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Gap widening between rich, poor

Paul Livingstone
University of Maine

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• Economics

Gap widening between rich, poor

By Paul Livingstone
Staff Writer

The gap between the rich and poor of the United States is widening, a visiting speaker at the University of Maine said Saturday.

"There have been tremendous changes in the U.S. economy in the past ten or fifteen years," Dr. Felice Yeskel said.

The Damn Yankee was filled with people from as far away as Lewiston to participate in Active Community Training I, a public event educating people on economic justice.

The event, which was sponsored by several Maine social action groups, featured a presentation by Yeskel who belongs to "Share the Wealth," a non-partisan organization dealing with income inequality in the United States. She has taught in the social justice education program at the University of Mass. at Amherst for the past ten years.

Although Yeskel arrived late due to inclement weather, the audience was patient and seemed eager to hear her speak.

Elaborating on an informational packet she distributed to the group, Yeskel explained the country's growing imbalance of private wealth, increasing federal debt and declining top tax rate.

Displays of facts and figures were plentiful. Among the most astonishing was a graph showing that in 1995, the top one percent of wealth-holders in the U.S. owned 40 percent of the nation's total private wealth, while the bottom 90 percent owned 29 percent of

the private wealth.

"The entire focus of debate is on the bottom percentages," Yeskel said claiming that not enough people are examining or judging the activities of the top one percent.

Lending an historical perspective to the discussion, Yeskel compared today's situation with the Populist Movement of the 1880 in which people campaigned for the first income taxes directed at the rich. Similar movements in the 1930s also pushed for limits on economic inequality.

Yeskel spent more time with the group in the afternoon, encouraging more audience response and getting a lot of thoughtful feedback. Everyone at the talk had similar concerns about the widening gap between the rich and poor. All agreed that people must overcome the fear instilled by economic insecurity and take action.

"Sometimes, part of me wants to live out my values and part of me is scared," commented Yeskel, in reference to the huge commitment people must make to enact changes in their government. She encouraged people to lead their own talks on these issues and to write about them.

The group also participated in other activities, including viewing a film featuring economist Noam Chomsky speaking about the troubles with today's economy. Participants also gathered in small groups to discuss solutions to inequality in such areas as corporations, military spending and campaign financing.

The event ended with a concert from the eastern Maine folk group Solstice.