

“What Do Workers Want?”

Minnesota AFL-CIO

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Mr. Rapoport answers the question, “What do workers want?” by turning to outside resources. He uses William Morris’ definition that workers want meaningful, pleasant work in good conditions. In his speech to the Minnesota AFL-CIO, Rapoport assesses what workers are getting and whether it follows William Morris’ definition. He talks about deregulation versus the government and the current problems facing labor unions.

To preserve a democratic society, Rapoport says we need the cooperation of businesses and society. When business is concerned with the quality of life in society and society is concerned with providing quality work to its constituents, then everyone wins. Current public opinion embraces deregulation as the answer to all problems. It denounces government as the culprit in an evil scheme to cheat Americans out of their money. Rapoport is concerned about this unrestrained acceptance of deregulation. For instance, the company Kravis and Roberts “has been engaged in some two dozen buy-outs since 1979.” The company has spent \$10 billion in “financial manipulation” but “not one single new job was created.” This revenue has gone to legal fees, consultants, and other expenses. None of it was reinvested back into the communities that lost their businesses sold to Kravis and Roberts. Rapoport has noticed the use of the phrase “get the government off our backs” increasing in frequency. Stripping government of regulatory power only results in the concentration of wealth “by very few people who are

engaging in unproductive activity and who do nothing to promote the welfare of the vast majority of Americans.”

Rapoport wants to make it clear that he does not oppose the “pursuit of fame and fortune.” The American Dream is a worthy tenet of this country. If an entrepreneur offers a product that meets the needs of Americans while providing jobs in a community, he deserves fame and fortune. However, Rapoport contends that financial manipulation benefits no one except the manipulators, as in the case of Kravis and Roberts. Regulation in the U.S. has been used to protect basic human rights. For instance, child labor laws protected minors from exploitation in factories. Laws regulating the maximum number of weekly hours also protected workers. The process of collective bargaining between workers and businesses “is because we have regulation.” Rapoport wants the American public to really think about the type of society we would have if we “get the government off our backs.”

Gus Tyler’s book, *Labor at the Crossroads*, was such an inspiration that Rapoport offers to send a copy to anyone in the audience who gives him his or her address. Tyler says that labor has problems whenever business is on the down cycle. For instance, in the early 1980’s the American public experienced a bad economy, high unemployment, bad labor board appointments, and Rapoport’s foe, Ronald Reagan. During this time, Rapoport says, “labor became a popular whipping boy.” Labor unions were in a weakened state because of poor leadership and high immigration rates. Industry started to build factories in states that had unfavorable laws toward unions. The economy shifted from blue-collar work in steel and oil to substandard wages in the service sector. In the present, labor suffers too. Mechanical replacements are being used in factories to replace

people. An increasingly global economy ships jobs out of the U.S. to factories in foreign countries where labor costs are less. The “Mega Corporation” trend has grown too large to effectively regulate. Although these “all encompassing problems” seem depressing, Rapoport offers some hope. The first step in finding a solution is recognizing the problem. The AFL-CIO has already commissioned a special committee to assess the changes that are taking place relating to the “labor force, occupations, industries and technology.” Next, union members have to be educated about national trends. Educated union members are also educated voters who can voice their opinion on workforce policies. Rapoport thinks they have a good start, he just hopes that they follow through because, “There can be no good society that does not have a strong union movement.”

After reviewing societal trends in business and labor, Rapoport hopes that his audience has a better understanding of the threat to labor. He wants them to be able to compare Morris’ definition of what workers deserve with what they are getting. Do they all have meaningful, pleasant work in good conditions? They will have to work together to find answers to the problems plaguing the labor movement and preserve their right to the kind of work they want.