Sadly, I supported Obama in 2008. I do not know much about politics. I am not very informed, but I think I need to learn a lot and learn it quickly."

Eighteen-year-old Angela Davis graduated from high school in June and has not been able to find steady work. She was at the job fair with her mother, who is a public employee.

Angela described her experiences working for temporary staffing agencies. "You never know from day to day if you will have a job. You go to their offices, stand in line and if there are too many people already there, you have no job. You have to show up at the agency, but if there is no work you don't get paid. That means you don't even get paid for the time it takes you to get there and sit there.

"The jobs I have gotten so far from the agency involved packaging and working with machinery. My pay is $7.25 an hour. You wouldn't believe all the things you have to do to get this type of a job. There is a screening process which includes drug testing. It's really hard finding a job."

Angela's mother pointed out, "A lot of people cannot even get to this job fair because it is located far from any public transportation. If you don't have a car, you cannot get here from Detroit."

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