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Workers Face Bitter Reality

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There's an old International Workers of the World poster of which my girlfriend (now wife) and I were fond some 30 years ago.

On a whim, she painted a mural enlargement of it on a makeshift sheetrock wall barely separating two downstairs rooms in a dilapidated house in Boston we shared at the time with an alcoholic ex-con and some Harvard dropouts - a '60s sort of scene it was, and passing even then.

It depicted a muscled worker, shirt torn and arms heavy with chains, with sweaty, imploring face uplifted to heaven, above the line "We have fed you all for a thousand years!" That's from a song of the same title, written by an "unknown proletarian," that begins:

We have fed you all for a thousand years
And you hail us still unfed, Though there's never a dollar of all your wealth
But marks the workers' dead.

And ends:

You have taken our lives, and our babies and wives,
And we're told it's your legal share;
But if blood be the price of your lawful wealth
Good God! We have bought it fair.

Now that we're children of a new millennium, of course, this sort of over-the-top imagery and language about worker dignity and its denial, or the basic unfairness of how our economy sometimes operates, is so over it hurts.

But it being Labor Day again, let's interrupt our cosmopolitan silence.

In 1935, with the passage of the National Labor Relations (or "Wagner") Act, America committed itself to the simple proposition that workers enjoyed associational rights inside the firm. They secured the protection of federal law to form unions if they wanted to. At the time this was celebrated as a natural extension of democratic rights into the workplace, a crucial centerpiece of the centuries-long civil rights revolution that defines our progress as a country.

The protections announced by the Wagner Act remain national policy today. But only on the books, since reality bites otherwise. In today's workplace, any worker brave enough even to try to form or join a union puts herself at risk in doing so, and should expect little help from our government. She is near certain to be harassed and threatened by her employer, and very likely to be fired. When it comes to voting for a union, we might as well be living in a totalitarian dictatorship.

That, indeed, is the conclusion of folks who study such things for a living. Like the international watchdog group Human Rights Watch, which recently reported, "Workers' freedom of association is under sustained attack in the United States, and the government is often failing in its responsibility under international human rights standards to deter such attacks and protect workers' rights."

Not surprisingly, frightened workers no longer join unions at anything like the rate they used to. Private sector union "density" - the share of the work force that belongs to unions - has dropped to levels not seen since before the NLRA was passed, indeed not seen since the very beginning of the 20th century. It's as if that century never happened.

Labor's weakness at work bespeaks a more general turn of American public life and policy against the working class. We are now experiencing the longest period of wage stagnation, and greatest inequality of wealth and income, in our history. Popular confidence in government as truly "of the people, by the people, for the people" - as against monied interests - has understandably reached an all-time low.

Substantially as a result of changes in our tax and regulatory policies, some 70 percent of all national income growth over the past generation (since the early 1970s) has gone to the top 1 percent of American families - folks whose financial wealth now exceeds that of the bottom 95 percent of Americans combined. Along with corporations (who deduct it as a business expense), the same 1 percent account for some 95 percent of campaign contributions. And, closing the loop of inequality begetting bad politics begetting more inequality, make no mistake that they get what they pay for.

As our fabled national surplus disappears overnight, national savings turn negative for the first time since the Great Depression, and the stock market shakes and tumbles those 401(k) retirement accounts, we may, for example, watch the further shift in national fortunes begotten by President Bush's \$1.3 trillion tax cut. After this year, virtually all of that will go to the top 20 percent of American families; more than half will go to, you guessed it, the same lucky top 1 percent.

* Meanwhile, those at the bottom languish. Despite a massive increase in work effort, over the same generation the after-tax incomes of the bottom fifth of American families have actually declined, and those of the middle fifth have essentially stagnated.

This is not the American dream of equal opportunity and shared prosperity that most of us were raised on, but something quite different - an MTV plutocracy of punishing inequalities, ruled by corporations and their hand-servant politicians rather than "the people."

It's Abe Lincoln's nightmare.

Writing in November 1864, with the Union's victory finally foretold and his own death still but a gleam in John Booth's eye, Lincoln described a vision he sometimes had for American democracy - a cruel world in which, after the battles were won, the true cause of the Civil War would be lost. In this peaceful but no longer democratic place, "corporations have been enthroned, an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money-power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until the wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed."

Lincoln described himself as "unnerved" by this vision, which made him "tremble for the safety of my country." This Labor Day, we might tremble too.

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see www.cows.org and www.sustainingwisconsin.org.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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