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Chitlin' Jobs
Black Folks Get Diminishing Scraps
by Meizhu Lui
Guest Commentator

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Slaves got the animal parts that their masters thought were unfit for whitefolks to eat. Pig intestines, it turned out, became an African American delicacy: chitlin's. They also got the jobs unfit for white folks. Even after slavery ended, they have gotten jobs only after whites have had the first pickin's. Unfortunately, there is no way of making something good out of underemployment.

In late January, the Ford Motor Co. announced the lay-offs of 25,000 workers and the likely closure of 14 plants around the country. Add this to General Motors' fall announcement that it would shed 30,000 jobs and close 12 plants: we are witnessing another step in the dismantling of the domestic U.S. auto industry. Once the unrivaled and consistent winner of the global auto race, we are falling farther and farther behind. The decline of auto has big implications for US workers. One official of the United Auto Workers characterized it as a "wildfire that's going to take down the middle class."

The first to be taken down is the Black middle class. For a moment there in the middle of the twentieth century, it seemed like Blacks would finally gain the economic security long denied them. With a need for all hands to be put to work for the World War II effort, President Roosevelt integrated the defense industries. For the first time, Blacks found good stable jobs alongside whites with good pay and good benefits. Black middle class prosperity increased in the 1950's with the expansion of unionized jobs in the automobile and aircraft industries now open to people of all races.

Blacks fought for greater inclusion and advancement in these industries as well as for better wages and benefits, as evidenced by the militant organizing in Detroit's auto sector and their strong union participation. With these jobs, they could afford to buy homes, send their kids to college, save for retirement, and get their family health needs paid for through employer-paid insurance. As a result, cities like Detroit and Los

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Angeles witnessed the growth of middle class and even affluent Black neighborhoods.

At a time when US prosperity was high and the US was clearly the dominant global economic power, there was enough to begin inviting Blacks to the dinner table. The Civil Rights movement pushed the door open wider to equal employment opportunity. But in the 1970's, President Reagan, the spearhead for a racist and elitist agenda, stopped forward motion on sharing the nation's wealth among all its people. Declaring class warfare, he busted the federal air traffic controllers union, PATCO, and the assault on unions has not let up since. As a result, employers have been able to increase the pay and benefits for those at the top, increasing the ratio of CEO pay from forty times that of the average pay for workers to 431 times more in 2005. While top management have made out like the bandits that they are, worker benefits have decreased and real wages have not kept pace with inflation.

Hardly before the ink was dry on Civil Rights legislation, Reagan's administration began to chase Blacks away from the table. Declaring race warfare, he invented the welfare queen as a target for white anger.

Support for affirmative action has eroded, and blaming the victim has replaced an understanding of the historical roots of racial economic inequality. Today, not only does racial income disparity remain so that Blacks earn 57 cents on the white person's dollar (per capita), but the racial wealth divide is a mile-deep canyon. White families have eleven times more wealth: the median wealth for a Black household is \$19,000, including home equity, retirement savings, and car ownership, compared to \$211,000 for whites. With the demise of the auto industry and the manufacturing jobs that fostered the beginnings of asset accumulation for Black families, we may well see a further widening of the wealth gap by race.

Since George Bush became President in 2001, the country has lost over 2.7 million well-paying manufacturing jobs, most in core urban areas. But these are not short-term trends tied to partisan politics.

The decline of manufacturing as a share of the economy has worsened for the last four decades. In 1965, the share of the economy that was linked to manufacturing was 53 percent. By 1988, it was 39 percent, and by 2004 it had plummeted to 9 percent.

Blacks suffer disproportionately from this trend. Even though they constitute 11 percent of the workforce, they are 15 percent of those receiving pink slips in the manufacturing sector. For example, two of the biggest announced Ford plant shutdowns are the Hapeville plant, employing 2,100 workers largely from Atlanta's south side Black neighborhoods -and the Hazelwood plant, employing 1,445 St. Louis employees.

While we used to make planes, steel and cars, now we make burgers and fries, and we make beds. Laid off auto workers, for the most part, will not find comparable jobs. National averages show that 57 percent of laid off workers make less in their next job -and a third of those make a full 20 percent less, with substantially less benefits. The median manufacturing wage is about \$51,000 a year, plus benefits. Jobs in the growing hospitality sector pay median wages of \$16,000; in health services, a median of \$33,000. The decline of manufacturing will only worsen the racial disparity in health care coverage. Over 28 percent of Blacks have no health insurance, compared to 33 percent of Latinos and 11 percent of whites.

When times were good, the scraps used to get better. But now, all the gravy is flowing to those with the most pork, while Blacks are back to chitlin' jobs.

Attacks on the working class and on people of color go hand in hand. Busting unions and then blaming Blacks for growing white economic insecurity has worked like the con man with his hand in your pocket yelling "thief!" and pointing in the other direction. Workers of all races need to stop falling for this con.

Either that, or everyone better start enjoying chitlins'.

Meizhu Lui is the Executive Director of United for a Fair Economy. She is co-author of the forthcoming

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book, The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide (New Press, June 2006). United for a Fair Economy is an independent national organization that raises awareness of the damaging consequences of concentrated wealth and power.