

President must eliminate wage inequality

Written by William E. Spriggs
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Last week, President Barack Obama delivered an address, starting a dialogue on how the long path to America's current level of inequality has led us to the wrong place.

The president said that Americans' frustration with Washington is "rooted in the nagging sense that no matter how hard they work, the deck is stacked against them." His timing coincided with the nationwide spread of strikes by fast-food workers, showing they cannot wait for Washington to act on raising minimum wages.

Unfortunately, the day also saw the loss of Nelson Mandela, a world-class standard bearer for justice. The passing of Mandela is a time to reflect on how the world can change if people just stand up, eventually justice wins out.

The president can do two things to add real meaning to his speech on inequality. First, he should sit down and meet with the workers who protested on Black Friday and with the fast-food strikers. His meetings with corporate heads to talk about creating jobs have yielded little. He should show America that now he is listening to those who labor to build this country. Their daily struggle to make ends meet will give a better understanding of what is wrong with our economy.

America cannot stand tall if multibillion-dollar multinational giants like McDonald's, the world's second-largest employer behind Walmart, gives its workers few hours and low pay. The workers at the two largest employers should be the customers that drive an economic engine.

Instead, McDonald's share of the billions spent by the federal government on Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, Medicaid and housing assistance to support the lives of fast-food workers is a little higher than \$1 billion. Generally billion-dollar subsidies are used to produce more of something we need-like education-not more of something we don't need, like heart stopping, bottom spreading fattening foods.

Everyone wants to ask if a McDonald's worker got \$15 an hour, what would that do to the price of a hamburger? Instead, what people need to be asking is how much in SNAP, Medicaid and housing assistance does a hamburger cost? Tragically, people in America are far more sensitized that if McDonald's polluted rivers from chicken farm runoff to make McNuggets to ask how much it costs to clean up McDonald's environmental mess than they are to the human sacrifice we demand to eat cheap hamburgers.

Our national inability to relate demands for cheap food, or cheap Chinese electronics with the human sacrifice of America's workers needing SNAP benefits to eat is at the heart of how our policies have drifted to create increasing inequality rather than rising lifestyles. At Walmart, the majority of associates don't even make a living wage of \$25,000 a year.

But, the tide is turning. Black Friday sales were down this year; in large part because corporate America overplayed its hand at cheapening the Thanksgiving Holiday. Similarly, the fast-food strikes this week are just the beginning of a march to economic justice.

America has lost touch with the value of work. If the minimum wage of 1968 had kept pace with American workers' productivity, then today it would be more than \$21; had it kept up with only

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half the growth in productivity it would be more than \$15. The productivity of America's workers continues to climb, while the wages of our workers sag—all workers, even those with four-year degrees and those who went to high school.

And that gap between what America's workers make and what they take home is the fuel of the rising inequality, because it tracks the rise in pay of the top 1 percent. We cannot close that gap through more education or training. The striking fast-food workers and the Walmart workers know that gap will be closed when workers stand up to fight for their share.

The second thing the president can do is produce a budget that talks about more than the fiscal deficit. He should score his budget to see how it reduces inequality. He should score his budget to see how it reduces child poverty.

In January at the State of the Union, he should point to a fast-food striker up in the gallery and tell how the budget being submitted will close the gap between America's promise and the reality of years of policies that work against fulfilling that promise. That is the deficit we want closed.



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