

Testimony on Economic Insecurity

by Laurie Taymor-Berry

On January 28, 1996, a public forum on Economic Insecurity took place at Faneuil Hall in Boston. More than 1,000 people from all over Massachusetts crowded into the historical hall to hear from those whose lives have been severely impacted by the direction of the current economy. Members of the Massachusetts Congressional Delegation including Senator John Kerry, Congressmen Joe Kennedy, John Olver, Barney Frank, Marty Meehan and Joseph Moakley, also listened to the many stories depicting the deteriorating quality of life for so many Massachusetts workers and families. The following is testimony presented by Survival News Board Member, Laurie Taymor-Berry.

I am concerned, not only about the job prospects for the 22,000 women in Massachusetts mandated to find jobs in a jobless economy, but for the uncertain future facing thousands of us dumped out of jobs after the age of forty and unable to find full-time work. After participating in the Two-Parent Workfare Program for eighteen months, my husband and I have been able to find enough part-time, contingency work to bring our income up over the \$579.00 a month allotted to a family of three on welfare.

I earned a M. Ed. in Human Service Administration and Criminal Justice while working full-time at Childrens' Hospital. In 1981 I started out as a Protective Social Worker for the Department of Social Services. As Program Development Specialist for over six years, I provided coordination for the DSS Citizen Board. We developed collaborative programs to respond to gaps in services to high-risk adolescents. I was also

responsible for training activities for area DSS staff regarding substance abuse, safety, AIDS awareness, homeless initiatives, infant mortality, domestic and gang violence. I was responsible for reviewing and negotiating programs and budgets for private sector Human Service contracts as well as ongoing supervision of childcare services.

Between 1981 and 1991, I worked under three different Governors: Ed King, Mike Dukakis and Bill Weld. What we put in place to enhance and support families during the mid-80's, was on the way to being dismantled within the first few months of the Weld Administration. My first directive, as Childcare Administrator, was to terminate children from DSS subsidized daycare slots whose mothers had obtained low-wage jobs. The last was to implement the privatization of my own job. By June of 1991, I believed I was professionally upwardly mobile. Besides having healthcare and dental benefits for my family, along with life insurance, I had earned a sizable pension. Ten years brought four weeks vacation which became permanent two months later when my position was defunded during the downsizing, privatizing and cutbacks in the recession of 1991.

After two years of pounding the pavements, researching job postings, wherever I could find them, networking with colleagues and friends, writing endless cover letters and going to multiple interviews, from coffee shop help to Domestic Violence Advocate, my self-image was deteriorating. I had no income nor assets. I had used my retirement pension to pay for healthcare and basic necessities. The Workfare program provided my family with healthcare and

foodstamps, enough to last for about ten days out of the whole month. My husband's part-time, contingency work made up for the cash grant. As an outsource worker for a Japanese Company he must make quota each month or be dropped.

I was assigned to a privatized DMH drop-in center to work as a cook. I reported to my workfare site where I met a young man in the Workfare Program who was a laid off union machinist with a wife and new baby. He was assigned to do janitorial duties. I made pizza on English Muffins. I knew we were displacing previously paid workers.

My endless job search, these past four years, is very similar to many seeking paid work in our current economy. There are at least two hundred applicants for every professional job for which I apply. 22,000 low-income women, flooding the job market will likely result in lowering wages for everyone. Most of these women will be unable to secure employment at anything near a livable wage with benefits.

There are no positive incentives being offered by the Department of Transitional Assistance. There are only more regulations and time constraints which now make it impossible to take care of the children's needs before school and nobody to be at home when school gets out...and no income. Just a day full of doors shutting in the faces of women who have been given an ultimatum that they must keep busy out of the home all day so their children will respect them for having gone out to at least look for work. It is a very cruel hoax when many of the 22,000 women have not had the experience of higher education, let alone a H.S.

Diploma and the fine art of resume writing. Those who are struggling with raising a family alone, especially, need some kind of relief. Statistics have documented that 60% of welfare recipients have fled a battering situation. Providing guidance, supervision, nurturance and support to children is intense, time consuming work. Looking for work is a full time job with no pay. It takes tremendous will and determination to go through endless job rejection as the years go by. The hardest times are when my twelve year old daughter asks me why she should try hard in school when I have a Masters degree and cannot find a job. I tell her she must always do the best she can.

I do not expect to find a good job within the field of human services...but I will keep trying. What I do expect is to continue working to change the public's misperception of those who find themselves in need of the safety net that was put in place sixty years ago for all of us to fall back on when things come apart at the seams. The U.S. is the wealthiest nation in the world, but much of the wealth is concentrated at the top. The combined wealth of the top 1% of American families is nearly the same as that of the entire bottom 95%. If we do not actively address the growing polarization in income distribution, there will be many more families who will need to fall back on workfare programs that are deadend, demoralizing and a post technological form of indentured servitude.

Laurie Taymor-Berry ran for the Suffolk/Middlesex district Democratic State Committeewoman seat, on a platform of Economic Insecurity, in the Presidential Primary on March 5, 1996, winning 41% of the vote.

