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U.S. Poverty is More Entrenched Than Ever



Homeless encampment, Portland, Oregon. Photo: Jeffrey St. Clair.

More Americans are poorer and persistently poorer than they have been in a long time. Since last year the number of people living in poverty in the U.S. increased by 15.3 million, as pandemic aid ended, according to CBS September 12. The census and CBS differ over how many American households endure penury, with the latter claiming 12.4 percent and the former 11.5 percent. Either way it's too much. Either way it means progress in recent decades combatting destitution has been pitiful. The poverty rate today is virtually unchanged from the turn of the century, according to Statista. True, it soared

from 2008 to 2014, but that was during the Great Recession and the reign of emperor Barack “Evict the Homeowners” Obama, when millions of Americans discovered that voting for hope and change meant losing the roof over their heads.

To blame for the recent increase in indigence was termination of such benefits as stimulus checks and the Child Tax Credit. “If the expanded Child Tax Credit had been renewed,” CBS said, “about 3 million additional children would have been kept out of poverty last year, while child poverty would have been about 8.4 percent, rather than 12.4 percent.” Imagine a world where the U.S. kept the CTC but ditched Donald “Save the Billionaires” Trump’s God-awful tax cut for the rich. There might even be enough money to provide low-income housing for the homeless. But nah, such a paradise of economic sanity has no chance with the best congress money can buy. Or with the bought-and-paid-for Supreme Court. Or with presidents who are, or soon hope to be, multimillionaires. We live in an oligarchy. And the only people whose needs the government tends to are plutocrats.

A more specific problem for the poor is that they earned less last year, according to the census. “The median household income in 2022 was \$74,580, a decline of 2.3 percent and the third year in a row that incomes have dipped.” So it wasn’t just during the pandemic: American incomes are still declining. Meanwhile to return to the expanded CTC, economists urge congress to reinstate it, since it has proved an effective weapon against shrinking paychecks. According to Common Dreams November 7, that tax credit “helped ensure that far fewer kids struggled with insufficient food and other essentials.” The article quoted the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: “Letting 9 million children in this country live in poverty is a policy choice,” just like Trump and his congress stuffing cash into billionaires’ pockets was a policy choice.

But the CTC has powerful enemies, namely the entire GOP senate and far-right Dem senator Joe “Poor People Spend Money on Drugs” Manchin. This combo ended the expanded CTC and thus promptly caused the largest single-year American increase in poverty among children. This lousy decision “was driven largely by Manchin’s false claim that parents who were given money to help with the cost of childcare and groceries each month would spend the cash on drugs.”

Manchin’s snobbery, that disgusting eagerness to believe lies about the poor, is actually a form of bigotry directed at the dispossessed. Remember, Manchin is a multimillionaire. A progressive news outlet, The Tennessee Holler, referred to Manchin’s views as “an inhuman disdain for regular people.” We can all thank our stars this monster will not run for the senate again, while recent speculation about Manchin campaigning for president on

a third-party ticket should nauseate decent people everywhere. Best case scenario? He retires from public life entirely – having done enough damage for an army of far-right fanatics.

The only presidential candidate with long-standing interest in assisting the poor is Cornel West. He made proposals to combat poverty for decades. Encouragingly, Jill Stein has called for a guaranteed basic income and Medicare4All. But then there's Biden – his passion for the oppressed is cold stuff, to say the least. Senator Bernie “Vote for the Status Quo” Sanders won't run – leaving such concerns near to the heart of the non-affluent as single-payer health insurance, student debt forgiveness and raising the minimum wage in Biden's icy, bored hands. Trump's views on those with small incomes are loftily indifferent or outright hostile and need no elaboration, nor do those of any of his GOP challengers. Robert Kennedy Jr. argues for federal housing vouchers to combat homelessness and has a plan – “working-class capitalism” or “populist capitalism” – but anything that smacks of socialism is not on his agenda. And it's hard to see how you eradicate indigence without socialistic programs; after all the most effective anti-poverty programs are Social Security and Medicare. So that leaves Cornel West or Jill Stein.

But even if a candidate of such obvious sincerity and integrity as West reached the white house, what could he do? The oligarchy owns Congress, so any economic amelioration would come via executive order. And when West revealed himself to be a true radical, how long before congressional troglodytes impeached him? They'd find some excuse, and no matter how flimsy, corporate media wouldn't shut up about it. Besides there hasn't been a president who truly lifted a finger for the indigent since Lyndon Baines Johnson – the butcher of Vietnam, who by today's standards would be regarded as a fire-breathing economic revolutionary.

So, leaving Washington behind, the problem throughout mainstream America is that family incomes failed to rise as fast as the 7.8 percent increase in consumer prices from 2021 to 2022. That jump was the highest since 1981, meaning that inflation-adjusted income fell. Not surprising, considering we now have the worst inflation in 40 years. Also expected – voters consider the economy their top issue. And they don't approve of inflationary moves like sending over \$100 billion to Ukraine.

Inflation wallops low-income people a lot harder than the well-to-do, for the obvious reason that the poor have less money for groceries, gas, medicine and rent. “Prices rose 3.2 percent over the year ending in October,” reported a Pollyanna-ish Washington Post article November 14. We're supposed to be pleased with 3.2 percent, according to the Post,

because it wasn't the predicted 3.7 percent, although the article concludes that prices for all essentials "are higher than before the pandemic started." The Post then paints a rosy picture of the stock market, something not of much interest to middle- and low-income America, before crowing that "the recession that seemed practically guaranteed one year ago has largely faded from economists' forecasts." Sorry to be a party-pooper but for indigent Americans the recession is here, has been here and will continue here into the foreseeable future.

If all those poor people vote for Cornel West, they might get a reprieve from their permanent recession – until some acceptable flunkey is installed in the white house and undoes all of West's executive orders.

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