

## UNEMPLOYMENT FIGURES ARE NOT MERELY CAMPAIGNING TOOLS, THEY IMPACT PEOPLE TOO



Whenever the government releases its finding on the American Labor market the political parties have a field day either defending it or tearing it apart, depending on which side of the fence you are. The latest official Labor report showed that the economy had added a pathetic 80,000 new jobs, while there was no change in the 8.2 percent unemployment rate. Instead of discussing the human implications of the faltering economy and the dismal unemployment scenario, most analysts were busy analyzing how Mitt Romney would milk these figures to his benefit and will Barack Obama be able to survive the continued depressed economy that is showing no signs of getting out of its sluggishness. The widespread prevalence of such an approach to news, that has huge human significance, shows how inured and uncaring professional observers have become. Wish those who matter would realise that the dreadful job market is not a political story. You cannot treat it as a political tool, to mold it to your advantage. It is a national catastrophe, a disaster that is affecting the lives and fortunes of millions of American people and their families. It is not just that the jobless have no paychecks at the end of the month; it is also that they are now managing with less and aspiring for less. It has made their thought process narrower. It has eroded their hopes and the confidence that at the end of their education a job will be waiting for them. The dismal scenario has made them impoverished, disheartened and dispossessed. The right question to ask, is not whether President Obama will survive the worst job market since the depression, the right question to ask would be if the average American can survive the job market? Take for example the plight of Yvonne Smith. She has a son, but no job. She has no money and since she could pay the rent was evicted from their rented townhouse almost 4 and half months ago. Since then she and her 14-year old son have been sleeping on the floor of a storage locker in northern Georgia. "Where else were we going to?" she told me by way of explanation when I met her last month at a food bank in Chattanooga. "I try not to think about it, but that's our space, and we sleep there." She rues the day when she left a cushy \$57,000 a year job as a document processor at a law firm and shifted to Atlanta. "In New York, everything was fine, but I wanted better," she told me. "I was tired of the weather, and I wanted my son to have his own yard." But in Atlanta, things did not work in her favor; she lost her job to the great depression when she was laid off along with her entire department. She tried to get any job she could lay her hands on and with the paycheck doing the vanishing act, she and her son subsisted on food stamps and her \$320-a- week unemployment check. In June 2010, when even her weekend check ran out, she packed her humble belongings into their car and moved to Northern Georgia, where she managed to get a temporary job in Chattanooga, some 20 miles away. But woes don't come alone. Behind on payments on her car, the repo man came and drove her car away, and now there was no way she could get to work rendering her jobless again. There are many others who are suffering the same fate as Smith's. Her story may be extreme but it is by no means limited to her alone. There are thousands of them and you can meet them at food banks, homeless shelters, and in welfare offices. Many of them out of frustration resort to drug abuse, or alcohol addiction. Many are known to suffer from depression and other mental illnesses. They are all sliding into these states, for one simple reason that they cannot find jobs. The latest labor department report has a cruel data that brings to focus the larger human issues. The report reveals that 5.4 million Americans have been officially out of work for six months or longer. These 5.4 million people may be a small statistic on paper, but they are actual people, who are categorized as 'long-term unemployed,' and who are resigned to their fates. Their lives have changed as a result of being jobless for such lengthy periods. Monica Ross-Williams, 42, lost her job four years ago. Having a college degree she was making \$50,000 a year. Now, she is reduced to line up part time work that pays \$10 an hour. She is a mental wreck and even though her husband is still working there household income has been curtailed by half. "It has put a strain on our marriage," she says. "When you have financial issues, every discussion leads to people being depressed. 'How are you going to be able to pay this?' 'How are going to be able to pay that?' She says that her faith in America's resourcefulness has taken a hit and that her belief in the American spirit has been shaken. People are becoming immune to the realities and it has become a part and parcel of the American story and most likely to stay there, as long as it becomes a crutch for two candidates, vying for America's top job, offering fanciful stories, covering for the lack of jobs and the economy that is showing no signs of improvement. Instead of making it a campaign tool, it should encourage sustained debate and discussion about what we all can do to fix the economy, rather than a platform for talk about how the economy can be used to wage the campaign. Let us not merely make noise but seriously debate how we can get Yvonne Smith and her son out of the storage locker and into a house of her own.