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Evan Barrett

Montana Tech of the University of Montana

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Three Lumps of Coal for the Working Poor

A Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett

December 19, 2013

I ended my commentary last month this way: “Here’s hoping that the onset of Christmas will result in some Christian values rising up in that ‘millionaire class’ that we call Congress so that we might, by year’s end, see the minimum wage go up. But I wouldn’t bet on it.”

Well here it is, almost Christmas, and so far Zippo from Congress.

At a time when TIME Magazine named Pope Francis as Person of the Year, based partially on his demonstrated concern for those in poverty, you’d think Congress would have done something on the minimum wage and other similar issues.

For, after all, as the Pope has noted: “The [trickle-down] promise was that when the glass was full, it would overflow, benefitting the poor. But what happens instead is that when the glass is full, it magically gets bigger - nothing ever comes out for the poor.”

In the face of that economic reality, Tea Party conservatives in Congress have compounded their minimum wage affront to the working poor by slamming them two more times – on food stamps and on unemployment benefit extensions..

Bottom line - if the Tea Party conservatives in Congress were Santa Claus, they would be delivering three lumps of coal to those striving to struggle out of poverty in America.

What drives them to this heartless and economically damaging position?

A different, but perceptive, social thinker, the late comedian George Carlin, really put his finger on it when he said: “Conservatives say if you don’t give the rich more money, they will lose their incentive to invest. As for the poor, ... [conservatives] tell us, they’ve lost all incentive because we’ve given them too much money.” Yes, George Carlin nailed it just as clearly as Pope Francis has.

Tea Party Congressional conservatives appear to believe that the working poor, in fact anyone who is poor, is that way because they either want to be poor or are too lazy to work their way to prosperity. Common sense Montanans know better – we know that almost everyone believes in the American Dream and would not only like a job, they’d like a better job, one that could lift them and their family out of poverty. That’s one reason a significant increase in the minimum wage is needed in America.

But let’s get back to the other two lumps of coal – food stamps and unemployment benefits.

Because of inaction by Congress – especially the Tea Party dominated House -- on December 28th, 1.3 million American families will be kicked off extended unemployment

benefits. These are people who are seeking work – that’s a requirement – but find there are 3-4 unemployed seeking every job that’s out there. And, by the end of 2014, another 3.6 million will lose their benefits.

Remember we have long-term unemployment problems because we have yet to fully recover from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. In past recessions, extended unemployment benefits ended when the long-term unemployed represented about 1.3 percent of the workforce. Today, the long-term jobless still represent more than 2 percent of the labor force.

So, this is still not a time to drop these benefit extensions given the economic reality of not enough jobs. But also because those benefits sustain families during a time of stress and also help stimulate the economy by being immediately spent on Main Street USA. Those unemployment benefit extensions are both a moral imperative and an economic imperative.

But what do we hear from Conservative Santa Congress’ elves about this? Elf #1, Rand Paul, says that if you extend unemployment benefits “you do a disservice to the poor.” Elf #2, Paul Ryan still advances a so-called fair budget that does nothing on the issue. Elf #3, Ted Cruz, votes against anything and everything that helps struggling people. And, so on for all the little elves.

The message: “Here, enjoy this lump of coal for Christmas!”

As for food stamps, a September Census Bureau report found that food stamps had kept nearly four million people above the poverty level and had stopped millions more from sinking further into poverty. So the House, led by Elf #4, Eric Cantor, responded by cutting \$40 billion from food stamps, while they continued to refuse to ask Billionaires to provide one additional penny to support such programs. The food stamp cuts fall disproportionately on children, by the way, but what the heck, “a lump of coal will help build character.”

All the while, Congressional Santa and his Tea party conservative elves have yet to extend any effort crafting a jobs bill for America -- refusing even the modest one proposed by the President. But then, a jobs bill would be a real gift for Christmas --- not another of their lumps of coal.

So for Christmas this year it’s three lumps of coal and a hearty Ho, Ho, Ho from Tea Party Conservative Santa.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte, thinking of the working poor in this time of Christmas.

Evan Barrett, Butte, has spent the last 45 years at the top level of Montana economic development, government, politics and education. He is currently the Director of Business & Community Outreach and an instructor at Highlands College of Montana Tech. These are his personal views.