

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Working Californians need a voice

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My name is Jennifer Muir, and I'm the Assistant General Manager of the Orange County Employees Association – a labor union representing 18,000 municipal workers in Orange County.

As readers of the Register's opinion pages, you may not think we have much in common. You may be surprised.

I was born and raised here in Orange County and graduated from Pepperdine University, where I was editor of the college newspaper. I earned an internship, funded by the libertarian Cato Institute, to work as a journalist in Brownsville, Texas, and was later fortunate enough to return to the county as a reporter for the Register covering county government.

These experiences taught me that while the news often focuses on things that divide us, there is so much more that unites us.

Yet today, all over America, neighbors who care equally about their community's schools and parks and libraries can't seem to have a civil conversation about political issues.

We all see ideological battles play out in Washington and in Sacramento, where ideological gridlock is commonplace. No matter which side we're on, most of us feel the same frustration and disgust.

The Register's opinion leaders are working to change that.

These pages have not always been welcoming to working people. In my current job, I have spent many Sunday mornings irritated about the newspaper's take on unions – organizations comprised of honest people who work hard to make a decent living for their families.

But in recent years, the Register has opened space where working men and women can provide new perspectives. And now, they've invited us to share views about working families in a weekly opinion column.

OCEA was built, brick by brick, more than 75 years ago by workers who wanted insurance coverage for their families.

Over the years, nurses, public safety officers, child abuse workers, veterans' advocates and other OCEA members have joined together to ensure all working families in our community are treated fairly and the community receives vital services.

Their sacrifices – and the sacrifices of workers across America – gave us protections we often take for granted: Weekends. Breaks. A 40-hour work week. The right to spend time at home with a newborn.

Today, these rights are slipping away for too many workers because some corporations, banks and their lobbyists have created a system that promotes increasing executive bonuses and bottom lines. Meanwhile, the workers who play the most important role in their success barely make ends meet.

The only obstacle that stands in the way of this social erosion is the same thing that stood in its way in our grandparents' generation: Working people standing together, bargaining together and using our strength in numbers to counter corporate strength in dollars.

So thank you to the Register for letting us share our voice. We hope to use the opportunity to discuss what unites us, and, ultimately, work together to restore the American Dream.