

Small Business Owners and Labor in America: The Backbone of the Nation

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Small business owners and working people constitute the core of the American electorate. They share the same origins and have far more in common than the major political parties would have them believe. Their shared political, social and family needs are being ignored by both parties, as they are cynically played one against the other.

A Common Background.

Organizations of craftsmen have an ancient origin and evolved into hundreds of specialized guilds in the Middle Ages. These guilds combined labor and small business. Members worked for themselves and trained their own apprentice helpers.

Along with independent farmers and local merchants, skilled craftsmen were the primary employers until the industrial revolution. Industrialization created the need for masses of unskilled workers *and* the conditions which ultimately compelled their organization.

Success of the earliest industrial strikes depended on local small business owners, who provided the necessary credit and support that allowed workers and their families to survive.

American small businesses and laborers have organized for self protection from the very beginning of the country. The bakery owners of New York City stopped baking in 1741 to protest price fixing by municipal authorities and printers struck in Philadelphia in 1786 for higher wages.

The Progressive Movement in the early 1900s was supported by labor, small businesses, the professional middle class and women activists. They sought to reform every aspect of the political system allowing voters to more directly control their government and to improve the quality of life for their families.

The Division of Labor

A strong labor movement expanded during World War II and the postwar era to reach its peak in 1972, with the organization of almost one third of all public and private workers. These union members were the ground troops of the Democratic Party.

With the comfort and security of higher earnings and benefits, skilled workers moved up to the middle class and many of them and their children started small businesses. At the same time, President Reagan's war on organized labor began to cut the ties that workers had to their unions.

These factors, combined with Republican cooption of “family values” and religious matters as political issues, has resulted in only about 11% of workers, primarily in the public sector, now represented by unions. Almost 50% of all workers are voting for Republican candidates, often against their own interests.

Small Businesses and Their Workers.

Half of all working people in the United States either operate a small business or work in one. Small businesses represent 99.7% of all U.S. private employers and have, since 1989, created 93.5% of all net new jobs in the country. (National Small Business Association)

Almost three quarters of all U.S. business firms have no payroll. In other words, most are operated by self-employed persons, who may or may not have other sources of income. Of the almost six million firms with employees, 78% employ fewer than 10. (U.S. Census Bureau)

Given these realities, there is very little effective contact between small business owners and labor unions; however, there is a very high degree of shared interests between most small business owners and workers in America.

Suffering.

Small business owners and workers share the anxiety of economic uncertainty, including the difficulty or impossibility of obtaining health insurance, saving for retirement and providing education, food and shelter for their families.

Small business employers and their employees travel to work over the same unrepaired roads, and they send their children to the same rundown schools that suffer from a lack of teachers, funding and direction. Their homes have negative value, they live in the same environment, drink the same polluted water and breath the same poisonous air. Their food supply is dangerous, and they all pay more than \$4 a gallon for gasoline.

Failure of Representation.

Whether they vote democratic or republican, the interests, aspirations and needs of workers and small business owners are ignored by their political parties, both of which are indebted to and controlled by large corporations and the wealthy elite.

With its decision in *Citizens United*, the Supreme Court reversed two hundred years of progress toward a democracy for all of the People. The U.S. Government no longer represents the voters who elect it, including the workers and small business owners of every political party.

Two thirds of small business owners revealed in a recent poll that they have been hurt by *Citizens United*, and 88% viewed money as playing a negative role in politics. (Lake Research)

The rallying cry last heard during the American Revolution, “no taxation without representation,” is once again on the lips of American workers and small business owners.

Solution.

The bipartisan outrage over the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United* has led to a number of proposals to reverse it through an amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The best known of these is the effort by Move to Amend, which restricts constitutional rights to natural persons only and which disallows the equation of money and free speech.

The Move to Amend proposal is a good start; however it does not go far enough. In fact, after a long and difficult amendment process, it only returns the electoral process to where it was the day before the court decision, a time when things were not so great for working people and small business owners.

The Voters' Rights Amendment (USVRA) includes the Move to Amend proposal, but goes further to clearly establish that the right to cast an *effective* vote is an inherent right under the Constitution. In addition, it provides for a national paid voting holiday, a national hand-countable paper ballot, and a process for the people to have a more direct role in the formulation of public policy. Finally, it mandates voter registration and prohibits voter suppression.

Transformation.

The USVRA will *transform* the U.S. government into a more representative democracy in which the power of money and corporations will be curtailed – one in which the opportunity for small business owners and their workers to live the American Dream will be encouraged, rather than denied.

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