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The best of times?

A new study shows Oregon's 'booming' economy actually hurts most Oregonians

"For the last 20 years," says Kathy Larin, "the American Dream hasn't been a reality for many hard-working Americans."

A new study from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, where Larin is a policy analyst, verifies what is obvious to those who have been paying attention — the rich are the only ones benefiting from Oregon's economic "boom." The study raises an important question that should have been raised long ago: How do we define what constitutes "good" economic times?

After all, the vast majority of Oregonians haven't seen any sort of economic progress. While income for the wealthiest Oregonians has grown by an average of \$12,510 in the last 20 years, a gain of 15 percent, every other group's income has decreased when the numbers are adjusted for inflation. The poorest quintile of the population took the worst hit — average income fell 21 percent for those who are least able to deal with such a drop.

"It's not that they aren't sharing in the gains," Larin reminds us. "The incomes of the poorest families are actually falling."

The promise of a fair chance at the good life — the American Dream — eludes them.

Added to the injury of poverty and economic inequity is the insult of media misrepresentation. The Register-Guard assures us that these are "some of the best economic times in the state's history." When jobs are mentioned in the Washington Post (or in The Associated Press, or by virtually any "respected" commentator), it is to emphasize our sterling "low jobless rate," not to wonder why so many of those who work those jobs seem dissatisfied. The new numbers explain the dissatisfaction: Living-wage jobs are being replaced with low-wage jobs, so people are working as hard or harder than they ever have — for less payoff. The results of the new study show that this is true in 44 out of 50 states.

This is an economic boom? These are some of the best times in state history?

Remarkably, sociology instructor Julia Fox says the new study doesn't reveal some of the most important numbers. Even more insidious than the growing income-level gap, says Fox, is the huge and expanding divide between social classes.

"If we look at concentration of wealth, it's even more disparate," Fox said.

In a general sense, this is due in large measure to regressive tax rates which favor the upper classes and corporations. As Fox says, "Income tax rates in Oregon are very high for individuals on a comparative basis. ... Individuals are paying more of a share, corporations are paying less."

For example, although individuals are taxed at a 9-percent rate, corporations are taxed at 6.6 percent. In terms of state and local taxes, ordinary citizens end up paying \$1 for every 66 cent corporations pay. Even when the state gives back, it gives to those who aren't exactly in need. The kicker, for instance, has kicked you and me refunds of 14 percent and 6 percent respectively for the last two years, but has dropped a startling 42 percent and 50 percent into the pockets of Hyundai, Nike and their ilk.

This is the best we can do? Sister Christine Vladimiroff of Second Harvest, the nation's largest food-distributing charity, wondered as much in the wake of Congress' recent welfare cuts. She noted that though "the economy is booming by most standards we use to measure it," Second Harvest's demand is up and can't meet the growing need in the face of welfare cuts. Vladimiroff hits on something vital to our nation's economic strategy: We have more important goals than to help people.

The economy is doing fine if the economy is defined as big business. It's the people who are losing out.

This applies to Oregon as much or more than any place in the nation. Even more shocking than the state policies that favor corporations are those specifically designed to cater to the high-technology sector. Our state draws these businesses with unprecedented tax incentives and subsidies — in other words, using public funding to serve the needs of private profit. This socialization of costs means the burden is borne by the many, with profits reserved for the few.

"High-technology industries tend to employ only very highly compensated workers. Policies that encourage high-tech industries to move into a state would certainly exacerbate trends toward income inequality," as Larin puts it.

An economy is only useful insofar as it satisfies the needs of people. It is time for Oregon to start rethinking the Faustian bargain it has made with the high-tech industry and reestablish its social contract with its citizens.

Jeff Shaw is a columnist for the Emerald. His work usually appears on alternate Wednesdays. His views do not necessarily represent those of the newspaper.



OPINION



Jeff Shaw

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Extend add-drop

In the first few weeks of school fall term, 2,079 students signed a petition saying they needed more time to evaluate their classes before they were forced to add or drop them. That's way over 10 percent of the student population. That's a lot of students that care. This Wednesday the University Senate has the opportunity to represent that desire by changing the policy with which students add or drop classes. The Senate needs to seize the day and do something that helps students.

This University exists for students, and while it probably can't bend to every wish of every student, it should go out of its way to help students get a better education. It's ironic that an institution that wants to teach people to think asks students to pick courses before they have a chance to see if they are going to teach them the things that they need. This is a simple solution to a

consistent problem. If the University can do something to help without costing itself too much money or any academic integrity (and it is obvious that they can), they should do so to help students.

Students are not asking for the moon; they just want the services they deserve to get the education they need. Having more time to add and drop classes is a big part of that, and faculty need to be sensitive to those needs. It is not a normal thing to get 2,000 students to agree on one issue; the faculty should be excited about students getting involved in their education instead of resisting the changes they propose.

All this turns out to be a win-win situation. Students get the classes they want, and faculty get the attention they deserve. It's a mandate from the masses. The University Senate just needs to follow the beaten path.

Benjamin Unger
 ASUO Vice President

Anarchists can be peaceful

Most would agree that our community needs words-promoting unity. I was disappointed to read Eugene Police Chief Leonard Cooke's words questioning why "self-proclaimed anarchist groups find ours such a welcoming community" (Register-Guard, Jan. 10). These and other comments Cooke made before the City Club seemed aimed at polarizing the community against these people. Is this "us against them" rhetoric a precursor to the P.R. campaign EPD and local politicians will use to encourage taxpayers' funding of the huge public-safety revenue measure this fall?

But does the shoe fit? Are these young people really the demons Cooke would have us believe they are? Undaunted, this middle-aged woman made a point of attending the "Hellfire" anarchist gathering last summer. I saw peaceful, politically active young people who made me feel wel-

come. It was incident-free. In past years, there have been incidents of law breaking associated with anarchist gatherings. However, run-amok football fans in recent years caused thousands of dollars of damage parading goalposts through campus. Should all students be condemned? Chief Cooke should have credited last summer's peaceful anarchist gathering — not play on the public's fears with widely misunderstood labels. Dialogue provoking public enmity is irresponsible at best, dangerous at worst.

Chief Cooke has a big job — one I do not envy him. But I hope he and other city leaders will recognize that many of us will not vote for huge increases in public safety budgets that are predicated on scapegoating any faction of our shared community.

Carol Berg
 Eugene