

Obama's "Food Insecurity Bill": Curtailing Food Stamps, Impoverishing America

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As part of a package of agricultural legislation, Congress and the President have passed what should be called "the food insecurity bill" that will cut \$8.7 billion in food assistance (SNAP or food stamps) over the next decade. The bill will cause an estimated 850,000 low-income households in sixteen states (including Maine) to lose an average \$90 in monthly benefits, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, following an approximately \$11 billion cut to SNAP benefits on November 1 of last year.

Since 2007 and the beginning of the Great Recession, food stamp enrollment has surged from about 26.3 million people to 47.6 million last year, according to Agriculture Department figures. Consequently, spending on the program has more than doubled since 2007 and represents about 2.2 percent of some \$3.6 trillion in total federal spending in the 2014 fiscal year. Lower incomes and rising food costs have pushed benefits upward, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office.

One in six Americans receives food stamp benefits. Seventy-six percent of SNAP households enrolled include a child, a senior, or someone who is disabled. Ninety-one percent of benefits go to households with income at or below the poverty line. One in six households, or nearly 18 million people, are considered "food insecure" by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture.

In the New England state of Maine, Feeding America, the nationwide network of food banks of which Good Samaritan of Auburn is a member, ranks Maine's "food insecurity rate" at 15.7%; and Maine's child food insecurity rate at 22.8% - even before these cuts take effect.

Sen. Angus King (I) and Rep. Mike Michaud (D) voted "yea" for the Farm bill which contains these food cuts; Rep. Chellie Pingree (D) and Sen. Susan Collins (R) voted "nay". The U.S. House passed the measure 251-166 Jan. 29; the U.S. Senate passed the measure 68-32 Feb. 6. The bill was signed into law by President Obama on Feb. 7.

In the view of the Editorial Board of the *Washington Post* [Feb 4], "In Congress's farm bill, the rich get richer." The bill expands crop insurance subsidies and all but guarantee beneficiaries' revenues [agribusiness] never fall below 86 percent of their earnings during years of high crop prices.

The *Post* asks: "Why would a president concerned about inequality endorse such welfare for the prosperous?" The *New York Times* [Jan. 29] felt the bill "clearly worthy of support, particularly because it will prevent austerity fanatics in future Congresses from gutting food

stamps for the next five years.”

The *Times* concluded that though the bill’s “food-stamp provisions were saved from being much worse, they will still reduce benefits for too many poor people.” A cynic might point out that the newspaper is employing the “canard” used by the Democratic Party and President Obama since 2008, “we’re saving you from much worse,” and is used here to reinforce the mirage of a two-party system and a sympathetic president. In truth, Mr. Obama verbalizes equality while facilitating inequality. Furthermore, not at the White House, in Congress or on the editorial board of *The New York Times* sits a poor person or a recipient of these food stamp cuts.

The reflex reactions by both right-wing “small government” groups and left-leaning opponents of “corporate welfare” were aptly summarized in a headline by the conservative Washington Examiner, “The farm bill: Left and Right on one side; special interests and the mainstream media on the other.” [Feb 3]

The bottom line of the Farm bill is that agribusiness which can most afford to lose subsidies gains them, and the poorest that can least afford to lose more, losses more. “Charities simply will not be able to make up the difference,” said Bob Aiken, CEO of Feeding America.

As the bottom drops deeper for the poor, the wealth sector reaps bonanzas. The *Wall Street Journal* and FactSet [Feb 3] admitted that any negative market conditions ahead “will sting a little less” for the nation’s wealthiest because they had benefited from “stunning windfalls” in 2013. Twenty executives with the largest stake in S&P 500 companies had their wealth grow by a combined \$80.9 billion in 2013, according to the *Journal*. Warren Buffett’s wealth in his company increased by \$12.7 billion last year bringing his total to \$33.9 billion. Mark Zuckerberg’s holdings in Facebook more than doubled from \$11.3 billion to \$23 billion; Larry Page, CEO of Google, gained \$9 billion, to \$26.9 billion; Sergey Brin (co-founder of Google) gained \$8.8 billion, to \$26.3 billion; Steve Balmer (Microsoft CEO) gained \$3.6 billion, to \$12.5 billion; Bill Gates gained \$1.6 billion, to \$13.4 billion. Gates, the world’s richest person, enjoys a total net worth of \$78.5 billion, up \$15.8 billion from the year before.

A *Bloomberg* survey published in January found overall, the world’s 300 richest people saw their wealth grow by 13 percent in 2013, to \$3.7 trillion, up by \$524 billion. Last Fall, a report on income disparity by the Univ. of California, Berkeley, found 95% of income gains from 2009 to 2012 went to the top 1% of the earning population while other studies concluded that America’s median household income has dropped by more than \$4,000 since 2000, after adjusting for inflation. “Top 1 percent incomes grew by 31.4 percent while bottom 99 percent incomes grew only by 0.4 percent from 2009 to 2012,” wrote Berkeley researcher Emmanuel Saez. “Hence, the top 1 percent captured 95 percent of the income gains in the first three years of the recovery [while the] top 10 percent captured 48.2 percent of income in 2012, up from the previous record, 46.6 percent, in 2011.” [“Striking it Richer”, Emmanuel Saez, UC Berkeley, Sep 3, ’13]

“The income gap between the richest 1 percent and the rest of America last year (2012) reached the widest point since the Roaring Twenties,” wrote CBS News [Sep 10, ’13]. Whistle a happy tune, Gatsby lives! “The rich get richer and the poor poorer.” Later, after the crash, people of the 1930’s elected a president who conservative Republicans accused of eating millionaires for breakfast. Today, we have billionaires eating Americans for breakfast, lunch and dinner (as sales to them of Lamborghinis, Bentleys and Rolls-Royces soar).

“Workers aren’t getting fair share of income, which is strengthening the burgeoning movement of worker protests in fast food, retail and the Occupy Movement,” Tamara Draut, vice president of policy and research at public interest advocacy group Demos told CBS [Sep 10, '13]. “If you think about the notions of what Americans believe about their country, like the American dream of a broad middle class, this should be a wake-up call that this is not a good path for our democracy to be on.”

Meanwhile, as numbers numb the average mind and alienate statisticians from feeling the human effects of hunger, Maine’s child food insecurity rate of 22.8% continues. Tragically, it will grow worse from these cuts.

If the future belongs to the children, why are we letting them go hungry?

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