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Evan Barrett

Montana Tech of the University of Montana

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Labor Day Disconnect Between Congress & American Workers

A Montana Public Radio Commentary by Evan Barrett
August 29, 2013

As we approach Labor Day, Montana and American workers are plugging away at their jobs, producing products and profits for their employers while Congress goes out of session for 5 weeks, leaving Washington having produced little or nothing.

There is a great disconnect between Washington, DC and the rest of the nation. Is it no wonder that less than 10% of folks give Congress a positive rating?

Let's take a minute to compare the jobs, job quality and productivity of workers in Montana and the nation with the wages, working conditions and productivity in Congress.

While the US economy is slowly recovering and jobs are returning, most of the new jobs being created pay lousy wages and have few benefits. According to the Economic Policy Institute, weak wage growth from 2000 to 2007, when added to a lot of wage losses for many workers since then, finds the bottom 60% of working Americans now earning less than they did in 2000. Yet worker productivity is up 25% since 2000.

Workers have jobs, but jobs not good enough to sustain and lift their families into the middle class, as poverty rates rise even as jobs are being created. In many cases, having more than one job still doesn't pull a family up. To sum it up, most folks are working, sometimes multiple jobs, to earn less while they are producing more. Not a pretty picture.

How about here in Montana? Median family income is a little over \$44 thousand, while per capita income is just under \$24 thousand – placing us 38th among the states in both categories. And more than 6% of Montana workers have multiple jobs. But still, Montana is renowned for its worker productivity.

How does our current worker situation compare to our employees in Congress? In 2000, the rank-and-file member of the House and Senate made \$141,300. They now make \$174,000, a 23% increase while average workers' wages and buying power have gone down.

Now, I believe that we ought to be offering good wages to those who represent us in Congress. We need to attract the best and the brightest, and you should not have to be a millionaire to aspire to represent the people in our representative Democracy. But, as an institution, Congress has fallen into structural disrepair on top of its disconnect from the economic reality of everyday Americans.

Montanans work 5 days a week, often 6 or 7. Congress, when it is actually there, generally is in session only 3 days a week, maybe 4. Montanans might get 15 days of

vacation a year. On the other hand, Congressional breaks are legendary – including the 5 week break they are in right now, with all the important work still waiting in Washington DC for them to get done. Overall, the Official US House of Representatives Calendar for 2013 has them with 137 work days for the entire year, just a little over half of what average American and Montana workers are expected to put in.

Montanans are not afraid of hard work, in fact we thrive on it. Do Montanans leave the job half done? No! We have always taught our children that you stay at it until the job is done. And Montana's workforce productivity rate shows that we live by those teachings.

This is Evan Barrett in Butte, thinking about Montana and American workers as we approach Labor Day.

Evan Barrett, Butte, has spent the last 44 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.