

# Rachel's Environment & Health News

## #461 - A High-wage, Low-waste Future -- Part 4, Sustainable America -- Part 1

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Some people are comparing the present moment to 1954, the last time the Republicans controlled both the House and the Senate. But perhaps a better comparison would be to 1896 when the populist movement was crushed by corporate money and the nation fell under the dominance of robber barons and an emerging corporate elite --a dominance that was wasn't broken until the New Deal nearly 40 years later.

So what should progressives do? Clearly the answer is NOT "more of what we've been doing." We are already killing ourselves working overtime and not getting very far.

We need to do something different --something big that has the potential to get most of us working together, and has the potential to excite and engage large numbers of people who are presently parked on the sidelines. Last week, we described a large "democracy project" aimed at making democracy itself an issue --an issue that all progressives could unite around, and which might motivate some liberals, who now seem paralyzed staring into their mirrors.

A major advantage of a "democracy" campaign is that it could address all the root problems of the present system --dominance of our society by corporations, which answer to no one; the fully-corrupting influence of private money in politics; the inability of ordinary people to have some say about their economic future. These are the fundamental issues of our democracy.

This last issue --giving people some say about the economy --is really THE crucial issue of our time: does the economy control us, or do we control it? Slowly over the last 50 years, we seem to have forgotten the purpose of the economy: to create prosperity with stability. In earlier times, Henry Ford said he wanted to pay his employees wages high enough so they could buy his cars, thus creating conditions that gave birth to the middle class. Today the corporados proudly point to the fact that they have broken the backs of many labor unions, and that wages are low and steadily falling while corporate profits are setting records. This is a trend that will produce neither prosperity nor stability. We seem to have forgotten that the economy is a tool to serve the needs of society, not the other way around.

Is this some utopian socialist dream, that people really want a say in the economy? Far from it. In the U.S. today, limits on the terms and conditions of production and exchange are more popular than ever. This is what underlies the almost universal belief that work should be adjusted to the realities of families (flex hours, family leave, etc.). This is what fuels the belief that employers have obligations to employees and communities beyond pay and taxes (job safety; factories that don't gas the neighborhood, etc.). If you think about it, having more say about production and exchange is what the environmental movement is about (reducing use of toxics, limiting dioxin discharges, etc.). Giving people more say about the economy would have ENORMOUS political appeal.

Although government and the general public are ill-prepared to instruct business on how best to achieve economic goals, the goals themselves CAN be specified by the general public: for example, full employment for the able-bodied; decent housing, education, and health care for all; an economy that is not obscenely unfair nor massively wasteful of natural resources.

What is most basically wrong with current economic policy is its failure to block the low-wage option of industrial restructuring --the option that seeks profit and increased competitiveness via downsizing, temporary workers, reduced benefits (or NO benefits) job insecurity, environmental degradation, and cutbacks in social spending, regulation, and training, combined with lowered taxes for corporations and the rich. This low-wage, high-waste option

--the "low road" --is what we'll get IN SPADES if we don't intervene.

We need campaigns both to foreclose the low-wage option AND to harness the productive energies of workers and communities in a more satisfying restructuring path --a high-wage, low-waste option ("the high road"). We need a way to limit certain options for capital AND to simultaneously indicate an alternative, more democratic restructuring route that is viable under realistic competitive conditions.

One could imagine a series of projects to "have our say about the economy" --making economic goals the subject of big organizing campaigns. To give but one example:

\*\* A livable wage campaign. Everyone who works should make a wage that allows him or her to raise a family. There shouldn't be any such thing as "the working poor." If you are able-bodied, you should have work, and if you have work you should make a livable wage. Is this some nut- ball utopian dream? It is not. It is a basic human right, affirmed by the United States alongside the other nations of the world. In 1948, the U.S. government voted affirmatively to approve the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which was approved by the United Nations General Assembly December 10, 1948). Article 23 of the Universal Declaration says, "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment." The same Article goes on to say, "Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection."

Furthermore, Article 25 of the Universal Declaration says, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well- being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control." A "livable wage campaign" would merely give substance in the U.S. to these basic human rights.

How to start? A livable wage campaign can begin at the local level. For example, in Baltimore, Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), a church-based organization, joined with a labor union --the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) - -and with the Solidarity Sponsoring Committee, an organization of Baltimore's low wage service workers. Together they successfully campaigned for the passage of a municipal Living Wage Bill. This ordinance, which was signed in December, 1994, requires city contractors to pay a living wage rather than the woefully inadequate federal minimum. As a result, employees of city contractors saw their hourly wages go up from \$4.25 to \$6.10 in the summer of 1995, and will see their wages rise incrementally to \$7.70 an hour over a four year period. This reverses Baltimore's old poverty-wage policy, which gave lucrative contracts to employers who paid family wages below the poverty line --contracts which cost the city millions in food stamps and health care.

Or a living wage campaign can take the form of a statewide ballot initiative, as it has in Oregon where the More Livable Wage Coalition is aiming now to raise Oregon's minimum wage to \$6.50 an hour by 1999. (For details, call 503-288-7932 in Portland.)

But a living wage campaign is merely one way to "have our say in the economy." We need to think larger.

Other ideas might include:

\*\* An "our money, our jobs" campaign targeted at "subsidy abuse" by government (the all-too-common use of taxpayer money to subsidize the low-road and make the high-road more difficult);

\*\* A campaign for better rules on the use of monies earmarked for training dislocated workers (e.g., requiring that people actually get trained, not just taught how to type their resumes);

\*\* A gigantic summer youth jobs effort (with a continuation in the fall!).

Less important than deciding on particular campaigns right now, however, is deciding TOGETHER that we will do that TOGETHER from here on out, and saying so. We should announce our collective intention to oppose what we see as this economically stupid and morally empty low-wage option --to make that itself an issue, and make it clear that we intend to move on it in a variety of forms. As a group, we need to say something like, "Diverse as we are, we stand together in declaring that ruinous low-wage restructuring must and can stop, and we hold our elected officials and ourselves account-able to stopping it and starting something better --a high-wage, low-waste, more democratically controlled economy. We oppose anything that furthers current destruction. We support policies aimed at raising social standards --on wages, production conditions, environmental sensitivity --and developing popular capacity to enforce them. We want public policy to support a new social contract, with public supports for firms complying with its terms and punishment of those defecting from it. We seek and accept responsibility and control in the administration of this contract. Its terms are..." and here we fill in the blanks.

Closing off the low-wage option for American firms and restoring some significant measure of popular control over our economic future will be a brutal political fight --fiercely resisted by well-heeled forces that benefit from the current lack of constraint. Who in America is most likely to lead this fight? Will it be the residents of declining rural regions? The rich white suburban enclaves? The low-wage and non-union ex-urban manufacturing zones? Surely, none of the above. The most likely agent will be urban, heavily "of color," and more unionized than the norm. In other words, this will be a metropolitan battle --a fight for the soul of our country, starting in the wreck of our cities and their hard-luck inner-ring suburbs. This is where a Sustainable America [1] can begin to be built.

This will require progressives to get serious about linking their issues (whatever they may be) to economic development, and about establishing a presence inside corporations. Some environmentalists are already doing this --establishing "good neighbor agreements" with polluters, promoting the redevelopment of "brown field" sites in cities, demanding that "covenants" be signed between local governments and corporations that get tax breaks, and so forth.

If we are to achieve prosperity and stability in a sustainable environment, we must do more of this. To create a Sustainable America, [1] we will need to gain some control over corporate behavior and the economy, starting at the local level. It will not be easy, but consider the low-road alternative and you'll most likely agree: plowing this ground is something we must do.

--Peter Montague

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[1] Once again, we have cribbed extensively from Joel Rogers at University of Wisconsin, and his activist colleagues, though neither he nor they are responsible for our corrupted version of their ideas. Rogers and friends have started a large new project called Sustainable America; for details, phone Elaine Gross at (516) 692-2601 or send E-mail to [egross@igc.apc.org](mailto:egross@igc.apc.org).

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