

## La Nueva Mayoría

By David R. Jones



By David R. Jones  
January 10, 2013

### **Paths Out of Poverty**

I wrote a column last summer warning that the present trajectory of the city's economy, coupled with the lack of good jobs or opportunities for young people to get work experience, and no discernible sign that our political leadership understand the ramifications of doing nothing, would eventually lead to civil disorder. Nothing's happened since to change my mind.

New York City's poverty rate is now 20.9 percent – 1.7 million New Yorkers live below the federal poverty line of \$22,811 for a family of four. Thirty percent of the city's children live in poverty. The poverty rates for Latinos and for adults without a high school diploma are also 30 percent.

There are approximately 177,000 young people in our city – ages 16 to 24 – who are neither working or in school. Some 40 percent are Latino youth. There are 1.3 million New Yorkers (18 and older) without a high school diploma.

What can be done? Political leaders need to do more to spur the creation of jobs offering decent pay and basic benefits. And we need to ensure that our young people have the skills to fill jobs and hold onto jobs when economic conditions improve.

We should invest in city infrastructure projects - to take advantage of low interest rates to build and repair schools, roads, and parks. The High Line stands as a dramatic example of how much economic development can be generated by visionary public works.

We should target businesses for tax credits to help generate good jobs with benefits. And press large city banks that are sitting on top of mounds of capital to ease restrictions on small business loans and startup entrepreneurs.

We should adopt a program to convert some employment benefits into "re-employment benefits" so employers who hire workers receiving employment benefits would be permitted to convert the stream of weekly checks into a wage subsidy. It would serve as an incentive to hire the unemployed for permanent jobs, not part-time work, and not cost the public sector any more than if the worker remained jobless and drawing benefits.

Between 1.65 and 1.85 million working New Yorkers are without paid sick leave. The Paid Sick Leave bill has been languishing long enough in the City Council. Nearly every worker at some time will need to be away from the job to take care of their own health needs or the health needs of a family member. The workers who can least afford to lose their pay when illness strikes are least likely to earn paid sick leave. A recent CSS survey found that half of the low-income respondents had less than \$500 in savings in case of an emergency. These parents often must choose between their paychecks and caring for a sick child.

Why can't we support the living wage bill? Without fair wages, costs for basics like food and health care can easily get passed along to taxpayers when low-wage workers are forced to seek public benefits such as food stamps or Medicaid coverage for their children. Many other cities have shown that living wage legislation has created good jobs without adversely impacting economic growth. It's time to require fair wage guarantees for jobs created at developments receiving public subsidies.

Where is the campaign to motivate our young people and show them that education and job-skills are their ticket to a brighter future? We should bring back the Summer Jobs Program. The city sliced the summer jobs program from 52,000 to 28,000 this year. And we should expand GED programs. Our most recent "Unheard Third" survey found that most New Yorkers (67%) are willing to pay more in taxes to spend more on increasing graduation rates and on programs that give people another chance to get their diploma.

There are ways we can create paths to jobs, training, education, and the type of skills needed to compete for jobs that provide a clear a path out of poverty. What is desperately needed is action and leadership.

---

*David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. For over 10 years he served as a member of the board of directors of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer.*