

Taking the middle class off the endangered list



William H. Young

Last month, I paid a visit to Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I went there to meet with letter carriers and attended a campaign event with Sen. Hillary Clinton, the candidate NALC has endorsed for president. It was an invigorating visit for a couple of reasons.

First, with just two days' notice, our union used its grass roots network to turn out a large group of volunteer letter carriers to participate in the event at which the senator unveiled her economic plan for the country. No other union was better represented, though three presidents of other (and much larger) unions were there. Dozens of letter carriers and their families answered the call from a local phone tree and from my e-Activist message to show up and to voice their support for political change. I want to thank the leadership of our Cedar Rapids branch and the Iowa State Association for making it happen.

Second, Sen. Clinton's speech offered the first ray of hope in many years for the future of the middle class. Indeed, she campaigned across the Hawkeye State on Columbus Day in a bus labeled the "Middle Class Express."

When I grew up, a large middle class was the pride of America and the bedrock of our economic growth. It symbolized our founding principles: democracy, freedom and opportunity for all. People who worked hard—and who organized into unions—could, and did, enjoy a comfortable standard of living. They could buy a home, save for retirement, send their kids to college. But in recent years, the middle class has been under siege and its very existence endangered.

Look around you: Wages have stagnated for most middle-class workers for three decades, with only a brief exception during the mid-1990s. Entire industries—steel, airlines, automobiles, to name just three—are imploding. Three million good-paying manufacturing jobs have moved overseas in just the past six years. Instead, we see the consequences of the so-called Wal-Mart economy: Off-shore or non-union

production in a low-wage, no-benefit workplace. Income inequality has reached its highest level since 1929, on the eve of the Great Depression. The number of workers without health insurance and pension protection grows daily as employers abandon systems developed after the New Deal. And corporate and judicial hostility to union organizing has severely weakened the American labor movement's ability to respond.

At the same time, the cost of housing, health care and college tuition has soared beyond the means of millions of Americans. We have responded by piling up debt and gambling with risky subprime mortgages—a strategy that has gone bust with the recent real estate crash and its related credit crunch.

Yet in Iowa, I was energized with a new feeling of hope as Sen. Clinton outlined her plans to rebuild the middle class of my youth. No, we cannot turn back the clock and recover the industries we have lost. But we can rebuild the labor movement in the new service economy of today by enacting the Employee Free Choice Act. And we can strengthen the global competitiveness of American employers by making affordable universal health insurance available to all citizens (as so many other countries have done at much lower costs). And we can bolster America's retirement systems with sensible, practical reforms. It won't be easy, but Sen. Clinton understands that such steps are essential to rebuilding the middle class, both in reality and as a symbol of America.

While I was in Iowa, I had one more thrill. I got a chance to see an American bald eagle fly overhead. Earlier this year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that the bald eagle would finally be removed from the government's list of endangered and threatened species. Saving this magnificent bird, another inspiring symbol of America, is a major accomplishment. With the help of NALC's activists, I believe Sen. Clinton can lead the way to saving the other great symbol of our country—the American middle class. ☒