

# Rep. Tom Jackson Speaks on the “State” of Alabama

By Angela Vullo

Feb. 17, 2019—Approximately fifty years after Dr. Martin Luther King made his pleas for economic justice, we are confronted with the fact that wealth inequality has turned the United States into one of the most extremely [income-stratified](#) nations in the world. In this context, it is instructive to look at Alabama. While the African-American population in the country is 13%, in Alabama it's 25%. Alabama provides us with a microcosm of the relationship between the degree of poverty (especially among African Americans) and the crises of drug overdoses, homelessness, illness, imprisonment, and residual racism in America.



A scene of poverty in Alabama, 2017

To fill out this picture, on February 13, I interviewed Alabama State Representative Thomas Jackson. Rep. Jackson, an African-American representative first elected in 1994, will imminently reintroduce a resolution into the State Legislature for a National Infrastructure [Bank](#), calling upon Congress to file a bill to put America to work at high-paying union jobs. Rep. Jackson has done this twice before; this time he hopes that it will not fall on deaf ears.

**“We are in dire straits right now.”**

Rep. Jackson laid out the crisis conditions in Alabama in clear detail:

“Poverty in Alabama is no different than the rest of the country, only worse, and worse than ever. Nobody cares about the poor. Nothing now in legislation is being done to alleviate poverty.

“We are trying to expand Medicaid. The rural areas are suffering. Rural hospitals are closing in Georgia and Alabama.

“We need health care. We need to increase the amount of food stamps. When the government shut down, this affected Alabama as well. Grocery stores were reporting that people were buying everything they could because they didn’t know when they would get another check.

“We lost numbers among Democrats in the legislature. The Trump tax cuts didn’t help anybody here. There’s no middle class. In Alabama, people are either rich or poor, Very few in between. We’re in dire straits right now.”

Alabama ranks number one in the country for homelessness, at approximately 13% of the population. It ranks among the poorest states in the Union.

### **The effects of poverty**

Rep. Jackson elaborated on the different effects of poverty on the population.



Alabama State  
Rep. Thomas  
E. Jackson

*On the drug crisis:*

“We are trying to push programs that include everyone, not just victims of opioids, but crack-cocaine, meth and more. ... We have a horrendous situation in the prisons. People are not getting treated. Suicides are very high.”

*On infant mortality:*

“We have dropped down to 8 from 9, which is still pretty high. (8/1000 deaths below the age of one). We’re trying to get money for Pre-K, because once you get behind, you never catch up.”

*On infrastructure:*

When Jackson was asked about infrastructure and what he thought was the most urgent to rebuild, he said, “Highways, roads, and bridges. We’re trying to raise the gas tax to cover investment. People are paying \$500/year for car repairs.” He said that in his county alone, “we have 500 miles of dirt roads.”

He added that 70% of the population doesn’t have broadband, mostly in the rural areas. “Schools and libraries have it, so people sit in their cars in the parking lots to use the WIFI.”

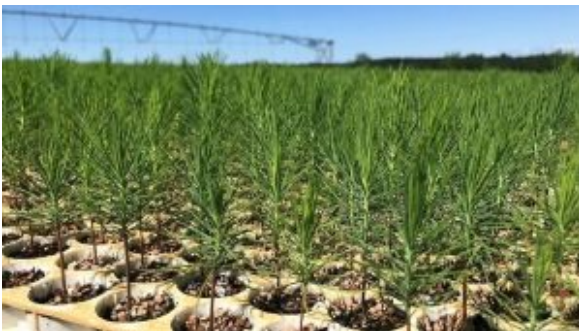
When asked about the water crisis that is erupting across the

nation, he responded: "It's not under surveillance so nobody knows about it. When pipes break, they get replaced, but nothing is done for the overall system."

### **Jobs coming in, but a drop in the bucket**

When I asked about the situation with employment, Rep Jackson said, "In my county, Clarke County, we have a sawmill coming in, but it will only create 75 jobs."

In a news release late last year, the Westervelt Co., which is based in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, said that its new Thomasville facility will produce around 250 million board feet of Southern yellow pine lumber annually when operations begin in 2020. Construction is expected to begin in mid-2019.



A field of trees planted by the Westervelt Co., which plans expansion into Clarke County.

This will be the 134-year-old company's second lumber mill in the state: The Westervelt Co. has operated a lumber mill in Moundville since 1997.

"The Westervelt Co.'s deep roots in Alabama date back for generations, and I'm pleased to see this family business continue to invest and grow in the state," said Greg Canfield, secretary of the Alabama Department of Commerce. "The company's new lumber production facility in Clarke County represents an important job-creating project for a rural area, and it will provide a boost for the forest products industry

throughout the region.”

Along with the Westervelt Co., Golden Dragon (GD Copper) has opened its first U.S. factory in Alabama’s poorest county, but pays no more than \$11/hour. Jackson said, “It’s hard to get people to work for them. They get mostly women. Men won’t stay there. You can’t raise a family on \$11.”

### **Special UN Report on extreme poverty in U.S.**

You don’t have to just take Rep. Jackson’s word for the extreme poverty in Alabama. Rural Alabama was one of the areas toured over a two-week period by UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights Philip Alston in 2017. Alston told AL.com, a local news outlet, that he had never seen conditions as bad as those in Alabama elsewhere in the “First World.” He mentioned a community in Butler County where “raw sewage flows from homes through exposed PVC pipes and into open trenches and pits.”



An open sewer observed by UN Special Rapporteur Alston in 2017.

In my article on Alston’s report, posted on this blog in January 2018, I reported on Alston’s overall conclusions. I quote from that post:

*In the introduction to his [report](#) he wrote: “The proposed tax reform package stakes out America’s bid to become the most unequal society in the world, and will greatly increase the*

already high levels of wealth and income inequality between the richest 1% and the poorest 50% of Americans. The dramatic cuts in welfare, foreshadowed by the President and Speaker Ryan, and already beginning to be implemented by the administration, will essentially shred crucial dimensions of a safety net that is already full of holes. It is against this background that my report is presented.”

On Dec. 19 Alston gave an interview to “Democracy Now” on his findings, in which he asserted that tax reform will make the U.S. “World Champion of Extreme Inequality.” Alston contended, “[M]y job is to try to highlight the extent to which people who are living in extreme poverty are jeopardized by government policies. What I see in the United States now is not just a tax reform bill, but a very clear indication by government officials with whom I met, by the Treasury in their analysis, that this is going to be funded in parts by cuts to welfare, to Medicare, Medicaid. And so what you’ve got is a huge effort to enrich the richest and to impoverish the poorest. That is going to have very dramatic consequences.”

However, it’s not so simple to get people off welfare when the government is not providing the full time quality jobs that are required to make a living,” Alston said. “I spoke with a lot of Walmart employees who are working full time, but who are still eligible for and totally dependent upon food stamps. This is compounded with the precariousness of employment, known as the gig economy.”

Alston posed the paradox: “The United States is one of the very richest countries in the world. But all of the statistics put it almost at the bottom – whether it’s child mortality rates, longevity of adults, the degree of adequacy of healthcare.” Among his findings, the United States ranks 36<sup>th</sup> in the world in access to clean water and sanitation.

When I go to other countries, the big debate is that ‘We

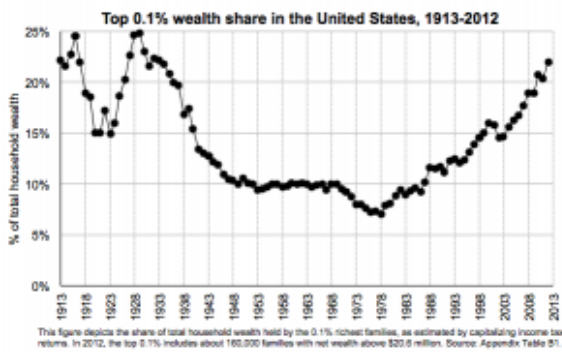
*don't have the money. We can't afford to provide basic services to these people.' And yet, in the United States, they've got a trillion or a trillion and a half to give to the very rich, but they also don't have any of the money to provide a basic lifestyle that is human for the 40 million Americans.*

## **Wealth inequality today comparable to the 1920s**

Despite an increase in manufacturing jobs over 2018, the overall situation for the U.S. population has not fundamentally improved.

A new report released in January 2019 by the National Bureau of Economic Research, entitled "Global Wealth Inequality," summarized the situation as follows:

*As shown by Figure 1 [see below], U.S. wealth concentration has followed a marked U-shaped evolution of the last century. It was high in the 1910s and 1920s, with a particularly fast increase in the second half of the 1920s. The top 0.1% wealth share peaked at close to 25% in 1929. It then fell abruptly in the early 1930s (in context of the Great Depression) and continued to fall gradually from the late 1930s to the late 1940s (in context of the New Deal and the war economy). After a period of remarkable stability in the 1950s and 1960s, the top 0.1% wealth share reached its low-water mark in the 1970s and since the early 1980s it has been gradually rising to close to 20% in recent years. U.S. wealth concentration seems to have returned to levels last seen during the Roaring Twenties.*



## U.S. Income Inequality

### The path forward

On August 28, 1963, Dr King, said, in his *I have a dream* speech, “One hundred years later (after the end of slavery), the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.” Several years later, he expanded his horizons to launch the Poor People’s Campaign, a movement for economic justice for the disenfranchised of all races.

In addressing an SCLC leadership conference in 1967, Dr. King put it this way:

*I think it is necessary for us to realize that we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights... [W]hen we see that there must be a radical redistribution of economic and political power, then we see that for the last twelve years we have been in a reform movement... That after Selma and the Voting Rights Bill, we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution... In short, we have moved into an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society.*

In at least two major speeches, *I have a Dream* and *Beyond Vietnam*, Dr. King used the phrase, “the fierce urgency of now”.

These words are even more apt today. Rep Jackson is acting in King’s spirit. The “urgency of now” couldn’t be more “fierce.”



## **Biography of Rep Thomas Jackson:**

Representative Thomas Jackson was elected in 1994. He serves as Associate Pastor for Church of God in Christ. He is also a member of Kappa Alpha Psi, the National Black Caucus for State Legislators, the Alabama and National Education Associations, and the Kiwanis Club.

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