

America's hungry 21st Century

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Feeding America, the US national network of food banks, released its annual report on local food insecurity Thursday, showing that one in six Americans, including one in five children, did not have enough to eat at some point in 2012.

The report found that there are dozens of counties where more than a third of children do not get enough to eat. The incidence of hunger has grown dramatically. The percentage of households that are "food insecure" rose from 11.1 percent in 2007 to 16.0 percent in 2012.

Food insecurity is more widespread in the United States than in any other major developed country. According to separate data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the rate of food insecurity in the US is nearly twice that of the European Union.

The growth of food insecurity has paralleled the growth of extreme poverty. The number of American households that live on less than \$2 a day per person more than doubled between 1996 and 2011, from 636,000 to 1.46 million. There are now nearly 3 million children who live in households that earn less than \$2 per day.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is featuring a photo essay depicting what life is like for those forced to rely on food stamps to feed themselves and their families. Fresh milk and dairy products are a luxury, as are fruit and vegetables. With an average food stamp allotment of \$1.40 per person, per meal, it is not possible to buy the types of food required to maintain "an active, healthy lifestyle."

Widespread hunger exists alongside the most shameless displays of wealth. Just last week, Copper Beech Farm, a palatial 50-acre estate just outside New York City, sold for \$120 million, setting a new record for the most expensive home sale in history. The ultra-luxury car market is also booming. Luxury carmaker Bentley, which recently introduced a revamped quarter-

million-dollar, twelve-cylinder coupe, said sales were up by 17 percent last year.

Christie's, the art auction house, sold \$7.1 billion worth of art last year, a 16 percent increase from the year before and the highest on record. This included the \$142 million sale of Francis Bacon's "Three Studies of Lucian Freud," the most expensive art sale on record, to casino mogul Stephen A. Wynn.

According to Feeding America, food-insecure people reported needing an average of \$2.26 per person, per day to have enough food. On that basis, ensuring that all 16 million hungry children in the US had enough to eat would cost just \$13 billion a year. There are 80 billionaires in the United States whose wealth, as individuals, exceeds this amount.

In an earlier period of American history, these levels of poverty and hunger amidst opulence were seen as a national disgrace. Michael Harrington's 1962 exposure of poverty in Appalachia and elsewhere, *The Other America*, moved sections of the political establishment of the day to support such reforms as Medicare, Medicaid and Food Stamps. There is no significant tendency in the political or media establishment today that identifies itself as "liberal" and supports genuine social reform.

The prevalence of hunger is "higher than at any time since the Great Depression," Feeding America told the WSWs in an interview earlier this week. Yet the spread of hunger is barely noted by politicians of either party or by the media.

The responsibility for this social disaster lies with the capitalist system and its political defenders. Administrations, both Democratic and Republican, have starved antipoverty programs of funds for decades. The Obama administration and Congress have overseen two successive food stamp cuts over the past six months: first in November, when benefits were slashed across the board by \$36 per month for a family

of four, and again in January of this year, when benefits were cut by an average of \$90 per month for nearly a million households.

In between these two cuts, the White House and Congress allowed federal extended jobless benefits to lapse for some three million people, together with their two million dependent children. These cruel and inhuman actions come from an administration that has transferred trillions of dollars to Wall Street while refusing to prosecute the financial criminals responsible for the 2008 crash.

Obama's signature social initiative, Obamacare, is already being exposed as a scheme to reduce the quantity and quality of health care available to ordinary working people while increasing their out-of-pocket costs. Government spending on health care will be slashed, Medicare gutted, and corporate outlays reduced, boosting the profits of the insurance monopolies, hospital chains and pharmaceutical companies.

Then there is the corporate-controlled media, which treats the roaring stock market and lavish displays of wealth by the rich with either open or thinly veiled enthusiasm, while barely acknowledging the existence of poverty. Major networks spend just 0.2 percent of their airtime covering issues relating to poverty, according to data from the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism.

As for the auxiliary organizations of the corporations and the government, the trade unions, they too have facilitated the attack on working people. As the ruling class has carried out an unprecedented redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top, the unions have focused their efforts on suppressing working-class opposition and preventing a political break with the Democratic Party.

What is emerging is the true, brutal face of capitalism, a system that piles up vast wealth at one pole of society and ever-greater poverty and wretchedness at the other.

This is true not only in the United States, but internationally. To satisfy the dictates of the banks, brutal austerity measures are being imposed around the world. The 85 richest individuals in the world now possess more wealth than the bottom half of the global population—some 3.5 billion people.

The means exist to provide all people with the

necessities for a comfortable and fulfilling life—healthy food, decent housing, health care, education, access to culture and recreation. But the capitalist system, and the ruling class that sits atop it, make any rational control of production and distribution impossible. This system must be done away with and replaced with socialism—the rational planning of society under the democratic control of the working class to meet social needs, not the drive of a financial aristocracy for personal wealth and corporate profit.



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