

# **The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r**

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## **Assault on Workers Would Begin On Day One of a Romney Presidency Solidarity America By John Funicello BC Columnist**

Some have said that Mitt Romney hates unions. More to the point, however, is that he appears to dislike workers more than their unions. Now, hate is a pretty strong word, but if you listen to him on the stump, especially when he is speaking to people of his own kind, the contempt comes pouring out.

He and others on the right (even if he is only pretending to be a real right winger) speak about how bad unions have been. During this election season, he has spoken repeatedly about how unions have to be reined in. In this assertion, he is taking up the cry of some of the more unintelligent yakkers on radio, television, and in political circles.

As has been mentioned here before, all of the union bashers do not speak against the heart of unions, the workers. Almost to a person, they speak of "union bosses" and how liberal politicians "take their marching orders" from the union bosses. It's what the GOP presidential candidate has said during this campaign. This is always said with feigned innocence, as if workers and their unions were somehow separate from one another.

Although he probably didn't mean it that way, Romney told an audience of contractors earlier this year that his goal is to out-Reagan Ronald Reagan, who famously fired 11,500 air traffic controllers and denied them any future federal work, thus keeping them from earning full pensions and other benefits that would flow from their union contract.

He told a convention of the Associated Builders and Contractors, a rabidly anti-union group, what he would do on his first day in office, and the list was long, starting with his pledge to fight for right-to-work laws, which workers derisively term "right-to-work-for-less laws." These laws, adopted by states principally to circumvent the intent of the National Labor Relations Law (NLRA), prohibit the requiring of union membership in a workplace, while guaranteeing that the non-member receives the same pay and benefits as the dues-paying member. Remember, those who push these laws are usually Republicans, who are always crying about the people who "don't work, but receive benefits from the taxpayers" in the form of government programs.

These laws have been adopted by several states as a way of weakening unions and the union movement and the workers in those states, on average, are paid at a lower level than the states which have full organizing rights under the federal labor law. The higher standard of living for union workers comes from exercise of the country's democratic principles, which include collective bargaining for wages, benefits, pensions, and working conditions, among other subjects of bargaining.

The National Right to Work Committee is an "Astroturf" organization, in that it may have a few workers as "members," but the prime membership is among the wealthy and corporations, whose sham concern for workers is a cover for the committee's work to weaken or destroy unions, to the extent they can in any given case. And for litigation, the right-to-work-for-less group has a legal foundation, which seeks out disgruntled union members or non-union workers, "on whose behalf" they bring lawsuits against unions.

One of the effects of the endless array of such lawsuits over many years is that unions, unlike corporations, have to answer to a government agency about their finances and expenditures to such an extent that, if such reporting increases, the accounting department will be as big, or bigger, than the organizing department. Already, there are laws and rules to which unions must adhere in reporting to the government. So, the additional requirements for reporting are ways of weakening unions, which, in turn, weakens the rights of workers to stand up for themselves and ensure that they can live at a decent standard.

Both Romney and his vice presidential running mate, Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., have expressed what can only be seen as contempt for working people. Romney has his comment at a GOP fund-raiser early this year in Florida, where he said that 47 percent of the electorate never would vote for him, so he has written them off. He said that they were dependent on government, that they feel themselves to be victims, and that they look to the government to take care of their problems. Ryan said during this campaign that Obama is "trying to create a permanent class of government dependents," adding that 70 percent of Americans get more from the federal government than they pay in taxes.

Between just these two charges against the American people, they have covered most of the electorate as something less than wholesome. Who do they expect will vote for them? Obviously, they are looking at the polls, most of which put them within 4-5 percent of each other, with Obama leading at last count. But aren't the majority of those who support Romney-Ryan in that mythical (Romney did disavow his number) 47 percent? And, most of their supporters are surely in the 70 percent that Ryan says gets more from the federal government than they contribute. Why, their supporters are, en masse, a bunch of slackers.

If Romney-Ryan supporters are, indeed, among the 47 percent and the 70 percent, those voters are going to pull the lever for a pair who think little of them and who have promised to reduce or eliminate many of the programs that benefit them. This is what they have promised and they seem intent on carrying out those promises, if they win in November.

Melissa Harris-Perry, who has a commentary show on MSNBC, had some numbers that should be of great interest to working Americans... actually for all American. Last February, she noted that, in 2011, 11.8 percent of workers in the U.S. were in unions, compared with 20.1 percent in 1983. During the 24-year period between those two years the rate of income inequality was 40 percent. Now, the disparity in wealth is the greatest seen in the U.S. since the Great Depression. The disparity in wealth had been growing for many years, but it accelerated after Reagan was elected and hasn't stopped since.

Another significant number pointed out by Harris-Perry, citing statistics from the Center for Economic and Policy Research, is that union members make 15 percent more than non-union workers and that translates into more money in local communities, more thriving

businesses and professionals, and more security for workers and their families. That's real recovery, and the money stays there and doesn't find its way into the Cayman Islands or some other tax-free wealth dump.

And, perhaps this is the clincher, from the Center for American Progress. The higher union membership goes, the higher all wages and benefits go. For example, if union membership rises 1 percent (from the 11.8 percent in 2011), every middle class (working class) family sees its income go up \$153. If union membership were to go up 15 percent, every middle class (working class) family's income rises \$1,532 per year. Every worker's income and standard of living increases, as union wages and benefits increase.

That's why unions and the labor movement are anathema to people like Mitt Romney. Unions level the playing field somewhat, and the 1 percent will not tolerate that. In fact, Romney equates the absence of unions with freedom. The freedom he envisions, however, is for the rich and Corporate America. The environmental movement is right up there with unions in posing a threat to the few, because they tend to slow down the free hand to exploit the environment that corporations seek.

For Romney and Ryan, the worst thing that could happen would be for the American people to understand what is at stake in the election, for a large percentage of their base is among the people they see as parasites on the body politic. One wonders who it is they think would be left to vote for them if the people knew their opinion of them and their intentions for the working class and the middle class.

"Mitt Romney's comments are shamefully disrespectful to all of America's veterans and military families," said James Gilbert, director of the AFL-CIO's Union Veterans Council and a veteran of war in the Middle East, about the GOP candidate's 47 percent assertion. Veterans, it could be assumed, fall into the 47 percent and, likely as well, in Ryan's 70 percent who take more from the federal government than they contribute.

"Romney's ignorant criticism of government 'entitlements' show total disregard for the families of the more than 6,500 American service members killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. As someone with a family member killed who leaves behind a wife and young child that receive survivorship benefits, this is personal for me as it is for many other veterans and military families," Gilbert said in the Sept. 18 statement.

Most politicians live in a different world than the vast majority of Americans. After all, they have the power of incumbency and the money that it can bring, both during and after their tenure in government, but Romney and Ryan are even several steps further away from the lives of most Americans. Their cuts to social programs have been proposed without so much as a glance toward the people who depend on those programs, especially the veterans. Virtually all politicians pay honor and respect and praise for the "brave young men and women in uniform."

Gilbert has another take on that: "...these disgraceful comments show his lack of concern for the nearly 50,000 Wounded Warriors who receive vocational and occupational therapy, the 8.3 million veterans in the U.S. that receive care at one of 152 VA (Veterans Administration) Medical Centers or nearly 1,400 community-based outpatient clinics around the country. The \$11 billion cut to the VA in year one of the Romney-Ryan budget [is] enough to know just who he means when he says, 'My job is not to worry about those people.'"

"Those people" are an ever-increasing percentage of the voting population, but the two-party system of elections guarantees people like Romney and Ryan that elections will be close and, therefore, sell papers or television time. Our system of electing politicians to office puts billions of dollars into play. Unfortunately, those billions, gravitating to television networks and stations which are owned by giant corporations, rarely find their way to help workers and veterans and their communities prosper. Rather, they are likely to find their way into a tax-free investment account in the Cayman Islands.

And, "those people" include teachers and their unions, unions in general, and now, even veterans are coming into the line of fire, this time from those who are in a position to provide for their needs after they have been wounded by their wars.

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