

The United States and WTO — the ‘American Nightmare’

By **BRUCE DENNIS**

When this country was founded, it was based on democracy, freedom, and an opportunity to live what eventually became known as “the American Dream.” The direction that our elected leaders have taken us in the last few decades goes away from democracy in favor of corporate domination with the ultimate goal of profit maximization at any cost.

The gap between the rich and the middle class is widening and eventually will lead to just two classes — the rich and the poor.

If we don’t do something soon, the American Dream could become the “American Nightmare.”

A majority of our politicians have told us for years that unfettered, unregulated free trade with all countries in the world is good for us and we should embrace it.

Let me tell you, the only thing free trade is good for is corporations. After all, they can get goods made far cheaper and, in turn, increase their profits immensely.

But what about the working families in this country? What about workers elsewhere? Are they just another commodity that can be bought and sold to

the highest bidder? Some people think so. Sounds a little like slavery, doesn’t it?

It appears that in order to survive, workers in the United States must learn to accept less and less.

After all, the United States is affiliated with the World Trade Organization, and the WTO is giving us direction on how to operate.

We might as well start by renaming our country the “United Corporations of America.” Within the “United Corporations of America” we could eliminate the right of citizens to vote for their senators and representatives; just take the top 100 corporations and give them each a senatorial seat. At least then, for example, the senator from Intel would actually have to make a good, common-sense argument to convince say, the senator from Nike, about the benefits of a proposed bill.

Within this two-class society, only the rich would need education. They can pay for it themselves. Public education could be eliminated in favor of reinstating child labor. After all, we need to remain competitive with the Third World.

We should also prepare to reenact some sort of federal system of slavery

in order to remain competitive with Third World dictatorial countries that, in essence, have not outlawed slavery.

The Department of Environmental Quality might as well be eliminated. How can we expect U.S. corporations to compete with foreign corporations with our burdensome environmental laws? Environmental regulations just cut into profits.

U.S. social service will need to be downsized severely, possibly eliminated. Workers in Third World countries have low or no medical or retirement benefits — certainly not state-sponsored welfare. In Third World countries, if you get sick and have no money to get medical help, tough it out — or die. And retirement? In those countries you work as long as you are able and then move in with your children.

I hope I am wrong about the “nightmare,” and we are able to resurrect the “American Dream,” but I am disgusted when I read that trade ministers from the WTO are telling our government what it can and cannot do. It’s like our corporate senators and representatives have ceded the power to govern our country to others. We aren’t even a sovereign nation anymore.

Corporations have way too much influence in our political system. Corporate interests contribute to too many political campaigns, and when a vote in Congress is taken it is not based on what is good for average taxpaying citizens, but rather on what is best for corporate interests.

Meaningful campaign finance reform is needed to get our country headed back in the right direction.

I believe we should limit the length of political campaigns, equalize financial resources and devise a non-partisan primary and general election system that insures a democratic majority for those who are victorious. We may also want to limit the amount spent on campaigns, restrict party financing, and ban negative campaigning and eliminate paid lobbyists. If we don’t enact meaningful campaign finance reform, I do not see how conditions will improve for the middle class. We will continue the race to the bottom and eventually become a Third World country that will require a massive upheaval or a revolution to avoid the “American Nightmare.”

When I was growing up, every time I questioned my parents about a decision involving education or career

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choices, they would indicate that they just wanted me to “have it better than they did.” Unfortunately, we are heading in a direction where I might have to tell my children or grandchildren, “I just hope the wheels don’t come off this wagon too soon.”

That’s not the kind of legacy that I am interested in handing to my descendants.

As we approach the 10-year anniversary of “The Battle in Seattle,” where 50,000 protesters, including myself and a delegation from my local union, rallied against profiteering WTO policies, we need to stay focused on what is best for our nation — a healthy, working, vibrant and hopeful middle class.

People worldwide will rally against the WTO. Be part of the solution and participate.

(Editor’s Note: Bruce Dennis is a 35-year member of Portland Carpenters Local 247 and past president of the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters.)

Health insurance reform: Same song, different verse

By **JERRY MORRIS**

Recently, the Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans sponsored a meeting entitled “What’s Happening in Health Care Reform,” featuring speakers from Oregon Center for Public Policy and Oregon Health Action Campaign.

I’d like to briefly address the same topic, but purely from the standpoint of politics. Let me suggest at the outset that, politically speaking, most working people do not usually act in their own best economic interests. For example, if most workers voted according to their economic situation, they would not be saddled with political leaders who principally serve interests of the corporate and financial elite. And, retirees would not be faced with “donut holes” in Medicare, attempts to privatize Social Security, or other political shenanigans that threaten their retirement security.

Let me further suggest that the principal means by which working people are diverted from their own interests is an old and often-repeated political game. In brief, those who politically serve wealthy and corporate interests know they must “divide and conquer” — they must raise issues which fragment and divert working people from pursuing their common economic interests. This is done by injecting issues that divide workers according to “life style,” or cultural dif-

ferences. Thus, workers who occupy a similar economic situation, or “class,” and therefore have similar economic interests, may be politically fragmented by cultural issues which emphasize differences in beliefs or customs.

These “wedge” issues play off cultural differences based in ethnicity-race, religion, regionalism-nationalism, gender, sexual orientation, age-generation, recreational/leisure group, and other status groups.

During the formative period of national unions in the United States, the late 1800s and early 1900s, employers often responded to organizing campaigns or strikes by importing strike-breakers who were African-American, Italian-American, Irish-American, or any of many other groups. Thus, differences in race/ethnicity, national origin, language, religion, and so forth, were used to disrupt unionization and to set worker against worker.

In fact, Henry Ford used this tactic in an effort to hold back unionism in his auto assembly plants. From a union standpoint, the problem was perhaps less severe during the organization of the skilled crafts. This may have been due, in part, to the fact that members of a local craft union were often from the same ethnic group. However, it was a big problem in the organization of mass industries. And, during the early days of unionization, it was a problem in any semi-skilled or unskilled workplace

where immigrants or other outsiders could easily replace an existing workforce.

Particularly since the mid-20th Century, many conservative politicians campaigned for election — or reelection — by using racial/ethnic (“Willie Horton”), religious (school prayer, school vouchers, anti-abortion), regionalism/nationalism (anti-Eastern Elite, anti-immigrant), gender (Hillary was “too shrill”), sexual orientation (anti-gay marriage, anti-gay adoption), age/generation (Social Security costs will burden the younger generation), recreational/leisure group (gun ownership/use), and other cultural issues to divert and divide those whose economic interests they did not represent.

They did this while serving the economic interests of the corporate and financial elite. Is this not the basis of the famous “Southern Strategy” adopted and used successfully by Richard Nixon and numerous other politicians? They played on the fears and the sense of loss of white workingmen by means of various subtle, and not so subtle, race-based political messages.

Through the use of symbols, innuendo, and sly phrases, they sent a message that they would defend white working people from the encroachments of African-Americans and other “undesirables” who are “not like us.” Of course, they did not promise to defend them from the ravages of the ra-

pacious corporate elite.

It should come as no surprise that now, in the early 21st Century, conservative opponents of health care reform are using the same playbook. They are attempting to divide and divert working people from their shared interests in federal legislation to establish a system of universal health care that puts individual health ahead of corporate profits. Thus, we hear a number of ominous warnings — exploiting the cultural differences that cut across and divide workers’ shared economic interests.

“Illegal immigrants will be flooding the country to seek health care.” “Our tax dollars will go to finance abortions.” “Death panels will be talking with grandma about how and when to die.” “Amoral individuals will be getting sex-change operations on the taxpayer dollar.” “‘Obamacare’ will bring in Nazi, communist, socialist — i.e. foreign, not like us — ways of doing things.” “National health care will encourage (poor, minority) people to be morally irresponsible, and (unlike us) not take care of themselves.” “Our country is being taken away from us (by those who are not like us.)”

Actually, what’s really happening in health care reform is the same old opponents of worker prosperity are using the same old strategy in an attempt to divide and conquer, to divert working people from their common interests,

and to allow huge corporations and financial interests to continue making enormous profits from health care. They do this because they can’t win on the basis of economic merits.

For workers and retirees, the challenge is to stay focused and not be distracted from meaningful reform by this diversionary strategy.

(Jerry Morris is president of the Oregon Alliance for Retired Americans. Before retiring he was national legislative director for the American Federation of Teachers in Washington, D.C.)

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