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Work That Matters - A Celebration!

Address given by Jennifer Higgins, Internal Vice President

To paraphrase the philosopher George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” And that is where we find ourselves today.

Since the period of the Gilded Age, the United States has gone through a series of economic upswings and downturns. The country’s economy during the Gilded Age, which occurred after the Civil War, grew at the fastest rate in its history. Up until this point in time corporations were essentially nonexistent. However, it was during the Gilded Age that they became the dominant form of business organization and a continuously growing influence on government. The Gilded Age ended with the Panic of 1893, a deep depression that lasted until 1897 and did not end until a major political realignment that saw the rise of the Progressives of the 1910s.

The “roaring 1920s” was a reaction to the Progressives and marked by the deregulation of business. That resulted in the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression. After President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, which included the enactment of numerous regulations, including ones on banks, built what we now call the safety net and led to our victory in World War II. As a result, the country’s economy became stable and the number of families in the middle class grew markedly. This continued until the 1970s when another economic downturn occurred as the result of externalities such as the first major oil crisis and a lack of progressive thinking.

The 1980s brought us “Reaganomics”, the deregulation of business and a “so-called” smaller government (an idea that was first pioneered in the 1920s). This resulted in the economy upturning briefly, followed by a dip again in the late 1980s and early 1990s. By the mid-1990s, with a focus on deficit reduction by President Bill Clinton, along with the rise of the computer industry, the economy again began to rebound. But it faltered yet again in the early 2000s during the tenure of President George W. Bush that was marked by the deregulation of the financial industry.

During each of these economic cycles there has been the deregulation of industry, - whether it be the manufacturing or the financial sector, and each time that business regulations were loosened, an economic downturn occurred.

The most recent market crash, which some call a recession and others a mild economic depression, has not brought an era of progressive ideas. Instead we find ourselves in the midst of a general belief that if you aren't wealthy, it's your fault. We have a Republican candidate for President espousing this belief and a Governor who seems to think that making half-a-million per year places a family in the same of middle-class category that working men and women are in. Instead of valuing workers of that middle class, these politicians are pushing workers out of that class by making them public enemy number one in the court of public opinion.

This wasn't always the case. In 1901 the progressive Theodore Roosevelt became President of the United States. His domestic policies, collectively known as the Square Deal, sought to protect American consumers, regulate big business, conserve natural resources, and help organized labor. The Square Deal aimed to help the middle class and attack the plutocracy, which is the rule of the wealthy. In 1905, Theodore Roosevelt stated:

“When I say I believe in a square deal I do not mean [that it is] possible to give every man the best hand.... All I mean is that there shall not be any crookedness in the dealing.... We must treat each man on his worth and merits as a man. We must see that each is given a square deal, because he is entitled to no more and should receive no less....All any of us can pretend to do is to come as near as our imperfect abilities will allow to securing through governmental agencies an equal opportunity for each man to show the stuff that is in him”

Unfortunately, working men and women do not find themselves with such an advocate today.

Over the past two years in New Jersey, unionized public employees have been persistently and unreasonably vilified by both Republicans and Democrats and in particular Governor Christie, and behind the scenes by the presidents of New Jersey's public Universities and Colleges. The press has blindly echoed these sentiments. The public has been convinced that we are the reason the economy and State's budget is in the sad shape that it is in. However, what fails to be noted is that if the income tax on millionaires was increased, and the State had met its pension obligation for the past 20 years, we would not be in this predicament.

As a result of this trend, the door has been opened to erode the contracts for public employees that ensure that we each receive “a square deal, because [each of us] is entitled to no more and should receive no less.” Governor Christie and Dr. Cole and her fellow presidents want to make sure we receive less. It is time to stand up and say ‘no.’ We deserve a square deal as do the students we serve. For 15 years we've been doing more and more with less and less. At this juncture to be told we need to give even back more or that we aren't doing enough is unconscionable and an insult our professionalism.

To those of you who might say the work needs to get done and someone has to do it. I respond by sharing an encounter I had with a former supervisor, who has long since retired. She asked me to do the work of a third person, when I was already doing the work of two. I told her that I got paid for one job and not three. I went on to say that I was not going to day after day stay 2, 3, or 4 hours after the regular business day ended to try and complete the work of three positions. I'd been down that road before while working for other employers and would not be taken advantage of again.

I urge all of you to consider that the work you do matters, that you have value and not to lessen that value by permitting the administration to take advantage of your professionalism. Yes, there will be times when one needs to stay late to finish a project. However, this should not be a daily occurrence. And if it is, it simply means more faculty, staff and librarians are needed. Existing employees should not be run into the ground under the guise of doing more with less. We do not serve our students by operating this way nor do we help ourselves.

And to those of you who might say, times are tough, so why shouldn't we give up more? If we don't stand up and stand together and fight for a square deal now, neither our students or our children get one when they enter the workforce. The time is now for working people, whether they work in the public or private sector, to stand together and demand a "Square Deal."