

Idahoans Should Unite for Better Wages, Economy

By Rian Van Leuven
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It's Labor Day again, and as it goes with opinion pieces, I hope to win you over to my way of thinking. Admittedly, that can be a challenge for me sometimes, but this year, I have spoken with folks of vastly differing political backgrounds and it's become increasingly clear to me that there's one point that most of us agree on-Idaho's bottom-of-the-barrel wages are hurting our families. So, in the spirit of unity, patriotism, and Labor Day, I'd like you to consider that, regardless of your political beliefs, joining together under the banner of our shared core values is the only way forward.

Idahoans have known for years that our wages are some of the lowest in the nation. Last month the Bureau of Economic Analysis released a report showing that our families spend a bigger chunk of their income on the essentials than families in nearly every other state. Even the conservative-leaning Cato Institute reported that Idaho's welfare programs pay less than any other state in the country, and 88% of public assistance recipients in Idaho participate in work programs-so we can all agree that Idaho families are doing their best to break out of the low-wage trap. But despite our sweat and sacrifice, too many families are still struggling. The costs of living continue to rise while stagnant wages, a growing pool of minimum-wage jobs, and disappearing benefits make it harder to get by.

The good news is that this is an election year. Idahoans of all political stripes-progressives and Tea Party members alike-are looking for candidates who understand our economic struggles. As you're filling in your ballot this November, you have the power to weed out the candidates that don't care about attracting high-paying, forward-thinking employers to Idaho. You can check boxes for candidates who will invest in education, and who care whether Idaho families have a fighting chance at a better life. You can choose the candidates willing to quit dividing Idahoans into "makers" and "takers" and start collaborating with their opponents, if it means achieving our common goal of a more prosperous state and a stronger middle class.

And the thought of working with folks we don't always see eye-to-eye with brings us back to the reason we recognize Labor Day. It's a day to celebrate the principle that unions were founded on: the idea that we're all better off when we work together to achieve our common goals. Some folks out there want you to believe that politics and

economics are zero-sum games. They'd like folks to forget that we're lucky enough to live in a country where there's enough wealth to go around. That's just not true.

In the Labor movement, we know that if unions only look out for the folks on our own team, eventually we'll lose out. On the other hand, when we work with business and lawmakers to foster conditions that help more working families make ends meet, buy things they need, and live without being dependent on public assistance, we're all better off, from the CEO to the union tradesman to the minimum wage waiter.

This Labor Day, I encourage you to stop thinking about your neighbors in terms of R or D, business or union, ally or opponent. Instead, consider the fact that we all have a choice to look out for one another, to curb greed, to sacrifice trivial gains for real victories, and to grow an economy where everyone who works hard and plays by the rules has the chance at dignity and a good life. Then align yourselves with folks who share those values.