

The human toll of slump and part-time employment

New Jersey woman dies while napping between jobs

Fred Mazelis
2 September 2014

The death of a fast-food worker in New Jersey last week dramatized the human toll of the ongoing destruction and disappearance of decent-paying jobs.

Maria Fernandes died in her car on August 25. She had pulled into a parking lot between jobs, and was found about eight hours later, killed by carbon monoxide and gasoline fumes.

This was no suicide. Fernandes, 32 years old, was napping between part-time jobs. She worked at three separate outlets of the Dunkin' Donuts chain, in Harrison, Newark and Linden, New Jersey, in the New York metropolitan area.

Fernandes, who was born in Massachusetts to Portuguese parents, went back to Portugal with her family at the age of nine and spent most of her teenage years there. She lived in Newark, New Jersey's largest city and the home to a large Portuguese community.

The tragic death provoked an outpouring of grief and affection from Fernandes' many co-workers. As reported on the NJ.com web site, they recounted her generosity and countless examples of support and friendship. One worker explained that, despite her own financial circumstances, she had provided a loan when he needed it. "She helped me out when I was going through some tough times," said Bruce Jirinec.

Another co-worker, Fernandes' former boyfriend, Richard Culhane, said she had helped care for his three children. "If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have custody of my kids," he said.

Though the circumstances of Fernandes' death were unusual, the conditions she faced and dealt with on a daily basis were far from extraordinary. Some 7.5 million US workers, about 5 percent of the workforce, have part-time jobs. The majority of these need full-

time employment, and millions cobble together two or even three jobs to support themselves and their families.

For these workers it is not a matter of living "paycheck to paycheck" but rather "paychecks to paychecks," adding additional levels of stress, exhaustion and uncertainty to already difficult lives.

This is but one example of the conditions facing many millions of workers. A recent *Time* magazine blog about inequality illustrated the issue through an account of an afternoon at a San Francisco impound lot where drivers retrieve their vehicles that have been towed for illegal parking and other violations. The author paints a vivid picture of desperation on the part of hard-pressed workers who are faced with losing their jobs and other disasters because they cannot pay the towing fees.

A Rutgers University economist told NJ.com that Maria Fernandes' death represented "the real face of the recession." "The cold statistics don't get to show the real people, those that are patching these jobs together," he said. "This is the horrible tragic circumstances of making those jobs work."

It must be added, however, that if this tragedy is "the real face of the recession," the unending "recession"—in fact, depression conditions of low wages, unemployment and poverty for growing sections of the working class—is the "real face of capitalism."

Whether it is a towed car or a doctor bill, a choice between paying a utility bill or a medical expense or of putting food on the table, this is the reality facing literally tens of millions of working people in the US.

For the working class as a whole, the growing inequality is translated into increased rates of family

breakdowns, mental illness, ill health and every other form and consequence of social sickness. Maria Fernandes represents the millions whose hopes are unfulfilled and their potential unrealized.

This tragedy also demonstrates how false and reactionary is the claim of the various Democratic Party hacks and practitioners of identity politics that the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri is exclusively about race in America. This claim is designed to obscure the reality of class oppression to which racism is linked, and does an injustice to what the legacy of Brown himself should be. The deaths of both Brown and Fernandes must awaken workers to the way in which capitalist inequality and poverty condemn millions, producing police killings as well as all the other forms of social injustice.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact