

The growing poverty of the U.S. working class

written by Stephen Millies
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99 cent store in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Millions of working-class families in the United States are so poor they can't afford to shop at grocery stores any more. They're buying food at 99 cent stores instead.

Ohio resident Kyle Dishman told the Washington Post that he knows that "any food you can buy for only \$1 is not the greatest for you." But he has only \$40 a week to spend on groceries for his two-person family.

Like millions of workers, Dishman had his work hours cut since the COVID-19 pandemic started. Despite the stock market being at an all-time high, there are [5.7 million less workers employed](#) as compared to February 2020.

Dollar General, the largest dollar store chain, has 32% more customers than before the coronavirus. Some 1,650 new 99 cent outlets are expected to open this year.

Many of [the 34,000 dollar stores](#) are located in "food deserts," neighborhoods where the nearest grocery store is at least a mile away. That makes it harder for residents to purchase fruits, vegetables and other fresh food.

These conditions help steal years from peoples' lives. Residents in the well-to-do Battery Park development in lower Manhattan live on average to be nearly 86 years old. A subway ride away in the overwhelmingly Black and Latinx Brownsville community of Brooklyn, [life expectancy is 11.5 years less](#).

There's nothing new about working-class families being forced to buy lousy food. Frederick Engels — Karl Marx's co-thinker — described what was available to workers in Manchester, England, in the 1840s:

"The potatoes which the workers buy are usually poor, the vegetables wilted, the cheese old and of poor quality, the bacon rancid, the meat lean, tough, taken from old, often diseased, cattle, or such as have died a natural death, and not fresh even

then, often half decayed.” ([The Condition of the Working Class in England.](#))

The now-bankrupt A&P supermarket chain was boycotted in the 1960s and 1970s for its rotten food and racism in hiring. Activists followed an A&P truck carrying spoiled produce thrown out of a Massapequa store in suburban Long Island, New York, to be sold in Harlem.

Cutbacks everywhere

Food isn’t the only item poor and working people can barely afford. Even during periods of “prosperity” millions buy used clothing and furniture at Goodwill or the Salvation Army.

In 2019, [7.5 million seniors couldn’t afford medicine](#) prescribed by their doctor.

Between 2007 and 2016 banksters foreclosed — that is, stole — nearly [7.8 million homes](#) from families. Just in 2015 [landlords evicted](#) an estimated 2.7 million families..

Millions more face being homeless once the COVID-19 bans on evictions and foreclosures expire. We have to mobilize to cancel the rent and mortgages!

Those kicked out of their homes often turn to family members for help. Between 1980 and 2010, the number of these [doubled-up families increased almost four-fold](#), from 1.15 million to 4.3 million. (2012 U.S. Statistical Abstract, Table 59)

Overcrowded housing is a big reason why deaths from the coronavirus are two and three times as high in Black, Indigenous and Latinx communities. In the [East Elmhurst neighborhood of Queens, New York](#) — where Malcolm X lived with his family — one out of every 129 residents have died of COVID-19.

This is a housing crisis but there’s no housing shortage. New York City landlords

keep nearly [a quarter-million apartments empty](#) so the rent stays sky-high.

That's as criminal as hoarding food during a famine. The people united can take over these empty apartments and abolish homelessness.

Close to 43 million people [owe \\$1.6 trillion](#) in student loans. Most will never be able to pay it off. That debt needs to be wiped clean.

Wages have stagnated or even declined since the early 1970s. You would [need \\$12.77 in July 2021](#) to match the buying power of the \$1.60 federal minimum wage that was enacted in February 1968.

But the federal minimum wage is only \$7.25 per hour. That's \$5.52 stolen from poor workers every hour. If you're lucky to work an entire year of 40-hour weeks, the wage theft amounts to \$11,481.60 — almost a thousand dollars a month.

A 50-year holiday for the rich

Even the Harvard Business Review admits that hourly wages, adjusted for inflation, have increased just two-tenths of 1% per year since the early 1970s. Since then the share of the [national income for poor and working people has fallen](#) from nearly 65% to below 57% in 2017.

According to the [Brookings Institution](#) — an establishment think tank — average wages, adjusted for inflation, increased just 3% from 1979 to 2018. At the same rate real wages would increase less than 16% in 200 years.

The wage stagnation — and for many workers wage cuts — happened despite a fantastic increase in productivity. Meanwhile there are 724 billionaires in the United States according to Forbes magazine.

The three richest [U.S. billionaires](#) — Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk and Bill Gates — have a

collective stash of \$452 billion. Three members of the Walton family, whose Walmart employees work for poverty wages, have a total fortune of \$181 billion.

At one pole of U.S. society you have several hundred billionaires, and at the other, 40% of people who [can't afford a \\$400](#) emergency expense. How did that happen?

The wealthy and powerful have enjoyed a reactionary holiday since the mid-1970s. An orgy of union busting erupted. In 1975, Wall Street demanded New York City Mayor Abe Beame fire 50,000 municipal workers.

Unions were pushed back not so much by broken strikes but by a tidal wave of plant closings. Thousands of union fortresses were shut down.

We weren't defeated on the battlefield. Our battlefields were taken away.

The workers of Flint, Michigan, made General Motors rich. In return GM closed nine of the ten plants there, making the city impoverished and its children poisoned by polluted drinking water.

Hardest hit were Black and Latinx workers. Median Black family income in the Midwest fell by 36% between 1978 and 1982.

Instead of young Black, Indigenous and Latinx workers getting jobs in the big plants, they were railroaded to the big prisons. The 2.2 million people in prison are workers, too.

The biggest defeat for poor people was the overthrow of the socialist Soviet Union, which had defeated Hitler and helped the African liberation struggle. The breaking up of the Soviet Union emboldened capitalists to attack us.

Now it's time for a fightback. The 26 million people who demanded justice for George Floyd shows it can be done.

