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LABOR DAY: Together We Are Better

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BY RICK BLOOMINGDALE, **President, Pennsylvania AFL-CIO**/ Labor Day is the one holiday on the calendar devoted to honoring and recognizing America's workers and their families and the value we bring to the prosperity and strength of our nation. That's pretty much all of us, whether we're employed or looking for work.

And no matter what we do, our work makes the work of others possible. Teachers depend on electricians, who count on steelworkers, who need nurses and engineers, who rely on researchers and bus drivers and flight attendants, who depend upon taxi drivers and child care workers, who need auto workers and traffic cops and firefighters, and so on it goes. Work connects us all. And together, we are better.

Here's what else connects us: Our vision of an America that values and respects work and the people who do it. Not some of us, all of us.

Today we are further from this vision than we have been in many generations. It's due in large part to the fact that our policy-makers are allowing corporations and the wealthiest individuals of our nation to capture just about all of the wealth our economy has generated over the past 30 years at the expense of the middle class. The premise is that if you give more power and wealth to corporations and the wealthiest individuals, they will create good jobs and prosperity for all.

It hasn't worked. All that we have received in return for these policies is low wage, no benefit jobs; greater income inequality between the wealthiest individuals and the rest of us; and a shrinking middle class.

Our own nation's history shows the road to economic prosperity and strength is through the streets and towns of Main Street communities across America. Generations ago we decided as a nation that we would build a middle-class economy that promotes prosperity for all, not just a few. Working men and women who lived through the Great Depression and WWII decided that it was better to band together and organize than to trust the bosses to pay them fairly.

Capitalism generally seeks the lowest wage so it can generate more wealth for the owner and the shareholders; as a result, workers organized in unprecedented numbers. At one point, one out of every three workers was union. Those workers, through their unions, fought for and got a bigger piece of the economic pie. By the way, the shareholders benefited too, by getting increased productivity from their workers as well increasing consumer demand for their products.

While union density never reached above 37% of the workforce, their presence alone was enough to lift the wages and living standards for all workers. Our economy is based upon consumer demand; the ability of working families to be able to afford to buy the products and services in the market place.

Working-family incomes have been flat for more than a decade. This is the primary reason it is taking longer for us to recover from our current recession as it did the previous recession. Even Henry Ford, who by no means was a big fan of labor unions, understood if he didn't pay his workers a decent wage they would not be able to buy his automobiles. He raised the wages of workers so they could afford to buy the trucks and cars they produced, otherwise there wouldn't have been a Ford Motor Co.

Many of our CEOs and their political allies today could learn this important lesson in kitchen-table economics. The solution to our economic woes and shrinking middle class is not more tax breaks and more wealth for the corporations and the wealthy individuals of this nation. We travelled down this road for the past 30 years and all we have received is lower wages, greater income inequality between the wealthiest and the rest of us, and a shrinking middle class.

The solutions are real job-creation policies that rebuild our aging infrastructure now, investments in public education that gives every child the opportunity to succeed, health security, and retirement security for all Americans.

And just as important is giving back to workers what they need the most to improve their own wages, benefits and standard of living – the freedom to organize unions without being harassed or fired by their employer. This is the path to economic prosperity for all, recapturing the strength of our nation, recognizing the value of work, and the American worker as the backbone of our nation.

(The Pennsylvania AFL-CIO represents over 800,000 union workers, who are members of unions affiliated with the Pennsylvania AFL-CIO.)