

Preserving the American Dream in the face of change

Editor's note: This essay is part of a series being published to help commemorate the Monthly Labor Review's centennial (July 1915–July 2015). The essays—written by eminent authorities and distinguished experts in a broad range of fields—cover a variety of topics pertinent to the Review and the work of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Each essay is unique and comprises the words and opinion of the author. We've found these essays to be enlightening and inspirational. We hope you do as well.

Maybe it's a cliché to say America is at a crossroads. But it's true. Globalization and technology are reshaping the very nature of work. Demographic changes are remaking the workforce. Union density may be at a low ebb, but unionism is in demand and workers are rising up across the country in collective action—from steel workers, electrical workers, and teachers to Walmart workers, taxi drivers, and fast-food staff.

We have to ask what will guide us through such great changes—because what guides us will determine the outcome. We know we will continue to rely on solid data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics about employment, wages, and working conditions. But the big question is, will we harness the changes brought by globalization and technology to benefit an elite few, or *all* the people of America? In 25 years, the workforce will be younger, more diverse, and better educated than ever. But what will work be like? And will workers gain from their productivity, or will it still be taken by the 1 percent?

I believe that if our *values* lead us through change, we will emerge as a stronger nation with communities capable of sustaining ourselves and meeting our shared priorities instead of lurching from crisis to crisis. Those values include fairness, democracy, equal justice, opportunity for all, and the belief that people who work hard should prosper.

In 2015, too many American families struggle with stagnant wages, precarious work, insecure retirement, crushing college debt, and more. We look at the yawning income gap and we know it is wrong and it is unsustainable. Our shared values tell us so—no matter where we fall on the political spectrum. But this next truth is less clear to



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many: the economy is not like the weather; it doesn't just happen to us and it is not out of our control. Elected leaders make deliberate decisions about what this economy will be like. Elected leaders determine who wins and who loses.

Politics can play a valuable role in American life as a tool for justice and the common good. But so much money is flooding into the political system from the very rich that our democracy is in danger. We risk becoming a nation whose leaders are *selected* rather than *elected*. Meanwhile, the politics of division has spurred suspicion and anger among America's working people. As a result, too often we engage in culture wars instead of uniting to put all our strength into harnessing change to benefit us all.

The most important way we can raise wages is restoring workers' freedom to form unions and bargain collectively.

In other words, we face a classic American dilemma. As Benjamin Franklin put it, we must all hang together or we will surely hang separately. That's the crossroads.

Maybe it's counterintuitive, but I believe that we have the opportunity to reach forward together to a new era of shared prosperity—a new era of labor–management collaboration—creating the virtuous cycle of good wages, and in turn fueling consumer spending and building a healthy economy. U.S. workers can compete with workers anywhere in the world if the playing field is level, and we can level that field.

What that will take is raising wages. And what we have to do to raise wages requires a comprehensive program of action to reestablish work—and workers—as the dominant force in the American economy. First, we must enact laws and policies at every level to improve workers' and families' standard of living. We must stop Wall Street from writing the economic rules and create a full-employment economy that works for Main Street. We must fund and equally share the public costs of our society—from healthcare to infrastructure—and ensure quality education and secure retirement for all. We also must confront our pressing racial and immigration challenges. And we must use our collective voice to establish a standard of accountability that no political leader can evade.

But the most important way we can raise wages—the pivotal choice we can make for a fairer economy now and 25 years from now—is restoring workers' freedom to form unions and bargain collectively for better pay and benefits, safe jobs, and family-friendly workplaces.

It will take a lot of work. But America's people have never shied away from hard work. It's what we do. It's how we invest in the American Dream. And it's how we will make ourselves proud when we look back in time from 2040.

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