



US repeating four horrible mistakes

Paul Buchheit, Common Dreams

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We may have once believed that the darkest days were behind us, and that slow and steady progress for middle-class workers would continue to be made. But greed and good sense are forever in competition. Gains made in our country's progressive years are, a century later, once again in serious jeopardy.

1. The Commons: A Toll Gate in the Grand Canyon

In the early 1900s the Grand Canyon had been taken over by speculators, especially Ralph Henry Cameron, an entrepreneur and soon-to-be Arizona Senator who laid claim to much of the canyon land. He built a hotel on the main trail, set up a toll gate, and even charged exorbitant prices for water at the steamy canyon bottom.

We're heading back in that direction, and we don't have Teddy Roosevelt to knock some sense into Congress. Attempts to privatize federal land were made by the Reagan administration in the 1980s and the Republican-controlled Congress in the 1990s. In 2006, President Bush proposed auctioning off 300,000 acres of national forest in 41 states. Paul Ryan's Path to Prosperity has proposed to sell millions of acres of "unneeded federal land," and the libertarian Cato Institute demands that our property be "allocated to the highest-value use." Representative Cliff Stearns recommended that we "sell off some of our national parks." Mitt Romney admitted that he didn't know "what the purpose is" of public lands.

2. Safety Deregulated: Workers Fell "Like a Living Torch to the Street"

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City on March 25, 1911 was one of the deadliest tragedies in U.S. history. 146 garment workers died, most of them young immigrant women, some as young as 14. They worked from 9 to 14 hours a day, six days a week, forced to keep up a pace of 50 stitches per second in the preparation of blouses, all for 15 cents an hour. They were all on the 8th and 9th floors when the fire started near the end of the Saturday work shift. Up on the 10th floor were Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, the "Shirtwaist Kings."

The factory was not equipped for safety. There were few government regulations in the early 1900s. Only two exits existed: one quickly became blocked by smoke and flames, the other was locked; the only man with a key ran off at the first hint of fire. A few workers raced up the open stairway before it filled entirely with smoke. Blanck and Harris also ran to the roof, without alerting the 9th floor.

In the final minutes, as the elevator made its final descent, the few fortunate women inside heard the impact of bodies falling on the elevator roof. About twenty girls ran out to an incomplete, poorly constructed fire escape, which collapsed under their weight, hurling them all 100 feet to the sidewalk. A reporter wrote, "I learned a new sound that day, a sound more horrible than description can picture -- the thud of a speeding living body on a stone sidewalk."

At some of the windows girls engulfed by flames joined in an embrace before leaping to their deaths. In the words of a reporter, one girl who was "screaming with clothes and hair ablaze, plunged like a living torch to the street."

Blanck and Harris were acquitted of all charges of manslaughter for blocking escape routes and ignoring simple safety measures. They took their insurance money and faded into obscurity.

A century later the attitude of big business is that self-regulation works best. For the profit margin, it certainly does, but not for workers. The Texas fertilizer plant, where 14 people were killed in an explosion and fire, was last inspected by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) over 25 years ago. The U.S. Forest Service, stunned by the Prescott, Arizona fire that killed 19, had been forced by the sequester to cut 500 firefighters. The rail disaster in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec followed deregulation of Canadian railways. Other examples include a salmonella outbreak that was exacerbated by shoddy FDA oversight; tainted syringes from a company that went two years without a federal inspection; and a sudden increase in coal miner deaths while the U.S. House was rejecting a proposal for safety measures.

3. Inequality: Workers Demand a 76-Hour Week in the Era of a \$300 Billion Man

A reader may have to look twice at the photograph to believe the numbers. Barbers were demanding a shorter work day -- down to 12 hours, and 16 on Saturday.

A wage crisis exists today among fast food workers, who make about \$18,000 a year. According to the Working Poor Families Project, the income required for basic needs for a family of four is about \$45,000. A McDonalds worker would have to work 100 hours a week to reach that level.

Far removed from the wage issue is individual wealth. During the time of the barbers strike, John D. Rockefeller, according to Forbes, had over \$300 billion in today's dollars. Andrew Carnegie was right behind him at \$280 billion. Today we're approaching those Gilded Age extremes again, with just 30 rich Americans owning as much as HALF of the U.S. population (about \$800 billion).

4. The 14th Amendment: It Worked for Slaves 6% of the Time, and for Corporations 94% of the Time

On July 28, 1868 the right of US-born slaves to full citizenship was guaranteed by the adoption of the 14th Amendment. For a while conditions improved for blacks. But sentiments were quickly changing, especially among Supreme Court justices, whose corporate friends were beginning to lay claim to what they deemed their fundamental rights as "persons." Of 307 14th Amendment cases brought before the highest court between 1890 and 1910, nineteen were on behalf of blacks and all the rest (288 cases) in support of corporations.

Today the American people are again under attack by the Citizens United and Speechnow decisions, which allow unlimited corporate campaign financing through independent "Super PAC" organizations, and by the pending McCutcheon v. FEC case, which would allow unlimited individual contributions. Meanwhile, we have people like Mitt Romney assuring us that "Corporations are people, my friend."

Our great shame is that we forget the past, or perhaps simply refuse to learn from it. We have traveled this path before. We have seen the worst of times for our most vulnerable citizens, for people who fought for many years for modest gains, only to see the self-interest of a powerful few whisk those gains away.

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