Those Who Despise America – Part 5: Workers' Rights

by
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Although the push for workers' rights began between the 1820s and 1840s, it wasn't until the 1970s that socialists became involved in the American labor movement. Since then, the workers' rights movement has become two overlapping movements. The labor movement has concentrated on workers having more power and better working conditions.

On the other hand, the socialist movement, while also advocating for greater economic power and better working conditions, went a step further by placing the blame for poor wages and working conditions on an economic system that produces inequality and exploitation.

Socialists publicly argue that their involvement in workers' rights is needed for several reasons. Such reasons include:

- Since businesses are owned and controlled by a small group of owners, workers are subjected to employer decisions that they do not control.
- The gaps in income and benefits between owners and workers are excessive and need to be reduced.
- Workers should have a voice in determining wages, working conditions, investment choices, and what gets produced.
- Businesses need to prioritize fulfilling human needs over profit.
- Collective bargaining is needed because people can be coerced by a lack of income, unemployment, or debt.
- During economic downturns or crises, owners and management also need to be penalized, not just the workers.
- People with enormous wealth have disproportionate influence over politics, the media, and public policy. By gaining economic power, socialists will be able to gain political power.

The socialist agenda and those of various labor movements often overlap. However, they differ substantially on how workplaces and the economy should be organized. Some socialists advocate government ownership; others favor worker-owned businesses or combinations of public and private ownership.

The main criticism of the socialist approach has less to do with workers' rights and more to do with how far the movement should go and what trade-offs come with it. While using workers' rights as a perceived issue, the underlying issue is a broader ideological struggle for power.

However, gaining concessions from business and industry does not necessarily mean that workers will have a better outcome. For example, if workers' wages are increased through collective bargaining or excessive employment protections are implemented, these "wins" could:

- discourage hiring,
- accelerate automation,
- encourage businesses to relocate,
- make it harder for inexperienced workers to enter the labor market, or
- make some businesses uncompetitive.

From the workers' perspective, the socialist arguments may seem to provide workers with a sense of having more power in the workplace. The problem, though, is that workers are not one unified group.

The worker population is made up of people with different occupations, ages, desires, and racial and ethnic backgrounds. Giving workers more control does not eliminate the problem of competing interests; it only changes who has the authority to resolve them.

With regard to government ownership, a different set of issues is created. These include:

- Increased bureaucracy
- Inefficient allocation of resources
- Weak incentives for innovation
- Political interference in workplaces
- Less individual economic freedom
- Restrictions on influence from outside groups, such as unions

Socialists rely on workers to achieve many of their objectives. The most effective vehicle they use is the formation of labor unions.

A union can improve workers' lives, but it can also develop:

- Entrenched leadership
- Internal political factions
- Corruption
- Resistance to necessary changes
- Protection of poor-performing members
- Conflicts between union members and nonunion workers
- Actions that go against members' wishes
- Control by the parent union

Union goals for worker protection and worker empowerment are relatively easy to justify; the controversial part is whether achieving these goals will require changing who owns and controls businesses. Changing ownership and control, however, can introduce enormous coordination, incentive, investment, and governance problems, not to mention additional costs.