



Another State of the Union

A chance to realize the promise of FDR’s Economic Bill of Rights.

BY GERTRUDE SCHAFFNER
GOLDBERG

Annual State of the Union messages can offer more than braggadocio and promises of comity belied by tomorrow’s tweets. Seventy-five years ago, in 1944, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had much to be proud of. In taking on the nation’s greatest depression, his New Deal had prevented economic and political collapse; employed millions of unemployed workers in jobs that greatly expanded the nation’s physical, social, cultural, and environmental resources; broadened labor rights; and initiated permanent social insurance and public welfare programs. Under his leadership, the United States and its allies were winning a world war. Instead of resting on these laurels, Roosevelt took the occasion of his 1944 State of the Union Address to propose a Second Bill of Rights, which was also known as an Economic Bill of Rights. “It is our duty now,” Roosevelt declared, “to begin to lay the plans and determine the strategy for the winning of a lasting peace and the establishment of an American standard of living higher than ever before known.”

Roosevelt’s Second Bill of Rights specified several economic rights, beginning with the right to a useful and well-paying job. Other economic rights included the right to housing, medical care, and education, along with protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, and unemployment. Perhaps aiming to transcend the racial bias of New Deal programs, Roosevelt’s Economic Bill of Rights specified that these rights were for all, “regardless of station, race, or creed.” A 21st century Economic Bill of Rights should also be for all, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, national origin, ethnicity, or disability.

In his final 1945 State of the Union Address, Roosevelt repeated his call

for an Economic Bill of Rights, emphasizing that the most fundamental right was “the right to a useful and remunerative job.” Such a federal job guarantee has been in eclipse for 40 years, after the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act of 1978 failed to reduce unemployment (see Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg, “Trying Again for Full Employment,” *D&S*, November/December 2018). The goal of a job guarantee, however, is re-emerging—with the support of prominent progressives, some of them presidential aspirants.



Drumming up fake emergencies, Donald Trump ignores a real one: climate change. An Economic Bill of Rights for the 21st century should include a right that is deeply threatened today: the right to a sustainable environment. The New Deal was presciently green—including reforestation (planting more trees than in the country’s entire previous history), protection of wildlife, and soil conservation. In fact, the New Deal solved the environmental crisis of its day, the devastating Dust Bowl. Extending the Economic Bill of Rights to include the right to a sustainable environment—on which all economic activity and human life itself depends—is thus very much in the spirit of the original New Deal.

Soon after the 2019 State of the Union Address—one inimical to human rights—Rep. Frederica Wilson (D-Fla.), co-chair of the House of

Representatives Full Employment Caucus, re-introduced H.R. 1000, the Jobs for All Act, which would establish a Federal Guarantee of useful, living-wage work. H.R. 1000 uses the New Deal model of direct government job-creation to guarantee employment and create jobs that restore the environment and provide goods and services that use relatively few fossil fuels. Moreover, H.R. 1000 requires all activities funded by the program to be carried out in an ecologically sustainable manner. Further, in assuring work for all job-seekers, it removes a major barrier to coping with the environmental crisis: fear of job loss. Such a job *guarantee*, not simply job creation, is essential to a Green New Deal. Although it is a universal measure that serves all job-seekers, H.R. 1000 requires that at least 35% of people employed on a project qualify as disadvantaged.

In another step toward this fundamental economic right to employment, presidential candidate Senator Cory Booker (D-N.J.) proposed the Federal Jobs Guarantee Development Act. This would allow high-need communities to participate in a three-year pilot program to guarantee the option of employment for all of its residents. Though not a job guarantee and confined to areas with disadvantaged populations, Booker’s proposal could provide a path toward nationwide job assurance.

Let us celebrate the 75th anniversary of Roosevelt’s Second Bill of Rights by advocating legislation that would establish a green job guarantee and other essential economic and environmental rights. **D&S**

GERTRUDE SCHAFFNER GOLDBERG is co-founder and chair of the National Jobs for All Network and is co-chair of the Columbia University Seminar on Full Employment, Social Welfare, and Equity.