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## Woe Is the American Worker

By Paul Waldman  
The American Prospect

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***Workers are paying the price for our productivity-focused, growth-at-any-cost business world. Why aren't the candidates talking about it?***

These are not good times for American workers. Real wages are lower today than they were before the recession of 2001, and barely higher than they were thirty-five years ago. Health insurance is more expensive and harder to obtain than ever before. Manufacturing jobs continue to move overseas. The unions whose efforts might arrest these trends continue to struggle under a sustained assault that began when Ronald Reagan fired striking air-traffic controllers in 1981, in effect declaring war on the labor movement.

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This is a story with which you are probably familiar. But these are in no small part symptoms of a larger transformation of the relationship between employers and employees, in which Americans increasingly sign away their humanity when they sign an employment contract.

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Let's take just one component of today's work environment that most people have simply come to accept: drug testing. [An article](#) published last year on Time magazine's web site titled, "Whatever Happened to Drug Testing?" reported that in the last decade, the proportion of employers testing their employees for drug use has declined to 62 percent, after having exploded to over 80 percent in the 1990s.

That's right - "only" 62 percent of employers make their employees pee into a cup (or fork over a lock of hair, the current state of the art). The recent decline notwithstanding, the fact remains that most Americans work at places where drug testing is standard practice.

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But the classic justifications for drug testing - that it will reduce accidents, absenteeism, and overall productivity - turn out to have very little support. When [this study](#) was released 10 years ago, it got a certain amount of attention for what the authors referred to as a "surprising" finding. In their survey of high-tech firms, they found that those that performed drug testing on their employees had lower productivity than those that didn't test. Forget all the rhetoric about pot-addled employees missing work and stumbling their way around the office.

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But I'd bet that most people who work weren't too surprised. Think about the jobs you've had. Where were you the most productive? Was it when you worked for a boss and an organization that treated you with respect, that valued your contributions, where you actually felt that you were part of something useful? Or were you more productive when you worked for a boss and an organization that governed by fear, that treated you with suspicion and contempt? Most adults have worked for the latter kind, while only some have had the good fortune to work for the former. And many if not most of them do just enough work to stay out of trouble and avoid the wrath of their superiors. That's the spirit fostered in a workplace where employees are treated like criminals.

There is an ideology inherent in the way employers treat their workers, one reflected in the relative amounts of attention paid by the news media to labor issues and the ups and downs of the stock

market. Wall Street, of course, makes heroes out of executives who cut benefits and sack workers, like the monstrous "Neutron Jack" Welch, formerly of General Electric. A corporate barbarian of the first order, Welch pocketed hundreds of millions of dollars while firing more than 100,000 employees, then went on to write a series of best-selling books gobbled up by junior executives looking for the secret battle plan to slash their way to the top. He's just one among many; another such executive, who [laid off 9,000 people](#) when he was CEO of Halliburton, later became vice president of the United States.

If you are one of those left behind, you get called an "associate" instead of a clerk. In the place of paid vacation, you get company-sponsored activities whose absurdity can only make you more depressed. In the place of a union to represent you, you get assurances that the company considers you part of the "family." Your samples will be analyzed, your movements surveilled, your email read, all in the name of enhancing productivity and rooting out the bad apples. And should they decide your time is done, they will send a security guard to march you out the door in a ritual of public humiliation, lest you decide to pilfer a stapler as a memento of your service.

There is no labor section of the newspaper to tell the stories of the families devastated by layoffs and the workers ground down by the daily parade of indignities. But in the morally inverted world of Wall Street, what's bad for workers is good for stocks, and the cable news "money honeys" will bare their gleaming teeth as they report the inevitable upward swing in share prices that accompanies a mass firing or benefit cut.

It would be positively revelatory to hear a presidential candidate truly speak to the conditions Americans find themselves in at work, to say firmly that companies that treat their employees like dirt are undermining our national spirit. They are the ones who have the ability to change out national conversation on topics like these. What if, instead of simply talking about "creating jobs," expanding health care, or increasing the minimum wage - important goals all - they actually attempted to speak to how people feel about their jobs? When candidates say the American dream is getting harder to attain, one often wonders if they understand all the reasons why that is so.

The Republicans certainly know the kind of workplace they admire. It's one in which power - not values, principles, or fairness, but raw power - determines how people are treated. They find deeply troubling anything that constrains employers from exploiting their workers to whatever degree they see fit. They despise unions precisely because they alter that balance of power in the worker's favor, providing some check on the ability of organizations to intimidate and humiliate, underpay and overwork. But so far, Democrats haven't articulated their vision of what a progressive workplace in the twenty-first century is supposed to look like - and what they're willing to do to create it. I'd be eager to hear.

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