

Editorial: On this Labor Day, ask yourself what kind of country you want

By the Editorial Board

On this, the first Monday in September, the United States celebrates [Labor Day](#), a tribute to American workers. It's a traditional demarcation for the end of summer, and millions of working Americans get the day off.

They may even contemplate the state of the worker in the United States while doing so.

Sadly, it's not a great picture for workers.

The [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) notes that [union membership has been slipping for three decades](#). In 1983, 20.1 percent of wage and salary earners in the U.S. belonged to a union. As of 2013, only 11.2 percent did, though 16.4 percent of California workers are in a union.

If the trend continues, which seems likely, it is even lower this year.

National [unemployment](#) remains stubbornly high, [at 6.2 percent](#), given that we are in something of an economic recovery. Characteristically, [economists can't even agree precisely whether the unemployment data are valid](#).

Given that full employment is considered to be 4 percent, this figure is lackluster. Pockets of our population are even worse off: [African Americans suffer about a 12 percent unemployment rate, nearly twice the white rate of 5.7 percent](#). Nearly 40 percent of African American teenagers between 16 and 19 are unemployed, double that of white teenagers. The Latino [unemployment rate](#) is much higher than the national average, at 7.9 percent, and youth unemployment is a similar story to the African American unemployment figure.

[In California, the unemployment rate is 7.4 percent](#). It's too high, but all of the jobs lost during the recession have been regained. So there is some good news; [job growth](#) in our state is on the upswing.

The recovery of those jobs is uneven. While [Silicon Valley](#) and the [Bay Area](#) hover slightly above 4 percent unemployment, [most of the Central Valley is over 10 percent](#). Sacramento tracks the state unemployment rate at 7.4 percent.

California may not be ready for six states, but certainly it shouldn't be two, either: the struggling interior and affluent coast.

While millions of Americans are employed, the quality of that employment has slipped. Many people have two jobs and more are not working in their chosen field. In short, [a huge segment of this country is working harder for less](#).

[A growing national movement to increase the minimum wage](#) has gotten some traction, and that's good.

In San Francisco, a ballot measure before voters in November would increase that city's minimum wage from \$10.74 to \$15 by 2018. Other cities are considering similar proposals. The fewer working-class people who have to resort to government assistance to make ends meet, the better.

Peter Thiel, the billionaire co-founder of PayPal and a conservative Republican, has called for a \$12 minimum wage in California. His rationale is that the alternative to higher minimum wages is that more people wind up on welfare. Mitt Romney has commented favorably on the idea, too.

[According to the AFL-CIO](#), Fortune 500 company CEOs earn 354 times the average wage of rank-and-file workers. [That's way out of line with other industrialized nations](#). In France, CEOs earn 104 times the average workers' wage. In England, 84 times. In Japan, 67 times.

Perhaps on this Labor Day, Americans will take a moment to consider these trends and ask themselves what kind of country they want to live in. Is it a gated-community America with a super-wealthy upper class, depending on services provided by others?

Or should we choose to live in a country where more people, who work hard and play by the rules, have a fighting chance to keep up, and maybe even get ahead, as is the American way?

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