

Hungry Californians, a Question of Economic Human Rights

By: Ethel Long-Scott

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Martin Luther King wrote, "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." This Thanksgiving, the Department of Agriculture estimates that nearly 35 million people - over 2 million more than last year -- are hungry or unsure whether they will be able to supply food to their families. Direct service centers are distributing more food to formerly middle-class people -- college graduates, dot-com fall-outs, blue-collar workers and others. As wages and benefits disappear, healthcare becomes even less affordable, rents and tuition rise, even more people will be falling into the ranks of the poor. As the holiday season approaches, we must ask, "Why is it that this richest nation in the world is producing more and more hungry people everyday?" To find an answer we must think beyond increasing charity or feeding a few more mouths. We must challenge the morality that allows such widespread hunger. We must ask whether we would want our own families to be forced to choose between a roof over their heads or food on our tables.

Fifty-five years, ago, the United States drafted and signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, declaring that all of God's people are entitled to food, housing, healthcare, living wages, and education. At the Women's Economic Agenda Project (WEAP) in Oakland, as the hosts of the California Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, we carry this long-ignored promise to poor and working people and people of conscience across California. It's not enough to talk about just food, just housing or just jobs because what poor Californians and increasingly middle-class Californians experience is that all of our economic human rights are persistently violated, as is our sense of decency and humanity. In Alameda County, nearly half of emergency food recipients are children, 46% of households requesting food are working households, and half are choosing between food and rent. The food banks can't keep up with the demand. And food is only one element. There is a shortage of decent housing, a shortage of childcare for working parents. We need to break our "charities-feed-the-poor" mentality and demand that food be seen as something to which we are all entitled. Today we are not asking for pity; we are demanding justice.

It is our government's responsibility to guarantee our economic human rights as promised two generations ago. Under-funded charities are not an acceptable substitute. It is an outrage for our governmental bodies to pose every Thanksgiving as humane and caring, when the rest of the year children go hungry throughout Oakland, Alameda County and the country. After all, there is enough food. California alone has the capacity to feed every single person in this entire country, three meals a day, 365 days a year.

This Holiday season, as we all take time out to be thankful for what we have and consider those who have less, let us remember justice. Let us remember that it is not right that in a country with unprecedented abundance, 1 in 9 Americans live under the threat of hunger. Let us remember Dr. King's words. And then, let us move forward in the work of building a world where all our economic human rights are realized. Ethel Long-Scott, Executive Director of Women's Economic Agenda Project.