

Is Black Unemployment Inevitable?

By Bayard Rustin

Government economists and private forecasters have finally agreed on something — unemployment, they predict, will rise to nearly 10 percent by the end of 1980.

Not long ago, such a gloomy prediction would have been met by shock and surprise. After all, the thought of having one out of every ten workers tossed into idleness should be quite dismaying, especially for

a nation which has long regarded itself as the most affluent and most productive society on the face of the earth. Today, however, forecasts of massive lay-offs have lost their sting; they receive scarcely any attention in the press, aside, from in the labor and black press.

In part, unemployment has lost its "newsworthiness" because many people, including some of those who lose their jobs, have accepted the conservative assertion that high unemployment

rates are natural, and perhaps even beneficial for the economy, since jobless workers supposedly help to combat inflation. Furthermore, some economists argue that America's high unemployment rates are misleading because they include thousands of women and teenagers, who, in the view of conservatives, don't even belong in the labor market.

At first glance, some of these arguments might seem to be persuasive.

But the notion that high unemployment is natural or beneficial appears ridiculous when we examine the records of other industrialized nations. If 10 percent unemployment is good for the United States, then it should also be good for West Germany, Sweden, Japan, France and Great Britain, all of which has industrialized economies, similar to ours. Yet none of these countries encourages or even tolerates the high unemployment rates that

have become such a persistent feature of America's economy. A comparison of American unemployment rates with those of Japan and several European countries demonstrates in a dramatic way that our nation is certainly the odd man out. For instance, back during the 1974-75 recession, the deepest unemployment in the United States peaked at nearly 9 percent. In West

Germany, by contrast unemployment peaked at just under 4 percent; in Sweden, it never got much beyond 2 percent; in Japan, it was under 2 percent; in France, it approached 5 percent. And in Great Britain it moved only slightly beyond 5 percent. Only one industrialized country — Canada — had a jobless rate close to that of United States. (See Bayard, page 17)

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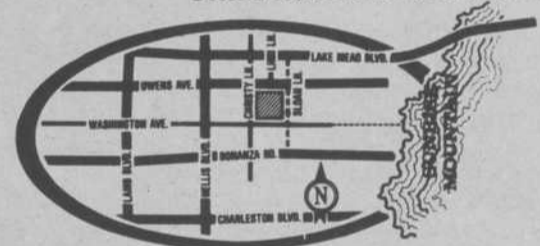
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