

Food stamp cuts devastate New York City's poor

Our reporters
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The nationwide cut in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, otherwise known as food stamps) that took effect on November 1 is hitting New York City's poor especially hard in light of the city's high cost of living as well as the prolonged high unemployment and the growth of the long-term jobless population.

Out of a population of more than 8.3 million in the city, approximately 1.8 million, more than 21 percent, receive SNAP assistance. Due to the cut, it is estimated that a family of four will lose \$36.00 in assistance per month from the current total of \$275.13 per household. The charity Food Bank for New York reports that the lost funding will amount to \$225 million a year for New Yorkers, or enough for 76 million meals. This is equivalent to the loss of a week's worth of food per month.

Even before the November 1 cut, food stamps did not provide a sufficient cushion against hunger. Three quarters of the city's food stamp recipients were using pantries and soup kitchens because their SNAP benefits only carried them through the first three weeks of each month.

A survey conducted last year by the New York City Coalition Against Hunger reported that 63 percent of the food charities in the city had to restrict their distribution of food due to the overwhelming demand, leaving some people without needed assistance.

The desperate situation in which many New Yorkers find themselves has not abated following the official end of the recession. According to the Food Bank for New York, which conducts an annual survey of those needing food aid, 30 percent of respondents reported experiencing hunger, up 7 percent from last year. The organization already provides 400,000 meals a day.

These conditions are exacerbated by the high cost of

food. Research by the Food Bank of New York revealed that the price of food in the New York metropolitan area rose by 16 percent from the start of the recession in December 2007 through the end of last year. In 2012, 32 percent of New Yorkers had difficulty in purchasing the food they needed.

Another study released earlier this year reported that nearly half of the city's population lived in or near poverty in 2011 (see "Study finds nearly half of New Yorkers living in or near poverty"). While incomes of the city's elite climb to unprecedented levels, the working class faces persistently high levels of unemployment. In the Bronx, the city's poorest borough, the average unemployment rate for the year so far stands at 12.7 percent. In 2009, it was 11.9 percent.

Despite the lack of jobs, under a policy implemented by the administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg the city's "able-bodied" unemployed are not eligible for food stamps unless they are participating in useless "job training" programs. The reality is that food stamp recipients who can find work are employed, sometimes in multiple jobs, that pay so little that they are forced to rely on whatever supplemental assistance they can find.

The reduction in food stamp assistance only compounds the nearly two-decades-long attack on all assistance to the poor. Since the federal welfare "reforms" of 1996, instituted under the Democratic Clinton administration, all forms of assistance in the social safety net have been drastically reduced. During this period, the number of New Yorkers getting cash aid has fallen by two thirds, from 1.1 million to 360,000. At the same time, rising poverty has driven the food stamp rolls from 1.4 million to a record of nearly 1.9 million.

During the weekend immediately following the November 1 cutback, WSWs reporters spoke with

SNAP recipients in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, near the Baruch Houses public housing complex.

Michael Claudio said, “The politicians don’t care about the poor that live on fixed income. They are cutting food stamps while the cost of food is going astronomically higher. Do you know what it is to go to four different supermarkets just to find goods that are on sale?”

Michael injured his back in a work-related accident at FedEx. He is now disabled and living on a fixed income. The cut will have a significant impact on him. “I am on food stamps and got a letter stating that the amount that I receive will be cut from \$189 a month to \$174 a month. This means less food and cutting back on other things.”

Seymona Burnell is also unemployed due to illness. She is supporting two daughters. “With these cutbacks, how do they expect people to live?” she asked. “Are we supposed to starve, while the rich people are getting richer? This is wrong. This is not supposed to be happening here. We are living in the richest country in the world, and there are more poor people than ever.”

Lillyen Soto, a student at Murray Bergtraum High School, condemned the food stamp cuts. “I think these cuts are ridiculous,” she said. “A lot of people need these food stamps. Some people can’t find jobs. Some people are living on disability checks.”

Her mother cares for nine children. “She is a cashier for Dollar Deals. She works more than 30 hours a week. She pays for our three-bedroom apartment, all of our clothes and all of our food. She makes a little more than the minimum wage, but with all these costs plus all our school supplies and transportation expenses, taking out the food stamp cuts is going to be hard.

“I don’t think it is fair that so many meals per month are being taken away. Families with growing children need to eat more and better meals, not fewer and cheaper ones. This is ridiculous. People who are unemployed and disabled are not going to be able to survive.

“They have no right to do this. It is going to start another Depression. It is bad enough that so many people lost their jobs. And they keep taking more money from the schools. Now they are taking food and meals away from us.”

All those who spoke to the WSWS expressed deep anger at the political system.

Michael said, “The New York City government supports the rich. You see the low-income projects that we are next to. Across the street from here, they are building multimillion-dollar condo buildings. To do that, they need permission from the City Council. The real estate industry supports these politicians to make it possible for them to not only make these buildings, but also to get really big tax breaks.

“When the supermarkets see the high-rise buildings, they will charge higher prices for the same goods, which will really hurt us lower-income people.”

Referring to the mayoral campaign, Michael had nothing but contempt for the Democrats and their union supporters. “The politicians are corrupt. They make promises that they know that they can’t keep. De Blasio [the Democratic candidate] will not tax the rich. They are paying for his candidacy.

“When I was working, I was in a union. The unions take our money to support the politicians, and the politicians represent the rich.”

Seymona reflected on the immense divide between the politicians representing the city’s tiny, super-rich elite and the mass of the population. “The politicians don’t know what it is like to struggle for a living. They lie to us just to get into the office. It is not right. Once they get in, they forget about the voters who made it possible for them to get the position.

“The politicians are walking all over us. We need something different. We workers need our own party that will create equality for all the people.”



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