

For Some After the Storm, No Work Means No Pay



Richard Perry/The New York Times

Muta Prather, who missed three days of work because his employer's plant was flooded, doesn't know how he'll pay for repairs to the storm-damaged roof of his West Orange, N.J., home.

By SHAILA DEWAN and ANDREW MARTIN
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Chantal Sainvilus, a home health aide in Brooklyn who makes \$10 an hour, does not get paid if she does not show up. So it is no wonder that she joined the thousands of people taking extreme measures to get to work this week, even, in her case, hiking over the Williamsburg Bridge.

While salaried employees worked if they could, often from home after [Hurricane Sandy](#), many of the poorest New Yorkers faced the prospect of losing days, even a crucial week, of pay on top of the economic ground they have lost since the recession.

Low-wage workers, more likely to be paid hourly and work at the whim of their employers, have fared worse in the recovery than those at the top of the income scale — in New York City the [bottom 20 percent lost](#) \$463 in annual income from 2010 to 2011, in contrast to a gain of almost \$2,000 for the top quintile. And there are an increasing number of part-time and hourly workers, the type that safety net programs like unemployment are not designed to serve. Since 2009, when the recovery began, 86 percent of the jobs added nationally have been hourly. Over all, about 60 percent of the nation's jobs are hourly.

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Even as the sluggish economy has accentuated this divide, Hurricane Sandy has acted as a further wedge, threatening to take a far greater toll on the have-littles who live from paycheck to paycheck.

“There’s a lot of people in our society that are living in a very precarious situation in terms of low wages or very insecure work,” said Arne L. Kalleberg, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and author of “Good Jobs, Bad Jobs.” “That’s why it’s important to have a safety net that’s based on the idea of people working insecure jobs like this.”

On Friday, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo announced that New York City and four suburban counties were eligible for [disaster unemployment relief](#), which covers a broader spectrum of workers than regular unemployment benefits, including the self-employed like taxi drivers and street vendors as well as those who were unable to get to work.

New Jersey has also [declared](#) people in 10 counties eligible for disaster unemployment assistance. In Connecticut, residents of four counties and the Mashantucket Pequot Indian Reservation are eligible.

A New York Department of Labor spokesman emphasized that workers who lost wages should call to apply because the program is flexible and many eligibility issues would be determined on a case-by-case basis.

But the program might not help people whose commute simply lasted longer or cost more, like Ibezim Oki, a cabdriver who spent \$50 on a cab to get from his Brooklyn home to Manhattan on Friday, rather than risk long bus delays, and “now I don’t know how long I’m going to have to wait for gas.”

The commute alone represented a hardship for workers whose jobs require a physical presence, while neighborhood coffee shops in the boroughs and suburbs overflowed with those who needed nothing more than a laptop and Wi-Fi to stay connected to work.

Ms. Sainvilus estimated that on Thursday, she had traveled eight hours to work for five, making her effective pay less than \$4 an hour.

Others could not work because their place of business was closed. At a food distribution center in Chelsea, Mike Samuel, 55, a delivery man for a florist, was feeling the pain of five days of lost income. “We don’t work, we don’t get no tips, we don’t get no pay,” he said.

Muta Prather said the chemical company where he works in Newark was flooded, causing him to miss three days of work. He worked part of the day on Thursday helping to clean up, but worried about how he would pay for damage to his own roof.

“It hurts, you know,” said Mr. Prather, who is 49 and lives in West Orange, N.J. “I looked up at my roof, and it’s going to cost me like seven grand. I don’t make that kind of money.”

But at a playground in the Clinton Hill section of Brooklyn, Damien Carney stood with his baby daughter strapped to his chest and his



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toddler on a nearby swing, enjoying a surprise week off. For Mr. Carney, a salaried portfolio manager for a wine distributor that was closed because it had no power, the storm was amounting to something like a paid vacation with time for cooking and rearranging the living room. “They basically said, ‘Don’t worry about it,’” Mr. Carney said of his employers.

Federal labor laws include more protections for salaried workers than hourly workers when a disaster hits. Employers must continue to pay salaries if the worksite is closed for less than a week, even though they are allowed to require employees to use vacation or paid leave for the duration of the closure. Hourly workers, on the other hand, do not have to be paid if the worksite closes. If the workplace is open but salaried workers cannot get there, their pay may be reduced.

Of course, policies vary from workplace to workplace, and some hourly workers were luckier than others. Cassandra Williams, 54, waiting for the bus from Brooklyn to Manhattan with her 6-year-old granddaughter, said the family for whom she keeps house would pay her full wages despite her missing three days of work. Tinash Makots, a 24-year-old salesman at the Nike store in Midtown Manhattan, said he would be paid for the days missed as well.

One nanny in the bus line said she would be paid her regular wages, while another said she would not be compensated for hours missed.

A financial district worker who would identify himself only as William S. said he did not strictly need to go into Manhattan to do his job, but felt that he should make an appearance after one of his staff members showed up every day at 6 a.m. and another paid \$40 a day to get to a distant office in Queens.

But Anthony Howell, a 42-year-old hair stylist in Chelsea, said he hadn’t worked all week because his salon, like his high-rise apartment, has no electricity.

“That’s the brutal part,” he said. “The hair industry is like that. You don’t do the work, you don’t get the money.”

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