

Forward Forum

Bush's Budget Works Against Americans

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After five straight budgets that have made the lives of working people more difficult, few among us expected this year to be any different. Earlier this month, President Bush met our diminished expectations when he unveiled his 2007 fiscal year budget.

As in previous years, the president's budget cuts funding for domestic programs, reduces taxes for the wealthy and increases spending on defense. More than half a billion dollars has been cut from job training programs, despite poor job growth and the continued loss of manufacturing jobs. Ignoring the harsh realities facing working people, the president's budget also takes aim at other programs that help low-wage workers. A total of \$65 billion is cut from health care, education, job training, childcare and other domestic programs.

These programs are not only a safety net for the destitute or unemployed. Even working people, forced by wage stagnation into multiple jobs, rely on these programs for basic necessities. Since welfare reform in the mid-1990s, Medicaid has become particularly vital source of health insurance for the children of low-wage workers.

According to the non-partisan Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the president's new budget would cut almost \$18 billion over the next 10 years from Medicaid spending for low-income children, parents, seniors, and people with disabilities. The budget would also cut by \$3.1 billion education programs — which can mean the difference between poverty and the middle class — and eliminates several Education Department programs, including school technology grants, vocational programs and parent resource centers.

An ethic of indifference pervades the Bush administration, but we need not follow the callous example set in Washington. Indeed, as demonstrated by recent state and local campaigns that succeeded in either raising the minimum wage or setting a living wage, not only are many Americans concerned about the plight of low-income workers, they have the ability to set standards for acceptable corporate behavior in their cities.

In the past, some of the harsh effects of Washington's misguided economic policies were softened by higher levels of union density and by industries in which local players were sensitive to the need of workers who lived in their communities. Today, the failure of Washington's economic policies, a smaller labor movement and industry dominance by international corporations has created an even greater need for workers and their communities to take matters into their own hands.

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Workers in the hotel industry are typical of those who suffer most from these changes. Hotel workers — largely minority and immigrant women — work hard to create a welcoming home away from home for business travelers and tourists. But too many suffer serious physical injuries from the workloads imposed on them by large multi-national companies. Severe understaffing forces workers to do more in less time. An increase in room amenities like heavier mattresses and linens is hurting these workers.

Most Jews have heard about the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in 1911 that killed 146 garment workers, including many Jewish immigrants. But the daily exploitation those women faced included injuries caused by carrying heavy piles of linens — and 95 years later, hotel workers continue to suffer from a similar problem.

Workers find themselves struggling to make ends meet. Wages vary dramatically from city to city. Those lucky enough to have essential benefits, like health care and retirement plans, are fighting to keep them. Others struggle to assert their right to organize a union, a right undercut by federal anti-worker regulations and a lack of enforcement of existing labor law.

Workers like these have long found an invaluable ally in the Jewish community. The Jewish commitment to worker justice begins with the story of the enslavement of Jews in Egypt and continues through a long tradition of rabbinic law intended to protect workers. More recently, it manifests itself in the Jewish community's involvement in workers' rights struggles in the United States and elsewhere.

That commitment is being renewed today, as hotel workers across the country stand up to improve their jobs and secure better lives for themselves and their families. For far too many hotel workers, fulltime jobs pay poverty wages with no benefits, and Jewish groups in many cities are now standing with them.

Recently, the Progressive Jewish Alliance led a campaign that serves as a model for this effort. They organized a grassroots response by Los Angeles-area Jews who sought to ensure that local hotel workers received the wages, health protections and respect necessary for them to do their jobs well and to support their families. Many felt that a particular obligation is owed to hotel workers, who are actively engaged in the mitzvah of *haknusat orchim*, or welcoming guests, which the Midrash declares to be "even greater than welcoming the divine presence."

Sadly, hotel workers are far from the only ones to be hurt by Bush's sixth straight anti-worker budget. Workers across the country, in a broad range of industries, need every ounce of the Jewish community's support in order to change corporate behavior — so when workers in your community stand up, make sure to stand up with them.

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