

Killing regulations endangers jobs and workers

By Anastasia Christman and Christine Owens, National Employment Law Project - 01/12/12 01:23 PM ET

With tens of millions of Americans still out of work and searching for jobs this new year, our nation's elected leaders need to get serious about putting Americans back to work.

Unfortunately, there's nothing serious about the supposed "job creator" bills that the House of Representatives passed along party lines late last year, unless your goal is to do serious damage to the government's ability to protect Americans through sensible rules and protections.

The House bills' supporters claim that government regulations are holding back the economy, and that by cutting these back, we will see increased hiring. This is nothing but a bait and switch. Accepting cuts in safety and fairness won't get us more jobs, it will just make the jobs we already have worse.

Government regulation isn't the problem, even according to business itself. Only 13 percent of employers identify regulation as the biggest problem they face, according to both the Small Business Majority and the National Federation of Independent Businesses. Government data on mass layoffs shows that employers blamed regulations for only 0.3 percent of dismissals. Even Chamber of Commerce surveys show that lack of sales is a bigger problem than government regulation.

We know too well the workplace dangers that too many face: We remember the 29 miners killed at the Upper Big Branch mine, and the 11 oil rig workers killed and 17 injured in the BP gulf oil spill. The reality is federal protections keep many millions of us safe at work, from crane operators and pipe cutters exposed to amputation dangers, to nurses in danger of contracting disease from needle sticks, to beauticians who risk cancer from unventilated salons and formaldehyde-based products.

Despite inspections of over 40,000 workplaces, however, more than 4,500 workers were killed on the job in 2010, an average of more than 12 deaths a day. Imagine how much worse that number would be if we allowed these bills to eviscerate our workplace safety rules. The sad truth, borne out by experience, is that we cannot depend on corporate self-policing or the market to keep workers safe. That's a fundamental role of government—when promises are broken, when working men and women are placed at unnecessary risk because corners are cut for the sake of profit, we have recourse to hold corporate lawbreakers accountable.

Sensible federal safeguards also ensure the promise of fair treatment and an honest paycheck for a hard day's work. If an employer fails to pay for the hours worked, or falsifies time cards, federal protections

give us recourse to recover what we earned. Yet, supporters of these anti-safeguard bills would claim that eliminating these safeguards and allowing corporations to book these stolen wages as profits, CEO compensation, or dividends would somehow boost “job creation.”

As a nation, we decided long ago that we weren’t willing to sacrifice worker safety, fairness on the job, or the sanctity of human life for the promise (often specious) of jobs. And decades of economic growth throughout the twentieth century have proven that we didn’t have to. Our values haven’t changed, despite the apparent willingness of some legislators to capitalize on today’s economy to trot out these tired and largely discredited arguments in order to impose a regime that Americans long ago rejected. When Congress returns to Washington D.C. next week, it needs to stop peddling its anti-safeguard snake oil and start putting America back to work.

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