While the White House boasts about the shrinking number of
people on welfare, a quiet throng marches off day after day to
one or more low-paying jobs in a futile attempt at self-suffi-
ciency. In response, last month the Women's Economic Jus-
tice Project (WEJP), a group of Ventura and Santa Barbara
County educators, students, working women, politicians and
social assistance program managers, released a report call-
ing attention to the growing "feminization of poverty" in the
region and the shortcomings of welfare reform—now known
as CalWORKS.

The WEJP evolved from the Ventura-based, non-profit
research and advocacy group CAUSE, who helped bring
about the first living wage ordinance in Ventura County in

According to the report, poverty among workers—espe-
cially women—is greater today than it was in the 1970s. The
report cites several factors responsible for this disturbing
trend: the growth of low-paying service and retail sector jobs
in Ventura County; the "work-first" reform policy of Cal-
WORKS; and the social phenomenon of devaluing jobs con-
sidered "women's work."

"Women are associated with unpaid work," said Universi-
ty of California, Santa Barbara Professor Eileen Boris, one of
the report's authors. "Women and men of color historically
have done [this type of work]—it's underpaid. If the worker
is despised [by society], then the work is defined as unskilled
to justify paying less."

Jobs considered women's work and predominately occu-
pied by women—for example, caregiving jobs—have lower
pay and less prestige than jobs mainly occupied by men,
according to the report. Home care aids who have been on the
job for three years are paid an average of $8.36 an hour in
Ventura County—and 80 percent of them are women. Certi-
fied Nursing Assistants, paraprofessionals who have com-
pleted professional training, are paid $10.90 an hour—and
ironically, they usually get no healthcare benefits. Compare
that with computer engineers—of which 71 percent are
male—who are paid an average of $21.58 an hour.

The race of the worker also plays a part. According to the
report, Latinas make up the greatest portion of the low-wage
workforce; documented and undocumented immigrant work-
ing women greatly contribute to the economy of the state and
region, though they are disproportionately concentrated on
the lower end of the labor market. Between the 1970s and
1990s, the earning gap widened between Hispanics and
whites from 28 percent to 45 percent. And Latinas are partic-
ularly vulnerable, especially since anti-immigrant sentiment
from Sept. 11 surfaced. Many—not aware of their rights or
unwilling to complain—experience workplace abuse, such as
unpaid overtime, and gender and age discrimination.

The WEJP report places some of the responsibility for
the feminization of poverty on the business community. The
government has to step in to subsidize the low wages
employers pay working women because they don't make
enough to survive on independent of government subsidies.
They are still dependent on tax dollars for housing, food,
and childcare. And it's these jobs in the low-pay-and-no-ben-
efits service and retail industries that are booming in Ven-
tura County. They account for 28 percent of all employment
and have increased 43 percent between 1994 and 2001. And
the trend is expected to continue. Nearly 40 percent of new
jobs projected for California over the next ten years will
require only a high school diploma or less and brief on-the-
job training—more than one-third of them will pay less than
ten dollars an hour.

Whether women in CalWORKS fare better or not depends
on the program. Those in the California Community College
CalWORKS program are more likely to achieve self-sufficien-
cy with a college-level education than those with a service or
retail job. For others, the priority is to find work—any work—
quickly. With 75 percent of Ventura County CalWORKS par-
ticipants being women, and paid employment an immediate
CalWORKS priority, they must find employment based on the
marketable skills they currently have—skills that are usually
best suited for low-paying service and retail jobs. On the
average, they are paid $7.15 an hour for a 40 hour work
week—or $1,144 a month (the average cost of housing in Ven-
tura County is more than 86 percent of that, or $888 a month,
according to the Census Bureau). This work-first attitude puts women in the welfare population at a disadvantage because most have a limited education, and many have to balance job obligations with the demands of heading a single parent household and childcare responsibilities. True, CalWORKS has successfully reduced the number of people on its rolls—down nearly one-half since 1996—but that success must be weighed against the working multitudes that still don’t make enough to climb out of poverty and must depend on government help. Most of them are women. With this state of affairs, how can CalWORKS ever end working women’s dependence on the government?

“People are struggling,” said Maricela Morales, CAUSE Program Manager. “People are working hard, and they’re trying to better themselves... but the reality is that they’re working and that society is benefiting from that work as well. They shouldn’t be earning poverty wages.”

One of the remedies the WEJP report calls for is unionization. There is currently a movement underway to unionize in-home service support workers (IHSS). Until recently, IHSS workers were either individual contractors or sub-contracted employees who work for minimum or near-minimum wages without benefits. They were excluded from last year’s Ventura County Living Wage Ordinance. According to Marcos Var-gas, executive director of CAUSE, and a WEJP author, county supervisors held off including IHSS in the living wage ordinance because they would be forced by the state to deal with them later this year. The state mandated all counties resolve who is the “employer of record” to determine responsibility for their pay and benefits. Ventura County just recently decided it employs IHSS workers.

“These are a group of approximately 2,000 people in Ventura County,” said Barry Hammitt, former executive director of the Service Employee’s International Union Local 998. “They save the government a ton of money and allow people to stay in their homes without being institutionalized. They deserve a livable wage with benefits.”

Hammitt said 95 percent of these workers are women, with a majority in their 40s and 50s who had to drop out of the job market in order to care of an invalid family member. IHSS workers make around $7.11 an hour ($1,138 a month); however, if the worker is injured or becomes ill, or if the person they care for is hospitalized, they do not get paid.

WORKING TO LIVE: TWO FAMILIES’ BUDGETS

Below is an actual budget for a family of four. Both parents work more than one job—sometimes six or seven days a week.

Combined Annual Gross Income .................. $24,000

Expenses:
Taxes (federal/state) ........................................... $ 7,200
Housing (government subsidized) ................. $ 7,200
Utilities (not subsidized) ............................... $ 1,320
Food ............................................................... $ 7,200
Transportation (car, gas, insurance and maintenance) .................. $ 2,000
Clothes ...................................................................$600
Healthy Families Insurance (for the children only) ..................$168
Childcare ....................................................... $0
Total ............................................................ $25,688

This budget for a single mother with one child is tight—even though her housing and childcare costs are partially subsidized.

Annual Gross Income
(full time, minimum wage) .................. $14,040

Expenses:
Taxes ............................................................... $3,510
Housing (government subsidized) .................. $ 4,800
Utilities (subsidized) ....................................... $900
Food ............................................................... $3,100
Transportation (gas, insurance and maintenance) .................. $1,800
Clothes ...................................................................$500
Childcare (government subsidized) .................. $720
Total ............................................................ $15,330

NOTE: In both cases, expenses exceed income, so basic necessities (food, clothing or car maintenance) are put off or alternatives such as shopping at a food bank must be utilized to make ends meet.

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Hammitt told of one invalid man who had a 154 percent turnover of IHSS workers in six months. One of the workers overdosed on drugs their first night, and the man had to call paramedics to help her.

Cold statistics and unadorned facts aside, the story of working women toiling to climb out of poverty must be fleshed out. Poverty a la Ventura County is not solely about the homeless and the hungry. Poverty is a tidy, lackluster government-subsidized home in a tract among clones. Poverty is working mothers named Maria Rodriguez and Katie Stenzel.

With Maricela Morales acting as translator, Maria Rodriguez, 32, said she came here as a legal immigrant with her husband, Jose Luis, 13 years ago. They have never been on welfare, and the mother of two young boys has always worked at a number of low-paying jobs—from working in the fields to assembling picture magnets. She now has three part-time jobs, working mostly late into the night: she works at home sewing garments for $2.50 or less an item and at her sons’ elementary school a couple of days a week, and she joins her husband cleaning office buildings in the evenings. She estimates that between their five jobs—Jose Luis has a full-time job and a second, part-time job—they earn $23,000 to $24,000 a year. And yet it is difficult to meet the needs of their family, even though the federal poverty guideline for a family of four is $18,100. (See box below.)

While her husband receives healthcare coverage through his fulltime job, and her sons are covered by the state’s Healthy Families medical plan, none of Rodriguez’s three jobs provide benefits. When Maria felt a persistent pain in her abdomen a year ago, she couldn’t afford to see a local doctor. She went to Tijuana, Mexico for medical attention. And fortunately, the cyst on her ovary could be treated with medication and didn’t require surgery, though that meant traveling back and forth to Tijuana several times a month for treatment. And when a sewing machine needle plunged into her finger while sewing garments, she had no choice but to go to a local emergency room. The bill for three stitches—$2,500—took over a year to pay off.

Morales said some employers take advantage of low-wage immigrant workers because the workers need the money and will put up with low pay and poor working conditions.

But Rodriguez is not one for self-pity, nor does the quiet dignity she exudes elicit pity from others. Rather, she is appreciative of the tiny paychecks she earns because they give her the flexibility to work around her children’s schedule, although that means working six, sometimes seven days a week. In addition, Rodriguez attends community college to improve her English skills and prospects for a better job.

Times were scary for 20-year-old Katie Stenzel last year.

Many besides the WEJP criticize the near 40-year-old method of establishing federal poverty standards as unrealistic and too simplistic. For instance, the standards do not include the cost of childcare and healthcare; there is no adjustment for geographical differences in cost, especially in housing; there is no way to update what are considered necessities, such as telephones; and there is no allowance for the impact of income taxes and tax credits.

For low-wage working women, public transportation is a must.
was desperate.”

She didn’t qualify for CalWORKS’ emergency housing any longer because she used it once before when she was pregnant and in a bad living situation with her baby’s father (she used one day and CalWORKS’ allows up to 14 consecutive days one-time only).

“Tight rules make it hard to survive sometimes,” Stenzel said.

She lived with family until her turn came to take part in social assistance programs, like Many Mansions and Many Motors, both of which allowed her to obtain transportation to work and temporary housing. And through a govern-

“THEIR RULES MAKE IT HARD TO SURVIVE SOMETIMES.”
—KATIE STENZEL

ment-subsidized program, most of her childcare is now paid for.

So things are looking up for Stenzel. Though she gets no child support from the baby’s father, she works in retail in Thousand Oaks, and at $10 an hour she makes more than most. But she wants to move up to a manager position so she’ll qualify for benefits and more pay.

“Ten dollars an hour is definitely not enough to survive,” Stenzel said. “That will barely get you by—maybe if you’re on assistance programs for the rest of your life. I’m trying to get off any assistance. I want to depend on myself and not on any government program.”

Stenzel wants to get her high school diploma, and then go to college. “I don’t want to be a statistic, the kind you see on a billboard about pregnant teenagers. I’d like to go to college and get more education.”

The amount of rent the applicant pays is no more than 30 percent of their income, Aguilera said. She estimated the most an applicant has paid is $1,500 a month; and the least amount being “negative rent.” Negative rent pays some of the applicant’s 30-percent portion because their income is very low. “It’s not often, but it does happen,” she said.

The properties are well maintained—inside and out—by the housing’s maintenance and landscape departments, according to Aguilera. “You can’t tell [our property] from anyone else.”

To view the full WEJP report or to get more information, visit www.coastalalliance.com.