**Jobless millions signal death of the American dream for many by Tim Henneman**

Even the criminals have fallen on hard times in America's poorest city as the long-term unemployed struggle to keep a grasp on normality

Union members hold up "I want to work" placards as they join a protest of several thousand people demanding jobs outside City Hall in Los Angeles on August 13, 2011.

Richard Gaines is one of the best-known faces on Camden's Haddon Avenue. It is a rough-and-tumble street, lined with cheap businesses and boarded-up houses, and is prey to drug gangs. Gaines, 50, runs a barbershop, a hair salon and a fitness business. He works hard and is committed to his community. But Haddon Avenue is not an easy place to make a living in the best of times. And these are far from the best of times.

Just how badly the great recession has struck this fragile New Jersey city, which is currently the poorest in America, was recently spelled out to Gaines. In happier times – whatever that might mean for a city as destitute as Camden – local businesses on Haddon Avenue could at least rely on a bit of trade from those who made their money on the street.

Young men bought flashy clothes and got sharp haircuts and always paid in cash. But no longer. The economy is now so bad in Camden that even the criminals are struggling and going short. "Even the guys who got money from illegal means really don't want to spend it," Gaines said.

Such a development, though, is just a snapshot of the deep problems still hitting the wider American economy. Growth rates are stuttering and a recovery is struggling to take hold. It may even now be showing signs of going backwards again, as countries such as Germany start to power forward. Joblessness has taken hold in America, with the numbers of long-term unemployed reaching levels not seen since the Depression of the 1930s. The figures are frightening and illustrate a society that remains in deep trouble.

The headline jobless figure of 9.5% is bad enough but does not begin to convey the problem as it fails to measure those who have stopped looking for work. Over the past three months alone more than a million Americans have fallen into that category: effectively giving up hope of finding a job and dropping out of the official statistics. Such cases now number some 5.9 million and their ranks are likely to grow as millions more find their jobless status becoming a permanent state of hopelessness. Surveys show that with each passing week on the dole their chances of finding a job get slimmer.

Though corporations, especially in the banking sector, are posting healthy profits, they are not hiring new workers. At the same time, government cuts are sweeping through city and state governments alike, threatening tens of thousands of jobs and slicing away at services once thought vital. Schools, street lighting, libraries, refuse collection, the police, fire services and public transport networks are all being scaled back.

America appears to be a society splitting down the centre, shattering the middle class that long formed the cultural bedrock of the country and dividing it into a country of haves and have-nots. "A once unthinkable level of economic distress is in the process of becoming the new normal," warned Nobel-prize winning economist Paul Krugman in a recent *New York Times* column. Or, as Steven Green, an economics lecturer at Baylor University, put it to the *Observer*: "We are really in a tough spot right now."

There is a new name for those falling down the black hole of joblessness that has opened up in America's economy. They are the 99ers.

It is a moniker that no one wants. It refers to the 99 weeks of benefits that the jobless can qualify for in America. Government cash helps those laid off keep a tenuous grip on a normal life. It keeps a roof over their heads, pays a phone bill, puts food on a table and petrol in a car. But once the 99 weeks are up the payments stop – as is happening now for millions of people – and they are 99ers.

For many, that moment, which America's politicians have refused to extend, represents the moment of destitution; a sort of modern American version of the old Victorian trip to the workhouse. There are now more than a million 99ers and the number gets bigger each week.

But who are they? Despite Republican attempts to paint them as feckless or job-shy, they are usually anything but. The 99ers are people like Anne Strauss, 58, who spent 35 years working as a PR professional on Long Island. Despite spending every day hunting for work, she has not had a job since June 2008. She and her husband are now living on credit cards watching debts mount as they stare into the abyss. "Looking for a job is the hardest I have ever worked," she said with a smile that conveyed no humour or happiness, only the deep stress that is common to many 99ers.

Strauss, along with about 50 other 99ers, protested on Wall Street last week, demanding an extension of the benefits that could keep them out of poverty. As bankers and financiers strode into the flag-draped Stock Exchange they chanted: "Shame! Shame!" and told their stories. It was a litany of middle-class lives shattered by the recession. There was Connie Kaplan, a corporate librarian who was desperate to resume her career. "We are not bums, we are hardworking," she said. Or Lori Ghavami, a New Jersey financial analyst in her 30s, who had once worked on Wall Street itself and now was staring at landlords' bills she was scared she could not pay. Or New Yorker Steven Bilarbi, 62, who had worked for the same employer for 37 years, until 2007. He has not worked since, despite refusing to spend daytime hours at home and engaging in a permanent job hunt. He is now living off savings and depleting his pension.

"I go to job fairs. I don't feel like staying home. What would I do? Watch game shows and soap operas?" he fumed.

Meeting 99ers is to tap into a deep well of anger at lives that have been knocked off course, shattering the enduring vision of the American dream that many had felt they had achieved. Just take Donna Faiella, a 53-year-old New Yorker who lives alone in Queens. She spent 28 years working in film post-production and video-editing. She was successful and had a career. Now she is desperate for a job, any job. But she cannot find one. "I will do anything. I will sweep floors. You think I look forward to collecting unemployment? It is fucking degrading," she said, almost quivering with anger.

Faiella is in dire trouble. Joblessness has eaten away at her sense of identity. "I feel like we are worthless. We are lost in the world. I don't know what to call myself. I don't have a title any more. What do we do? What do we do?" she implored. Faiella has one week of benefits to go. Then her 99 weeks will be up. She will have a title again. But not one she expected. She will be a 99er. "I am petrified. Do I become homeless?" she said, adding that she has begun making inquiries at local shelters.

If the 99ers are coming to symbolise a human segment of society that America is slowly abandoning to its fate, then Camden is the geographic expression of that marginalisation. Large stretches of the once bustling river port city seem to epitomise urban blight. Vacant lots and burned-out abandoned houses line many of its streets.

Its 79,000 residents have the lowest median household annual income of any city in the US at just $24,000 (£15,000). In terms of crime rates it was the nation's second-most dangerous city last year. Some estimates reckon that about a third of Camden's houses are empty. A third of its people are in poverty and a fifth are unemployed.

It is a deeply grim picture and it is getting worse. Camden's city government is facing the prospect of massive cuts as its cash-strapped resources have run out and it has built up huge debts. Services have already been cut and only a last-minute rescue last week saved Camden's three public libraries from being closed.

In a city that has had it tough for decades these are hammer blows to its residents. One woman who has watched in dismay as the recession unfolded outside her door is Dorothy Allen, 81, who has lived near Haddon Avenue for almost four decades. Known by almost everyone as "Mom", she calls herself "the mother of the block". She has never known anything like the area's current troubles. "I have been here since 1971 and it's the worst it's ever been," she said. Yet to listen to America's politicians many would think recovery is just a matter of time. Yes, they say, the recession has been hard, but America will pull through and everything will be as it once was. Last week New Jersey senator Robert Menendez visited Camden, stopping at a local health clinic. He spoke of the achievements of the Democrats in staving off economic disaster.

Job creation was coming, he told his audience of health executives: "It is not going fast enough to get people back to work but it's a dramatic turnaround." It does not feel that way for millions of Americans all across the country. Camden is far from unique in slashing its services. In Colorado Springs more than a third of street lights have been switched off to cut the municipal electricity bill. The city has also sold off its police helicopters.

In Hawaii schoolchildren were told to stay at home for 17 Fridays to save costs. In a suburb of Atlanta local bus routes were closed, at a stroke wiping out public transport for thousands of people who relied on it to get to precious jobs.

Whether it's the poor of Camden or Colorado Springs or Atlanta, or among the growing throngs of the 99ers, millions of Americans are discovering that working hard, doing the right thing and obeying the rules are no longer enough.

Back at the 99er rally on Wall Street, Anne Strauss felt that way. During her working life she had refused to claim benefits to which she was entitled as she thought she was doing just fine. Now, as a newly minted 99er, she was looking for help from the country that she had always believed in. But the help was not forthcoming. It is hard to see how the version of the American dream that Menendez described could now ever apply to her. For Strauss, living on credit, desperate to work, but with no job in sight, that dream looks a thing of the past, not the future. "This is not the country I grew up in," Strauss said.