

California: Food stamp recipients speak about cuts

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Californians have been hard hit by the cuts in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), more commonly known as food stamps, which took effect on November 1. Four million people in California receive food stamps—more than a tenth of the total population. Around the same number are “food insecure,” defined as living “in fear of hunger or starvation.” Already grossly inadequate to address hunger, the reduction in food stamp assistance—\$36 less per month for a family of four, or around \$1.20 a day—will push more into hunger.

California has one of the highest costs of living in the US, making food stamps even less sufficient to cover basic food security. The state’s unemployment rate is also among the highest in the nation, currently standing at 8.9 percent.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed food stamp recipients in the Bay Area of California about the cuts to the SNAP program. Many asked only to be identified by their first names.

“My family is eligible for \$372 a month in food stamps, and I lost \$29 a month,” said Marie, a current recipient. “I know \$29 doesn’t seem like a lot of money for food, but I’m attempting to support a family of three on a full-time minimum wage job. I have an “under the table” job that helps and I also get assistance from community organizations that help pay our bills. My spouse is currently unemployed and fighting the already failing health care system to get an accurate diagnosis for a condition that has persisted for almost 2 years; and, at this point, he’s still not eligible for disability. Food stamps are all the money we have for food and the cut won’t be noticed at the beginning of the month when we go and do our big monthly stock up, but at the end of the month when things start to run out and gallons of milk, bread, and other simple things

are needed.”

“We rely on our food stamps to keep food on the table,” said Frank, another recipient.

“By the end of the month we’re already out of food stamps. Now, we’re going to be out of them by the middle of each month and I’m not sure how we’re going to make ends meet. All of our cash already goes to rent, car insurance, the electric bill, phone service, gas and garbage pick-up. I don’t know how they expect us to just pull money out of thin air to put food on the table.”

Frank explained that he lived with his girlfriend and their child, with food stamps being stretched to provide food for all three. He added that he lives with several health problems and has been denied disability.

“I have been out of work for a little while now due to a number of health problems such as high blood pressure and alpha-1-antitrypsin deficiency, which leaves me susceptible to upper respiratory infections. I’ve had two lung operations in which they stapled off 20 percent of each one of my lungs due to blebs. I have a torn ACL in my left knee which makes it buckle and pop if I step just the right way, bad back from working at a fish packing plant and moving half a ton of frozen sardines by myself. All of which make it really hard to find a job that I’m physically and mentally able to handle.

“My kid is in relatively good health, other than being a little hyperactive. My girlfriend is in pretty good health which leaves her to pick up the slack on what I can’t do, which makes me feel awful.

“I guess it ends up working out because at least our kid has a parent with him full time, rather than him going to daycare, where you have to rely on some stranger to watch and teach your kids. It makes it almost impossible to make ends meet.”

Our reporters asked Frank, “What are your views on the cuts in light of the continued program of ‘quantitative easing’ in which Wall Street will continue to receive \$84 billion per month?”

“I’m pissed off that they cut the little guy and continue to line the pockets of the big wigs, but I’m not surprised. That’s capitalism. They’d kill us all if they thought they could make a buck.

“This country needs to make some major changes right now, in the way they’re handling the system and treating the working class. We are the people who do all the work that they’re getting rich from but as soon as you’re laid up and unable to continue to benefit them, they treat you like trash and kick you to the curb. What are we supposed to do? They force people’s hands into doing things they know they shouldn’t like prostitution or selling drugs. Then they can bust you, lock you up, where they can make money off you again. We’re treated like expendable pawns and I don’t see this changing anytime soon.”

The WSWS also spoke to applicants for food stamps at the Department of Human Assistance in Sacramento, the downtown SNAP location. Many of those present were visibly frustrated and in a hurry to leave. When asked about the cuts, more than one applicant succinctly told us, “It sucks.”

Dee, who was waiting for his friend as he applied for food stamps, stopped to talk. “Food stamps are supposed to help people in need who don’t have any other option. It *does* help people—it helps families. It sucks.” He continued, “I get food stamps, I need it to help feed my kids. When you have a family you have to choose whether you’re paying bills, or rent, or buying food. Now that gets harder.”

Dee also talked about the politics of cutting food stamps. “Their [politicians’] priorities are shot,” he said. “There’s always money for all kinds of bulls---, but what about even small steps that would make us better as a nation. The military wins over helping families and education and anything like that.”

A mother said, “Parents need that extra SNAP money to provide snacks for their kids, because the schools already don’t provide enough food in lunches. \$36 a month will have a huge impact on us because our kids need fruit and other snacks to get through the school day.”

Another man said, “I’ve been cut \$20 a month this

week. \$150 a month is not enough for one person to survive.” Another said, “They discontinued part of my food stamps. Anything they’re taking off will hurt. Money I need to commute will be spent on food.”

Mike told us, “The benefit system does not respond to the needs of the people. They make it almost impossible for people just to get the food and the benefits that they require, and a lot of people who are homeless and who are living out here in the creeks and stuff like that don’t have any help at all.”

How did he feel about the cuts to food stamps in particular? “It makes me angry,” he said. “That’s how I feel about it.

“Politicians should have to take a cut, too. The distance between the prosperous and the struggling is growing greater every day and I don’t support it.”

When asked whether by “politicians” he was referring to the Democratic or Republican parties, Mike said, “I don’t believe in anything that either one of those parties have to say.

“I want every child to have equal opportunity to grow up, have their needs met, and for it to be a level field so that together we can further the cause of humanity, instead of people furthering their own desires for material wealth, power, et cetera. The decision-making process shouldn’t be such a difficult one to participate in. Because we don’t feel like our voices are heard.”



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