

Leveling The Bargaining Table

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The overall U.S. economy has been growing since the end of the 2001 recession, yet the median household income in the U.S. has fallen by \$1,300. This should worry anyone who cares about whether our economy is fair to American workers or not.

Many different reasons account for the fact that America's middle class is losing ground despite the country's economic growth. One of the most important is that companies routinely deny workers the ability to form unions and bargain for better wages and benefits. As a result, unions represent just 12 percent of the U.S. workforce today—a much lower percentage than just a couple of generations ago.

If we want workers to get their fair share of the benefits of a growing economy, then we have to ensure that their organizing rights are protected. Under the current system for choosing unions, workers' rights are easily ignored.

Consider the case of Ivo Camilo. For 35 years, Camilo worked at the Blue Diamond Growers plant in Sacramento, the world's largest almond processing plant. But he and his co-workers were worried about job security and felt they had no voice at work. So, in 2004, Camilo joined with some of his co-workers to try to form a union. In 2005, just two weeks after Camilo and 58 of his coworkers informed management of their union efforts, he was fired.

In congressional testimony this week, Camilo described Blue Diamond's campaign against the union. "They had put out more than 30 anti-union flyers. In group captive audience meetings and one-on-one talks, company officials and supervisors threatened that we could lose our pensions and other benefits if the union came in. They threatened that the plant would close."

These kinds of actions on the part of employers are despicable and discouragingly frequent. In our broken union election system, companies harass, intimidate, reassign or fire workers every day for trying to form a union. In 2005, over 30,000 workers in the U.S. received back pay from their employers because they had been illegally fired or discriminated against.

As Camilo put it, "Getting a union shouldn't be so hard." He's right. Headlines constantly blare about the outrageous compensation packages that corporate executives arrange for themselves. Workers should at least have the opportunity to bargain for a better life. That's why this week I, along with over 230 other members of the House, introduced the Employee Free Choice Act.

The legislation is simple. It says that when a majority of workers sign cards authorizing a union, they get a union. It also stiffens penalties against employers who illegally interfere in workers' union decisions—because, let's face it, simply having to pay someone back wages is never going to effectively deter companies from violating workers' rights.

This majority sign-up method is not new. Under current law, employers may voluntarily recognize a union when a majority of workers sign up for one, and some responsible employers—like Cingular—have done just that. But many more deny workers the ability to make that choice for themselves.

Passing the Employee Free Choice Act would finally give workers the ability to join together to bargain for better wages and benefits. And there is no doubt about the difference that having this leverage would make for workers and their families. Union workers earn, on average, 30 percent more than nonunion workers. They are much more likely to have health and retirement benefits. They also tend to have more generous paid time off.

Our economy is more unequal than it has been at any time since before the New Deal. We cannot keep

going in this direction. We need to make sure that people are paid decently for their work and treated fairly in the workplace. The Employee Free Choice Act will go a long way towards strengthening the middle class.