Iowa workers know ‘an injury to one is an injury to all’

By Colin Gordon

Last week, a panel of courageous local workers testified to:

• The conditions under which they worked.
• And the prevalence of employment practices that rob them of their time, their hard-earned wages and their dignity.

Their stories were chilling but alas, not unusual.

Ongoing survey work by the Eastern Iowa Center for Worker Justice finds wage theft — unpaid wages, failure to pay the minimum wage or overtime rates, illegal paycheck deductions — to be distressingly common in and around Iowa City. A recent Iowa Policy Project report estimated these unpaid wages at nearly $600 million a year in Iowa, a price tag that brings with it almost $50 million in lost state tax revenues. And new estimates from the Economic Policy Institute put the cost of wage theft nationwide (about $50 billion a year) at more than three times the annual cost of all the robberies, burglaries, larcenies and motor vehicle thefts in the nation combined.

How did it come to this?

• First, the conditions of employment have deteriorated dramatically over the last generation. Job-based security (including stable hours, living wages, and employer-provided health and retirement benefits) has withered. And workers are increasingly thrust into “contingent” work relationships in which the identity (and responsibility) of the employer is opaque. Some work (as day-laborers for example) for many employers in a short period of time. Many are employed by temp or staffing agencies, an arrangement that gives employers “flexibility” at the expense of its own workforce. And many (especially in construction) are willfully misclassified as “independent contractors” and denied basic workplace rights.
• Second, workplace institutions — especially labor unions — which used to provide workers voice and bargaining power on the job, have been beaten back. Nationwide, only 6.7 percent of private sectors are union members (down from nearly a quarter of workers in 1973); in Iowa, the total is only 6.4 percent. In part, this decline reflects changes in the economy to which organized labor has been slow to respond. But, more importantly, it reflects the unrelenting hostility of organized business and the law, which have made it harder to sustain unions or to organize new ones.
• And third, state and federal agencies have fumbled the responsibility of enforcing our most basic labor protections. The enforcement budget of the Federal Department of Labor has shrunk, and even when it can follow up on complaints, the maximum civil monetary penalty for failure to pay the minimum wage or the required overtime premium is only $1,100. The Iowa Division of Labor employs one investigator for a workforce of 1.5 million, a staffing level that is much lower than almost any other state — and completely inadequate to the task at hand.
The Center for Worker Justice has begun to push back, both by helping individual workers confront scofflaw employers and navigate legal remedies, and by organizing workers and their allies. The Iowa City Federation of Labor, under the leadership of Jesse Case, has embraced the center’s efforts — hewing to the old adage that an injury to one is an injury to all.

Now we need a serious political push — to raise the minimum wage and other standards and, just as importantly, to ensure that those standards are enforced.

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