

Report reveals depth of social crisis for African-American men in Milwaukee

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In January, the Center for Economic Development at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee published a report titled “Race and Male Employment in the Wake of the Great Recession,” revealing a decades-long decline in employment that has affected African-American men in particular.

The report compares the 2010 employment rates for black men in Milwaukee to other metro areas in the United States, focusing on the employment rate rather than the unemployment rate because, as its author Marc Levine states, “the unemployment rate is a seriously flawed and often misleading indicator of labor market performance.”

The report reveals the devastating social impact of the recent economic recession; reflected in the data is the general crisis of capitalism that has gripped the working class since the 1970s.

Since the 1970s, white male employment has witnessed a general decline of 5 to 10 percent. In nearly every major city in the same period, black male employment has seen what can only be termed a complete collapse.

The metropolitan Milwaukee area has one of the worst employment rates for young black men and for black men in their prime working years. Out of the 26 largest metro areas, only Buffalo and Detroit have a worse overall employment rate. At 52.7 percent, Milwaukee claims the worst overall employment rate for black men between the ages of 25 and 64.

The report indicates that from 1970 to 2010, Milwaukee’s decline in employment for black male workers has been the most precipitous, a drop of 28.7 percent, one-tenth of a percent worse than that in Detroit.

In 2010, the employment rate for all black men of working age in the Milwaukee metro area was 44.7

percent compared to 77.4 percent for white men and 65 percent for Hispanic men. These numbers have declined steadily since the 1970s.

An examination of youth employment in 2010 reveals a similarly abysmal state of affairs. The employment rate for black men between the ages of 16 and 24 was 26.8 percent, while white male employment of the same age group was 59.2 percent.

With each passing year, the collapse in employment has encompassed larger and larger swaths of the city. In 1970, there were only 8 census tracts that had less than 50 percent male employment. By 2010, that number had risen to 64.

High unemployment rates due to the collapse of manufacturing in the Midwest/Great Lakes region as a whole is also indicated in the report. Employment rates for black men of any age are the lowest in St. Louis, Cleveland, Chicago, Milwaukee, Buffalo and Detroit.

Levine identifies three factors that account for this collapse in the employment rate: the rise of mass incarceration, changes in disability rules which make it easier to claim disability, and discouraged workers dropping out of the workforce due to poor employment prospects. What Levine does not state is that these factors are themselves symptoms of the dramatic decay of the capitalist system itself.

Each year since 2000, an average 5,000 black Milwaukeeans have been incarcerated, mainly men, with an increasing proportion of these men being incarcerated for nonviolent drug offenses. More black men were imprisoned each year per year over the previous decade than were employed in the city’s factories in the year 2010.

Official unemployment statistics are no longer an adequate measure of the actual rate of labor force participation, since more people drop out of the labor

force because of a severe lack of employment opportunities. Due to the lack of job opportunities, black men have turned to disability insurance and other paltry welfare programs simply to get by, and these actions result in their effective removal from the labor force.

The percentage of black males who are not counted as part of the labor force has increased dramatically since the 1970s, from 20.3 percent to 36.5 percent. By comparison, the rate for white males has increased from 11.2 percent to 14.9 percent.

The report's thorough examination of declining employment and labor force participation over 40 years reveals the bankruptcy of the global profit system and its inability to meet the social needs of the working class. The only thing that capitalism has to offer the working class is continued worsening social misery.

Levine offers a reform program, a "left" variety of the policies once advanced by the Democratic Party, including the promotion of so-called green jobs, enhanced job training programs, the promotion of black capitalism via "buy local" campaigns, enhanced public transportation, and a reformed drug policy.

In fact, there is today no political support within either of the two big-business parties for such a program. And even if such measures were enacted, they would be completely inadequate to meet the expanding need for decent-paying jobs, adequate benefits, and good pensions.

The experience of Milwaukeeans with the Democratic Party is instructive for workers everywhere. The Democrats have ruled the city since 1960 and during this period Milwaukee has dropped from the top 10 for black male employment to the very bottom, and white and Hispanic male employment rates are at historic lows.

No major public works programs or reforms are forthcoming from either the federal, state, or local governments that address in any serious fashion the social crisis gripping Milwaukee and cities across the nation.

Moreover, the plummeting Hispanic and white male employment rates demonstrated that the jobs crisis is not a "black" issue, as the proponents of identity politics would claim. The main division in a capitalist society is not race, but class.

There is no solution for the problem of mass

unemployment and impoverishment to be found outside a struggle for a socialist program with the working class at the fore.



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