

# Homelessness and hunger on the rise in San Diego, California

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The economic crisis and unending austerity measures implemented by the Democrats and Republicans have had a devastating impact on cities throughout the country. San Diego, California is no different. A WSWS reporting team recently spoke to families in City Heights, a heavily working class neighborhood in the city.

Home to many Hispanic, Northern African, Middle Eastern, and Asian immigrant families, City Heights has been particularly hard-hit by the 2008 financial crisis. Median household income in 2009 stood at \$33,826, more than \$25,000 below the citywide figure. Housing values have plummeted in the community since 2007, pushing them far below the San Diego average. The real unemployment rate is close to 20 percent, well above the national average.

As the New Year begins, many working class families and individuals in the area are forced to seek services to address their deteriorating social position. This was highlighted at a recent food distribution center.

Located in the City Heights neighborhood, the Church of the Nazarene in Mid-City provides shelter and food services to the diverse working class community of almost 90,000. The church has three food distributions a week, serving anywhere from 100 to 350 people per distribution. At times, the numbers have swelled to over 1,000.

Rita was at the food distribution center both receiving assistance and giving it. She works for the San Diego Coalition for the Homeless and also receives benefits for her and her son from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the federally funded food assistance program.

“Last week there was a glitch in the system—we went to the grocery store, and it said the card was active

but the number was cancelled. We were told we could go to the welfare office and wait in line to be issued a new card, or we had to wait for a new card in the mail. Either way, we couldn’t buy food when we needed it.”

Rita told us that there has been an increase in people coming in the last 3-4 years who are in need of food, blankets, pillows, and other supplies.

“Recently there were a few families that have come here that sleep in their cars because they have lost their jobs and homes. There is a family of six that just moved here from San Jose after the father lost his construction job.”

Asked what explained the surge in hunger, Rita said, “There are budget cuts and it hurts a lot of people. The worst part is a lot of it came right before Christmas. Hostess laid off a lot of people in San Diego, and Texas Instruments shut down some of their operations here right before the holidays too. I have a friend who works down at Albertsons. They told her she could take a pay cut and keep her job or get laid off. She took the pay cut, but she was already struggling every day—and she’s been working there for 14 years.”

“I worked as a machinist in Ohio until 2008,” said one worker, now unemployed. “We worked for Ford and GM doing contract work. The company I worked for declared bankruptcy, and in 2010 I came out to San Diego. I’ve been out of work ever since. When you don’t work you feel beat down. I have 10 fingers, there’s no reason why I can’t work. I want to have a job, I want to have pride, I don’t want to accept handouts.”

The worker agreed that both political parties and the media were organs of the rich. “Our government was elected by the media. Now there is all this talk about gun laws—they don’t really care about that issue either—they’re just trying to distract us from the real

problems. They just look for the next story that will dominate the news for a week.

“If you ride the trolley for a mile here in San Diego you can look out the window and you see the homeless everywhere. There are over 20 million unemployed people in the United States. That’s like some of the top US cities being entirely unemployed, it’s ridiculous. It’s never been like this before.”

Christopher, a worker in his mid-20s, moved to San Diego from Texas a few years ago seeking better opportunities. He volunteers during the distribution hours in addition to receiving food assistance himself.

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“Over the last year there has been a growing number of children coming with their parents, especially when the weather gets bad. I was living on the street, which made it difficult to come and collect certain foods that could spoil. How can you store vegetables, or even cook them, if you are homeless?”

Asked if he thought the situation facing working people had improved under the Obama administration, Christopher replied, “No. In this neighborhood there are so many empty apartments and abandoned buildings. Why not use them, renovate them for families? Put people to work. These next four years I am going to be very critical of [Obama].”

John, the volunteer facility coordinator of the church, has been overseeing food distributions for the past three and a half years. Asked about the numbers of people seeking assistance, John said, “It was worst in 2008, where we served sometimes 600 people. Then it decreased until last year but now the numbers are back up.

“Most of the people are low-incomes families, usually a mother with a child or two. Many times, a woman will come while the father is at work.”

We shared an article with John on poverty in San Diego and stressed that many people who have full time employment still fall below the poverty line and go without health insurance.

“That is very common,” John said, “A lot of people who come in are working—and San Diego is expensive, \$9 per hour is not enough to live on, especially if you have a family. It’s the one’s that don’t have power that always seem to get beat up.”



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