

Dayton Daily News

Commentary: Labor Day Grinch highlights woes of working men, women

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With President Barack Obama in Milwaukee and Vice President Joe Biden set for a parade in Toledo, politicians of most every stripe will hit the campaign trail on Labor Day, Sept. 6, to exude about the virtues of America's working men and women.

One thing's for sure.

It's unlikely that any of them will use Amy Hanauer for a speechwriter.

Hanauer, 42, just might be the Grinch who stole Labor Day.

Hanauer likes American workers just fine, but she thinks they've been losing ground ever since the 1970s, under the leadership of both Republicans and Democrats in Columbus and Washington.

Her report from Cleveland-based Policy Matters Ohio, released today, Sept. 5, identifies woes that go far beyond the Ohio's 10.3 percent unemployment rate and 16 straight months of double-digit joblessness.

Policy Matters Ohio is independent and leans to the liberal side, but the report talks about what it considers bad policies, not good and bad political leaders.

"In a bipartisan way, we've pursued a set of policies over the last generation that didn't adequately pay attention to how regular people are sharing in the gains of our economy," said Hanauer, Policy Matters' executive director.

The misguided policies, according to the report, include deregulation of big chunks of the economy, excessive borrowing and "an upside-down tax system in which the wealthiest families paid an ever-declining share."

Results in Ohio include long-term unemployment in 2009 "dramatically higher than anything seen in the last 15 years." Among the unemployed, nearly one in three — 29.7 percent — were out of work for 26 weeks or longer, the report says.

Low and median-wage Ohioans now earn less, adjusted for inflation, than they did in 1979 while high earners take home 15 percent more than in 1979, according to the report.

There continues to be growing disparities for black workers, less-educated workers and young workers.

Black workers in 2009, for example, had an unemployment rate of 17 percent, nearly 8 percentage points higher than whites, according to the report.

The report's recommendations won't please everyone, especially those who believe the federal government's already spending too much and is too involved in the economy. They include more federal aid to state and local governments to make sure that public services such as police and fire protection stay intact. Also, federal dollars should be used to hire unemployed workers to insulate buildings, raze abandoned properties and help with child-care and education.

The report also calls for a new "financial speculation tax" on trades that would let Wall Street pay "for the economic downfall they created." The Bush tax cuts should expire and capital gains should be taxed at the same rate as income, the report says.

Even if the solutions don't meet universal approval, the problems certainly deserve everybody's attention, not just on Labor Day but until they are solved.

"It's challenging," said Hanauer. "But we've taken on much bigger challenges than this as a nation."

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