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Woe is the American Worker

Workers are paying the price for our productivity-focused, growth-at-any-cost business world. Why aren't the candidates talking about it?

Paul Waldman | December 5, 2007 | web only

These are not good times for American workers. Real wages are lower today than they were before the recession of 2001, and **barely higher** than they were thirty-five years ago. Health insurance is more expensive and harder to obtain than ever before. Manufacturing jobs continue to move overseas. The unions whose efforts might arrest these trends continue to struggle under a sustained assault that began when Ronald Reagan fired striking air-traffic controllers in 1981, in effect declaring war on the labor movement.

This is a story with which you are probably familiar. But these are in no small part symptoms of a larger transformation of the relationship between employers and employees, in which Americans increasingly sign away their humanity when they sign an employment contract.

Let's take just one component of today's work environment that most people have simply come to accept: drug testing. An **article** published last year on *Time* magazine's web site titled, "Whatever Happened to Drug Testing?" reported that in the last decade, the proportion of employers testing their employees for drug use has declined to 62 percent, after having exploded to over 80 percent in the 1990s.

That's right -- "only" 62 percent of employers make their employees pee into a cup (or fork over a lock of hair, the current state of the art). The recent decline notwithstanding, the fact remains that most Americans work at places where drug testing is standard practice.

But the classic justifications for drug testing -- that it will reduce accidents, absenteeism, and

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overall productivity -- turn out to have very little support. When **this study** was released 10 years ago, it got a certain amount of attention for what the authors referred to as a "surprising" finding. In their survey of high-tech firms, they found that those that performed drug testing on their employees had *lower* productivity than those that didn't test. Forget all the rhetoric about pot-addled employees missing work and stumbling their way around the office.

But I'd bet that most people who work weren't too surprised. Think about the jobs you've had. Where were you the most productive? Was it when you worked for a boss and an organization that treated you with respect, that valued your contributions, where you actually felt that you were part of something useful? Or were you more productive when you worked for a boss and an organization that governed by fear, that treated you with suspicion and contempt? Most adults have worked for the latter kind, while only some have had the good fortune to work for the former. And many if not most of them do just enough work to stay out of trouble and avoid the wrath of their superiors. That's the spirit fostered in a workplace where employees are treated like criminals.

There is an ideology inherent in the way employers treat their workers, one reflected in the relative amounts of attention paid by the news media to labor issues and the ups and downs of the stock market. Wall Street, of course, makes heroes out of executives who cut benefits and sack workers, like the monstrous "Neutron Jack" Welch, formerly of General Electric. A corporate barbarian of the first order, Welch pocketed hundreds of millions of dollars while firing more than 100,000 employees, then went on to write a series of best-selling books gobbled up by junior executives looking for the secret battle plan to slash their way to the top. He's just one among many; another such executive, who **laid off 9,000 people** when he was CEO of Halliburton, later became vice president of the United States.

If you are one of those left behind, you get called an "associate" instead of a clerk. In the place of paid vacation, you get company-sponsored activities whose absurdity can only make you more depressed. In the place of a union to represent you, you get assurances that the company considers you part of the "family." Your samples will be analyzed, your movements surveilled, your email read, all in the name of enhancing productivity and rooting out the bad apples. And should they decide your time is done, they will send a security guard to march you out the door in a ritual of public humiliation, lest you decide to pilfer a stapler as a memento of your service.

There is no labor section of the newspaper to tell the stories of the families devastated by layoffs and the workers ground down by the daily parade of indignities. But in the morally inverted world of Wall Street, what's bad for workers is good for stocks, and the cable news "money honeys" will bare their gleaming teeth as they report the inevitable upward swing in share prices that accompanies a mass firing or benefit cut.

It would be positively revelatory to hear a presidential candidate truly speak to the conditions Americans find themselves in at work, to say firmly that companies that treat their employees like dirt are undermining our national spirit. They are the ones who have the ability to change out national conversation on topics like these. What if, instead of simply talking about "creating

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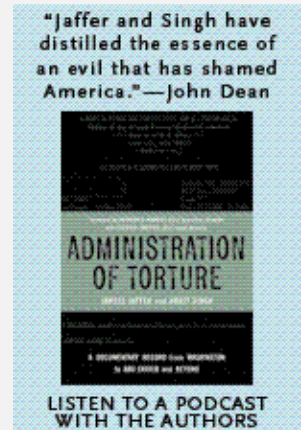
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jobs," expanding health care, or increasing the minimum wage -- important goals all -- they actually attempted to speak to how people feel about their jobs? When candidates say the American dream is getting harder to attain, one often wonders if they understand all the reasons why that is so.

The Republicans certainly know the kind of workplace they admire. It's one in which power -- not values, principles, or fairness, but raw power -- determines how people are treated. They find deeply troubling anything that constrains employers from exploiting their workers to whatever degree they see fit. They despise unions precisely because they alter that balance of power in the worker's favor, providing some check on the ability of organizations to intimidate and humiliate, underpay and overwork. But so far, Democrats haven't articulated their vision of what a progressive workplace in the twenty-first century is supposed to look like -- and what they're willing to do to create it. I'd be eager to hear.

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Paul Waldman is a senior fellow at Media Matters for America and the author of *Being Right is Not Enough: What Progressives Must Learn From Conservative Success*.

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As long as the same mass firing executives continue to bank roll all presidential campaigns you wont hear any candidates talk about the rubbish working conditions Americans face every day. Its just craven cowardice that the corporate kleptocracy might turn off the money taps and presidential candidates actually have to start getting donations from the "little people" and start making policies in their favour. So far all the presidential candidates both Rep and Dem are bought and paid for.

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Posted by: **JT** | Dec 5, 2007 8:00:49 AM

"Real wages are lower today than they were before the recession of 2001, and barely higher than they were thirty-five years ago."

First, this statement is only true for men's wages, women's wages are slightly higher than in 2001 and MUCH higher than in 1972.

Second, be careful what you wish for. The real populist alternative may not be a workers paradise but the stagnant European model, where work is great if you can get it but far fewer people do.

Posted by: **ConsDemo** | *Dec 5, 2007 8:15:11 AM*

Out of the current slate of the Presidential candidates, only two - Edwards and Kucinich - genuinely appear to support the American Labor. Only they seem to be truly concern about the plight of the workers. Yet, Edwards is probably not going to break out of his third place where he is locked in by Obama and Clinton and Kucinich will even fail to make an impression upon this campaign long enough to woo any significant votes.

Republicans have been avoiding this subject all together. but truth is strong Labor made for Great America. Right now, Labor is at its weakest in a century or so.

Posted by: **Eugene** | *Dec 5, 2007 9:11:02 AM*

The problem is the Democratic party has no interest in the working class anymore. The only groups the Dems will truly fight for are the wacko left-wing hate groups. Homosexuals, abortion providers, feminist man/family haters, etc. Why do you think so many union members cross over and vote Republican in presidential elections. Dems use the union members like they use the blacks and like the Republicans use the Christians. Promise them the world before an election and then wish they would "just go away" afterwards.

I think everyone realizes by now that the Republicans dream of a Mexican type economy where a small wealthy ruling class determines the fates of the peasant class. Any kind of program that will benefit the working class is classified as "wasteful government spending".

Ask for a tiny tax hike on billionaires and they scream, "you'll wreck the economy"!

Even on illegal immigration, both parties are disgusting. Democrats want citizenship and voting rights as soon as possible for the illegals. Do you think if the Mexican-Americans voted overwhelmingly Republican they'd be pushing this? No Way! Of course the Republican business class wants these hardworking immigrants to do jobs Americans just won't do. If there was a fifteen dollar per hour minimum wage for these illegals do you think the Republicans would be interested in them? No Way!

What I'm trying to say is that neither party gives a damn about average Americans. Whether you agree with people like Lou Dobbs or not, he is striking a chord with the American working class. Why is Mike Huckabee becoming so popular? Because he is tapping into this too. People are really worried in this country. Most people don't feel like another fight in Washington over a tax cut or whether a thirteen year old girl should be able to have an abortion without her parents knowledge is in their best interest.

The blue-collar working class is the forgotten class in this country. If Huckabee can appeal to these Reagan Democrats, he'll do very well!

Posted by: **TheTruth** | *Dec 5, 2007 9:54:10 AM*

Just a question... what happens when the UAW, through its perpetual strikes and demands for ever increasing wages and benefits, finally drives one of the major American auto makers out of business? What happens when Ford finally says "We just can't compete anymore, so we are closing our doors"? What happens when Toyota decides that it's going to withdraw its production to places outside the USA, so it doesn't have to deal with the UAW? Are the displaced auto workers supposed to move to Mexico or Japan to find work?

The missing piece of Waldman's equation is this: Unions and government may have the ability to force a corporation to pay for higher wages and benefits, but they can NOT force them to stay open for business.

Posted by: **rwgrove** | *Dec 5, 2007 9:55:53 AM*

The problem with Unions is that they do not empower the people as you wish in your bullshit Utopian dream. I have worked for a Union against my will, and the Union is in every sense built on power. Not values, principles, or fairness, but raw power. If I don't agree to sign up for a Union, I can be fired. My wages can be garnished to pay back dues. So what is the fucking difference Waldman? Any gains the American worker might see through Unionization are thrown away on Union power and greed for its own set of elites, for its own political cronies. The American worker is screwed each and every time we sell out our arbitration to any party. The cure is always as bad as the disease with people like you. The answer is not in banding together, it is in reclaiming our individuality by not selling out our values and principles to a bunch of populist espousing liars like yourself.

Posted by: **X** | *Dec 5, 2007 10:05:28 AM*

"Second, be careful what you wish for. The real populist alternative may not be a workers paradise but the stagnant European model, where work is great if you can get it but far fewer people do."

What are you talking about? That's already here, only you have poverty level and near poverty level McJobs in lieu of extended unemployment. Sure, that's a huge positive of life in America.

Yeah, keep blaming "the populists."

Posted by: **Anonymous** | *Dec 5, 2007 10:17:22 AM*

Unions are not the guys with the white hats, as X so forcefully states. The real solution for most folks is to acquire more education and skills, not possible in most crappy public high

schools which --surprise!-- are taught by unionized teachers.

Posted by: **Y** | *Dec 5, 2007 10:40:14 AM*

"The real solution for most folks is to acquire more education and skills, not possible in most crappy public high schools which --surprise!--"

Oh, please. Even the educated and rather very educated have their McJobs-- surprise!-- there's a good chance you'll end up in one of them.

That's a cheering prospect, anyway.

Okay, I'll go tend to my portfolio now, maybe I can hurry the matter along a bit.

Posted by: **Anonymous** | *Dec 5, 2007 11:51:00 AM*

Rarely do I agree with anything Media Matters says, but I agree with this article, such as it is. The one aspect you glaringly left out is illegal immigration. It is an endless supply of cheap, illegal labor that robs American workers of their bargaining power. It is illegal alien labor that has put an end to upward mobility for unskilled American workers. Illegal aliens burden schools and hospitals, placing huge additional burdens on American taxpayers. As a result the wealthy elites get richer, while the workers get poorer.

Probably because of their centuries old socialist commitment to "workers of the world", progressives refuse to recognize the harm that an open ended labor market does to American workers. Instead they work at cross purposes, talking about the plight of American workers while seeking amnesty for those who undercut their wages.

Tom Tancredo has done more for American workers than any liberal progressive activist. Illegal immigration isn't just a partisan matter. While the leaders of both major parties try to force amnesty down American's throats, rank-and-file members of both parties are fighting to stop the influx of illegal labor. See the SAVE act recently introduced in the Senate by two Democratic senators.

As long as liberal progressives continue to push amnesty, their concern for American workers will ring hollow.

Posted by: **Stuart** | *Dec 5, 2007 11:56:54 AM*

TheTruth really did hit upon the main cause of stagnating real wages among the working class - unrestrained illegal immigration. Employers like the cheap labor (at least until illegal immigrants start depressing management wages), many union officials would rather have

1,000,000 members earning \$10/hour than 800,000 member earning \$12/hour, Republican politicians like corporate donors, Democratic politicians like uneducated masses to milk for votes.

Posted by: **JerryF** | *Dec 5, 2007 12:01:05 PM*

Note to The Truth:

If you oppose illegal immigration, Mike Huckabee is the last candidate you should support. Huckabee says that he opposes "amnesty" when in reality he agrees with Bush and supported the Senate amnesty bill. Huckabee goes on at length about how it is athe Christian thing to do to show compassion for illegal aliens, yet he doesn't care about American workers losing their jobs to illegal aliens one bit. Huckabee is a fraud and a liar. No one who admired Ronald reagan should ever support Huckabee.

Posted by: **Stuart** | *Dec 5, 2007 12:05:29 PM*

This is the truth that no one in Washington will ever admit, and certainly no leftist. Wages are stagnating across the board because the labor market is being distorted by the presence of 20 million illegal aliens. Period. End illegal immigration, lower corporate tax rates (that's right, we have the highest in the world), and wages will rise as the economy grows. As long as you have a vast pool of inordinately cheap labor at the bottom, everyone's wages will fall. It's a market phenomenon.

Posted by: **Jim** | *Dec 5, 2007 12:19:46 PM*

Hey, remember how corporate fat cats ran riot in the 1990s, firing everyone in sight? And remember how NAFTA and the WTO were created which further contributed to labor miseries?

But wait, didn't wages surge and unemployment decline to record lows?

Try squaring that circle for me.

Posted by: **Colin** | *Dec 5, 2007 12:23:24 PM*

"Stagnant European model"--bring it on! What on earth is wrong with it? "Stagnant" is a misleading piece of rhetoric that obscures the fact that GDP growth doesn't necessarily translate into more overall utility--understood as pleasure, happiness or desire-satisfaction.

Of course more is always better, but more of WHAT? More money and consumer goods at any cost--or more PLEASURE? Money and stuff are great--I have no objections to crass materialism--but if the misery of work outweighs the pleasure of getting more money and stuff, growth isn't worth it. Partisans of cut-throat capitalism never even mention work as a cost. Moreover, given the way the system operates, with benefits tied to full-time work, it isn't feasible for most workers to make trade-offs they might prefer--less stuff and less work.

Give me that Old European religion: less work and greater quality of life.

Posted by: **LogicGuru** | *Dec 5, 2007 12:24:23 PM*

Its ludicrous to look to the government to remedy the de-personalization of people. The good news is the free market will deal with these tyrannies. Companies that operate from this paranoid stance usually are also inflexible, archaic, and incapable of innovative thought.

Keep the markets free.....eventually these entities will be dealt with in the severest way. Ask government to step in???LOL.....they are the first and worst offenders when it comes to depersonalizing people, my friend.

Brian

Posted by: **Brian Donahue** | *Dec 5, 2007 12:30:00 PM*

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Posted by: **Stuart** | *Dec 5, 2007 1:15:09 PM*

I like the title of the authors book, too bad he didn't learn anything about conservative success. This entire article is typical of liberal over blown hysteria. If you have an employee that is operating machinery or driving and don't do random drug tests and he has an accident, look out, here come the "other Democrats" the lawyers. I get treated like a criminal at the airport because we can't be unfair to guys named Muhammed so why isn't he complaining about that? More liberal HYPOCRASY if I ever heard it.

Posted by: **Writer** | *Dec 5, 2007 1:15:31 PM*

"Probably because of their centuries old socialist commitment to "workers of the world", progressives refuse to recognize the harm that an open ended labor market does to American workers. Instead they work at cross purposes, talking about the plight of American workers while seeking amnesty for those who undercut their wages."

No, that's not international socialism, that's bourgeois liberal multi-culti-- never saw an economic claim they could mentally process. And why would they? They're the spawn of 1950s Organization Man and gifted with gratuitous stock portfolios, pampered by Daddy's indulgence into mentally idle self righteous pseudo-moral musings-- which they'll happily foist on you so they can keep on doing what they're doing. ("Should I get the i-Pod or the wide screen for my 60th?").

Put the blame for that where it belongs. A little international socialism wouldn't be a bad thing right now.

Posted by: **Anonymous** | *Dec 5, 2007 1:20:05 PM*

TheTruth really did hit upon the main cause of stagnating real wages among the working class - unrestrained illegal immigration. Employers like the cheap labor (at least until illegal immigrants start depressing management wages), many union officials would rather have 1,000,000 members earning \$10/hour than 800,000 member earning \$12/hour, Republican politicians like corporate donors, Democratic politicians like uneducated masses to milk for votes.

Posted by: **JerryF** | *Dec 5, 2007 1:24:47 PM*

Why do people even aspire to be "workers"? Why not find a need, create your own small business to fill it and reap the rewards? Or, at the very least, find a need and get the training/ education needed to find a good job in that field?

I live near a major shipyard on the west coast and see all of the union workers get on the buses every morning with their lunch pails, work their eight-hour, dead end job, then take their shipyard paid buses back home at the end of their day. What is the draw to that style of living? Is it the lack of other jobs?.....or is it human nature at its laziest, comfort level worst?

What does a union do for people? Keep them from getting ahead in life by getting their wages artificially raised just enough to eek out a living and get locked into their stagnant, dead-end jobs? Whoop de freakin' do.....

Posted by: **BigGovSux** | *Dec 5, 2007 1:44:44 PM*

"Why do people even aspire to be "workers"? Why not find a need, create your own small business to fill it and reap the rewards?"

Uuh, the business loan? Fighting corporate monopolies for market share? Paying your workers and not yourself because you won't even be profitable for a few years (if at all)? Taking flack from liberals for keeping your costs down when you haven't even paid yourself yet? Taking flack from local republicans as they paw over the Mexicans in the kitchen?

You know, monopoly enterprises used to pass some of the benefits down the line because they knew they could have their privileges yanked. What happened?

Okay, I'm going to go play with my corporate portfolio now because I can't make enough selling my labor. See you on the unemployment line. Nice country you have here.

Posted by: **Anonymous** | *Dec 5, 2007 2:08:28 PM*

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Posted by: **Anonymous** | *Dec 5, 2007 2:20:33 PM*

On the air traffic controllers bit --- If you or one of your loved ones (mom, dad, son, daughter, etc.) was in an airplane at the time the air traffic controllers went on strike what would you have wanted the president to do? Nothing? Let them run out of fuel & crash? Reagan did what needed to be done for the safety of those people in the air. The people that others seem so eager to forget about; because it wasn't them.

Posted by: **Mark A Shrider** | *Dec 5, 2007 2:38:23 PM*

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Give me that Old European religion: less work and greater quality of life.

Posted by: **LogicGuru** | *Dec 5, 2007 3:32:34 PM*

Isn't the type of workplace we're looking for (that we'd "admire") a merit-based one? Don't most workers want respect not because they're workers, but because they deserve respect? Not to say that all people don't deserve a certain level of respect just by virtue of being human, but being rewarded (with respect, pay increases etc.) for more merit seems preferable over some bland "respect" I get for just being a worker; the latter sounds more like pity.

Posted by: **cn** | *Dec 5, 2007 4:12:26 PM*

In addition to all of the business news on cable, on PBS (the people's network) we have a NIGHTLY Business Report. Do we have a Nightly Labor Report? How about a weekly, monthly, or yearly labor report? The closest thing on television to a consistent voice for the interests of working people is--God help us--Lou Dobbs.

As far as drug testing goes, it can be described in one word--Gattaca. Very soon employers will be able to look at your precious bodily fluids and determine your probable life span.

Another reason why we need national health insurance.

Posted by: **fredo bush** | *Dec 5, 2007 4:25:19 PM*

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Another reason why we need national health insurance.

Posted by: **fredo bush** | *Dec 5, 2007 4:41:11 PM*

Yup, only 62 percent of the work force pee in the bottle for drug screens, except for CEOs, Senators, and Senator's sons. Since the professions--doctors, lawyers, and judges--are excluded from such milking chores, it must be nice to be in the oligarchy. Oh, and a merit based work force? Affirmative action has been very very good for white females--now 49 percent of law school graduating classes--indigenous black males disproportionately go to jail, and illegal aliens get college discounts on tuitions. We can't ethnically profile the enemy at the airport, but we have no problem with ethnic profiling when it comes to affirmative action hiring and promotions. New Age lawyers suck.

Posted by: **Don** | *Dec 5, 2007 4:42:37 PM*

In the 1980's the Raiders began their greedy destruction of American companies. They would take them over by using junk bonds in many cases, raid the pension funds, put the company in debt by borrowing, using the company as collateral, and then sell the companies. Then they started on cities, counties, states and now the Federal government. We have lost 5.5 million manufacturing jobs, we have been outsourced, and we have been in-sourced by illegals. Banks, credit card companies, tel-com companies, health care companies, and mortgage companies have been bleeding the consumer dry. The only event that can end this nightmare is depression or revolution. Which would you prefer?

Posted by: **ghostcommander** | *Dec 5, 2007 5:02:46 PM*

I don't think it's necessary to slander republicans in order to make your point. I've talked with many, and never has one suggested that they are happy with companies that treat workers in a shabby manner. Any evidence, or is this simple bigotry? There's a big difference between the bigoted assumptions made in this piece and the idea that is is not the government's business to interfere in the employment contract. Our government has consistently maintained pro-worker legislation for decades after it has become irrelevant (Davis-Bacon) and ineffective. Unions have failed because they are corrupt - they truly victimize workers, as opposed to the idea that the government is victimizing them if it doesn't dictate every aspect of employment. The global free-market economy is sorting out which companies, and indeed, which countries and which governments, will endure, and the outlook isn't good for nanny-government socialism. The true test of an idea, a government system, or an economic model is to test it in an environment of freedom - not coercion. It's revealing that socialists never allow that test to happen with their ideas.

Posted by: **R LaBonte** | *Dec 5, 2007 5:23:57 PM*

The battle between Corp. America and Unions have done nothing for the American worker. The unions raised wages until GM and Ford can't afford to operate competitively (example).

Until illegal immigration is stopped, there will be a continuance of cheap labor, first from Mexico, and then all the way down to the tip of South America (NAFTA/CAFTA/WTO). Corporations are laughing all the way to the bank. Union leaders doing the same.

Meanwhile, let's all buy some Chinese garbage and help them destroy ourselves by mass gluttony. There is supposed to be a circle of economy (we make something, get paid, go spend to buy the items we make, invest in the rest). What we have now will slowly strangle us. Corporations don't care because once you are out of money, then they just shift operations to another location. All for the increase of the stock. The American worker is nothing more than a paid slave. If you choose not to be a part of it, then you take the risk of no health care for your kids and no connection with society (internet/cable, etc.).

The entire reason for the HR division at any given company is to perform the Gestapo role to protect the Corp. It has none of your interests in mind.

There is no such thing as a Progressive Party. In this country we will end up being a 1984-style country full of automatons, consuming all the garbage thrown down to us. It's closer than you think.

Posted by: **GoSolo** | *Dec 5, 2007 5:32:05 PM*

"As far as drug testing goes, it can be described in one word--Gattaca. Very soon employers will be able to look at your precious bodily fluids and determine your probable life span.

Another reason why we need national health insurance."

Oh, please. They're linking the health insurance bid to the electronic medical records employers will use to put you permanently out of commission.

Preventive medicine-- yup, I'll say. We'll see how sick you are when you can no longer afford to feed yourself.

Posted by: **Anonymous** | *Dec 5, 2007 7:24:04 PM*

"In the 1980's the Raiders began their greedy destruction of American companies. They would take them over by using junk bonds in many cases, raid the pension funds, put the company in debt by borrowing, using the company as collateral, and then sell the companies."

Ah, President Mitt Romney: Get used to it.

Posted by: **Anonymous** | *Dec 5, 2007 7:29:42 PM*

So many straw men, so little time! Hey, it's getting kind of cold in here. Someone toss another Mexican on the bonfire.

Posted by: **Marti Perez** | *Dec 5, 2007 7:30:26 PM*

The xenophobic and right-wing anti-union hogwash on here would almost be funny if it weren't so tragic and stupid.

UNIONS are the problem? Give me a f-ing break. UNIONS are corrupt? UNIONS keep our glorious workers beaten down? Are you even on the same planet as the rest of us?

The decline of America is the same as the decline of the union. And Ronald Reagan was no hero, he was a genial moron with Alzheimer's and a script written for him first by Hollywood and then by the most craven and most corrupt people to ever subvert a nation.

Anyone who admires Reagan, or anything he did, should leave the U.S.A., because they aren't fit to live here.

Posted by: **jprichva** | *Dec 5, 2007 9:46:27 PM*

Uh, Mr. Waldman, have you looked even a little bit into John Edwards' positions on labor and the working person? I'm with you on the problem of media not giving enough coverage, but there definitely IS a candidate who talks about these issues, and who has put forth plans for things he will do to help change this state of affairs if he is elected.

His name? JOHN EDWARDS

Posted by: **doug lowe** | *Dec 5, 2007 11:34:23 PM*

Excellent, most excellent article. Here in the South, even applying for a job is a humiliating experience under the banner of "Homeland Security".

After lie detector tests, drug tests & a physical to be sure she wasn't pregnant, a 52-year-old friend was rejected for a part-time office job with the VA State Police because she admitted growing marijuana in her bathroom closet under lights when she was 19.

Another was refused a temp job because her credit rating wasn't great enough for the agency, who felt that if they placed her at a money-handler's job it would be "temptation".

So obviously, Bush can't work at a temp agency and Ken Lay had a great credit rating was.
God Bless American workers.

Posted by: **Groucho** | *Dec 6, 2007 10:07:03 AM*

all this whining about the plight of the american worker reminds me of an old Woody Allen
joke:

two elderly women are at a Catskill mountain resort, and one of 'em says, "Boy, the food at
this place is really terrible." The other one says, "Yeah, I know; and such small portions."

Posted by: **Eric** | *Dec 6, 2007 11:05:52 AM*

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Posted by: **Eric** | *Dec 6, 2007 11:20:17 AM*

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Posted by: **Eric** | *Dec 6, 2007 11:53:49 AM*

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this place is really terrible." The other one says, "Yeah, I know; and such small portions."

Posted by: **Eric** | *Dec 6, 2007 12:08:00 PM*

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Posted by: **Eric** | *Dec 6, 2007 12:56:01 PM*

For the same reason they're not talkin' about anything that is important, i.e., their copo-rat puppet masters won't let them.

Posted by: **Ernest Stewart** | *Dec 6, 2007 2:08:30 PM*

Yeah, I'm for Edwards precisely because he's the only candidate that's focused on these bread-and-butter issues. My question is: why doesn't the electorate care--including the working class who should care the most?

I think there's a fatalism about working conditions and the economy, particularly amongst low income low skill workers. "Work is bad, can't fix it: it's a law of nature. Financial insecurity is a fact of life that can't be fixed either. Any interference by the government will only take away the little bit of freedom we have, and unions just such money out of workers without producing results."

So, let's fight for the lifestyle issues...

Posted by: **LogicGuru** | *Dec 6, 2007 3:39:38 PM*

Dennis Kucinich and John Edwards are talking about these issues yet the press only covers Hillary and Obama.

I have an English friend who says the reason US workers keep voting against their own interests is that we are all convinced we are 'upper class' that because we have a DVD, wide screen television and SUV we are just one step shy of those in power.

Our quality of life here is full of material things yet so lacking in real quality.

Posted by: **Robert Bowles** | *Dec 6, 2007 5:51:59 PM*

Again, why whine about the "horrible working conditions of the worker"? Go out and figure

out a way to get ahead!

Not all of the business owners/CEO's/management are evil. MOST of them came up through the ranks or built their own business through hard work. Most of them started in the same place as most of the "workers".

The only difference is they decided to make something of themselves. They stuck their necks out, went out on a limb, refinanced their house and started their dream.

As an evil small business owner myself, I can tell you that I've got no use for whining, lazy workers. Those of us that write the paychecks can't afford to carry dead-weight union type whiners. We need employees that work hard, learn and strive to do better. Those "workers" get raises and promotions at my place. They eventually become "management". I consider the lazy, whining, union types to be stealing money from my pocket. I have no time for that nonsense. I'm busy trying to grow my business so that I can provide more good paying jobs and opportunity for advancement to the people that deserve it most.

And no, I don't feel even slightly guilty about making a profit while i'm doing it. You've got to remember that when things get slow and the profits dry up occasionally, I still have to write those paychecks so that my good workers are still there when the big orders come in.

Posted by: **BigGovSux** | *Dec 6, 2007 5:52:57 PM*

"I consider the lazy, whining, union types to be stealing money from my pocket. I have no time for that nonsense. I'm busy trying to grow my business so that I can provide more good paying jobs and opportunity for advancement to the people that deserve it most."

That's exactly how I feel about our high finance economy. Push that lard-ass shit off the farm.

Posted by: **Anonymous** | *Dec 7, 2007 10:22:57 AM*

I'm a worker. I'm not senior management, not even management - that would mean long hours and putting my neck in the line of fire.

I make just under a 6 figure salary for 40 hours a week.

Woe is me, living large in the field of I.T.

Posted by: **Popsico** | *Dec 7, 2007 4:22:44 PM*

"Woe is me, living large in the field of I.T."

I.T. you say? Just you wait another 15 minutes. Very logical. Like a clock.

Posted by: **Anonymous** | *Dec 7, 2007 8:44:42 PM*

Americans need to remember this basic truth: man is a wolf to man. The system will be stacked against the poor unless the poor take collective action and MAKE the system be fair.

At this point I think that our best hope lies in minority women. It is black and Hispanic women who are the real working class nowadays, working in low-paying jobs with little money and no respect. White men are too blinded by prejudice: they fundamentally admire the rich man. They want to be like him. But I think that minorities realize that the upper class is the enemy, not the benefactor.

Posted by: **ChristianPinko** | *Dec 8, 2007 1:39:20 PM*

This piece is interesting and a little unique, because it addresses the day-to-day experience of work a little bit, apart from just talking about wages and benefits.

And the responses are interesting too, but I'm amazed at how vicious they are. In political debate you're supposed to sort of be courteous, even to your opponent, even to people whose opinions you despise. You don't do this out of timidity, you do it because you want to make sure that political debate is based on reason and respect, and not raw emotion. And you want that mostly to make sure politics happens through debate and discussion and rules, and doesn't devolve into raw power battles. That isn't rightwing and it isn't leftwing, it's just the way a democracy has to work. If you don't care enough about what you're saying to think it through and be reasonable and respectful to the person you're addressing, don't speak.

Weblogs can be interesting because they let people with no prior connection or necessary position speak with one another, across space, across title, across class, race, gender, whatever. They only make sense if you treat words with respect, and let them have meaning.

Maybe TAP could use a ranking system on comments, or just require names or something?

Posted by: **Donald Jackson** | *Dec 8, 2007 4:14:59 PM*

There are a few strong opinions being voiced in all this, and it might be worth looking at one of them.

*Should workers use unions for "improve" conditions for everyone (whatever improve means) or should they just work harder and pursue higher positions? Another way some people phrased it, are workers workers instead of managers or business owners because they're lazy?

This whole like of talking is something that lefties don't really do, because it goes against left

values like solidarity and humanism in the sense that it means we're going to assume some people just suck and deserve to be on the bottom, and people at the top are just better than them. I'm leftist, but I want to address it because it's a very popular belief, especially among small businesspeople it seems. It would be nice if people who believe in or are part of unions and people who believe in or are small businesspeople could get on the same page.

On the one hand, yeah, sometimes union people don't work hard. Is that the rule? Most union people I've ever known worked their asses off. Many of the top companies in the world are unionized and have pretty good relationships with their unions. I was at a UPS hiring session yesterday. UPS is a union company. They work hard, they work fast, and they get paid well for it.

If you actually look at the research, companies with unions that have good relationships between the union and management have HIGHER productivity than companies without unions at all. Now companies with bad relationships between the unions and management have lower productivity than both. But that's a question of management policy, do they work with labor or just try to break it. Point is, the best of both worlds is unionization AND cooperation between both, at least in this country. So from that angle, this is a moot argument. Unions are only bad for productivity if management attacks them. (If anyone asks I can send them links to the study I'm talking about.)

But there's also the argument that workers are workers just because they're lazy, or don't take the necessary steps to move up. That sort of claim is sort of difficult to argue with calmly, because it's a pretty big insult. But I'll try.

Most businesses in America and the world have owners, managers and workers. Within a normal business, most people involved are going to be workers. If most businesses are composed this way, and people derive their incomes from businesses, than most people in our society are going to be workers. So if you have one boss and twenty employees, if one rises up or quits and starts his own business, that means they still need to hire another employee.

My point is just that if you accept the economic system we live under, then most people HAVE to be workers, and will always be workers. The system itself demands it. So sure, one person can start a business or become a professional or a manager. And that's fine. But it doesn't change things for the system as a whole, and for most of the people in that system. Most people can't do this, even if they want to.

So the next question is, what should someone reasonably expect for selling themselves to someone else for 40 hours a week? I'd say that you should reasonably expect a patch of earth and a house to live in. You should reasonably expect medical care. You should reasonably expect to not worry about food and water. You should reasonably expect to be able to transport yourself. You should reasonably expect to be able to afford a family. You should reasonably expect a few weeks off in a year. You should reasonably expect that the rest of your life is your own business and not your boss's. You should reasonably expect to be able to afford to go bowling or see movies, to do something pleasant to make up for giving up half your life to someone else. And you should expect to be able to do your job properly and not be

forced to treat your workplace like a cult.

This is simple, simple stuff. Do you have the right to expect society to take care of you without doing anything? No, probably not. Do you have the right to expect some minimal level of security and comfort if you give away half your waking life to someone else? Damn right you do.

What's so weird about American businesspeople is that they seem to think workers should treat their job like their religion. If you're lucky enough to work somewhere noble or honorable, doing good for the world, then sure, you should care quite a lot about it. Most people don't get that chance, even if they're smart and work hard, if only because there are very few places like that. Most of our economy is based on getting people to buy crap that's bad for them and the world as a whole. Bad food, mind-killing television, cars that destroy the air and clog up half a city, houses that fall apart in twenty years, clothes that wear away in months. That's the way it is. Even if it's a small business doing it, and I respect small businesses much more than corporate ones, why should a worker care that much about a job making one more widget? We'll do it because we don't have a choice, and all we want is to have our lives and our families and our friends and our churches and our communities. For that we'll work on this crap and pretend it's important, as long as we're paid to. But otherwise, we just want you to leave us the hell alone. If managers need to be in a business cult to be managers, that's their business. That world just doesn't have much to offer the rest of us, because what we want doesn't cost money and gets harder the more you get in that world-family, community, friendship, genuine faith, meaningful activity that is good for the world and makes us feel more human. With far too few exceptions, all y'all have to offer is being a rich slave to numbers and widgets.

How could anyone ever expect most human beings to want that, to give up their lives and their minds so completely to a set of numbers on a bank account?

Things could be different, business could be different than that, but most of the time it isn't. It would be nice if, say, unions partnered with small business groups and tried to actually build an America that let people be human instead of demanding they be rich (and damning them when they can't as lazy and worthless). It'd be nice if everyone that wanted to could work for themselves or be taught how or get the loans. But right now, that isn't happening.

In the meantime, the answer is just that most people don't want that type of life, they don't want to be bosses, they don't want to be managers. But they don't want to be serfs either, they don't want to be cult members. They shouldn't have to be either. And it's the duty of anyone who gives a damn about the world to make that "shouldn't" into a "don't."

Posted by: **Donald Jackson** | *Dec 8, 2007 6:22:30 PM*

"But I think that minorities realize that the upper class is the enemy, not the benefactor."

Yeah, but they keep on voting for the bankrupt Democratic Party, so we're not going to get

anywhere until all the shit gets shoved into the other one, which I don't expect to happen too fast.

Sorry if that wan't nice enough for Donald Jackson and Tapped.

Posted by: **Anonymous** | *Dec 10, 2007 10:26:11 AM*

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