

LABOR AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

hour to \$6.25 per hour over 18 months. Maine's minimum wage is now \$6.50 per hour. While no Maine worker was affected in the short term, Snowe's vote showed she was willing to put Maine businesses at a competitive disadvantage with out-of-state companies that can continue to legally pay sub-poverty-level wages. It is just another example of the Republican war on the poor. Olympia Snowe is a general in that war.

The link to illegal immigration

If the federal minimum wage were a living wage, more Americans could afford to go to work at jobs that are now being filled by illegal immigrants.

Illegal workers who are willing to work for those sub-poverty-level wages are violating not only the laws of this country, but by accepting less-than-respectful wages for their work, they are also the driving force in a race to the bottom of the economic ladder.

President George Bush keeps saying Americans don't want to do those jobs. But American workers are not afraid of hard work.

They are not fools, either. It's not the hard work, long hours or backbreaking labor that is keeping American workers from taking these jobs. It's the pay. Most Americans are not willing to

work full-time at a job that does not pay enough to keep food on the table, clothes on their backs and a roof over their heads.

When the issue of illegal immigration was confined to a few lettuce fields in California, most people were willing to ignore the issue. But now that the numbers of illegal immigrants employed in America is estimated at several million, and they are expanding into construction and other better-paying jobs, we are seeing a profound affect on our national economy.

At a time when our federal treasury is hemorrhaging red ink, we have millions of undocumented workers making undocumented money, paying no taxes, but using government services, from schools for their children, to the roads and highways to get to and from work, to the social services or emergency health care that they do not pay for.

Employers are the key

The illegal workers and the employers who hire them are gaming the system. To stop this, we need to clamp down on employers who hire illegal workers.

Laws are already on the books that require employers to verify citizenship or legal status of new employees. Even the smallest employer has to fill out those forms for each new hire. But

enforcement appears to be practically non-existent.

We need to remove the financial incentives to businesses who hire illegal immigrants. We need to prosecute employers, fine them, and – for repeat offenders – maybe jail them, until employers get the message that what they are doing is un-American.

If illegal immigrants can't find work in the United States, I predict many, if not most, will find their way home to their own countries without our having to deport them.

I dismiss outright the complaints of businesses that it is too hard to verify Social Security numbers for new hires. Systems already exist to do that, quickly, and as easily as getting authorization of a credit card at a gasoline pump.

Outsourcing

At the other end of the spectrum are NAFTA and CAFTA, and the outsourcing of high-paying jobs. It doesn't matter how much education you have if no one in America will hire you for a job you're trained to do.

In the fall of 1993, I was a candidate for Congress, for the seat then held by Olympia Snowe. I came out against NAFTA that fall, before the ratification vote in Congress.

This year, as a candidate for U.S. Senate, for the seat now held by

Olympia Snowe, I came out against CAFTA, which as you know was passed by the Republican Congress late last year.

If we get a Democratic majority back in Congress, we have a chance of withdrawing from both treaties.

We can also change the laws to make outsourcing of jobs more difficult and expensive for multinational corporations.

Protectionism? You bet! I believe it is the job of Congress to maintain and promote a thriving economy IN THIS COUNTRY. And that means doing whatever is necessary to keep Americans working.

National Health Care

One program that would do a lot in that direction is national health care, Medicare for all. The massive layoffs at General Motors is a stark example of what our lack of national health care is doing to our economy.

I predict that if unions did not have health care as a bargaining issue, contracts would be easier to negotiate, and employers would be less inclined to ask bankruptcy courts to void them.

On the other side of the coin, I've heard from tons of workers who would love to start a small business, but who are staying at jobs they dislike because the family needs the health care benefits.

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National health care would prompt an entrepreneurial explosion like this country has never seen before.

Retirement

Pensions and Social Security must also be stabilized. With most workers now changing jobs several times during their working lives, pensions must be as portable as Social Security. That may involve some standardization, but it also will require employer cash in the kitty, instead of empty promises from corporations which are more and more disappearing in the morass of bankruptcy.

And Social Security must be stabilized, by lifting the cap on wages, by extending FICA to unearned income, or by any number of other solutions. The point is that we need, as a nation, to recognize our government's responsibilities toward its poor, its elder-

ly, its retired, and its disabled, and to act accordingly.

The Iraq War and Tax Cuts for the Rich

Of course before we can do any of this, Congress needs to deal with two elephants on the table – the Iraq War and the tax cuts for the rich.

The Republicans are driving this country into bankruptcy by waging a horribly expensive and tragically unnecessary war, at the same time they give obscene tax cuts to their wealthy friends. Then, with not enough money in the federal kitty, the Republican choice is to wage more war on the poor, cutting food stamps, home heating assistance, Medicare, Medicaid.

Is this the country we want to live in?

If not, in November, we need to get together and Vote for the America We Want To Live In.

FIND OUT MORE

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JEAN HAY BRIGHT

ON LABOR

AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

LABOR ISSUES DEFINE WHO WE ARE AS AMERICANS.

Labor issues are not just union versus non-union. They are the minimum wage and illegal immigration on one end of the spectrum, and corporate outsourcing of high-paying jobs on the other. They are pensions and Social Security, education and national health care, NAFTA and CAFTA.

The concept of labor in America is nothing short of a national recognition that, collectively, the workers of America are the driving force in this country.

Individually, what we do for work often defines who we are. At its best, that work involves using our talents and skills to do productive work that is respected and appropriately compensated.

All of our labor laws, from the federal minimum wage, to a 40-hour work week, to OSHA standards, recognize the concept of a fair day's pay for a decent day's

work, and the dignity of a job well done. This concept, of getting and keeping a good job at decent pay to support oneself and one's family, is at the very foundation of the American Dream.

Minimum Wage

The federal minimum wage is no longer a fair day's pay for a decent day's work. That needs to change. The federal minimum wage should be a living wage for a single adult. Since a living

wage can vary greatly across the country, we may need to regionalize that minimum. And that minimum should be adjusted annually, just as Social Security is adjusted, to account for cost of living increases.

Last fall Senator Olympia Snowe voted with the Republican majority against raising the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 per

"The workers of America are the driving force in this country."

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