

Help Rising Economy Lift

Working Families

By Representative Jan Schakowsky

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This Labor Day weekend, families are taking time out from their backyard barbecues and softball games to talk about serious matters: how to pay for their child's medical bills, whether their job will be outsourced, if they'll be able to pay this winter's heating bill.

Many are asking the question a constituent recently posed to me: "How can they say the economy is so good when so many of us are struggling to pay our bills?"

New census data confirm that while productivity is up, wages are down. Between 2004 and 2005, the average full-time male worker lost \$774 in wages, bringing his earnings down below the 2000 level. Full-time women workers experienced their third year of reduced earnings, down \$427 from 2004 to 2005. In one year, 1.3 million more Americans lost health coverage. A rising tide is clearly not lifting all boats. It is time to change course and head in a new direction.

I believe there are three steps to take to make sure that working families benefit from America's economic recovery.

First, we should reward companies that hire domestically and treat their employees fairly -- not those who outsource jobs and stash profits overseas. I have introduced H.R. 5699, the Patriot

Corporations of America Act, to provide preferential federal contracting and tax treatment to companies that hire American workers and treat them fairly.

Second, we should raise the federal minimum wage, following the lead of Illinois and other states. It is a national disgrace that a full-time minimum-wage worker cannot earn enough to stay above the poverty line or rent a one-bedroom apartment anywhere in the country.

Third, we must guarantee workplace rights by passing the Employee Free Choice Act, and we must prevent the National Labor Relations Board from taking away workers' right to organize and join a union. Why is that important? Because union workers earn more, are more likely to have health insurance and pensions, have better job security and receive more vacation and paid leave.

The NLRB is considering a set of cases, the Kentucky River cases, that could affect 8 million workers: nurses, electricians, cashiers, clerks and others. If it decides to treat them as supervisors -- not because they can hire or fire, promote or discipline other employees but because they provide instructions -- those workers could lose the right to join a union and the improved financial security that comes with that choice.

Consider a loading dock employee who tells her co-worker where to place cartons, or a nurse who tells an orderly how to handle a patient. Depending on how the NLRB acts, those workers could be considered "supervisors" and lose the right to join a union and bargain collectively for better wages and benefits.

Labor Day is about honoring the role of workers. The best way to do that is to ensure that all workers in America share the benefits of an improved economy.