

MY VIEW: Holding the super-rich accountable

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Mount Carroll, Ill. — A popular video being circulated by email shows former Labor Secretary Robert Reich explaining the economy in a little more than two minutes.

Even though the video is brief, the facts it presents are undeniable. The American economy has doubled since 1980, but most wages, allowing for inflation, have remained stagnant. Most of the gains have gone to the super-rich, whose political power has increased, allowing them to lower their tax rates. Before 1980 the top tax bracket was 70 percent, but now it is 35 percent. Taxes on capital gains are only 15 percent, and the IRS reports that the 400 richest Americans pay only 17 percent of their income in taxes.

Lack of tax revenue causes budget deficits, and public services are cut. Roads, jobs, public education are sacrificed. People, seeing competition for the jobs remaining, are too frightened to band together. We get union vs. non-union, public employees vs. private, and native-born vs. immigrants. Since the middle class has been weakened, they have lost purchasing power, thus preventing an economic recovery.

It has always been puzzling to us that so many readers write to The Journal-Standard defending the super-rich, especially since very few people in Carroll or Stephenson County would qualify as ultra-wealthy. The Washington Post reports that the top 0.1 percent of earners in the U.S. take in more than 10 percent of the country's personal income, and the income of the wealthiest business executives has gone up 400 percent since the 1970s.

Scott Russell Sanders in an article in Orion points out that the super-rich draw on the efforts of thousands of others, living and dead, and by using the natural resources of the planet, as well as public resources such as schools and courts. Several of the wealthy have signed a pledge to donate most of their wealth to philanthropic causes, following the advice of Andrew Carnegie, who felt great fortunes should be restored to society.

The estate tax, which affects only the richest 1 percent of Americans, is currently under attack by the wealthy and powerful, who want it eliminated. This is what Carnegie had to say about it: "Of all forms of taxation, this seems the wisest. Men who continue hoarding great sums all their lives, the proper use of which for public ends would work good to the community, should be made to feel that the community, in the form of the state, cannot thus be deprived of its proper share."

Sanders describes a hypothetical billionaire who invests in long-term US Treasury bonds. He could spend \$110,000 a day for his lifetime without ever touching his capital.

What then is the purpose of accumulating more and more billions? Sanders says it is power, and the super-rich maintain this power by contributing to political campaigns, by maintaining think tanks such as the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation, and by using the labels "communist" and "socialist" in order to cast aspersions on citizens who try to secure basic rights for people or benefit society as a whole. "These twin labels have been used to vilify the income tax, the estate tax, unemployment insurance, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, the Civil Rights Act, every major piece of environmental legislation, American participation in the UN, disarmament treaties, aid to the poor, humanitarian aid to other nations—any endeavor by government, in short, that might reduce the coffers or curb the power of those who sit atop the greatest heaps of capital."

The super-rich and their corporations have spent billions of dollars trying to convince Americans that climate change does not exist, though the evidence is all around us from Arizona to Missouri to Florida. They have cooked account books and misrepresented their financial condition and cheated investors (witness Enron, Goldman Sachs, AIG and many others). They have opposed public health care, and lobbied against safety regulations and against efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

According to Sanders, our economy has treated every part of the natural world "as a commodity for sale, subject to damage or destruction if enough money can be made from the transaction. Nothing in nature has been spared—not forests, grasslands, wetlands, mountains, rivers, oceans, atmosphere, nor any of the creatures that dwell therein."

We need to take back our country and our planet. We must work for a strong middle class. Some suggestions Sanders makes are to stop private companies from dictating research in public universities (and we would add not allowing them to dictate the public school curriculum), to strip corporations of "personhood" status, to break giant corporations into smaller ones that would be answerable to democratic control, and to defend the natural world we share.

We cannot allow those with selfish interests to accumulate more and more wealth and thus more and more power. The future is at stake.

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Wow, that is some amazing stuff from the Wemstroms today.

Not content to lecture people today on how eating asparagus from Mexico is 'not sustainable', they really let their contempt for freedom and success show today.

Bravo comrade Wemstroms, you are least are willing to show what you are made of.

ick,

j

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