

## **Warfare on Working Class Will Not Solve Economic Crisis**

by Senator Shirley K. Turner

New Jersey, the nation, and the world at large are facing one of the worst economic crises in modern history, and as recession gives way to depression, people are rightly asking who they should blame. Unfortunately though, rather than fess up to the mistakes which have pushed the economy to the brink of collapse, some are choosing to engage in age-old class warfare, shrugging off responsibility as they point the finger to the very working-class families who are hit hardest by the economic meltdown.

These class warriors contend that obviously, our current crisis has been caused by our years of living in "excess," as middle-class New Jerseyans spent money on such frivolities as rising property taxes and basic necessities like food, shelter and transportation. They lament that, rather than dumping hard-earned money into tax shelters like responsible captains of industry, these blue-collar work-a-day folks in some cases spent money to send their kids to college. Imagine that – parents who wanted better for their sons and daughters and invested in their education, rather than the get-rich-quick schemes that have nearly bankrupted Wall Street.

Class warfare is nothing new in this country and around the world. But at a time when we should all be working together to weather the economic onslaught, such divisiveness should be set aside. Sadly, it seems the opposite is true, and the war rages on.

The evidence can even be seen in the federal stimulus efforts to combat the multi-pronged attack on our economy. In establishing a bail-out program for Detroit auto manufacturers, which employ a mostly blue-collar workforce, the federal government has set high standards to qualify for assistance. The President of the United States was even able to use the power of his office to engineer the resignation of the CEO of General Motors.

While I believe it's appropriate that the federal government address the sustainability of the US auto industry before handing out taxpayer-funded bail-outs, the same sort of scrutiny was not applied when the banking industry came, hat-in-hand, requesting their own bail-out. Rather than issue guidelines or attempt to reform the

banking practices which have contributed to our economic decay, money was simply handed over, and in some cases, used for lavish executive perks such as bonuses and corporate retreats.

The same class warfare mentality seems to be guiding New Jersey's response to an historic decline in tax revenues and a shortfall of more than \$7 billion in the FY 2010 Budget.

There's no denying that a \$7 billion gap between revenues and expenses can be anything but painful. But rather than share the pain equally, I'm afraid that the proposal on the table saddles State workers with the lion-share of budgetary pain.

A vast majority of State employees are non-political, hard-working and firmly middle-class. They put in an honest day's work for an honest day's pay, administering the services that State residents have come to rely on. Many of these folks are struggling with the economic crisis, just as every other family on Main Street is struggling.

However, in the proposed FY 2010 Budget, these workers will be cut deepest by the Governor's budget scalpel, being forced to accept furloughs which represent a 5% wage reduction, as well as an 18-month pay freeze, denying them contracted cost-of-living increases. For many middle-class employees, these cuts in pay will make tough budget decisions for their own families next to impossible.

State employees should not be demonized for the mistakes of the past. Through Democratic and Republican regimes, these workers have toiled to make New Jersey a better place to live for themselves and their neighbors.

If some wage or benefits givebacks must take place, they must be negotiated at the bargaining table, not imposed by an Administration which clearly doesn't understand the pain these workers are facing over lost wages. And everyone – from the Governor's top-paid advisors down to roadside clean-up crews – should share in the pain, based on the impact it will have on their ability to provide for their families.

Shared budget pain must really be shared – not focused on a select few who can least afford it. Unless we spread the pain from the global economic crisis evenly, we may quickly find New Jersey's middle-class residents falling through the cracks into poverty. We must set aside class warfare and the need to assign blame, and protect those who need the most protection during these trying and difficult economic times.

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*Senator Shirley K. Turner represents the 15th Legislative District in the State Senate, which includes parts of Mercer County. She serves as Chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee, and as a member of the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee.*