

“A JOBLESS FUTURE”

The July 2004 jobs report from the government’s Bureau of Labor Statistics is in, and the news is bad for incumbent President George W. Bush’s re-election prospects. Only 32,000 new jobs were created nationally in July, far fewer than the 200,000 new jobs economists were expecting. Worse yet, the Bureau reported that it had overestimated the number of new jobs it had previously reported in May and June 2004. The weak employment reports stunned the Stock Market, with the Dow Jones industrial average now down over 6 percent for the year and at its lowest point since last November 2003.

The weak employment record of the Bush administration is important politically, because it is a key indicator of whether a president is perceived as successful by the electorate. Since Harry S. Truman, no president in history has a worse economic record than Bush. Based on the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ establishment survey, which questions 160,000 employers nationwide, Bush’s record of job growth at minus 0.8 percent is the lowest. Second lowest, at a plus 1.5 percent, was Bush’s dad, George Herbert Walker Bush – and he lost to Bill Clinton in 1992. The real question to explore is why aren’t Democrats talking more about Bush’s mishandling of the U.S. economy?

The greatest disappointment from the recent Democratic National Convention was the low priority placed on the crisis of jobs in our country. Both John Kerry and John Edwards are essentially “New Democrats,” committed to free trade, NAFTA, and market-oriented strategies to improve the domestic economy. The Democrats did not adequately emphasize that despite recent employment increases that a net loss of 1.1 million jobs has occurred since George W. Bush became President. But this fact alone doesn’t begin to tell the full story.

A new study by Northeastern University's Center for Labor Market Studies establishes that in 2002, one of every four African-American adult males was unemployed throughout the entire year of 2002. The black male jobless rate was over twice that for white and Latino males. Even these statistics seriously underestimate the real problem, because they don't factor in the huge number of African-American males in prison or those who are homeless.

For black males without a high school level education, their job prospects are even worse. The Center's study notes that among black male dropouts, 44 percent were unemployed for the entire year of 2002. For black men between the ages of 55 to 64 years, jobless rates for 2002 were almost 42 percent. New York Times columnist Bob Herbert has described these dire statistics as evidence of "an emerging catastrophe - levels of male joblessness that mock the very idea of stable, viable communities. This slow death of the hopes, pride, and well-being of huge numbers of African Americans is going unnoticed by most other Americans and by political leaders of both parties."

As difficult as the employment prospects are for African-American males, they are less severe in many ways to the challenges that confront women of color. According to the research of the Women's Action Coalition, an alliance representing thousands of women founded in 1992, gender discrimination especially affects black women and other women of color in the workplace at all levels.

About three-fourths of all U.S. women who work full-time earn under \$20,000 annually, compared to only one-third of all U.S. male workers. The Women's Action Coalition notes that "the average salary of an African-American female college graduate in a full-time position is less than that of a white male high school dropout."

So long as African Americans were the chief casualties in the ranks of those who were permanently unemployed, white elected officials could afford to ignore the crisis. But now, increasingly, millions of white workers who have considered themselves "middle class" are being pushed into the ranks of the jobless. In late July 2004, the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics noted that between 2001 and 2003, 8.7 percent of all jobholders in the U.S. were permanently dismissed from their jobs. This figure amounts to 11.4 million men and women age 20 or older. This was, according to

the Bureau, the “second fastest rate” of layoffs “on record since 1980. Among laid-off workers who found new jobs, 56.9 percent were earning less money than from their former employment.

For decades, U.S. corporations have been outsourcing millions of better-paying jobs outside the country. The class warfare against unions has led a steep decline in the percentage of U.S. workers.

Many U.S. urban neighborhoods have lost virtually their entire economic manufacturing and industrial employment. With neoliberal social policies in place, which emphasize cutting job training programs, welfare, and public housing, millions of Americans now exist in conditions that exceed the devastation of the Great Depression of the 1930s. In 2004, in New York’s Central Harlem community, 50 percent of all black male adults were currently unemployed. When one considers that this figure does not count those black males who are in the military, or inside prisons, its truly amazing and depressing.

In short, millions of Americans of all “racial” backgrounds now face a jobless future. There’s absolutely no question that the policies of a Kerry-Edwards administration would be preferable to the failed record of Bush-Cheney. But the Democrats must be challenged to face reality during this presidential campaign. Let’s hear from the Democratic candidates that they truly understand the jobs crisis confronting millions of Americans, and that they are committed to addressing the problem as a top priority once they are in office.

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NOTES: "A Jobless Future"

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