

One in four in the church pew out of work

Written by Julianne Malveaux, NNPA Columnnist
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(NNPA) - Pretend you are on a church pew. Worshipping, eight of you. If you are sitting up in the Black church, two of you eight do not have a job. Multiply that by the whole church. The two in eight number gets even worse. Someone sitting jobless is connected to a family with a job, a family who feels connection and responsibility, a need to help.

The family member with the job is more frightened than frightened can be. Lance needs a loan, and she can offer it today, but what will happen tomorrow to Lance and the family. The entire extended family is traumatized by Lance's job loss.

Lance, of course, is a Black man. Unemployment has hit Lance and Tanya harder than it has hit the entire population, but it has hit all of us hard. The double-digit unemployment rate which was released on Friday, 10.2 percent, is a lovely fiction, a glossing over, of the church pew reality. The fact is that one in six Americans, and more than four African Americans are out of work.

The unemployment rate is one we have not seen in over 25 years, when (ugh) Ronald Reagan was President. Then, the spin-doctors tried to alter unemployment rates by excluding the military and manipulating the number so that the more than 10 percent rate was less that it might have been. At the same time the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 10 percent could be higher if discouraged workers, those who worked part time but wanted to work full time and those otherwise underemployed were counted.

Here we go again.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics has been reporting alternative measures of unemployment for a long time. The media has not often picked them up. I was delighted to hear that, finally, the media is getting it, noting that 10.2 is a beautiful fiction. According to BLS the unemployment rate is as high as 17.5 percent. If the same proportions apply to the African American community as to the overall community, the Black unemployment rate is 26 percent. That means look around you at the church pew. One in four people are not working. Maybe one in three because the data doesn't capture Black folks like it does the rest of the world. The church is teeming with unemployment.

So where do these spin doctors get off talking mess about an economic recovery. They say unemployment is a lagging indicator, which means that unemployment rates trend down only after economic recovery occurs. Tell that to the woman standing outside the toy store, trying to buy a holiday present. Calling somebody a lagging indicator is like calling them out. How does it feel to be a lagging indicator in an economy that is shedding jobs so fast that it is frightening? How does it feel to be a lagging indicator when some say there is economic recovery?

Do I repeat myself when I say that it is time for a federal jobs program? Health care has gotten narrow Congressional approval, but health care without employment is like romance without finance, and the choir should now all holler, "a nuisance." In other words, much of the health care passed is employer connected health care. When people don't have jobs, they don't have opportunities.

We have examples from the 1930s, the 1950s, the 1970s, and the 1980s of ways the federal government has been involved in creating jobs. It is time to create jobs now, to deal with a

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Works Progress Administration type program to put our nation back to work. Too many people have been hit too hard, too long – with nearly 16 million out of work, with more than a third of those having been out of work for half a year.

We know the numbers, and they are daunting numbers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, one in ten of us is out of work. That statistic is an amazing fiction; the reality is nearly seventy percent worse – 17.5 percent of us are jobless. In the African American community the numbers are more daunting – more than 26 percent, more than one in four, are not working.

Look up and down the pew in your church. One in four of you is praying for survival. One in four is not working. We who are working are connected to those who are not working, and we too are scarred by the weight we will carry because of their unemployment. We are waiting, wanting a federal jobs program. Up and down the pew, the pain palpitates. Let us create jobs. Let the church say “Amen”.

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