

## Policy Blog

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### A Plan to Put Work – and Workers – First

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*My father used to say "don't tell me what you value, show me your budget and I'll tell you what you value." It's true in a family and it's true for a nation. He used to say something else, too: "If everything is equally important to you, nothing is important to you." It is all about priorities. What matters most. And that should determine what we invest in.*

For me, our highest priority is clear as can be. We have to restore the basic bargain. There used to be a basic bargain in this country that if you contributed to the success of an enterprise you got to share in its profits so you could not only make ends meet but also get ahead.

This basic bargain has been broken. And as a result, too many workers are being left behind. Income disparities are increasing to dangerous proportions that can't sustain a democracy.

That's why last fall, I wrote about and convened a panel of experts to discuss the significant, legitimate anxiety millions of Americans are feeling regarding whether or not automation and globalization will wipe out middle class jobs. Whether hard-working middle-class people will be able to provide for themselves and their families.

I noted that some in Silicon Valley, whose fortunes are built on automation, have proposed a universal basic income on the theory that there will no longer be enough work to go around. But that misses the point. Americans have always defined themselves by what they do and how they provide for their families. What the idea of a universal basic income misses is that a job is about more than a paycheck. It is about dignity and one's place in their community. What Americans want is a good job and a steady paycheck, not a government check or a



consolation prize for missing out on the American dream.

The American people are willing to work and when they work they're entitled to be justly rewarded. That's the American promise. So the question is, how do we restore the basic bargain?

To put workers first, we have three promises to keep. First, we need to make sure hard-working Americans have the skills and opportunities to succeed in the jobs of the future. Second, we need to make sure people are paid fairly for their work. Those who work hard and do their part should share in the benefits, allowing them to earn a good living and get ahead. And third, we need policies that allow the

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middle class to maintain or improve their standard of living. A small pay raise doesn't help much if the costs of housing, health care, and education are rising significantly more.

That's why I put forward some ideas for how all of us – Democrats and Republicans, business and labor, employers and workers – can begin to restore the basic bargain by making good on the first promise of ensuring that hard-working Americans have the skills and opportunities to get a good job.

To start, we need to make sure our students get the education they need to succeed. Everyone knows that in the 21st century, 12 years of education is not enough. In 2014, when President Obama asked me to lead a year-long process on the workforce, we found that by the end of this decade more than six in 10 jobs would require some education beyond high school. Community colleges are a perfect vehicle for that – offering everything from short eight-week certificate programs to apprenticeships to associate's degrees. The wage boost for getting an associate's degree is \$9,000, every single year. A lot of families need this raise.

Every American should have access to at least 14 years of public education. There are great

state models to build on, like the one being set up by Republican Governor of Tennessee Bill Haslam making two years of community college tuition-free, whether individuals are right out of high school or have already been in the workforce. We should also allow students to keep existing financial aid like Pell Grants to help them pay for other expenses that too often make it impossible for them to stay in school.

In addition, in the new economy people need to build their skills so they can keep pace with the technological changes in their industries, whether they are a home health care worker wanting to use the latest tools to keep a patient healthy or an autoworker needing to understand the new technologies that will be building driverless cars. We need more community colleges working with businesses to develop certificate and credential programs that will retrain people, so they can adapt as quickly as technology is changing their job requirements. And finally, we need to shut down training programs that don't offer results for American workers and instead redirect that funding to community colleges with proven track records of success. A program that doesn't work isn't just a waste of taxpayer dollars, it also undermines the

***"I KNOW WHY WE'RE STRONG. I KNOW WHY WE HAVE HELD TOGETHER; I KNOW WHY WE ARE UNITED: IT'S BECAUSE THERE'S ALWAYS BEEN A GROWING MIDDLE CLASS."***

**– JOE BIDEN**



PHOTO: DAVID LIENEMANN

confidence that all taxpayers have in these important efforts and is a waste of the time and energy of those trying to get new skills.

But making continuing education more accessible and affordable is not enough in itself. In some cases, entire industries will be disrupted, and specific communities will be devastated by severe unemployment. Just look at the retail sector. In 2017, there were 7,000 retail store closings – more than three times the number in 2016.

We need to come together to form a jobs SWAT team that is on the ground 24/7 in communities hit hard by dislocations, because a factory closes or an industry is disrupted altogether. There are already good examples of companies, including Dick's Sporting Goods and Chobani, which have invested in areas where there is a shuttered factory but a talented and willing workforce. And, if that still doesn't work, we should fund employment opportunities that give Americans the dignity of work.

Lastly, we need to break down the barriers that keep workers on the sidelines of our economy or keep them from being paid fairly for their work. We have to remove obstacles that deprive workers of their bargaining power. For example, we need to get rid of non-compete agreements that prevent workers from seeking better job opportunities elsewhere. Nearly half of workers will be subject to these agreements at some point – not just engineers with trade secrets, but sandwich makers, pest control workers, and so many more. We need to prevent companies from denying workers overtime by mislabeling them as management. It's wrong. And, we need to support laws that allow labor unions to flourish and fight for basic worker protections.

There are all sorts of reasons people are unable to get hired or retain a job. Everyone should have a chance to get in the game. That means we need to end discriminatory policies such as those that allow an individual to get married to a same-sex spouse in the morning and get fired for it in the afternoon. We need to end policies that exclude from the workplace individuals who have served their time in prison

/And, we need to ban job applications that require a college degree for jobs people could do just as well without one.

I'm still an optimist. I believe America is better positioned than any nation in the world to own the 21st century, in large part because we have the most productive workers. But, we have to make an investment in our workers in order for our economy to continue to grow. And what I know for sure is that it has never been a bad bet to bet on American workers. When given a chance – just a fighting chance – they've never let us down.