

Majority of Buffalo, New York, children live in poverty

“The rich are getting richer and they don’t care about the poor”

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A majority of children in Buffalo, New York, the state’s second largest city, live below the federal poverty line, according to the most recent US Census statistics. In 2013, the city’s child poverty rate stood at 50.6 percent, a 5.6 percent increase over the abysmal 45 percent rate in 2012. Buffalo ranks third in the number of children living in poverty, behind Detroit (59 percent) and Cleveland (54 percent).

The official unemployment rate in Buffalo is 8.2 percent, but this figure masks the large number of low-wage, part-time positions that make up the majority of jobs available to residents, especially those without a college education. The figure also conceals the large number of people who have fallen out of the workforce—the long-term unemployed who are no longer counted in the statistics.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with workers about the economic crisis in Buffalo. Frances Johnson, 48, is a sorter for a thrift store. “I happened to luck out on that job,” she said. “I don’t like it, but I can’t find anything else. Who is going to hire somebody my age?”

Frances said that two of her coworkers had just been fired. “One guy was 52. They didn’t like him because he was always speaking up. Now where are they going to go?”

“They only pay \$8 an hour. That is not enough to live on. The cost of living keeps going up, but the pay doesn’t. I am lucky, I live in my father’s house; he gave it to me. If it wasn’t for him helping me, I don’t know what I would do. I am not even eligible for food stamps.”

She said, “The rich are getting richer and they don’t care about the poor.”

Buffalo is typical of many other “rust belt” cities in the US Northeast and Midwest that were once major industrial centers, employing tens of thousands in

factories and related industries, including steel, automobile, oil refineries and chemical plants.

Cities such as Pittsburgh, Detroit, Cincinnati and Cleveland were home to these workers, where entire neighborhoods sprang up to house them, and city infrastructures were built to provide services and amenities to workers and their families.

Beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s, these cities began to undergo “deindustrialization,” which has continued unabated ever since. Factories closed and moved to South America and Asia, where labor costs were cheaper, leaving behind high unemployment, school closures and impoverished neighborhoods across the region.

Doreen Porzio, an unemployed worker, said, “My job just shut down after 15 years. It shut down in September 2013, and I have been out of work since then. I was a mental health assistant in-patient specialist at Buffalo General Hospital.

“They told everyone that they were going to consolidate it with another mental health department and that everyone would keep their jobs. That turned out to be a big lie. They didn’t merge them and no one kept their jobs.

“At my age, people don’t want to hire you. I now am getting evicted from my apartment. I don’t know where I will be living next month.

“I have been applying for jobs everywhere. I don’t get any response even though I have 15 years of experience. The only job I was offered was back in December making \$10 an hour. I was making \$22.50. Who can live on \$10 an hour? I would end up homeless. I can’t live on that.”

She is angered over the cuts to mental health and how it has affected people without insurance or access to Medicare or Medicaid. “It is a shame what has happened

to them. I live in this neighborhood, and I see many of my former patients. We were like a family, we were looking out for each other.”

Doreen said many of her former patients have stopped taking their medication. “I know of at least two who have ended up in jail,” she said. “Some want to go because they know they will have food and a place to sleep.”

Buffalo, with a population of 500,000 at its height in the 1950s, has declined to just over 260,000 today. Of these, 31.4 percent live in poverty, twice the national average. Although the city has seen job growth in sectors such as higher education, technology and health care over the past decade, the situation continues to worsen for the majority of residents.

The overall poverty rate has jumped by 4 percent since 2005, while the child poverty rate climbed nearly 13 percent over the same period. The poverty rate stands at 10.5 percent for those with a college degree, 25.2 percent for those with a high school degree, and 43.2 percent for those who did not complete high school.

Maura Evans’ father worked for Bethlehem Steel, and her mother worked for Republic Steel, factories that are now gone. “How can people survive on the minimum wage?” she asked. “When you get your check you have to choose. Do you pay the rent, the gas or buy food?”

“Food stamps are not enough, and they are making it too hard for people to get” she said. “We have a food pantry at our church three times a week. We are seeing more and more young people coming in there to get something to eat because there are no jobs for them.”

Maura said people with Ph.D.’s and master’s and bachelor’s degrees are competing for minimum wage jobs. “I have a master’s in education, but I had to make a decision to wait for the Buffalo School system or take an entry level job in a health clinic. I have loans to pay, bills to pay. Everyone is just living paycheck to paycheck.”

Ronald Evans is a single father of five children who all attend the Buffalo public schools. He works at Goodwill Industries, but his wages cannot keep up with housing expenses. He has been on the city’s Section 8 housing list since 2007 and is only now anticipating a placement.

Two of his children have attended three schools in five years due to closures and mergers. He wonders why his children do not have access to the high quality schools that more advantaged students in Buffalo are able to attend. “Like City Honors,” he said, “that school is one of the top in the country, but they have admission requirements. It’s unfair that some kids don’t get a chance to go to the good schools that get all the money.”

City and state plans for addressing the social crisis in Buffalo include New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s \$1 billion investment in the Buffalo-Niagara region, announced in 2012. So far the plan has approved \$75 million for the region in each of the last two annual state budgets, although there is no set schedule for future spending. It also includes tax credits for businesses, and proceeds from sales of unallocated hydropower.

No other definite plans have been announced for the remainder of the billion, which is to be divvied out over a 10-year period. The plan is billed as “a long-term approach to turning around” the economy. In other words, it offers no immediate jobs or training opportunities for those living in poverty. The majority of jobs created will be highly skilled, or require extensive training that would only benefit a small percentage of those living in the most extreme circumstances.

Mike Moore was a carpenter for 10 years. He now works as a tow-truck driver. “I just got hired by AAA,” he said. “I do towing and roadside assistance. I was unemployed for three years.

“It is really bad out here. They want skilled labor, but they don’t want to hire people from urban Buffalo. There is a lot of inequality. They don’t have entry-level programs to train people to do these jobs. My rent is \$900 a month and I have my little girl to support.”

“When I was unemployed, I was looking every day, a lot of people just don’t get back to you, others would say that you were not the right person.”

Kevin Williams is self-employed, doing jobs such as snow removal and landscaping. “There aren’t any good jobs,” he said, “so you have to make your own work if you want to get by.” Speaking on the situation in Buffalo and across the country, he said, “It’s the rich against the poor. It’s not about race. Obama only represents the one percent. He doesn’t care about working people.”



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