

# THINKING ABOUT POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES IN A CHANGING WORLD

*Thoughts on Developing a New Women's Agenda – Presented to the UAW CAP Council*

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1

As you've just heard, the title of my talk this morning is "Thinking about Political Alternatives in a Changing World."

Although the theme I eventually want to get into in my talk this morning pertains to the interconnected issues of women, politics and social-economic change, let me first give you a specific example of what I mean by a changing world.

Seventeen years ago in 1985, the General Motors plant on Boxwood Rd. had a two-shift workforce of about 5,000 people. These were among the best-paying manufacturing jobs in the state. They were the kind of jobs that kids getting out of high school could look forward to getting if they didn't want to go to college. Unfortunately, many of those jobs are gone now. Today the Boxwood plant works only one shift and has about 1,200 UAW members working there.

As most of you in this room know, a good part of those jobs were lost because they were outsourced. The production of things like seat cushions and instrument panels, which were once made in the Boxwood Rd. factory, were shifted to smaller plants so the company could increase its profits by paying lower wages.

But outsourcing wasn't the only cause of GM's job losses in Delaware. Another cause had to do with the company's engineering and marketing problems. A case in point is the Saturn LS series. GM had big dreams for that car. It expected the new Saturn to explode onto the market in the late 1990s with record sales, but unfortunately, because of management miscalculations, this didn't happen. Those miscalculations were related to a wide variety of factors including design mistakes, engineering flaws, and how many production hours were needed per vehicle in order to get cars successfully out of the plant. The end result of all these factors was a bad launch from which the Saturn plant is still trying to recover.

What I find troubling about the job losses at the Boxwood plant is that they are typical of what's happening, not just to the auto industry, but to many better paying unionized jobs around the country. The number of those jobs is shrinking. The fact is that for two decades the job market nationally has been characterized by a downward trend in real wages. A key element in this trend is that since 1979, the number of U.S. manufacturing jobs has been decreasing whereas the number of service jobs -- which on an average pay less than 50% of what production jobs pay -- has increased by about 40%. In other words, once wage rates are adjusted for inflation, more people work at lower-paying jobs today than 20 years ago.

It's sad but true that Delaware is typical of this phenomenon. More than a decade ago in 1988, the Delaware Department of Labor issued a report which correctly predicted that the creation of service sector jobs would outpace the creation of manufacturing jobs in the state by approximately a 5 to 1 ratio. At the time local politicians, both Democrats and Republicans, didn't fight this trend but for the most part praised it by stressing all the new jobs that were going to be created. What these politicians from both parties ignored was the downward pressure this trend would have on many people's wages over the coming year. And when I say downward pressure, I really mean downward. As recent census numbers show, from the late 1970s until now the income gap between the wealthiest 20% Delaware's families and the poorest 20% has grown by a staggering 39%. This is not good news for the poor and it's not good news for working people in general.

Wilmington, the city where I was born and still live, is a good example of how over the last two decades more and more people have been edged into poverty by pro-corporate state economic policies that have encouraged the creation of low-paying jobs. Already in the early 1980s, it was becoming clear in Wilmington that, unlike in the past, having a job no longer guaranteed financial security; as a result, from 1979-1985 the number of Wilmington households living at poverty level increased by 25%, although the unemployment rate was relatively low. By the early 1990s the situation had grown even worse: 49% of Wilmington residents who lived in poverty worked full-time. Can you imagine that: just about 50% of the poverty-stricken population worked at 40-hour-a-week jobs and yet were still poor!?! The 2000 census showed that over the last decade this trend has continued in high gear as the number of Delawareans holding lower-paying service jobs continues to rise while those working at better-paying manufacturing jobs continues to drop.

The impact of such facts on Delaware and the region is obvious. High school graduates are less likely today to get a relatively decent paying job at DuPont or GM's Assembly plant than they were in the past. Instead, these young people are more likely to end up in minimum wage positions in the fast-food industry or in other low-paying service occupations.

All this is happening not because, as the nation's editorial writers sometimes imply, America's workers don't do a good job. And it's not happening because high school graduates deserve less today than they once did. Rather, it's happening because the pro-corporate character of the nation's economy has become so blatant that CEO's and boards of directors today dominate almost every aspect of our lives.

Yet these same CEO's and boards of directors, whose profits mount because of the labor expended by their employees, often don't do anything to return the favor to those employees. Instead, management cuts jobs, fights unions, disinvests in communities, frequently keeps faulty books and in some cases, as in the recent Enron scandal, defraud their employees in ways that push those employees to the edge of financial ruin.

And as you well know, the scare of financial ruin isn't just a problem for Enron employees. Just recently, it was revealed that the workers' pensions at the Metachem chemical company in Delaware City are in jeopardy because of the firm's bankruptcy filing. Not only is the company

leaving these workers in **potential** ruin, but it has also contributed to the **ruination** of the local environment by leaving behind millions of tons of by-product materials and chemical waste. Too often such companies are respecters of neither their workers, the environment, nor community rights.

2

So, what has all this got to do with women, you might ask? Well, the answer to that is simple and it's this: you can bet your bottom dollar that when the economy has serious structural problems, those problems will hurt women by continuing old trends of male-female disparity within the workforce.

Let me give two examples of the kinds of disparity I am talking about.

The first example I want to give pertains to **OCCUPATIONAL DISPARITIES** between men and women. What I mean by occupational disparities is how women get slotted *into* certain kinds of work and get slotted *out of* other kinds of work. You might think that in our so-called "post-sexist" era, when many advertisers and companies are happy to talk about diversity and to praise the right of women to do non-traditional work – you might think that during such a time women's numbers in traditionally all-male occupations would be growing by leaps and bounds. But if you think that, you'd be wrong. .

Take the example of skilled crafts and precision repair work as an example. This job category includes carpenters, electricians, plumbers, precision metal production workers, and so on. For the most part, no blue-collar jobs are better paying than these. Yet women, in spite of making up approximately 50% of Delaware's workforce, have barely established a toe-hold within this job category. Females hold only 8.1% of such positions.

Meanwhile, as women fail to gain access to such prestigious non-traditional jobs, they remain the dominating presence in traditional low-paying "women's work" occupations like typist, records processing, and low-level health services work. In fact, this issue of low pay brings me to the second, and related, point I want to make

That point is about **WAGE DIFFERENTIALS** between men and women in the workforce – differentials that exist even when men and women do the same basic work.

As an example of this, let me briefly talk about two different job categories. The first category is that of stock and material movers. The second category is the packers and packagers category. Both job categories require approximately the same level of physical conditioning. The one difference between them is this: that whereas packers sometimes require a slightly greater level of hand-eye coordination and motor skills than do movers, movers sometimes require a slightly greater level of upper body strength than do packers. Given that these two distinctions basically

cancel each other out, the jobs are for all practical purposes the same in terms of skill, energy expenditure and so on.

Yet in spite of this equivalence between the jobs, the packers and packaging category is filled predominantly by women and the stock movers category is filled predominantly by men. What makes this problematic is that the mostly male stock movers earn more than \$12 per hour while the mostly female packers earn only \$9.75 per hour.

Unfortunately, this wage difference is not surprising once we realize how deeply ingrained it is in our economy to pay women less for their work than men are paid, even if the work is equivalent. As more and more companies downsize and temp companies like Manpower, Incorporated become some of the country's biggest employers, women can expect to feel the power of such wage biases grow even stronger, unless, that is, we fight back.

### 3

But how do we fight back? – that's the question. To arrive at the answer to this question, we have to face a few facts.

To fight back successfully, the first thing we must realize is that the old feminist idea of merely putting forward a so-called "women's agenda" and then getting a bunch of women's organizations to support it is outdated. If the feminist movement had any weakness in the past, it was its inability to build strong coalitions with other groups that also wanted social-economic change. For instance, too often the women's movement was silent on the rights of labor and was even more silent on the racism that has so often hindered our nation's forward progress. The struggle for women's rights can't afford such aloofness from other struggles. If we want something as women, we must build coalitions with others to win our goals.

Let me use racism as an example of why it's so important to create coalitions. But first, as background, let me rehash 3 points that I've already made this morning about the economy.

The first point was that downsizing and outsourcing have cost our state and the nation some of its best-paying unionized jobs, which is one of the reasons that over the last 10 years Delaware's poverty rate increased by 23%.

The second point I made was that, in spite of all the legal advances that have supposedly been made for women's rights, women are still trapped in mostly lower-paying "women's work" job. Even worse – and this was my third point – too often women are paid less than men even when they're performing the same basic tasks.

All of these three points is troubling. And yet the truth is that the statistics for racial minorities, particular blacks, are even worse. In almost every economic category in Delaware, as in the rest of the nation, African-Americans bear a disproportionate amount of economic despair.

Listen to this list of just a few race-related economic and social facts regarding to our state.

**One:** Black per capita income in Delaware is only 60% or three-fifths of white per capita income.

**Two:** The African-American unemployment rate (8.2%) is more than twice as high as the white unemployment rate (4%).

**Three:** The rate of home ownership among blacks is 20% less than among whites.

**Four:** For every white person who is imprisoned in Delaware, 9.4 blacks are imprisoned in spite of the fact that blacks make up only about 19% of the population.

**And Five:** In Delaware the infant mortality rate for blacks (14.7 deaths per 1000 births) is almost three times as high as for whites. In fact, the mortality rate for Delaware's African-American newborns is so bad that there are 46 nations in the world that have lower infant mortality rates than black Delawareans. Babies born in poor countries like Bosnia, Malaysia, Lithuania and Jamaica have a better chance of reaching their first birthday than does a black infant in Delaware. Can you imagine that?

Facts like these show the undeniable presence of a racial dimension within all the nooks and crannies of our state economy. Because of this, it's impossible to imagine struggling for women's economic rights without simultaneously struggling for economic justice for blacks and other economically hard-hit groups. This means working in coalitions that include women, African-Americans, labor, environmentalists and other constituencies in support of social-economic change.

Given today's excesses of corporate greed, we definitely need a new movement in our state and country to curb corporate power and to politically enfranchise the disenfranchised. New steps must be taken to create a newer, more vital democracy for a new day. But to do this successfully, we must rely on ourselves and build our own movement. On election day we can vote as we want as individuals, but in between elections we must forge ourselves into a mass movement that is independent of the major political parties and that is intent on becoming an autonomous force that must be reckoned with. This is how the giant unionization drives of the 1930s operated. It's also how the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s operated. Additionally, this is how the early women's movement operated. None of these movements tied itself down to an outside party; instead, they focused on creating their own destinies.

To develop creative political alternatives for the problems facing us in our changing world, we must be like the people who belonged to the movements I've just mentioned. We must be independent-spirited, united, forceful and willing to work in coalition with other constituencies hungry for economic justice and fairness for everyone.

Thank you.