

## A Message from IWER Co-Director Thomas Kochan

The op-ed piece below appeared in the Los Angeles Times on September 26, 2001. I wrote it because I believe the nation's leaders need to be encouraged to address the critical needs of the workforce if we are to sustain the unity of purpose needed to address our current crisis. Labor, business, and government need to work together, yet even in crisis, we appear to lack the leadership needed to make this happen.

I urge all who share this concern to contact the President and leaders of Congress and urge them to step up to the task.

“FDR Knew the Key to National Unity: Workers”

By THOMAS A. KOCHAN

Once again, an external crisis is uniting Americans. But this support could fade quickly unless Washington's response also includes a plan to maintain the confidence of U.S. workers and their families, who are bearing the heavy economic costs of this crisis.

In a cooling economy, U.S. industry was already shedding workers at an alarming rate. Now more than 100,000 workers have lost good airline industry jobs; the unemployment tally from Boeing and other airline-related firms multiplies into ever-bigger numbers. The toll across the economy is devastating to millions of American working families.

We need a solid plan to address this domestic crisis even as we engage in the prolonged effort to root out international terrorism. Business as usual which in the last decade has meant laying off workers at will, suppressing workers seeking union representation, and a government retreat from labor-management relations must end.

Franklin Roosevelt showed how to do this. Immediately after Pearl Harbor, he assembled labor and industry representatives to gain their support for the war effort. Labor and industry voluntarily pledged not to engage in strikes or lockouts for the duration of the war and workers were assured that a new institution would be created to address their problems.

The result was a string of workplace innovations, including sick pay and formal grievance procedures, that we now take for granted.

Today's workers are reeling from a decade of prosperity without real wage growth; improved standards of living have come by putting more household hours into the labor force, often at the expense of family life. Now the national

job bubble has burst: Cuts and layoffs by key job-generating sectors are sliding the nation toward recession.

Without the skills needed to survive in the new economy, the working poor will soon become the unemployed poor. Families that only recently made it to the middle class risk becoming the new working poor. Even highly educated professionals can no longer count on their network of contacts that so helped them prosper.

Long before Sept. 11, America's labor policies, put in place after World War II, seriously needed fundamental overhaul to catch up with the reality of today's workplace. After Sept. 11, that need has become a priority that, if not met, could pull apart a now-united nation.

President Bush should follow Roosevelt's example and immediately ask business and labor leaders to forge a new set of principles to address the problems workers and employers face and which have been exacerbated by this crisis. Labor peace is an important goal but as Roosevelt showed, such peace can be achieved only by addressing critical problems facing workers and industry alike.

That means giving more priority and coherence to assisting displaced airline and other workers, for example. Why not retrain and redeploy some of the thousands of talented and experienced employees who know how airports work to beef up security efforts? Simple as this sounds, government leadership is needed to make it happen: In their rush for government aid, industry leaders largely ignored such workforce opportunities and issues.

Other overdue policy moves will help ease the difficulties facing workers who are now being asked to sacrifice even more. Families who are now losing health insurance coverage must be given ways to maintain it. Firms must be given incentives to build paid leave into national policy and into benefits packages so that U.S. families are better able to care for each other, especially during emergencies.

We need to revisit the GI Bill of Rights and develop policies that allow for the reschooling of workers.

We also must revise labor-management policies and practices so that workers who want to unionize don't have to endure the long and costly battles with employers that characterize union organizing today. Policymakers must build upon examples of successful labor-management relationships and expand them, especially to the airline industry and broader aviation sector. Otherwise, labor and management likely will pull apart and ignite the tinderbox of destructive conflict that lies just below the surface in this and other troubled sectors.

If the president calls labor, industry and family representatives together to work on such issues and if he supports the results they produce we will do more than maintain national unity during this crisis. We will emerge from it with a stronger society and economy.

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