

A War on Poverty, or on the Poor?

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What does today's war on poverty look like? It's waged by people like Maria Shriver, who this week called attention to a human tragedy: the 42 million women and 28 million children in America who either live in poverty or are on the brink of it. And by Mackenzie Childers, a Head Start teacher in Kanawha County, W.Va., who last week brought food to 75 students who missed school—and school meals—because of the community's contaminated water supply, knowing that many of them would otherwise go hungry. Childers teaches at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center, and, as the country celebrates Dr. King's life and legacy, she shows that his ideals endure.

A half-century ago, President Lyndon B. Johnson, in conjunction with civil rights, religious and labor leaders, commenced the war on poverty. Their moral and political might persuaded Congress to pass waves of legislation targeting hunger, joblessness, discrimination and inequality—and within a decade the poverty rate in America was cut nearly in half. But progress stalled in subsequent decades, and poverty in America is once again a fearsome force. Despite herculean efforts by many Democrats, Congress has allowed unemployment assistance to expire for 1 million out-of-work Americans, and has thwarted efforts to raise the minimum wage and slashed food stamps. Rather than a war on poverty, it feels like a war on the poor.

The same week that the last bit of federal support stopped coming for many long-term unemployed Americans—support keeping them out of destitution—news broke that more than half the members currently serving in the House and Senate are millionaires. Perhaps those who oppose unemployment insurance and food stamps simply can't fathom needing such a lifeline.

My own family lived with that anxiety when my father lost his job while I was in junior high school. He was a talented engineer, yet his tireless search for work endured for more than a year. I am infuriated when people demonize the unemployed, essentially blaming them for their unemployment, knowing

as I do how hard they work to get back on the path to the American dream.

Decades later, such uncertainty has only grown in the United States. Today, the lines are blurring between the middle class, the working poor and those unable to find work. The housing crisis, the lengthy recession, wage stagnation and a "recovery" in which the well-paying jobs that evaporated have been replaced by low-wage, contingent jobs, have led to more Americans slipping down the rungs of the economic ladder. At the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom 50 years ago, Dr. King implored: "Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children." Justice is long overdue.

Justice means that hardworking people must have access to a living wage. It means that great educational opportunity must be the standard for all students in all our schools. It means that paid sick leave must not be the province of only the well-to-do and those who still have a union contract that provides for it. It means we must remove obstacles to forming and joining unions, which built America's middle class and are key to rebuilding it.

Throughout America, foot soldiers for justice have taken up Dr. King's call. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio has pledged to confront the city's deep economic chasm. California and several cities, such as Washing-

ton, D.C., have significantly increased their minimum wage. U.S. Sens. Elizabeth Warren and Sherrod Brown have shown that it is ethical and patriotic, not quixotic, to take on financial reform and income inequality. Hillary Clinton is championing the advancement of women and girls, not simply as a "nice thing to do," but because it is a "core imperative for every human being." In Cin-

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cinnati, the teachers union and school district have partnered to make every public school a community school, addressing the social, emotional and health needs of students and their families. Gov. Jerry Brown is restoring \$10 billion to California schools—a recognition that a high-quality public education for all children is an economic necessity, an anchor of democracy and a moral imperative. And Asean Johnson, a Chicago fourth-grade student, has been one of the most powerful voices against devastating school closures, budget cuts and teacher layoffs.

These foot soldiers for justice show that we all have a part in carrying out this war. Now Congress must play its part.



Weingarten and Chicago fourth-grader Asean Johnson on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial at the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington.

Photo: John Harrington

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