Alabama food stamp use doubles since 2007

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According to data released this month by the federal government, the state of Alabama's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) distributed food stamps to over 900,000 residents in the 2014 fiscal year. This number represents a jump of over 100,000 people over five years. Since 2007, the number of Alabama families receiving SNAP benefits has nearly doubled. Of this number, the vast majority are families with children.

The numbers are scarcely surprising. While Governor Robert Bentley has triumphantly cited a decline in unemployment during his tenure (from 8.9 percent in 2011 to six percent in 2015), further analysis paints a more nuanced picture.

According to the Pew Charitable Trust, the percentage of people ages 25 to 54 working full-time in Alabama declined from 77 percent in 2007 to 71.9 percent in 2014. This drop of 5.1 percentage points placed Alabama in a tie with Georgia for the eighth highest number of people unable to find full-time work. This figure does not include the number of people who must work two or more jobs to pay rent and stock their pantries.

Furthermore, as Keivan Deravi, an economics professor at Auburn University at Montgomery points out, "We did not create high-paying jobs. We created low-paying jobs. ... Personal income was much lower here because of the nature of the jobs."

Among a population where increasing numbers of people are either unemployed or underemployed, SNAP benefits can mean the difference in a family going hungry and having food on the table. Yet despite the alarming evidence of the program's importance to Alabama's working class, Alabama's legislature passed four separate bills in 2014 aimed at reducing participation in and funding of programs such as SNAP.

The WSWS spoke to a married couple in rural north Alabama. In many ways, the couple, who asked to be referred to as M. and J., are the face of Alabama's SNAP recipients. For a year and a half, between 2012 and 2014, M. worked a series of part-time jobs to supplement the income brought in by J.'s two part-time, minimum wage jobs. Though eager for a full-time position, J. was unable to find one.

The couple relied almost completely upon SNAP benefits to feed their four children. Though J. gained a full-time position in late 2014, the family still qualified for SNAP benefits, though they received a reduced amount. The family struggles the most during the summer, when their three school-aged children no longer benefit from the free lunch program at their school.

With working class Alabamians facing both high unemployment and deep cuts to SNAP, the region's food banks have had to step in to help fill the gap. Laura Lester, executive director of the Alabama Food Bank Association (AFBA), says that in an increasingly tight economy, this means that "everybody has had to become more creative" with sourcing and delivering food for families in need.

The AFBA works with private donors (including Wal-Mart, which is well known for the pittance it pays its employees), government agencies and community food drives to gather, transport and distribute food for Alabama's hungry. Lester states that AFBA has witnessed a dramatic increase since 2007 in the number of families across Alabama who must rely upon local food banks.

But she sees cause for optimism, pointing to what she calls the "coming together" of private business, nonprofits and government agencies to address the issue of food insecurity. "Nationally, my sense is that there is an increase in awareness in how many people are struggling," she says.

Lester's words, intended to shore up hope and

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optimism, instead throw another grim shade over the tableau of hunger in Alabama. Without denying the importance of her agency's work, they point to the tenuous nature of nutrition for Alabama workers, who more and more must rely upon the beneficence of private companies (the same private companies that refuse to pay them livable wages) and slashed-back government agencies.

According to AFBA's web site, "Very low food security had been getting worse even before the recession. The number of people in this category in 2010 is nearly double the number in 2000." AFBA states: "19.2 percent of Alabama's population is food insecure—that equates to 919,670 people," and points out that of this number, only 65 percent will receive SNAP benefits. The site uses data from the Food Research and Action Center, which places Alabama at number two for food insecurity among all 50 states.

"Families' struggle to afford necessities follows closely on their employment status and wages—and the most basic necessity is food," AFBA notes. With an economy that has traditionally been based upon agriculture on one hand and providing a pool of cheap labor for industry on the other, Alabama's workers, a great percentage of whom struggled to provide food even before the recession, can expect to struggle more as the global, national and state economies continue to leave them behind.

In January 2015, Democratic President Obama stood before the nation and claimed that "the shadow of the crisis has passed." That same week, Republican Governor Robert Bentley proclaimed that Alabama's unemployment rate had decreased dramatically. The number of Alabamians on SNAP is a grave testimony to the fact that this vaunted growth has not benefited workers and their families.

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