

The right's crusade against overtime pay: Why they despise worker rights

Opposing the minimum wage, overtime pay, even child labor laws, the GOP is trying to repeal the 20th century

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Silly me: President Obama's executive order to expand opportunities for overtime pay Thursday seemed like a win-win. Currently, if you make more than \$23,000, you can't necessarily receive overtime; the president's order would raise that cap, and also make it harder for employers to classify people with almost no supervisory duties as "supervisors" and thus exempt.

Where's the downside? Newly qualified workers currently being forced to work overtime without pay will now get higher wages. Or, if their employer doesn't want to spring for the overtime pay (traditionally time and a half), they will have to expand their work force to get the work done. Higher wages and/or more jobs: sounds good, right?

Not to Republicans, of course. The backlash to the president's Obama's overtime-pay expansion just makes clear what we've known for a long time: They oppose every attempt by government to reward hard work and protect the rights of workers – unless it applies to the very wealthy.

Speaker John Boehner sounded unusually befuddled opposing Obama's move. "If you don't have a job, you don't qualify for overtime. So what do you get out of it? You get nothing," he told the Washington Post. "The president's policies are making it difficult for employers to expand employment. And until the president's policies get out of the way, employers are going to continue to sit on their hands."

The president's policies are in fact making it harder for employers to exploit their workers. That's all. As Jared Bernstein told the New York Times. "I think a potential side effect is that you may see more hiring in order to avoid overtime costs, which would be an awfully good thing right about now,"

Or you'll see higher wages, which would also be an awfully good thing. One of the major causes of rising income inequality is that back in the 1970s, rising productivity suddenly became detached from rising wages. For decades — since the labor-rights reforms and social welfare advances of the 30s and 40s — the two lines climbed in tandem, with higher productivity

translating into higher paychecks. The two came apart, in what's become known as "the great divergence," at the same time as income inequality began to climb. There are many reasons for the productivity-wage split, including a stagnant minimum wage, declining union membership, and weaker labor rights overall – including less compensated overtime.

Republicans no longer accept that it was government intervention in the economy, first in the Progressive era and then, more forcefully, after the Great Depression, that created the greatest economic boom and the biggest middle class in history. The 40-hour work week. The weekend. Vacations. Child labor laws. The minimum wage. Social Security. Health and safety protection. All of these represented government intervention on the side of working people, to balance the playing field with exploitive employers, and to carve out a realm of family and personal life that could be protected from ceaseless labor. Progressive public policy essentially created childhood, as a time when kids who weren't wealthy might be educated and protected from labor abuse.

These became bipartisan values, with some debating around the margins, through Richard Nixon administration. But then a pro-business backlash put all of those gains back on the table. Republicans are now trying to repeal the 20th century.

"The federal government, in particular, shouldn't be involved in labor markets in any way, shape or form," says Jeffrey Miron, economic studies director at the Cato Institute. Cato's a libertarian think tank, but Miron's once-radical point of view is now the GOP mainstream.

We've seen Republicans, like friend-of-the-poor Paul Ryan, fiercely oppose even modest increases in the minimum wage – even though earlier hikes always had a decent amount of bipartisan support. In fact, more Republicans today are openly insisting there shouldn't even be a minimum wage, from formerly sensible Tennessee Sen. Lamar Alexander to Texas Gov. Rick Perry and his homestate ally Rep. Joe Barton. GOP Senate candidates in North Carolina and Iowa have made abolishing the minimum wage a pillar of their campaigns.

We already know Republicans hate unions, whether public or private sector. One of the hottest CPAC sessions last week focused on "the Wisconsin model" of public sector union busting, but we also saw how hard GOP elected officials in Tennessee fought a union drive among Volkswagen workers there.

Some on the right have even clamored to bring back child labor. Newt Gingrich suggested poor kids should work as janitors to earn their school lunches, in order to fight the "culture" of poverty. (Like Paul Ryan, he doesn't seem to see that food is the best answer for hunger.) Utah's Tea Party Sen. Mike Lee has declared federal child labor laws "unconstitutional," while up in Maine, wing-nut Gov. Paul LePage would like to lower the legal working age from 16 to 12.

I've never understood why Republicans believe rich people need more money to ensure they'll work harder, but the non-rich don't deserve such incentives. From skyrocketing CEO pay to lower tax rates, the GOP defends putting more money in the hands of rich folks as a good thing. Giving more money to working people, by contrast, only encourages slackers and moochers. The president can't wait for Republicans to join the 21st century while they're busy repealing the 20th. He's right to do whatever he can to boost workers' wages on his own.

