

UN rapporteur “shocked” by deep poverty in US

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18 December 2017

On Friday, United Nations Special Rapporteur Philip Alston published a report on poverty and democratic rights in the United States titled “Statement on Visit to the USA.”

In 1831, the French intellectual and diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville traveled to the United States and compiled notes on what he saw, publishing an optimistic report titled *Democracy in America*. One hundred and eighty six years later, Alston, an Australian academic and New York University professor, traveled through a country in the throes of a social catastrophe. His report might well be titled *Destitution in America*.

Alston recently concluded his trip through California, Alabama, Georgia, Puerto Rico, West Virginia and Washington DC, visiting working-class neighborhoods and talking with experts and local officials.

“I have seen and heard a lot over the past two weeks,” he writes. “I met with many people barely surviving on Skid Row in Los Angeles, I witnessed a San Francisco police officer telling a group of homeless people to move on but having no answer when asked where they could move to, I heard how thousands of poor people get minor infraction notices which seem to be intentionally designed to quickly explode into unpayable debt, incarceration, and the replenishment of municipal coffers, I saw sewage-filled yards in states where governments don’t consider sanitation facilities to be their responsibility, I saw people who had lost all of their teeth because adult dental care is not covered by the vast majority of programs available to the very poor, I heard about soaring death rates and family and community destruction wrought by prescription and other drug addiction, and I met with people in the South of Puerto Rico living next to a mountain of completely unprotected coal ash which rains down upon them,

bringing illness, disability and death.”

His concludes that the government does not recognize “rights that guard against dying of hunger, dying from a lack of access to affordable health care, or growing up in a context of total deprivation.”

Forty million Americans live below the official poverty line, with 18.5 million living in deep poverty. The US infant mortality rate is the highest in the developed world. Obesity is rampant. The US is 36th in the world in access to water and sanitation. Its incarceration rate is the highest in the world. Youth poverty is nearly double the rest of the industrialized world. “Neglected tropical diseases” are “increasingly common.”

Hookworm is spreading in poor areas of Alabama as sewage flows openly through homes and streets. The US is 35th out of 37 among all industrialized countries in terms of inequality and poverty.

The UN report suggests that poverty and inequality are the product of the domination of the political system by a corporate oligarchy. “Successive administrations, including the present one, have determinedly rejected the idea that economic and social rights are full-fledged human rights,” Alston notes.

His statement begins:

“My visit coincides with a dramatic change of direction in US policies relating to inequality and extreme poverty. The proposed tax reform package stakes out America’s bid to become the most unequal society in the world, and will greatly increase the already high levels of wealth and income inequality between the richest 1 percent and the poorest 50 percent of Americans. The dramatic cuts in welfare, foreshadowed by the president and Speaker Ryan, and already beginning to be implemented by the administration, will essentially shred crucial

dimensions of a safety net that is already full of holes.”

The report notes that at the federal level, proposals to cut Medicare will be “disastrous.” Underfunding the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) will “have devastating [effects] on the health of millions of poor children.” If funding for the Federal Qualified Health Centers (FQCHs) is eliminated, “9 million patients could lose access to primary and preventative care.”

Alston describes a situation where the police, courts and public agencies treat impoverished workers like criminals. “In many cities and counties the criminal justice system is effectively a system for keeping the poor in poverty while generating revenue to fund not only the justice system but diverse other programs,” he writes.

Over 730,000 people are in jail, “of whom almost two-thirds are awaiting trial, and thus presumed to be innocent.” The government sets bail at extremely high levels, “which means that wealthy defendants can secure their freedom, while poor defendants are likely to stay in jail.”

Intrusive policing policies for welfare, food stamps and other public benefits include forcing workers to undergo drug tests, in-home inspections and other humiliating procedures.

“Calls for welfare reform take place against a constant drumbeat of allegations of widespread fraud in the system,” Alston writes. “The contrast with tax reform is instructive. In that context, immense faith is placed in the good will and altruism of the corporate beneficiaries, while with welfare reform the opposite assumptions apply.”

Alston rejects the notion that poverty is primarily a racial issue. “The poor,” he says, “are overwhelmingly assumed to be people of color, whether African Americans or Hispanic ‘immigrants.’ The reality is that there are 8 million more poor Whites than there are Blacks... The face of poverty in America is not only Black or Hispanic, but also White, Asian and many other colors.”

Child poverty is widespread across races: “Contrary to the stereotypical assumptions, 31 percent of poor children are White, 24 percent are Black, 36 percent are Hispanic and 1 percent are indigenous.”

Conditions for Native Americans, ignored by Black Lives Matter and other identity politics groups, are

particularly deplorable. At the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, conditions are “comparable to Haiti... Nine lives have been lost there to suicide in the last three months, including one six-year-old. Nevertheless, federally funded programs aimed at suicide prevention have been de-funded.”

The growth of inequality has “steadily undermined” democratic forms of rule, Alston writes. In fact, democracy is incompatible with the ruling class’s efforts to expand and protect its wealth at the expense of the working class. This process is not accidental, but the product of the policies implemented by both major capitalist parties, whose aim over recent decades has been to eviscerate all benefits and protections won by the working class through more than a century of social struggle.

The corporate-controlled media is complicit in the growth of inequality and poverty. This shocking and disturbing UN report, which speaks frankly of the immense levels of economic inequality and destitution in America, reflecting the stark class divide that dominates US social and political life, has barely been reported by the establishment broadcast and print media. Meanwhile, the same media outlets are devoting endless coverage to allegations of sexual harassment made for the most part by wealthy and privileged women against prominent figures in the worlds of entertainment, the arts and politics.



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