

Labor Day blues

WHAT President Obama tells the nation Thursday night will have a lot to do with whether he is re-elected next year. More immediately, it will greatly affect the hopes of economic recovery in Ohio and the rest of the country.

The President must offer a comprehensive plan for immediate job creation, and must be ready to overcome predictable Republican opposition to his proposals by appealing directly to Americans. That plan should include such measures as extended unemployment benefits and health-insurance subsidies to workers who have been laid off for a long time.

It should extend the payroll tax cut. It should provide federal aid to hard-pressed states and communities to fix schools, roads, and bridges, and address other infrastructure needs. That would employ jobless construction workers.

It should include job training to address the special needs of long-term unemployed workers, as well as young and low-income ones. And it must reject the GOP fantasy that more tax cuts, less regulation, and indiscriminate incentives alone will cause corporations to shed their "uncertainty" and create scads of jobs.

None of this is incompatible with the urgent need to reduce the nation's debt substantially over the next decade, through spending cuts and revenue increases. But helping the economy to recover now will yield tax revenues that would make that task much less painful.

Labor Day 2011 finds Ohio suffering more than most other states from a lack of good jobs. A new report by Policy Matters Ohio shows that median hourly wages declined more in our state than any other between 2000 and 2010.

The percentage of Ohioans who are employed is down for the fourth straight year and at its lowest point since the late 1980s. The share of employed adults of working age is at its lowest level since 1985.

It gets worse: The percentage of Ohio men in the state's labor force is at a modern low, while the percentage of men and women unemployed for 26 or more weeks is at a modern high.

The report says African-American unemployment is "at crisis levels." One of six black Ohioans is jobless for the second consecutive year. Adjusted for inflation, the wages of black Ohioans who are lucky enough to have jobs are \$2.50 an hour less than in 1979.

The study notes that U.S. income grew enough between 1979 and 2008 for each American to have another \$10,401 to live off each year, yet "every penny went to the richest 10 percent." As a result, workers today have less disposable income than those of previous generations. At the same time, reckless cuts by government in public-health and environmental programs have imposed billions of dollars of additional hidden costs on Americans.

As the nation's gross domestic product grows at a lukewarm annual rate of 1.3 percent, and official U.S. unemployment remains stuck at 9.1 percent, there is a clear case for the President to make for prudent short-term spending.

The White House reportedly wants to spend billions of dollars on overdue school repairs, for example. But Republicans have balked at the proposed funding mechanism: eliminating \$50 billion in tax breaks for oil and gas companies.

On this Labor Day, 25 million Americans are jobless, are working part time when they would prefer full-time jobs, or have stopped looking for work out of frustration. Our national holiday to celebrate workers includes a commitment to decent wages and safe working conditions.

For too many Americans, such things have been replaced by a quest for merely staying afloat, and the odds are growing against even that. President Obama must be ready to act boldly, and Americans must be ready to support him.