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The conservative contempt for the working person shows through

By: Michael Hiltzik – December 18, 2013

At a hearing Wednesday of the Senate Finance Committee's Subcommittee on Social Security, conservative scholar Andrew G. Biggs made the following remark in defense of the idea that retirement ages can safely be raised:

"Go back to 1950, when we had a highly industrialized economy. You had coal miners, and farmers, and factory workers. The average age of initial Social Security claiming then was 68. Today, when your biggest on the job risk is, you know, carpal tunnel syndrome from your mouse or something like that, it's 63. ...[T]he idea that we can't have a higher retirement age, I think it just flies in the face of the fact that people did, in fact, retire later in the past, and today's jobs are less physically demanding than they were in the past."

A couple of things about this. First, carpal tunnel syndrome, which Biggs seems to think is a big joke and an excuse for malingering, is no laughing matter to people who have it and for whom it can be a crippling condition.

Second, the idea that older workers typically hold down office jobs or other comfy sinecures is fatuous and flatly untrue. The Center for Economic and Policy Research actually examined the numbers, mostly from the U.S. Census Bureau. (Unlike, apparently, Biggs.)

What it found in 2010 was that 6.5 million workers, or 35% of those 58 and older, were employed in physically demanding jobs. This was defined as work requiring "handling and moving objects, spending significant time standing, or having any physically demanding work." Working conditions included "cramped workspace, labor outdoors, or exposure to abnormal temperatures, contaminants, hazardous equipment, or distracting or uncomfortable noise."

These are conditions you're not likely to encounter in a Senate committee room, unless you consider hot air to be an environmental menace.

Latino and black workers were overrepresented among older workers with these jobs.

To be fair to Biggs, his remark about older workers was an offhand crack, a punchline to a straight line fed him by his questioner, Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.) His prepared testimony for the committee was rather more measured.

Biggs is a resident scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, and a former deputy commissioner of Social Security, a post he was named to during the George W. Bush administration. He's been a Social Security scholar at the conservative Cato Institute too.

Generally speaking he's one of the more intelligent and serious critics of Social Security on the right, which is not at all the same as saying he's a friend of the program as it exists today. He's advocated privatizing Social Security and converting it to something resembling a means-tested welfare program; either step would destroy what has been the most successful government program in American history.

But it's Biggs' reasonable veneer that makes his crack about older workers so telling. It reflects conservatives' failure not merely to empathize with older workers, but to learn anything about them before mouthing off. Instead of understanding, they offer contempt.

What the facts actually tell you is that raising the retirement age for Social Security -- it's already rising from 66 to 67 for people scheduled to retire from 2017 to 2022 -- is no easy nostrum for improving the program's finances. The CEPR's study pointed out that the cost of raising the retirement age falls especially hard on lower-income workers and minorities.

Those in physically demanding jobs would have to work longer in conditions that become progressively more difficult. Many would be driven to file for disability, placing added strains on a portion of Social Security already under intense financial pressure (which Congress has shown no signs of addressing).

This is another sign of the essential shallowness of our debate over Social Security. If conservative critics can't do better than to throw out airy misperceptions about the workforce conjured up in their Washington offices, why in heaven's name should anyone waste time listening to them?