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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

[Click Here](#)

[Home](#)

Republicans Refuse Stimulus for Citizens Deep in Poverty

African American Leadership

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BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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I understand that several Republican governors, such as Haley Barbour of Mississippi, are considering refusing money from the Stimulus package. Well, at this writing I am in the Mississippi Delta on a poverty tour arranged by Antionette Harrell, a courageous African American woman from New Orleans and what we are seeing definitely marks such actions as cruel at most and unaccountable at least to the needs of most people living in the most vicious form of abject poverty.

As Mardi Gras weekend began, we boarded vans and traveled Route 55 out of New Orleans into small towns and communities of black people in Quitman and Washington Counties in Mississippi, in places like Marks, Lambert and Glen Allan. For example, in Lambert, a community of 1,700, we found many people experiencing grinding poverty - living in ramshackle houses built nearly a century ago, with rampant unemployment, scores of young people with nothing to do but make babies, trash and stripped cars all over the place, people with serious health needs, cut off from mainstream services for the lack of public transportation.

There nearly 100 people assembled at a food pantry. Some said they had to drive 100 miles to see a doctor and nearly the same distance to shop for food. We found that although Ms. Harrell gave away 60 bags of clothing while we were there, the pantry was running low on food. Although the local mayor said the "people wanted to live that way," in a dramatic moment of repudiation at the food pantry, people were asked what they wanted. They launched into a chorus of, "jobs, jobs, library, decent houses, food, transportation, health services!" In other words, people had gross needs that were not being served by state, county and local leaders.

These communities were formed by exclusion and isolation. They are those left behind

when so many left the South and King Cotton became mechanized and made their labor useless. Many are the grandsons and granddaughters of people who had been slaves in the 19th century and sons and daughters of many who had been sharecroppers - who are really slaves in the 20th century - have lost hope of finding their own way out. There are communities that experience structural exclusion dotted all over the Delta.

Their poverty is not merely that shaped by the lack of money, but a poverty of the spirit shaped by the oppressive forces that have robbed them of hope, such that many cannot conceive of leaving or don't know how to manage the transition to a new reality of living. They do not fit the model of Harriet Tubman, they fit her model of those who do not yet fully know they are free. We found only one person among those poor who had access to a computer for the information they needed.

They already suffer from a local leadership that is often dismissive, that holds the same negative stereotypes about poor blacks as their overlords. In fact, many of these local black leaders are ministers, who are linked to the white power structure that administers a modern brutal oppression of neglect and rejection of services, part of the chain of oppression, that begins with the political decisions of leaders at the top, to ignore their condition.

Now for these leaders at the top - governors - who are concerned that they might have to continue funding unemployment benefits for such people when the Stimulus money runs out, they are balking. They could end up withholding the funds that could provide job training, decent housing and services to these locked out families and individuals, pushing them further into the drug culture and depravity that now has them in its grips.

As we read of the long lines of newly poor, many of them middle class people who are casualties caught in the current economic crisis, we see billions of dollars being directed toward them for jobs, job training unemployment assistance, displaced workers funds, housing programs and the like. But the people we are seeing in the Mississippi Delta have been kept in the shadows by their politicians while millions of dollars is still being made on cotton by agribusiness farmers and the new catfish farms, while their communities continue to suffer.

They wonder to what extent Barack Obama will find a way around the governors, directing money into these desperate communities to reach them. I wonder whether the focus on poverty in the White House Office on Urban Policy will only care for those in the metro areas of the country and not reach out into the people hidden in neglected communities, behind acres and acres of cotton. We went into Marks, Mississippi and there on one corner was a billboard showing the spot where Dr. Martin Luther King's staff began the Mule Train to Washington, DC in April of 1968 to dramatize the plight of the poor, a project he began before he was assassinated.

There needs to be a new Poor Peoples' March today while the attention of the nation is being socialized to the damages that can result from an unregulated economy. But this time, it should deal with those who have been ravaged for decades with no one coming to their aid because those in power were allied with their oppressors.

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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

Click Here

[Home](#)

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