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Jobless Numbers

By John Conyers Jr.

WASHINGTON—Early this month, the Labor Department announced its latest statistics on employment in the United States. The number of jobless dropped from 8 million in October to 7.7 million in November, causing the unemployment rate to decline from 8.6 percent to 8.3 percent (a good sign!). At the same time, the number of jobs decreased slightly, from 85.44 million to 85.28 million (not such a good sign!).

These figures had to be disappointing to the Ford Administration, which hoped that the upsurge in jobs and production registered during the third quarter of this year would continue. Nevertheless, it assured us that economic recovery was still rolling along. Just more slowly than hoped.

A closer look at the figures, as appalling as they are, reveals a chilling picture. The fact is that for millions of blacks as well as whites the job scene is incredibly bleak. The crucial statistic, the one showing the number of employed, remained almost motionless.

Even more critical is the fact that the Government's method for calculating unemployment is rigged, deliberately designed to conceal the true level, understating it by almost half.

According to the National Urban League, nearly 15 million persons (not the 7.7 million officially admitted by the Labor Department) are jobless, and the unemployment rate is 15 percent. For blacks, conditions are worse, for the official rate of 13.8 percent, when adjusted, soars to 26 percent.

How does the Labor Department slant the statistics? The method is fairly simple. It merely defines in very narrow terms who is unemployed and calls many people employed who are not, in any real sense.

Amazingly, millions who searched for jobs so long that they stopped looking are not considered officially jobless, because they don't fit the department's "unemployed" category (they must have looked for jobs within the four weeks preceding the monthly survey). Thus, in a stroke, some 5.3 million discouraged workers are written off the rolls.

Who else is omitted? The 3.6 million forced to work on the average half a week because they can't find full-time jobs but who, when asked in the monthly survey, say they would take one immediately if it were offered.

If we add the 5.3 million discouraged workers and just half the part-time workers (1.8 million) to the official 7.7 million, the number of unemployed soars to 14.8 million. For blacks, the numbers surge from 1.5 to 3.1 million.

Who is called employed? The Labor Department includes the 3.6 million part-time workers. It also includes the unpaid family workers who don't receive wages but help on family farms and stores and share in the family income, generally because no other jobs are available. The department also labels employed those millions who work for wages beneath the official poverty line (\$5,400). At present, over 25 percent of black workers in this country work for poverty wages, but they, like the part-time and unpaid family workers, land in the Labor Department's "employed" column; just as if they earned, say, \$35,000 a year.

What does this mean? For those forced into part-time work, life is a daily search for more secure, full-time work with full-time pay. For those working for poverty wages, there is the incessant struggle to survive on that pay, as well as the realization that they must hang on to their jobs.

And for those luckier workers with better paying jobs, there is a vivid awareness that they must tame any demands for higher pay or improved work conditions.

For industry, the vast numbers of jobless, part-time and low-paid workers mean a huge supply of cheap labor when the business cycle picks up.

For obvious reasons, the Government must hide the extraordinary extent of unemployment, of wasted, idle lives and productive capacity. Indeed, if the truth were known, the public outcry would be so great, so unrelenting, that it would be forced to act, to guarantee jobs now and at livable wages. And this is precisely what the present Administration is unwilling to do. Instead, it would leave the matter to the "market," to "supply and demand," to chance.

In fact, Government spokesmen now talk of acceptable unemployment rates in the 7 percent range. Yet only a few years ago, such pronouncements would have been attacked as intolerable. But since the Administration is aware that vast unemployment is the tool that allows big business to extract its profits it asserts that joblessness is an economic necessity.

To reduce the current "official" unemployment rate to 5 percent by 1985, over 37 million jobs are needed; 8 million for the present jobless, 15 million to accommodate the normal population increase, and 12 million more to compensate for those jobs lost because of technological advances in industry.

But over the last ten years, according to "The 1975 Manpower Report of the President," only 16.5 million new jobs were created, and most of these were in low-paying industries.

The task of public policy must be to turn that around, to put people to work for people, rather than for profits. Unless we act now and support legislation being proposed in Congress that would insure each worker the right to a job the outlook for American workers will be only a replay of the present—No work, no wages, no self-respect and no hope of change.

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