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USA

# Regulation - Who Needs It?

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**Surrounded by CEOs and autoworkers bused in for the event, Donald Trump made it clear during his March 14th appearance in the Detroit area that he was going to get rid of a federal regulation in order to free up the industry so it could “make thousands and thousands and thousands of additional cars.” For him it was a simple decision: “If the standards threatened auto jobs, then common-sense changes could have and should have been made.”**

Trump sees regulations for higher fuel efficiency burdens auto manufacturers and drives up the cost for potential buyers. In Trump’s vocabulary, regulations are ALL bad. (Of course Trump sees regulations around reproductive rights as good, but consistency isn’t one of his characteristics.)

Trump talks as if regulations were designed by federal bureaucrats to give them greater power over corporations and consumers. That view turns the history of health and safety regulations upside down!

We have all heard of food contamination in preparation and packaging. Every year we learn of products that must be recalled because they have resulted in deaths and injuries “whether we are talking about GM ignition switches or baby cribs.

But these are cases where the company did not meet regulations that had been established. Take away inspectors so regulations are not enforced, or reduce/wipe regulations off the books and we knowingly endanger ourselves. Why should companies be allowed to sell products that are unsafe at whatever cost?

## Fuel Efficiency

Originally passed during the Middle East countries’ oil embargo back in 1975, fuel efficiency legislation only later became a mechanism for decreasing human-caused CO2 emissions. Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) regulations are based on how far the vehicle travels on a gallon of fuel. Standards were not increased for 20 years; as oil prices declined automakers built bigger vehicles and doubled the average horsepower.

But California, concerned about air pollution, adopted a higher benchmark in 2002. The Environmental Protection Agency, in charge of the CAFE standards, granted the state, and more than a dozen others, waivers enforcing more stringent rules. But when California cited climate change as the reason for a waiver during the George W. Bush administration, the request was denied. California’s attorney general then sued.

The issue was settled when Barack Obama became president and negotiated to have the EPA adopt the California standard. In the first phase (2012-16) increased fuel efficiency, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists, saved Americans more than \$17 billion. Yet the UCS noted that each year, under the current CAFE standard, 53,000 people suffer early death from vehicle pollution. [1]

For its part, the EPA projected that by 2025 the higher standards would decrease oil consumption by 12 billion barrels, produce six billion fewer metric tons of greenhouse pollution and save consumers \$1.7 trillion. [2]

Additionally a 2012 study by the Blue-Green Alliance “an organization made up of environmental organizations, businesses and unions” reported that the new technology would create 50,000 auto parts and assembly jobs by

2030. [3]

Investigating a wide range of factors to set the standard for CAFE's second phase (2022-25), the midterm report established an average of 54.5 miles per gallon. Since the review was finalized a year early, Obama signed off on it last January.

On March 15th Trump announced he would direct the EPA to reopen and review the report at the request of automakers who claim the evaluation was truncated. The EPA website states that the evaluation will be completed by April 1, 2018.

Unless Trump demands an end to waivers, states with a higher standard will continue to set the bar because they represent 40% of the national market. This means manufacturers will be forced to adhere to the higher standard. And given that the U.S. industry exists in a world market where competition demands greater fuel efficiency and electrification, the consequences of a review with a revised lower standard might not mean much for auto manufacturers, although they are always pleased when they have more wiggle room.

Trump's announcement does accomplish three goals. First, it makes his administration seem like they are moving ahead on their promise to rebuild U.S. manufacturing, creating thousands of jobs. Second, he underscores his mantra that regulation is a ball and chain that inhibits industry. And third, he thumbs his nose at those who want to drastically curtail usage of fossil fuels in the name of saving the planet. As Trump remarked, "The assault on the American auto industry is over. Believe me, it's over."

## Regulation and Labor's Trap

Regulations in capitalist economies enforce standards to protect workers or the larger community when people demand action. The passage of the Clean Air Act of 1970 and creation of the EPA is the direct result of unions, organizations concerned with public health and environmental organizations.

In particular, Tony Mazzocchi of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers read Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring* and realized OCAW workers were in danger. He pushed workers to understand why they needed to fight for clean air legislation, made a bridge to the environmental movement and educated them to support worker health and safety. That's why it is shocking that the U.S. labor movement has been trapped by Trump's promise to create jobs through deregulation.

Building trades officials were delighted with Trump's order to the Army of Engineers for a go-ahead to complete the Keystone and Dakota Access pipelines. In fact drastically reducing dependence on fossil fuels means employing people to make buildings energy efficient, building a mass transportation system both regionally and nationally and continuing to develop solar, wind, geothermal and water power. These are the jobs we need to demand!

My own union, the UAW, embraces Trump's "Buy American" "Hire American" mantra. But it's not possible to oppose some of the Trump agenda and enthusiastically support other parts. Unions don't realize that the narrow "We only care about ourselves" perspective takes us away from seeing ourselves as having more in common across the globe with other workers than with the multinationals who employ us and pollute our cities and countryside.

Frankly it is chilling to read that the Trump budget calls for a 21% cut to the Department of Labor and a 34% cut to the EPA. If those cuts are implemented, inspectors who carry out the work of enforcing the laws may be on the

chopping block.

When the Occupational Health and Safety Act was passed in 1970 there were 14,000 on-the-job fatalities and two million workers with serious on-the-job injuries each year. Today worker deaths have been reduced by two-thirds. Thousands more suffer debilitating injuries from improperly maintained equipment, tools and machines.

In the auto parts plant where I worked, one young woman was scalped by an assembly line that was later determined to be running too fast. Of course some industries are far more dangerous than others, but injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome occur at every workplace. We need a strengthening, not a weakening, of health and safety protections. This is particularly true for non-union manufacturing plants where the injury rate is high.

## More Cars on the Road?

It is also chilling to hear Trump speak of the production of many thousands more cars. Last year the U.S. auto industry produced more than 17.6 million! Climate change isn't a problem for the future; we already see the effects of burning coal, oil and gas. We need to move rapidly from reliance on cars and trucks to a system of mass transit. Auto plants can be retooled to produce trains, fuel efficient busses and even components for turbines. That's the kind of infrastructure we need to build, not more pipelines, cars and highways!

During World War I and World War II, auto plants were quickly converted to defense production. But workers were laid off and communities surrounding the plants left to make do as best they could. That must not happen again! Environmental justice demands that society guarantee full compensation to workers and frontline communities most directly affected.

In the process of moving to an energy-efficient society we have the opportunity to guarantee economic security and reduce inequality. The destruction that capitalism has unleashed in its continued demand for accumulation and profit needs to be replaced by the imperative to put the wellbeing of all at the center of the transition — beginning with those most harmed by pollution and climate change.

Just as regulations have offered some protection to the hazards of industrial production, a “just transition” is an essential tool to move from our fossil fuel economy to a sustainable one. No one should have to choose between a job and one's life.

Certainly we are far from the kind of democratic planning that could bring us this transition, but only in maintaining the vision of a better life are we able to counter the rhetoric of right-wing populism — where words are twisted to mean their opposite, and a bully tells us that everything will be all right if we let him make the decisions.

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