

Heavy hand of military at veterans job fair in Detroit

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On June 1, with much fanfare, President Barack Obama announced a jobs fair for veterans to be held in Detroit later in the month. He said 12,000 job opportunities would be available to veterans at the event. Obama spoke at a press conference inside a manufacturing facility of the Honeywell Corporation in Golden Valley, Minnesota.

He touted several measures he signed into law the previous November, including the “Returning Heroes Tax Credit” and the “Wounded Warriors Tax Credit,” both measures providing tax breaks to employers who hire veterans. The Democratic president also extolled the creation of an online veterans jobs bank, a “veteran gold card” providing limited case management and Internet resources to connect a vet’s military skills with comparable civilian occupations.

Last week, at Detroit’s giant Cobo Center, the “Veteran Hiring Fair” came to fruition. The number of potential jobs announced grew to 24,000, twice as many as Obama had originally promised. Under the auspices of the Department of Veterans Affairs, a cabinet-level organization (VA Secretary Eric Ken Shinseki stands 17th on the list to succeed the president), itself employing over 280,000, the mega-event was not only a jobs fair, but a veteran open house and small business networking extravaganza.

The *World Socialist Web Site* sent two reporters to cover the jobs fair as it often does with such events in order to get a sense of the real conditions facing workers and young people. The scene at the event was overwhelming. Registration desks lined the hall and staff; young women wearing blue aprons and holding “Let Me Help You” signs were everywhere. By the look of it, staff members well outnumbered the attendees actually looking for work.

Often in reporting on such events, it is best to occupy

the fringes where people are coming and going to get a chance to speak to them. Our reporters considered this tactic, but as so many of the people around were staff we thought it better to make an approach to the media table to see if there were any benefits to registering. We presented our credentials for the *World Socialist Web Site* and asked what we should do to speak to some of those attending.

We were told that the only way to report on the fair was to register and get a badge, which we would need to get into the events, and that we would have to be escorted by a “guide” who would show us whatever we wanted. Badges reading “Media, ESCORT REQUIRED” were hung around our necks.

It was at that point that it became apparent that the security at the event approached the level of a presidential motorcade. Burly men in blazers eyed each person entering the room for the proper credentials with the seriousness of purpose of secret service agents. One of us had our badge flipped over and the sentry asked him to turn it over before letting him pass.

The media registrar then handed us over to our guide, an employee of the Department of Veterans Affairs who happened to be an ex-Marine; a nice enough fellow, but overly willing to promote the official version of the affair. The first question we asked him was how many job-seekers were expected to attend the fair. He told us 10,000, which seemed a quite high estimate based on the apparent number of attendees on the floor at the moment. He told us it “would be dream if we could get 25,000 veterans hired this week.” Indeed.

Reporting on this function had much the same air as being a reporter embedded with the military in Iraq. There was an air of disconnection from the reality of life faced by the mass of the population. Instead, the

manufactured reality and morale of a recruiting officer predominated. Too many times during the course of the day we heard the meaningless platitude: “The words unemployed and veteran should never go together.”

We did speak to one veteran, an unemployed Detroit city worker, who expressed anger at the hackneyed excuse for slashes in city services that “there is no money.” We gave him a copy of a statement calling for opposition to the bankers’ dictatorship in Detroit and he wanted to talk, “to get the truth out.”

He told us that he had 17 years on the job before he got his layoff notice six months ago. He said, “It’s management. It’s not like they’re going to be hurt. It’s the people who do all the work and make everything work that are hurting. We’re taking all the concessions and then we’re the ones who get laid off. The ones at the top are making more and more money.”

He came to the jobs fair to get help, but he was concerned that our publishing his name or even his previous job would prevent him from getting assistance.

The reason-for-being of the Veteran Hiring Fair was not to provide new jobs, but to direct ex-servicemen to available jobs. This is being played up for all the political points it is worth this election year by Obama and his reelection campaign. A real program of jobs creation, especially one that will make a dent in the devastating unemployment numbers over the last three-and-a-half years, requires the allocation of substantial revenues, something that both Democrats and Republicans are not prepared to do.

The promoting of stunts like the Cobo event, exploiting the plight of veterans for political points, has another, more ominous logic—the militarization of American society. Slogans like “Returning Heroes,” and “Wounded Warrior” are meant to promote an uncritical attitude to expanding US militarism and the prospect of endless wars.



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