

The Nation.

Unconventional Wisdom Since 1865

[subscribe](#) | [donate](#) | [advertise](#) | [about](#) | [shop](#) | [class](#)
[Home](#) ▶ [Rapid Response Weblogs](#) ▶ [Editor's Cut](#)

Tsunami Crisis: Help UNICEF Respond
DONATE NOW TO PROTECT CHILDREN AT RISK
unicefusa.org



editor's cut by Katrina vanden Heuvel

The Real Moral Fight

01/12/2005 @ 12:44am

[E-mail this Post](#)

On January 20, hundreds of Republicans will descend on Washington, DC, wearing furs, boots and Stetsons, and partying like the Hollywood stars (they love to loathe) at festivities that will cost some \$40 million to host--or \$25 million more than the first pledge of US assistance to victims of the tsunami. These high-end Bush donors will be paying to play in our nation's capital.

Their high-flying parties come after a holiday season of little sacrifice for those in the top one percent. At a time when growing numbers of Americans cannot afford essentials like rent, health care and retirement security, the Bentley car dealership in Bethesda, Maryland, registered a 700 percent increase in sales last year. (One popular seller this season is the new Continental GT, which goes for \$165K.)

A few days before the release of a [report](#) showing that New Yorkers needed to make \$18.18 an hour (three times more than the federal minimum wage) to afford a one- or two-bedroom apartment, the media titan Rupert Murdoch [agreed to pay \\$44 million](#) for a Manhattan penthouse on Fifth Avenue. (That's \$29 million more than the first pledge the Bush Administration offered to tsunami victims.)

While Murdoch lives high, the working poor in the same city can't make ends meet. Playing by the rules hasn't done them much good. Thanks to a series of recent reports that I'd call required reading for journalists, policymakers and concerned citizens, we now have more than enough evidence (even for the faith-based members of this Administration) showing that the working poor cannot afford basics for survival including, in some cases, food.

In late December, the [National Low Income Housing Coalition](#) concluded in a [landmark report](#) that full-time workers making the federal minimum wage (an appalling \$5.15 an hour) can't pay rent or utilities on the vast majority of one-

Welcome to Editor's Cut. Expect no major manifestos or sweeping pronouncements. This weblog will be more of a running journal recording thoughts on politics events, and offering reflections on what's and what's not (but

register for
EmailNa

Enter your e-mail
free advisories from
Nation.

also by
Katrina vanden Heuvel

[Babushkas vs. Putin](#)
02/7/2005 issue

[Annals of Outrage](#)
01/31/2005 issue

[Progressives: Get R](#)
11/29/2004 issue

[Putin's War](#)
09/27/2004 issue

[Victory in 2004--an](#)
08/2/2004 issue

[Former Bush \(41\) a](#)
[Officials Say Bush \(](#)
06/28/2004 (web)

[What Recovery?](#)
12/22/2003 issue

[What Are They Rea](#)
08/18/2003 (web)

[more...](#)

bedroom apartments.

Last November, the Community Service Society and United Way of New York City [reported](#) that about one in three low-wage, full-time workers in New York City used a food bank, or couldn't afford their utilities, or their rent, or to fill a prescription. A different report completed by the Women's Center for Education and Career Advancement reinforced the grim picture for families citywide: Almost half of the city's households can't pay the cost of food, housing, child care or other necessities.

Last October, the [Economic Policy Institute](#) issued a [briefing paper](#) driving home what US policymakers know is another new reality: Health care is increasingly unaffordable and out of reach for middle-income families. Between 2000 and 2003, married couples with children saw health care spending outpace income by a factor of three, EPI reported. About one-fifth of the full-time workforce now lacks health insurance and almost 50 percent of lower-income New Yorkers don't have health insurance.

Job security is also becoming a thing of the past. Those who lose their jobs in this economy, [reports](#) the *Washington Post*, need "some combination of specialized skills, higher education and professional status that can be constantly adapted [or they] will be in danger of sliding down the economic ladder to low-paying service jobs, usually without benefits." Anthony Carnevale, senior fellow at the [National Center on Education and the Economy](#), warned that unless a comprehensive industrial policy is adopted soon, "we could have a permanent working poor. They don't live in America; they kind of live under it," he [told](#) the *Post*.

What's the Republican response? Give more [tax breaks](#) to corporate America and give billions to Wall Street by privatizing Social Security. Talk about distorted priorities.

Now is the time to enact a new industrial policy--and raising the minimum wage is an essential first step.

Progressives have already achieved living wage victories in Florida and New York (Floridians, for example, [voted](#) on November 2 to raise the minimum wage to \$1 above the federal level, although the mainstream media has ignored the living wage [momentum](#) that's occurring in at least fourteen states and 123 cities and counties nationwide). Moreover, until we get to a universal health care system so desperately needed, policymakers should pass laws that will control rising health care costs and expand our employer-based health insurance system. The government should invest in worker retraining so people who get outsourced or downsized can find high paying jobs elsewhere.

Economist Jamie Galbraith, in his smart book [Created Unequal: The Crisis in American Pay](#), argues that by encouraging full employment and taking other steps, the US can close the wage gap that threatens to undermine our social fabric. Another vital step is correcting the tax imbalance by raising corporate taxes, closing tax loopholes for corporations relocating overseas and increasing funding for low-income housing because the funding "hasn't kept up with demand," [says](#) the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

Finally, progressive religious activists believe this is a moment to push poverty and economic justice into the "moral values" debate. As Kim Bobo, director of the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, a Chicago-based advocacy group, and other religious leaders [say](#), "Shame on us--those of us who work with the religious community have not adequately made the connection between economic disparity and moral values."

These religious activists hope to move beyond issues of sexual morality and bring attention to the Administration's new efforts to increase inequality by privatizing Social Security and overhauling the tax code. Or, as Bob Edgar, General Secretary of the [National Council of Churches](#), said in a recent open letter, "Allowing 45 million Americans to go without health insurance, permitting 35 million Americans to live with incomes below the official poverty line and standing by while millions of children attend decrepit schools violates our faith, assaults our sense of justice and condemns us all to generations of poverty, violence and injustice."

With the Republicans in control of all three federal branches, building a new consensus for sane economic policies that give more opportunity to more Americans will take time, organizing and savvy political and policy skills. But, it's an urgent project, and it's never too late to begin setting out the alternatives. Americans should not be required to work eighty-hour weeks just to pay the rent, eat, and live in a decent neighborhood.

OLDER [Privatizing the Public Good](#)

NEWER [Partying While Baghdad Burns](#)

[Back to top](#)

[About/Contact](#) | [Media Kit](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)

Copyright © 20