

“There are a lot of people here who need help”

Thousands line up for winter coat distribution in Detroit

Shannon Jones
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Thousands of workers and unemployed people from Detroit and surrounding suburbs lined up Saturday for free winter coats for children. More than 4,000 coats were distributed at the event in northwest Detroit, which was sponsored by a local pizza company.

The large turnout is indication of the dire conditions facing working class families in the area and puts the lie to the Obama administration’s claims about an economic recovery. A new US Census report shows that over 49.7 million Americans were living below the poverty line in 2010.

After decades of industrial downsizing, the official household poverty rate in Detroit—the poorest big city in America—is 41 percent, with more than 57 percent of children living in poverty. Overall poverty in the state of Michigan has increased by 66 percent since 2001, the largest increase of any state in the US.

Hundreds of thousands of auto and other manufacturing jobs have been wiped out in Michigan over the last decade. The “turnaround” of the auto industry hailed by the Obama administration is chiefly a rebound in profits. Those workers who have been hired are largely laboring for poverty level wages.

In the metropolitan Detroit area the percentage of families whose incomes dropped below the poverty line rose in 45 of 52 communities with populations of 20,000 or more. Meanwhile, the percentage of families receiving food assistance through the federal Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) rose in every metropolitan Detroit community.

The WSWS spoke with a number of those attending the event. Robin, a young working mother, was one of those lined up to receive coats for her children. She remarked on the large turnout for the coat distribution,

calling it “shocking.” She continued, “It shows how much people are in need. There are a lot of people here who need help. I think it is horrible. I think it is a broken city.”

“I am working part time and trying to support a family. It is hard, especially with the bills from DTE Energy. The bills are impossible.”

Another young mother said, “I was in an accident about two months ago and I can’t work. It is very hard. I am trying to apply for assistance and I still haven’t heard anything yet. Thank God I have relatives and friends to help out with the children.

“It shows how many people are struggling and don’t have jobs. I think the government should be doing something to help.”

Azarria, another of those waiting in line, said, “A friend of mine told me about this event. You can see that the line is long, but people are patient and waiting. It is getting cold and it is important that children are warm.

“There is a great need. There is a statement being made just by the number of people that are here about the condition of the city. It shows there is a great demand for help. My church ran out of vouchers and Happy Pizza ran out of vouchers.

“I can speak, being one of those affected. I worked for 25 years and got laid off and now my unemployment benefits have expired. I worked in management, marketing and customer service. I am trying to re-educate myself and get in a college program.”

The WSWS also spoke with workers about the outcome of the recent US presidential elections. During the presidential campaign neither President Obama nor

Republican challenger Mitt Romney raised the issue of poverty. Since the election the Republican and Democrats have entered negotiations over massive cuts to social programs, which will throw millions more into destitution.

Dashirah, a single mother of two children, remarked that she was glad Romney didn't win the presidential election. But, after WSWS reporter told her about Obama's plans to cut Medicare, Social Security and other programs to deal with the government's deficit, Dashirah said, "Well, that is very disappointing to hear. What it means is that his campaign deceived working people in a way. While campaigning Obama made it seem that he stood with the working people but now that he's back in office, he stands for the wealthy.

"If they let extended unemployment benefits run out at the end of this year, it will be disastrous for a lot of people. It is very hard to find a job these days. The crime rate is already pretty bad and it is because of the conditions of poverty. With further cuts in programs, crime will get even worse. We definitely need to consider some alternatives."

A worker from the Detroit suburb of Redford said, "If Obama took a 10 percent pay cut maybe we wouldn't be in this trouble. I took a 20 percent pay cut to keep my job. It is not easy. I have a daughter and a lot of grand kids."

Her daughter added, "I was unemployed for five years and couldn't find work. I work at a market and it is hard work. I have to stand up for 12 hours a day. I have to work Christmas and Thanksgiving and I don't get holiday pay. I work 5am to 5pm."

Her mother spoke about the conditions in Redford. "There are a lot of foreclosures in my neighborhood. Houses were selling for \$140,000 and they dropped all the way to \$29,000. Now they are back up to \$40,000."

Alesa Reed said, "I am a nurses aide. I need to finish school so I can make more money. I make just a little above minimum wage, \$10.50 an hour. It is not really enough to live on.

"We are here today to get help for my kids with coats. I have five grandchildren. It is hard trying to support them. Especially for the coats and the shoes. Basic things. It seems like the lights and gas are getting higher and higher. And I really don't use that much electricity and I have a \$300 light bill now.

"There is a lot of poverty out here. There are a lot of

people who are in need. It is sad because it is not just the grown-ups that are affected but the kids as well.

"I think the cutbacks they are talking about in Medicare and Medicaid are horrible, because everyone needs their money. Everyone needs insurance like for eye care and dental care. And they have cut all that out and it is hard. A toothache can get poisoned and get inside your body and can kill you if you don't have the proper medical care. I think that is ugly."

"Conditions for working families like myself are very tight. I am a single parent and over the years the cost of living keeps going up but wages remain the same. How do they expect people to survive?"



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