

Bills, Hunger: Realities of the Working Poor

Would you recognize a poor child when you saw one? Nine-year-old Carolyn Latimore and her sister Aalijah, eight, are beautiful little girls with big smiles on their faces. But Carolyn, Aalijah, and their older brother, Robert, 17, of Middletown, Ohio, fell into poverty when their parents divorced. They’ve lived in four places in the past four years including a chaotic housing project where their bikes and toys were stolen. Their mother, Christine Allen, works nights and goes to a junior college but escaping poverty is mighty hard in a recession.

Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Julia Cass, on assignment for the Children’s Defense Fund, met Christine and her family earlier this year. Three-quarters of poor children have a working parent. Christine began her adult life at a disadvantage: no high school diploma. She got married and worked. For ten years, she was a nursing assistant, earning \$10 to \$15 an hour. “I was doing personal care for the elderly and I worked in a lot of Alzheimer’s units,” she said. Her husband was “making pretty good money” with overtime as a cook in a Bob Evans restaurant. “We had a little house.



CHILD WATCH
Marian Wright Edelman

We didn’t have to worry about bills being paid and food in the refrigerator.” But things changed after their divorce.

Christine’s experiences over the past four years are typical of some of the realities of the working poor. One is the nature of the work itself—frequently physically demanding, sometimes unpleasant, often not fulfilling, and always poorly paid. Bathing and changing elderly people day after day, year after year, she said, “takes its toll”—but after that job, she found herself stuck in a series of other jobs that paid even less: at a gas station, bowling alley, fast food restaurant. It took her a month, she said, to save \$100 for the deposit on an apartment in a housing project and two more years to get out of subsidized housing and into her current

house—a well-kept place in a somewhat rundown neighborhood. At one low point she slipped on ice, broke her wrist, and lost her job at a nursing home. As a consequence she lost the car she was still paying on. When her wrist healed she rode a bicycle uphill across town to a part-time job at a Burger King. Christine decided at that point she had to go back to school in hopes of doing better for her children.

Christine completed her GED

which could lead to a better one: she’s down to her last semester of classes but the courses she needs run until five o’clock and she starts work at 2:30. She said the school told her she could do the courses online “but I don’t have a computer, and I can’t afford the Internet. That’s another bill!”

On the morning Julia Cass met them, the girls were up at 7:30, getting dressed and collecting their school supplies. Their brother had already left. None of them

times we get those little boxes of cereal.”

They aren’t the only family struggling in Middletown, which has steadily lost factories and population. Through a U.S. Department of Agriculture program, Family Services of Middletown distributed 26,500 lunches in parks this summer so Middletown children wouldn’t go hungry while school was out. Millions of children are not so lucky in the summer. While almost 32 million children have lunch provided to them during the school year, only 2.3 million children benefit from summer feeding programs. Federal summer feeding programs have been plagued by state bureaucracy and need to be simplified right now. Not only can child hunger during long summer months be staunched, high quality summer learning programs can staunch summer learning loss which widens the achievement gap between poor and nonpoor children. Our nation needs to attend to the summer feeding needs of children because hunger does not stop when school is out.

‘There’s no milk in the refrigerator right now. It’s horrible to say that. No milk for cereal.’

and got a Pell Grant and student loan to study administrative medical assisting at the local junior college. Through a temporary agency she got a job at a nearby factory where she earns \$8.15 an hour. Although her hours have been irregular, they made it possible for her to go to classes in the morning. But now the irregular job she can’t afford to give up is getting in the way of the education

ate breakfast. “There’s no milk in the refrigerator right now,” Christine said. “It’s horrible to say that. No milk for cereal. But they get breakfast and lunch at school so I don’t have to worry about them being hungry.” “Sometimes we have granola bars, and every day we have chocolate milk and orange juice,” Aalijah said. “Sometimes we don’t get orange juice; we get peaches. And some-

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Rich Republicans are Out of Touch with America

If you needed evidence that Republicans are out of touch with America, look no further than recent exchanges among candidates. Mitt Romney bet Rick Perry ten thousand dollars over something in his book. I understand that Mr. Romney is disturbed that Mr. Perry has taken some of his work out of context, but a ten thousand dollar bet! Give me a break. With the average American household surviving on about \$50,000 a year, that ten grand represents nearly three months living expenses for the average family. Could Romney have figured out a way to make his point with Perry without thumbing his nose at the rest of us?

On a roll, Romney also took on now-frontrunner Newt Gingrich for making more than a million dollars in a contract with Freddie Mac. He thinks Newt ought to return the money. I want to know what Newt was doing for the mortgage company that made him worth \$1.6 million. And it just goes to show how differently Newt lives than the rest of us do. Of course, that point was made when he dropped a cool half million dollars at Tiffany’s.

There is a yawning gulf between the economic status of these Presidential candidates and the rest of us. Even the Obamas were still paying off student loans when elected in 2008! No wonder these folks don’t want to tax the wealthy – they are the wealthy.

The Tea Party populists talk about the “little people”, but not many little people make ten thousand dollar bets or earn millions of dollars consulting for mortgage companies. It’s enough to make you chuckle in dismay at how out of touch these people are.

Meanwhile, although the unem-



BENNETT COLLEGE
Julianne Malveaux

ployment rate has dropped, there are still more than 14 million people officially out of work. Out of touch Republicans who refuse to pass legislation to put people back to work. The concerns of such ordinary working people are a concern that certainly Mr. Romney has never had to experience. No wonder he can run around making five-figure bets.

Whenever the wealth of some Republicans is raised, others talk about “class warfare” and suggest that economic envy is at the root of talk of taxing the wealthy more. But folks like Bill Gates, Sr. say the wealthy should be taxed more, not less. Romney and Gingrich are using their wealth to finance their campaigns, and so I guess they need every nickel they can scrounge together.

Maybe this seems a little mean-spirited, but the audacity of a wealthy candidate to make a five figure bet has just flabbergasted me! It reminds me of Marie Antoinette, who probably never said, “let them eat cake”, but was beheaded for her free spending ways. I’m not suggesting beheading as punishment for Romney or Gingrich, but the French Revolution raises interesting parallels to the present time. The Occupy movement speaks to the deep economic frustration that so many people are experiencing, but there are probably more people who went shopping the day after

Thanksgiving than occupied anything, even for a minute.

That’s why Romney’s bizarre behavior won’t even raise eyebrows in some circles. Romney may be out of touch with America,

but sometimes I think that we, too, are out of touch for electing people who have essentially told all of Americans who can’t afford bread that they, too, can eat cake.

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