

□ 1645

LABOR RIGHTS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. DAVIS) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. DAVIS of Illinois. Madam Speaker, I am pleased to take this opportunity to salute first of all organized labor and to talk briefly about the role that it has played and continues to play in the lives of average citizens, ordinary Americans, the role that it has played in helping to create what we call the middle class.

Every day when I pick up the paper, the first thing that I generally see is where the rights of workers are being eroded. We are continuing to downsize, outsource, privatize. There is a tremendous amount of anti-union organizing activity. We see the diminution of workers' rights and the elimination of fringe benefits. More and more people are forced into having to work part time, with not a real job where they have benefits, where they know that if they should become ill, they can go to the doctor or go to the hospital.

In a world that is increasingly connected by international trade and investment, the need for enforceable rules in the global economy to protect workers' rights and prevent a devastating drive to the bottom in labor standards has never been more critical than what it is today. Working together, countries must take steps to establish minimum international labor standards so that increasing trade competition between nations does not continue to spiral downward.

The fact is that since NAFTA was enacted in 1993, the United States has lost more than 600,000 jobs. U.S. companies have less stringent labor and environmental standards. In fact, more than 150 U.S. companies have left the U.S. for Mexico since NAFTA and are now relishing in the fact that they have avoided compliance with important worker safety and health standards. And, of course, they are getting away with paying their employees as little as \$7 a day. How can a Teamster, for example, who might make an average of \$19 an hour compete with this? The fact of the matter is that he or she cannot. And each and every time we go to the bargaining table to negotiate a good, fair contract, we are berated with threats of companies relocating. In the end, American jobs are eliminated, our wages are suppressed, and benefits cut. Unfortunately, the World Trade Organization does not seem to be concerned with this problem.

I was pleased not long ago to listen to my colleague from North Carolina talk about reauthorization of the agricultural bill and the fact that rural America must have a real place in it. I was thinking that when we reauthorize that bill, we need to make sure that we

look at some of the subsidies that we are giving to agribusiness, that we look, for example, at the tremendous subsidy that the sugar growers are getting which is keeping the cost of sugar so high in places like where I live that candy companies are going out of business, or they are talking about moving to Mexico or Argentina or someplace other than in the United States.

And so I think it is a call to arms for the workers of America to unite, to keep coming together, to keep organizing, to make sure that there is protection for the average person, the workers of this country.

WORKERS' RIGHTS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from California (Ms. SOLIS) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. SOLIS. Madam Speaker, today I rise to talk about the importance of workers' rights. I want to tell my colleagues a little bit about my own personal history. My parents came as immigrants to this country. Because they became a part of working America, they were also involved in the union movement. Because of that, we had protections for our family, seven brothers and sisters. Because of that protection, my father lives a better life. He lives on a fixed income with a retirement, a pension plan. My mother is well. But the fact remains that before the union came into their place of work, they suffered quite a bit. My father, in fact, was exposed to very hazardous and toxic materials and as a result became involved with the union to provide protection so that other employees there, immigrant employees who could not speak English could have clothing, appropriate clothing and even an oxygen mask that would help prevent them from being exposed to harmful chemicals.

My mother worked for many years, 20 years exactly, on her feet almost 10 hours a day and now suffers from arthritic problems and severe varicose veins. She was lucky, though, that she had the union to fall back on, to provide her protections, medical coverage not only for herself but for her seven children and I as one of those. It has not been an easy road for them, and I thank the unions for providing that safety mechanism for them and my brothers and sisters.

But the movement of the union effort needs to go on. In fact, I was very privileged as a member of the State Senate to run the industrial relations committee where I was very much involved in helping to raise the minimum wage. I am sad to report that in the Federal Government, our minimum wage is much lower than the State of California. In fact, it is at \$5.15 an hour. In California, it is \$5.75. It is still below the poverty level. In fact, if we were to

raise it up a bit, we would still have to give a boost of \$1.24. We still have a long way to go. Working America needs a break.

In my opinion, we have much to do to protect women, particularly many of those that are forced to work two and three jobs at minimum wage to raise their families. Many of them have children. Many of them sorely need insurance, health coverage and many other protections that are provided to union people. Many of those individuals are seeking to organize and have not been successful because many anti-union companies or businesses are trying to erode any support so that they can collectively bargain for their rights.

I want to put my support behind efforts that I was recently involved in in California in the city of Vernon with a particular organization there that was trying to organize women and immigrants that were working to sew mattresses and blankets. Some had worked there for 30 years at the Hollander Home Fashion in Vernon and were not given any kind of retirement benefits or any kind of pension plan. Thirty years at minimum wage and not one increment. I went out there and met some of those workers. Thank God that the employer there came to his senses and they were able to work out an agreement. They now have a collective bargaining agreement that will provide protections for the some 200 or 300 workers that I saw there in Vernon.

I cannot say that about an ongoing effort right now with Pictsweet Mushroom in California where farm workers are trying to get also a better medical plan, a pension plan, and the one that is being offered right now by the employer is much too small and it would require a much greater premium on the part of the worker. The California Agricultural Relations Board has upheld an unfair labor practice charged against Pictsweet by the United Farm Workers. The United Farm Workers won that, but we still need to do more. I stand here now in support of what the Pictsweet Mushroom employees are working on.

We have a long way to go for working families, especially those that are new immigrants, that are coming to this country with the realization that they want to share in the American dream. I would ask this House and body to put forward a minimum wage bill to provide protections for all workers and to work to provide more sufficient coverage in terms of OSHA, because we know that there are many, many thousands of workers that lose their lives, that go to work thinking that they are going to have some protections in place and find out that they cannot even go home because something happened at work.

I would ask this Congress, this body, to please take note of these issues.