

## **Inequality Is Deeply Rooted**

### **Fight to Raise Wages for All Must Continue**

*By Jesse Jackson*

The economy is strong. Stocks are at record high prices. But amid the champagne and caviar celebrations, it is worth remembering what remains to be done. Thirty years after the Kerner Commission warned that our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white - separate but unequal, the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation reports the warning has become a reality.

Yes, dramatic progress has been made since the 1968 Kerner Commission report. The black middle class has grown to unprecedented levels. Black businesses have grown. The percentage of children graduating from high school is catching up with that of white children. This year's black poverty is the lowest in 30 years, with black family median income at a record high.

Yet despite those gains, inequality remains deeply rooted. While the U.S. economy booms, most adults in many inner cities do not work during a typical week. Forty percent of minority children attend urban schools where more than half the students are poor. One in three young African American men are in prison, on parole or on probation. The median income of black and brown families remains about two-thirds that of whites. The poverty rate is three times as bad. Four of every 10 black and Hispanic children are raised in poverty.

This year's Economic Report of the President traces the history. For a decade after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, income disparities between minorities and whites declined dramatically. Then the economic recession of the 1970s and early 1980s hit minorities the hardest: last hired, first fired.

When the economy grew again in the 1980s, the rewards didn't trickle down to poor and working people, so minorities did worse. In the 1989 recession, blacks and Hispanics were hit particularly hard, with black poverty reaching a 30-year high. It is only in the last two years that minorities have finally begun to make some progress.

Part of the problem is continued and wide-spread racial discrimination. All people tend to be more comfortable with people like themselves, so white employers tend to have more positive reads on white employees and more suspicions about young African Americans or Hispanics.

That's why the president's race commission urged him to request increases in funding for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Opening locked doors is still essential.

But what the Economic Report shows is that a good portion of the gap is between top and bottom, not simply white and minority. Since African Americans and Hispanics are disproportionately low-wage workers, when the gap between CEO and worker rises, the gap between races also grows.

Over the last decades, America has grown much more unequal. The top has done remarkably well, while most workers make on average less than they did 25 years ago. In the eighth year of the current economic recovery, the wages of most workers have not yet reached the levels of 1989 before the last recession. This damages blacks and Hispanics disproportionately.

The reasons for the growing gap between the affluent and worker are many. The global economy places severe pressure on wages for less-skilled workers. The growth of the service sector has seen jobs move from high-wage, unionized manufacturing sectors to lower-wage, non-union service sectors. Benefits have been cut back; more workers are forced into temporary, or part-time work.

The result is the economy can be growing, the stock market booming, CEO salaries soaring, but most working people - and the vast majority of African American and Hispanic workers - have to work harder for less.

This isn't inevitable. In the last two years, wages have finally begun to rise for both low and medium-wage workers. The Federal Reserve has allowed the economy to run at lower levels of unemployment. Tight labor markets do help lift wages up, Unions have expanded their organizing. Democrats forced through the increase in the minimum wage, which had a dramatic effect on wages on the bottom.

The lessons are clear. Poor children need to be given a fair start - in nutrition, health care, education. Discrimination in employment must be fought relentlessly. And blacks and Hispanics have a clear stake in a full-employment economy with stronger unions, mandated health care and a rising minimum wage.

In this light, the attempt to cripple unions in the political arena - through the so-called paycheck protection laws - concerns far more than union

members. Strong unions are essential if the gap between top and bottom is to be reduced. Unions mobilized to force Congress to pass the minimum wage increase. And when the Teamsters won the UPS strike, the non-union workers at Federal Express got a raise too.

When unions are weaker, workers fare worse. And when worker incomes stagnate, blacks and Hispanics take the biggest hit. The conservative attack on unions also is a direct attack on racial justice.

Separate and unequal is a harsh and avoidable reality. We can do better. To reduce the gulf between black and white, we must challenge the growing inequality between CEO and worker. With the tide rising, we should ensure row boats and outboards are rising - and not just the yachts.

*Jesse Jackson's syndicated column appears Mondays in the Herald-Journal.*