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The Other America and the Challenges Ahead

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Following the second leg of the "Economic Human Rights Bus Tour," U.S. Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) wrote in [The Nation](#) that "(t)he challenge to Democrats is to recognize the limits of the current economic boom and act boldly to assist those left behind."

Representative John Conyers (D-MI) and Actor Danny Glover joined Schakowsky on the tour. On this leg of the tour, the delegation visited a homeless shelter in Columbus, Ohio; a rural Women's organization in Beaver, Ohio and a Community Health Center in the Hilltop neighborhood of Columbus to highlight the dire need for national policy initiatives that could make a real difference in the lives of families left out of the "economic boom."

Below is Schakowsky's letter to [The Nation](#) .

The Other America

On the eve of the Democratic convention, the challenge to Democrats is to recognize the limits of the current economic boom and act boldly to assist those left behind. In late July those of us on the Ohio leg of the ongoing Economic Human Rights Tour heard Donna Schoolcroft tell how ten days after giving birth to her son, she walked seventeen miles a day to and from work as a janitor to qualify for welfare benefits. When she told officials after three months that she was willing to work "but I just couldn't do that anymore," she was thrown out of the program. Now, she said through her tears, "I get nothing for me or my kids."

Representative John Conyers and I, both of us members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, joined the Progressive Challenge project of the Institute for Policy Studies in hosting the Ohio tour. The message was that the persistence of poverty, hunger, lack of healthcare and inadequate schools is a national scandal as well as a massive violation of people's basic human rights. Some 18 percent of children in Ohio are living in poverty--up from 13 percent in 1980--and fully half the job categories that are growing the fastest pay poverty wages. Overall in America, more than 36 million people do not have adequate access to food and more than 44 million are without health insurance. After almost a decade of economic growth and low levels of unemployment and inflation, the United States remains afflicted by pervasive poverty and a growing gap between rich and poor.

The good news is that a grassroots antipoverty movement rooted in the promotion of

economic human rights is building across the country. Schoolcroft and other women and children from the impoverished community of Beaver, Ohio, are trying to fight back through their growing community organization, CommUNITY Pride. In Philadelphia, the Kensington Welfare Rights Union has just sponsored a huge march at the Republican National Convention in which thousands of poor people and their allies demanded economic rights.

The fifty-three-member Congressional Progressive Caucus, representing more than a quarter of House Democrats, believes in the importance of these groups' efforts and the legitimacy of their demands. During the tour we released position papers on income inequality, healthcare and the federal budget that offer new solutions to poverty. The Health Care paper lays out steps to insure healthcare access for all and to spread coverage for low-income people. The Income Inequality position paper offers specific proposals on raising the minimum wage, enacting a living wage, closing the pay gap and ending wage discrimination based on gender.

We ended the trip with the conviction that poor people's organizations like the one Donna Schoolcroft belongs to--if linked to grassroots activists, national advocacy organizations and progressives in government--have the power to end poverty in this country. As we drove through the hills of Northern Appalachia, we discovered another aspect of a rekindling of activism that has spread across this country in the wake of the battle of Seattle.