

## Michael Polson's statement

There is a reason and a purpose for picking up and traveling 3,000 miles to be part of a California Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign delegation. We will speak not only to the plight of what's going on in my community but also to the fight that we are waging to secure basic economic human rights in California, the sixth largest economy in the world.

I am a graduate from one of the top schools of this nation. As part of that inner circle, the entire world was promised to me. When I arrived in California three years ago, however, that promise evaporated, like the shimmering mirage it always was. Faced with joblessness for months on end, I took the nearest possible job, a job in the service sector. Like most low-wage service sector jobs, I was not provided health insurance, I did not have any job security or recourse to a union, I was at the whim of management and I was expected to do it all with a smile. The irony was ever greater, as I found a job in a high-end restaurant where I was handling food that I could scarcely afford.

Since I've arrived in San Francisco, I've moved houses on average every five months, because, in a city where you have to be a millionaire to buy a house, rentals are always an iffy bet. Lease-holders move, the rents go up, and everyone is forced to move. When I finally did settle into a house, it had a mold problem, to which my landlord said, "Well, we could break your lease." He knew the trouble involved in moving, uprooting and finding another place that was close to that price. He also knew the trouble of tearing up the walls and fixing a mold problem. With little rights for renters in a city owned by large-scale developers, I was stuck.

As a gay man, I had hoped to live in San Francisco largely because of the community it had built for gay people. When I got there, however, I quickly understood that the community extended only as far as your pockets were deep. The homeless shelter that was kicked out of the Castro by a neighborhood association was only the tip of the iceberg in a community that had turned its pride in itself—against all odds and the opinions of the rest of the world—into a market ploy, a scheme in which membership in the community is based on ability to buy the accessories of the community. Now the concerns of our "community" are whittled down to the interests of a few at the top who want to be included in the institutions of marriage, our armed forces, and who want to punish other poor and working people with the death penalty for their ignorance of our lives, an ignorance cultivated by the rich and the powerful.

After a full year of job searches and a battle against creeping depression, I was asked to help conduct a media campaign for the "Save the Soul of America" March and Bus Tour, an 8-day march and bus tour through the East Bay corridor to document, protest and educate that poverty is an economic human rights violation. What I found on the bus tour, in the camaraderie on display and in the spirit of unity behind the most diverse grouping of people I'd ever encountered, were answers to the questions I had been asking. Why wasn't the dream I had been sold on, a variation of the American Dream, working for me? Why wasn't my degree getting me anywhere? Why did so many of the answers society tells me—it's my fault that I'm jobless, I am worthless because I don't have a "quality" job, I should just try harder—seem unconvincing? I was able to find in

this grouping of people a community that understood that my troubles are the result of the denial of my economic human rights. If we all had the right to food, housing, education, living wage jobs, and healthcare, we could all have the opportunities that had been promised to me by the bearers of my elite education. I was shown a moral and spiritual conviction in fighting for economic human rights that I had never seen before. Today, I take a stand not simply because it is in my interests to do so, but because I understand that all people deserve better than what we are given. I take a stand because we can do so much better.

When the day comes when even the highly-educated graduates are facing joblessness, housing and healthcare insecurity, and barely scraping by, the American Way is truly deteriorating. The rich are walking away with billions as they literally rewrite tax laws to their benefit and cut “pesky” social programs that supply for the rest of us. Meanwhile, working and poor people—from the refugees of the dot.com bust to the youth living on the streets of Oakland—are all being lumped together as we slide down the slippery towards poverty and economic insecurity together.

I am traveling to New York because there is nothing that will guarantee our rights except our own claim to those rights. All we have is our voice. Even that is under threat in New York as they raise one of the biggest standing armies to protect “us” from “terrorists.” The way it looks from here, though, “us” is just the people with the power and the purse. And the “terrorists” knocking on the door of the Madison Square Garden, are no one more than our mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, all demanding that we have the basic economic rights to ensure our ability to live a dignified and whole life.