

## ***THE NUMBERS***

**By Michael Ventura**

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If you pay attention, the numbers make you sick. The numbers are about a ruling elite (they are not populous enough to be called a "class") that doesn't care whether or not we know the numbers because they are convinced both of their power and our helplessness -- or rather, our consent, every day, to be helpless. The numbers are about an America that isn't America anymore, a democracy that isn't a democracy anymore. The numbers are about a lie called "the boom." The numbers don't need much commentary; the numbers speak for themselves.

\* The United States has the industrial world's largest gap between rich and ordinary citizens. Note: This isn't the largest gap between "rich and poor" (though we have that too), but the largest gap between "rich and ordinary." "The richest 1% of Americans enjoy about 13% of U.S. household income under official definitions, which excludes capital gains -- But if capital gains are included, as they should be, those at the top have 20-25% more income. Marie Antoinette and the French nobility (also a wealthy 1%) had a comparable share in 1789" (*Los Angeles Times*, August 1).

\* American technicians make 9% less now than in the late Seventies. American unskilled workers make 25% less. Simple laborers make 30% less. *CEOs make 480% more* (*Boston Globe*, October 16). These facts describe an even more drastic situation when you realize that 80% of American workers are still unskilled (*The New York Times*, July 5). So --

\* The wealthiest 2.7 million Americans, the top 1%, have as much to spend as the poorest 100 million. (Read that twice.) That ratio has more than doubled since 1977. In our "boom," *four out of five households* are taking home a thinner slice of the economic pie today than in 1977. Their share of national income has fallen just under 50%, from 56% in 1977. *More than 90% of the increase in national income is going to the richest 1% of households.* Yet, according to the Budget Office, even this figure is low because it "excludes deferred forms of income like restricted stock," etc. Meanwhile, the average after-tax household income of the poor has fallen 12% since 1977 (*NY Times*, Sept. 5). Yet --

\* Americans lead the world in hours worked! We put in the longest hours among workers in industrialized countries. So, not surprisingly, America gained an astounding 22% in productivity between 1980 and 1986, for instance (*NY Times*, Sept. 7).

In other words -- most Americans work harder, and American productivity has gone way way up, yet these harder-working Americans are getting a much smaller slice of the pie while the wealthiest 1% are taking in better than 90% of the profit. In fact --

\* "The typical married-couple family with children puts in 256 more hours of work -- six additional full-time weeks! -- than it did in 1989" (*NY Times*, September 6). And those

typical people are making less an hour, when figures are adjusted for inflation: "The men in that group are actually doing a bit worse than 10 years ago -- inflation-adjusted hourly wages of middle-wage men [have been] 1.8% lower in 1999 than in 1989" (same article). So -- if you're an average working married couple you are working, in hours, six weeks longer than you used to, for less money. *That added productivity and profit isn't going to you; it's going to the richest 1%. The benefits of your work and the hours of your life are being stolen, and you're putting up with it.*

And what is the median household income anyway?

\* According to the IRS, *two-thirds* of our "boom-time" Americans earned less than \$40,000 in 1997. Said Robert Greenstein, executive director of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: "Many Americans who make \$80,000 a year, \$100,000 or \$120,000, think of themselves as middle class, but the fact is that while these people are not rich, they are also not in or even near the middle, which is only about \$32,000 in after-tax income." (*NY Times*, Oct. 16). Meanwhile --

\* Businesses across the spectrum are cutting the number of full-time workers who are entitled to benefits, to such an extent that "just *one third* of all workers in California now conform to the stereotypical notion of employment: working outside the home at a single, full-time job year-round as a daytime employee" (*LA Times*, Sept. 6). When you consider that California accounts for more than 40% of the national GNP, the figure becomes even more astounding. "[In California] just 31% of women who work, compared with 35% of working men, work traditional hours" (*LA Times*, Sept. 13). "Few benefits, lower wages, diminished labor standards -- this is the reality for the nearly 1 million temps under age 35. On average, they earn 16.5% less than their regularly employed counterparts. When it comes to benefits, temps better take their vitamins and look both ways before crossing the street: only 5% receive employer-provided health insurance" (*LA Times*, Sept. 6). While --

\* "The nation has lost 500,000 manufacturing jobs in the last 18 months" (*NY Times*, Oct. 18). That means 500,000 people forced from well-paying jobs into god-knows what.

\* Sixty countries in this world are in "far worse" condition economically than they were in 1980 (*NY Times*, July 14). In 16 of these countries, the world-wide boom has decreased the average life expectancy, especially for women (*NY Times*, Sept. 23). While in the United States, executives made 419 times more than factory workers in 1998, compared to 42 times more (the good old days) in 1980 (*NY Times*, Sept. 22). While in 1997 rents in America rose twice as much as the rate of inflation, pricing many poor and old people out of the (decent) housing market (*NY Times*, Sept. 24). And in the United States, "among blacks, incomes failed to rise and poverty failed to fall" (*NY Times*, Oct. 1). While "the ranks of the uninsured have grown by more than 4.5 million since President Clinton took office in 1993" (*NY Times*, Oct. 4). And how is poverty officially defined: \$16,655 for a family of four, though "the Census Bureau has begun to revise its definition -- the bureau's new approach would in effect raise the income threshold for living above poverty to \$19,500 for a family of four." This new figure "tries to determine what a low-income family must spend in the 1990s not only to survive, but preserve a reasonable

amount of self-respect." (Which doesn't sound like too much to ask.) This would assume that what the minimum a family of four needs per month is \$506 for food, \$481 for housing, \$245 for health care, \$249 for transportation, and \$199 for personal expenses, (Which amounts to \$1.65 per person per day for "personal expenses" -- how would you like that for a daily personal allowance?) If the official estimate is thus revised, then "46 million Americans, or 17% of the population, would be recognized as officially below the line" (*NY Times*, Oct. 18).

This, while 36 million American children live in households that are "food-insecure" -- my god, what a phrase, "food-insecure"; 70% of all poor children live in households where at least one parent works. In the 1990s, the number of "extremely poor" American children grew by 16% (Children's Defense Fund, C-Span, Oct. 16).

And yet we are treated to headlines like this:

\* **"Increase in Costs of Labor Stirs Up Financial Markets.** Both the stock and bond markets fell sharply after the Labor Department reported that the employment cost index rose 1.1% from the first to the second quarter of the year -- Mr. [Alan] Greenspan [of the Federal Reserve Board] has warned that he would act "promptly and forcefully" at the first hint that inflation was accelerating" (*NY Times*, July 30). Dig it: The cost of labor is called an "inflation indicator." *Working people earning more money is considered inflationary*; CEOs earning more money is considered a sign of profitability. These basic assumptions and definitions are not seriously questioned by any major American news outlet that I'm aware of.

So much for the "free" market. Most Americans are working *six weeks longer a year*, in wage-earning hours, and are earning less. It is clear from the numbers that their additional work is going directly into the pockets of the top 1%.

This used to be called "wage slavery."

All of the leading presidential hopefuls -- George W., Al Gore, Bill Bradley, and McCain -- are enthusiastic advocates of this same "free" market. There is no viable candidate who advocates an alternative. So if you're a wage-earner in America -- or a "food-insecure" child -- you don't have a candidate. The numbers prove it.

If the word "freedom" means anything, it means a measure of control over one's economic life. By this definition, you and I are not free. And if "democracy" means a political structure through which the average citizen has a say in how power is wielded in our lives -- then we do not live in a democracy. The American myth says that if you work hard and play by the rules, then the sky's the limit. Well, most rule-abiding Americans are working harder than ever and have the highest productivity in history -- but their share of the pie is less, and they have no recourse in the political system. We have become a nation of serfs. Worker ants. The numbers prove it.

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