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Opinion

Our View

Overtime rule promises more than it will deliver

The president wants to change the rules on when workers are eligible for overtime pay. And as with attempts to increase the minimum wage, he wrongly assumes that government can increase worker income by fiat where there is no corresponding increase in economic output.

The Fair Labor Standards Act mandates that hourly wage earners be paid time-and-a-half when they work more than 40 hours in a regular work week. The act exempts salaried and some hourly workers — managers, executives, administrative staff and professionals — from receiving overtime if they meet narrowly defined criteria and are paid at least $455 a week. That's $23,660 a year.

The criteria, including the wage levels, are set by Department of Labor regulations. The president wants to increase the minimum salary to $970 per week, or $50,440. The president also proposes mechanisms that would increase that minimum automatically over time.

The administration said as many as 5 million U.S. workers will become eligible for overtime under the rule, and will collectively receive more than $1.2 billion in extra earnings.

"It's one of the single most important steps we can take to help grow middle-class wages," the president said.

A lobster in every pot, and a unicorn in every garage. While it makes a great headline, unless the president is writing checks he can't guarantee anyone a pay raise.

The operative word in all of this is "eligible."

Though many politicians would have us believe otherwise, businesses don't have a magic pot of money that fills up to meet new government mandates. And they don't employ people as part of a social welfare scheme, but to accomplish work that contributes to the profitability of the business.

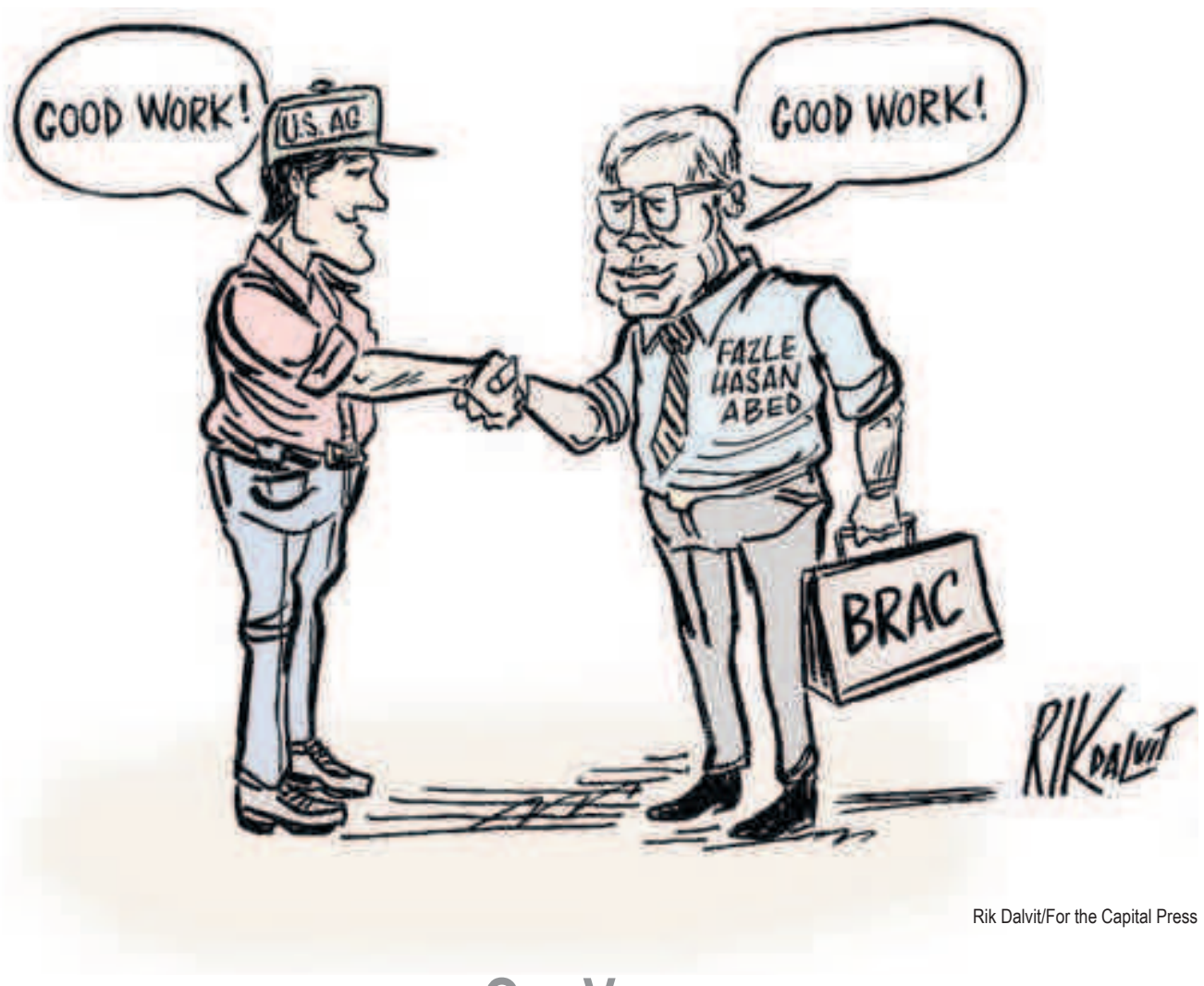
Aren't there some employers who take advantage and classify workers as "exempt" just to cheat them out of overtime? Yes, unfortunately, there are. But most employers are fair, and try to offer pay competitive in the local market commensurate with the duties performed.

This mandate raises no new revenue, delivers no new customers, produces no additional goods or services. So rather than get a pay increase, most workers will probably see their base wage fall so that everything remains equal.

The assistant manager working 50 hours now and making $35,000 as a salaried employee will still work 50 hours and make $35,000 as an hourly employee.

And if it did the math on its own figures, the administration knows this. That $1.2 billion in extra wages averages out to $240 per new eligible worker. Hardly the stuff that middle class dreams are made of.

All Americans could use more money in their paycheck. But most Americans are smart enough to know that won't happen unless there's more money coming into the business. Too bad the president and his advisers haven't figured that out.



Rik Dalvit/For the Capital Press

Our View

Prize is about feeding the world

When we talk about agriculture, it's easy to become distracted by catch phrases and buzzwords. Conventional, organic, biodynamic, sustainable, gluten-free, natural, processed, GMO-free, locavore, food sheds and even salmon safe are among the many terms that have entered our vocabulary over the years.

But no matter how you describe it, agriculture is primarily about feeding people.

And we need to do a better job.

Around the globe, 805 million people are hungry every day, according to the United Nations World Food Program. An estimated 3.1 million children die of hunger-related illnesses each year.

The good news is that those startling figures have been shrinking in recent years, as many private and government organizations and agencies have stepped in to help feed the most needy of the world's 7 billion people.

One organization that has proved to be extraordinarily effective in the battle against hunger is the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee — best known by the acronym BRAC. In 1972, Fasle Hasan Abed was an accountant for an oil company when his country was devastated by a cyclone that killed 500,000 people. He founded BRAC as a way to bring relief to his fellow countrymen, who were also emerging from a years-long war.

Since that time, BRAC has become the largest nonprofit organization in the world and has helped an estimated 150 million people in 11 countries escape from hunger and poverty.

BRAC is unique in every sense of the word. Among its primary goals is helping women learn to grow enough food for their families, and to sell the excess. This simple model has helped millions of women farm their way out of poverty.

BRAC is also different from other organizations in how it receives much of its money. BRAC and its 110,000 employees operate an array of businesses that provide most of the funds for its humanitarian efforts.

Abed's efforts have attracted the attention of many individuals and organizations. In 2010, Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain knighted him. This year, the World Food Prize has chosen to honor him.

"What distinguishes him is the incredibly difficult environment in which he has built now the largest, and some would say, the most effective and far-reaching nonprofit organization in the world," Kenneth Quinn, president of the World Food Prize, said last week.

Norman Borlaug started the World Food Prize in 1986. He won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in what came to be known as the Green Revolution, in which scientists bred high-yielding crops that have helped feed the growing world population. Each year the $250,000 prize goes to researchers or nonprofit organizations that work toward feeding the world.

We often hear the forecast that the world population will grow from the current 7 billion to 9 billion by the year 2050. This raises the question: Beyond that year, what will the population be? 12 billion? 15 billion? 20 billion?

And more importantly, how will they eat?

These are serious questions. Civilization depends on their answers.

Those answers will come through the efforts of agricultural researchers around the globe and organizations such as BRAC. They offer hope that many of the world's hungry will find relief, and a full belly.

That is the ultimate food prize.

Farming the National Mall: Smithsonian showcases agricultural innovation

By KARI BARBIC
For the Capital Press

Guest comment
Kari Barbic

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History is introducing visitors to the ingenuity of America's farmers and ranchers through new interactive exhibits and programming that showcase innovation in agriculture.

On July 1, the museum welcomed the public to the American Enterprise exhibit at the ground level of its new Innovation Wing in the Mars Hall of American Business.

Visitors get to see firsthand how innovation has driven American business as they walk through the four eras of enterprise: the Merchant Era (1770s–1850s), the Corporate Era (1860s–1930s), the Consumer Era (1940s–1970s) and the Global Era (1980s–2010s).

The exhibit shows the breadth of the American business story, and agriculture takes a leading role as one of the "five pillars" of enterprise, alongside consumer finance, information technology/communication, manufacturing and retail service.

At the center of the new exhibit, a 1918 Fordson tractor — the exhibit's largest artifact — shows the shift to modern farming practices and production that cleared the path for American agriculture to become a leader in the global marketplace. From Eli Whitney's cotton gin to a prototype of an experimental gene gun, the agricultural items on display demonstrate how farmers have long been in the business of making their practices more environmentally friendly and efficient.

But the Smithsonian's new exhibit does more than show museum-goers evidence of the strides farmers and ranchers have made. It gives them a chance to take on real business decisions in the new Wallace H. Coulter Exchange. At the Farming Challenge, visitors of all ages can take the wheel in an interactive tractor cab where they quickly learn that, much like corporate CEOs, farmers face tough decisions each day that can make or break their businesses. From choosing how to irrigate their crops to investing in new equipment, visitors will see the consequences of their choices and learn if they have what it takes to farm in today's economy.

The Smithsonian is also putting faces to the American Enterprise story through a special biography wall that includes interactive kiosks to highlight stories of business leaders and visionaries — from agricultural innovators like Norman Borlaug and Barbara McClintock to well-known food industry names like Henry Heinz to family farming businesses like Hartman Farms of Parma, Idaho.

These stories whet the appetite for visitors looking to learn even more about how business and modern agriculture have evolved. The museum continues to build its online archive as well, and will preserve and share the story of farming and ranching across the U.S. through its Agricultural Innovation and Heritage Archive.

Finally, the museum's new first floor will also play center stage for the Smithsonian's Food History Project. Cooking demonstrations, talks and tastings will take place at the Wallace H. Coulter Performance Plaza to highlight innovation on the plate. American farmers and ranchers will have a special opportunity to join in the conversation each month at the museum's "Ask a Farmer" program. Every third Wednesday of the month, beginning this month, farmers will share their stories, the challenges they face and the role innovation plays on their farms.

The new American Enterprise exhibit has not only chronicled the story of innovation in agriculture, it's bridging the gap for consumers far removed from the farm. Smithsonian is opening the door for farmers and ranchers to keep telling their stories for generations to come.

Kari Barbic is a media specialist for the American Farm Bureau Federation.

Readers' views

Youth must be taught where food comes from

As a farmer's daughter and former member of FFA and 4-H, I know first-hand how amazing it is to be involved in the agriculture industry.

While I have grown up knowing mostly farm kids, I am still surprised at how little those around me know about the products they are consuming. They act bewildered when I say I know the names of the steaks I eat for dinner or that I prefer my milk straight from the cow. They take advantage of the leisure that comes with buying groceries today, not thinking twice about where their food has come from or how it was raised.

The route our society is taking is a dangerous one. Instead of being grateful for the man on the tractor, they can only think about how inconvenient it is to be stuck behind his load. They don't realize what would happen if that tractor wasn't there.

Farms are such a large part of our community. They provide jobs, are an essential part of the economy, and most importantly they feed us. As an industry, we can do more to promote ourselves. Children grow up thinking their milk comes from the refrigerator and their vegetables come from a stand in the grocery store. It is our responsibility to educate these young people on the importance of agriculture and how it affects every human being on this earth in a multitude of ways, including themselves.

If we do our job right, we might just end up with lifelong support by those that truly believe in our cause.

Tilly Zylstra
Snohomish, Wash.