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Unemployment Still A Problem

by John E. Jacob

The monthly unemployment figures coming out of the Labor Department continue to improve and many economists are openly proclaiming that the U.S. now has "full employment."

Nothing could be further from the truth. Those statistics are low only relative to the sky-high jobless rates of recent years. I remember when five and a half percent unemployment was cause for concern, not an excuse for declaring the problem solved.

And those overall statistics don't put the spotlight where it ought to be — on minority unemployment. Black jobless rates are still well into the double-digits.

The black rate is close to three times the white rate, which says a lot about the nature of employment patterns in the U.S. and about the indifference to black suffering.

While the headlines trumpet so-called "full-employment" the official figures for black unemployment indicate continuing Depression in the black community. If whites suffered the same twelve percent unemployment that blacks do, there would be a national outcry.

That's why we've got to keep focusing on those intolerably high black rates. They tell us that there's something drastically wrong with our economic performance, and that race continues to be a factor in deciding who works and who goes without.

Beyond that, the way federal unemployment statistics are compiled reinforces the myth of full employment while millions go without work.

The government doesn't count as unemployed anyone who worked for even a couple of hours in a week. Nor does it count part-timers who want full-time work, new entrants into the labor force, and discouraged workers — people who have given up looking for work because available jobs are inaccessible or require skills levels they don't have.

Although the economy has improved since the last recession, blacks and other minorities still experience recession-level unemployment.

Meanwhile, many experts are suggesting that this long-term economic recovery is about to run out of steam and the next recession may hit within a year. If that

happens, it will be painful for all workers.

But blacks will go into the next recession with twelve percent official unemployment rates and even higher real jobless rates. We can then expect one of five black workers to be back on the unemployment rolls.

In part, that will happen because blacks are disproportionately concentrated in the most vulnerable industries. The jobs least affected in a recession require high educational and skills levels, and are in industries relatively safe from cyclical downturns and from import competition.

But those are the jobs that blacks are least likely to hold. And when minorities do acquire the educational credentials, their unemployment rates continue to be higher than those for whites.

Government, and especially the presidential candidates, must address this disastrous black economic vulnerability. We need stricter civil rights enforcement, affirmative action, programs that assure quality education for the disadvantaged, and work opportunities.

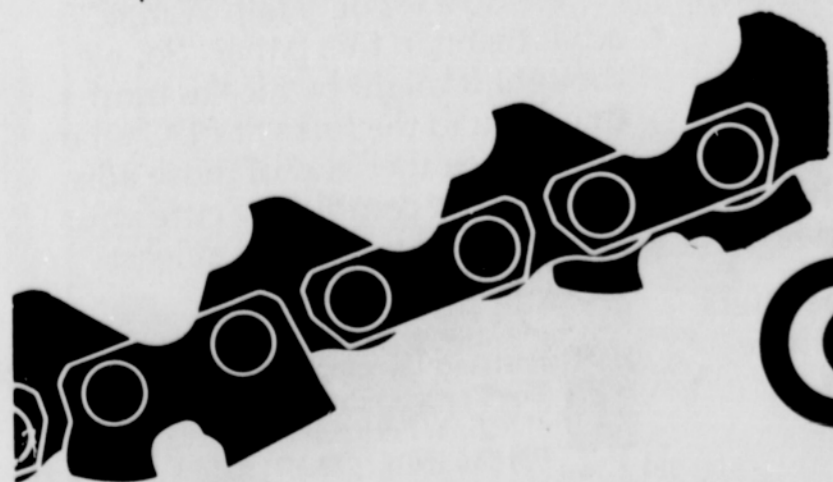
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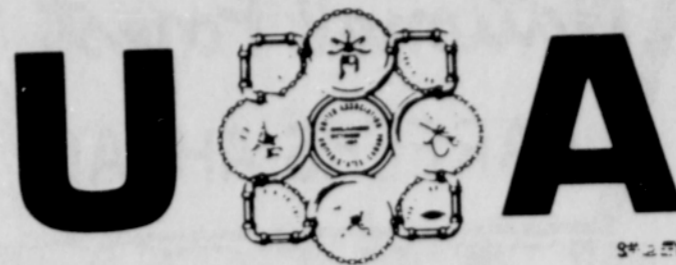
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