

## The Jones Act Puts America First

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A piece of legislation long set into law is now receiving numerous calls for repeal in the wake of the hurricane that ravaged Puerto Rico last month.

The Jones Act was voted into law all the way back in 1920. The Merchant Marine Act of 1920 was enacted after World War I and made in the spirit of preserving national security. The law stipulates that shipping between American ports must be done by American-made ships with American crews.

This sounds just like the kind of policies that helped get Donald Trump elected president. But a chorus of protest has erupted from conservative corners on keeping the Jones Act around. The law earned controversy after the Trump administration showed hesitation in waiving it after Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico.

The Act is often waived after natural disasters and eventually the administration opted to temporarily not enforce it in Puerto Rico. Now a new bill in the Senate, sponsored by Republican Sens. John McCain and Mike Lee, aims to permanently exempt the U.S. territory from the dictates of the Jones Act.

Many conservatives see the McCain-Lee bill only as a step in the right direction of scrapping the protectionist law altogether. National Review, Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and Americans for Tax Reform have all recently featured articles calling for the elimination of the Jones Act.

The primary argument against the Act is that it makes goods in the U.S. more expensive, the typical complaint against all protectionist policy.

National Review writer Theodore Kupfer typifies this argument in a piece for the conservative journal published earlier this month.

Kupfer argues the law raises consumer goods and hurts Puerto Rico and Hawaii. According to the author, Republicans scrapping the Jones Act would help the party ditch its “stale” image. The funny thing is that the GOP’s stale image owes to its image as primarily concerned with serving interests of billionaires — and scrapping the Jones Act would only bolster that image. There may be cheaper goods as a result of the act’s repeal and it may be in Puerto Rico’s interest, but that will come at the price of American jobs and the further deterioration of many American communities.

American ships are built in places like Wisconsin and Pennsylvania — states Trump was able to win with his America First message. Eliminating protections for the native shipping industry means more of those jobs disappear and go overseas to places like China. There's an obvious national security concern created by more ships not overseen by our government entering our nation's harbors.

Fewer jobs for working-class people means more communities fall prey to the depredations of blight — drug abuse, broken families, rising mortality rates. The same that has occurred to many working-class towns all over the country.

Heroin, not iPads, is the cheap good that dominates these run-down communities.

Trump's election sent a message that America would prefer to pay slightly higher prices on goods if it meant more Americans were able to find gainful employment. Trump's message was not "profits first" but America first — and that's what the people voted for.

Since the primary profit motive for eliminating the Jones Act is not a good sell in our political climate, it makes sense that advocates for the measure use the plight of Puerto Rico to promote their cause.

Apparently, an America free of the shipping law would do wonders for the island territory. While the elimination of the Jones Act may serve the interests of Puerto Rico, access to cheap goods is not the island's primary issue. It's corruption, and cheaper goods is not going to solve that problem.

There is little reason why we should harm the economies of numerous states and leave thousands of Americans unemployed just to slightly alleviate Puerto Rico's many issues.

Additionally, there is one swing state that benefits immensely from the Jones Act: Florida. In that state alone, over 50,000 jobs are connected to the domestic shipping industry, which adds nearly \$10 billion dollars to the local economy.

Those jobs and dollars could be at serious risk if the Jones Act is repealed by a Republican Congress, and the party would feel the wrath of outraged Floridians at the ballot box. The Jones Act prioritizes American workers and American-made ships above foreign ones. This is an outrage to the folks who put free trade above all else. But to the rest of America, it sounds like a law we should keep.