

# Women in the Forefront of the Struggle

## Interview with leader of Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign

By Sandy Reid

**People's Tribune:** Cheri, tell us about America's new poverty

**Cheri Honkala:** I've been working with low income families across the U.S. for about twenty years. The volume of poverty is out of control. We used to get families here and there. Now families are doubling and quadrupling up in homes together. In any of our major cities every other property is vacant because of foreclosures. In rural America, farmers that have had their farms handed down from one generation to another now work two or three jobs. Most farms have been taken over by huge multinational corporations. The situation is devastating all over the place. The band-aid solutions of social service programs don't work. So for the large numbers of new poor that are being created as a result of the jobs that

are not coming back, there is devastation. In the large urban areas we're seeing a direct correlation with the absolute proliferation of drugs that are cheap and accessible and the large numbers of families that are going to jail as a result of the criminalization of poverty. As a diversion, immigrants are being made into the new enemy and being held responsible for all of the problems of a failing system. So, we're trying to figure out how to link all these different sections of the population. The good news is that the reality of something bigger needing to happen in this country is beginning to awaken more people. That is the hopeful aspect. It's not hard to explain that this thing is coming in everybody's direction, so a bigger and better social welfare system is not the answer. And it's clear that it won't be the Democratic Party that will save them.

**PT:** Tell us about your upcoming activities at the Republican convention protests



Cheri Honkala.

PHOTO/HARVEY FINKLE

Minnesota Truth Commission will say what people see as a solution and who is responsible for what is happening in the country. There will be a national arts and culture event, an anti-war event, and a National Truth Commission. On September 2 we'll have our third National March for Our Lives. There will also be traveling caravans from North, South, East and West with a special focus on art and culture to the growing movement against poverty. People can connect up through our new web site at <http://www.economichumanrights.org>

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**Cheri:** Once again the Poor Peoples Economic Human Rights Campaign intends to organize the largest poor peoples march ever during the Republican Convention in Minneapolis. In August, 2008, we'll have a month-long bus tour throughout Minnesota, collecting human rights documentation, and then a reality tour. A Minnesota Truth Commission will say what people see as a solution and who is responsible for what is happening in the country. There will be a national arts and culture event, an anti-war event, and a National Truth Commission. On September 2 we'll have our third National March for Our Lives. There will also be traveling caravans from North, South, East and West with a special focus on art and culture to the growing movement against poverty. People can connect up through our new web site at <http://www.economichumanrights.org>

in a couple of weeks.  
**PT:**What new ideas do you teach?  
**Cheri:**We teach that our country has an abundance, that we are human beings, and our government has a responsibility to provide all of these things for residents of this country as a basic human right. We find it's a lot easier to deal with stereotypes now — about poor people being lazy and irresponsible and not having work ethics — because there is a much broader section of people not knowing where they are going to live. People are also seeing that elected officials haven't been able to stop the foreclosures or help them when their family needs health insurance. People are understanding that something else has to be done. Some are excited about a Black man or a woman potentially being president. I know that soon after whoever is elected, people will come to see that it has much more to do with a system based around greed and not human need. The problems will continue to exist, whoever becomes president. The main thing is to link up and form the kinds of organizations that are going to be able to withstand this horrible storm and come up with a plan for a better world. The other important thing is to go beyond the misleaders that have great rhetoric but who are doing nothing. People need to look at who is saying what and what they actually do with their time and money.



PHOTO CREDIT/Rally (USSFAtlanta); Domestic Worker Organizers (Sandy Reid); Mississippi Youth (Jonathan Lawson)

**International Women's Day, on March 8**, commemorates the struggle of women garment makers in a New York sweatshop in 1911. Trapped in a horrible fire behind locked doors, 146 people perished, but the factory owners were acquitted of any wrongdoing. In memory of those workers, March 8 was designated as the day on which people all over the world remember the contributions women bring to the fight for social equality. Today, Women's History Month in March offers the opportunity to celebrate women's struggles, visions, and victories.

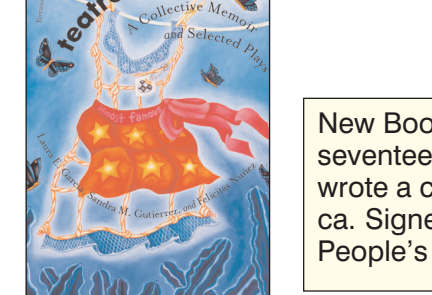


## Women are key to social change

Women's position in society makes them a powerful force for change. Today in America, one-third of all families maintained by women live below the poverty level. Families headed by women of color are disproportionately poor. The revolution in the economy is throwing more and more women out of the job market. "Working women are very, very afraid," said an Ohio union worker. Most of us are one negative event away from poverty. Even women like me: I have a Ph.D. but can only find part-time teaching jobs. If my husband dies before I do, I will be destitute."

But, Women's History Month, 2008, will mainly be a time where the achievement of individual women from the corporate or government world such as Condoleezza Rice, Nancy Pelosi, and Hillary Clinton, the first woman running for President, will be lauded. They will be offered as proof that women have achieved their equality.

We have to ask: can women from the upper echelon of society alter the plight of the masses of women who are becoming poorer by the day? They cannot. This is because destitution is endemic to capitalism, a system based on the drive for maximum profit and new labor-replacing technologies. The only solution for women — and for men — is for those who are becoming part of the dispossessed class to join with the already dispossessed to overthrow this dying system. The goal must be to create a new social system based on this principle: to each according to their need, from each according to their individual talents and skills. Herein lies the importance of a powerful women's movement.



New Book: *Teatro Chicana, A collective Memoir and Selected Plays*, profiles seventeen women in the Chicana Movement in the early 1970s. Laura Garcia wrote a chapter and is available to speak through Speakers for a New America. Signed copies of the book are \$30. Call 800-691-6888 or mail check c/o People's Tribune, PO Box 3524, Chicago, IL 60654.

Let us trace the progression of the women's movement to see how integrally connected is their revolution with the revolution for a new cooperative world.

Like all processes, the women's struggle for equality develops in stages. In early matriarchal societies people lived cooperatively. Women played a leading role in early agricultural societies because production was centered around their work, the gathering of nuts and berries. Once the economy changed, women over a long period of time became separated from the economic processes, increasing their dependency on the men. There could be no reversing this until a new productive process arose.

The invention of the first labor-saving housework tools arose around 1935. With the development of the vacuum, the dishwasher, and the washing machine, women were more free to enter the job market and hence to fight for their equality. However, the massive women's movement that arose in various countries based on the new conditions was a different

movement than we see today. Then, it was a movement for women to become part of the capitalist system. Today, the majority of workers are being forced out of capitalism.

Women today are the numerical majority in society, the majority in the working class and the majority in the new class of destitute here and globally. Consequently, women's position makes them key to social change. For example, no one has to tell the woman in the street with children that those abandoned usable apartments the city is tearing down to create high-end housing should instead house her family. No one has to tell the single mom that society has a responsibility to provide healthcare for all.

The point is that the objective conditions for change exist today. But, without women playing a conscious role, a revolutionary movement cannot be consolidated. It's a question of revolutionary tactics.

International Women's Day, 2008 finds our country at a critical juncture. We are facing a rapidly changing world. The woman question is at the very heart of the formation and politicization of the new class of dispossessed workers. Now is the time for revolutionaries — women and men — to provide the revolution with the indispensable ingredient of change: new ideas! It's time to deliver a new society.

## DETROIT IS THIRSTY!

By Valerie Burris, Volunteer, Michigan Welfare Rights Union

I got involved when my best girlfriend's Mom got a \$10,000 water bill. She took out a loan to save her home! I said. No. That makes no sense. Then, my own mother got a \$1200 bill. I told the water company this is ridiculous. Where are these numbers coming from? I since found out that over 40,000 homes got water shut off notices. I'm President of my Block Club. This past summer the water company turned off five houses on my block. I called and said wait a minute — water rates continue to go up. It's not that people don't want to pay, they can't. Why turn off water? It's a human right especially since Detroit owns its water (they're trying to privatize it). I started going to the hearings each time they had another increase. People were crying, saying "I can't afford another increase." Now they are starting to attach the water bills to your property taxes. Detroit has not only a high rate of mortgage foreclosures, but tax foreclosures. So a lot of seniors are now in jeopardy of losing their home. Water is a human right and you should be able to have water even if you can't afford it. We are surrounded by water. We put a skit on youtube.com called "Detroit is Thirsty" to help educate people. I also talk to people standing out in the cold, wrapped around the block waiting to pay their water bill. I tell them, we can't just complain. We have to band together! We have to get young people involved too.

## My broken back...

I hold the world... or try to...

on my broken back ..

I have carried worlds and toasters — the guts of a hundred evictions, couches and king-sized beds and everything else — ...on my broken back

I have carried the love of some people and the disdain of others the hate of a thousand landlords, welfare workers, and a few hundred angry creditors.. and my broken family.... ..on my broken back

I have carried pain and fear — time and stress — confusion and moments when my face could no longer smile and my eyes could only leak blood colored tears



Tiny Gray-Garcia

PHOTO/POOR NEWS NETWORK STAFF

I have seen too much and felt even more on my broken back —

But it was never supposed to be broken I was always supposed to carry these people and these things these landlords and these toasters those creditors and that underwear my family and even those tears I was always supposed to be there...

I was always supposed to be ok

Because if my back is broken — and if I have to stop then I surely will perish because backs aren't fixed and time doesn't heal and I can't just rest and I won't be able to slow down —

I can't and won't like other poor women before me with no health care, no comfort and no time who carry their children, their poverty, their houses and their families through the jungles of peru, the streets of brooklyn, India, frisco and Mexico, who sing and cry and love and heal and can't ever stop.. to be broken.. no matter how broken... their backs... really are.

— By Tiny Gray-Garcia, founder of *Poor Magazine*

### WOMEN IN POVERTY STATISTICS

• Seven out of 10 of the world's hungry are women and girls. More than two-thirds of the world's unpaid work is done by women.

• Two-thirds of children denied primary education are girls. 75% of the world's 876 million illiterate adults are women.

• Of 37 million people living below the poverty line in the US, 21 million are women.

• Almost half of single, Black mothers live below the poverty line. Immigrant women are almost wholly concentrated in the lowest paying jobs.



FREE copies of Speakers for a New America brochure: Book speakers now. Call 800-691-6888 or email [info@speakers-foranewamerica.com](mailto:info@speakers-foranewamerica.com)