

Toward An Economic Bill of Rights

In his 1944 State of the Union address, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt called for a Second Bill of rights “under which a new basis of security and prosperity can be established for all – regardless of station, race, or creed.” Sixty-six years later, his vision for a nation, in which no member of society went “ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed and insecure,” is yet to be realized.

To prevent the grotesque social inequalities that unbridled capitalism would otherwise engender, democratic societies “decommodify” (take out of private market provision) and provide as a right such basic human needs as healthcare, childcare, education, housing and either jobs or income. Such a society must protect labor rights, ensure a sustainable environment and employ a strong social insurance system to protect, as far as is possible, all members of society from the vicissitudes of life, such as illness, disability, and old age.

The United States can readily afford these economic rights by restoring progressive taxation, cutting wasteful “defense” spending, investing in human needs and curtailing runaway health care costs via a single-payer health insurance system. Winning this second economic bill of rights — and making it applicable to all those who labor and reside within our borders — will eliminate the stark inequality in life opportunity between a child born in an inner city or an affluent suburb.

Every person is entitled to these fundamental economic and social rights:

Jobs: FDR said it well: “right to a useful and remunerative job.” This is perhaps the most fundamental criterion for creating an economy that serves human needs: that it generate living-wage jobs for all who are willing and able to work.

Food: A sufficient amount of nutritious food, free of contaminants and harmful additives, is essential for human well-being and the greater health of our society. No country can maintain stability and productivity if this basic need is not widely available without restriction. FDR’s reference to “one-third of a nation ill-fed...” still resonates today.

Housing: Safe, healthy, secure and affordable housing is a right not a privilege. An adequate place to live must provide the necessary energy sources for cooking, heating, cooling and lighting. The right to housing supersedes the profit interests of lenders, developers and landlords. If other human needs are not to be threatened, protection against forced evictions must be guaranteed.

About this Document

Toward an Economic Bill of Rights represents DSA’s first effort to define the critical economic and social needs of our society within the framework of rights. We believe that this framework can be an important and useful tool in making the case for the fundamental reforms required if this society is to reverse its backward drift. We welcome your suggestions. Comments can be sent to DSA at bill_of_rights@dsausa.org. A version of this document was released at the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit.

H **Health Care:** Preventive, acute and long-term care must be readily available as needed. Unless health care is recognized as a human right, as the U.S. did in signing the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and its accessibility ensured in law and custom, health care becomes a commodity for private purchase. If health care is left to the private sector, the nation's people will suffer as barriers to access increase, costs skyrocket, and quality deteriorates.

E **ducation:** Society has an obligation to provide free, high quality public education. First, elementary school but then, high school was regarded as generally sufficient. In the 21st Century, college, or its equivalent in career and technical training, are becoming baseline requirements, and should be free for everyone, as is provided by right in some developed countries, but not in the U.S.



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C **hild Care:** Publicly financed childcare, provided through childcare co-ops or public pre-schools, would ensure that the children of working parents receive high-quality care. Paid parental leave would enable a parent to stay at home full-time with an infant child without suffering any loss of income.

I **ncome Security:** Economic well-being means more than a living wage job. Equally important is the confidence that, in periods of unemployment, or in our retirement, or if we are or become disabled, there will be assurance of income sufficient to live in dignity.

L **eisure Time:** Free time is fundamental to cultural, political, and intellectual development. Every working person should be guaranteed a minimum of four weeks paid vacation and paid family leave, as needed. A democracy requires that citizens have time to think and to engage in politics.

A **Healthy Environment:** Whether in the workplace, community, or biosphere. A healthy environment means one that is free of toxic pollutants, pathogens and hazards. We should all have equal access to wholesome air, water, land and habitats and a just share of energy and natural resources. We all need a stable climate and ecosystems and must pass on a healthy planet to future generations.

T **he right to organize:** The free choice to form and join a union is essential to gaining and safeguarding all other economic rights. Community organizing is key to effective democratic participation in social and political life. But without the right to freely organize, bargain and engage in political and mass actions collectively, workers and others are powerless against employers, corporations and government bodies that are hostile to their interests.

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