

Why Must Government Be So Cruel to Disabled People?

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A sign designating wheelchair access, in a file photo. Susan Mortimer/The Epoch Times



By Jeffrey A. Tucker
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Commentary

The Department of Labor, acting with absolutely no legislative mandate, has proposed a new rule to phase out job opportunities for disabled people. The notion is to get rid of a special category of wages called subminimum that pertains to people with disabilities. It allows businesses to hire them and allow them to work without the high expectations that come with high minimum wages.

More than 100,000 people depend on subminimum-wage jobs for meaning in life. This new bureaucratic initiative would condemn the whole lot of these people to unemployment.



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Yes, I know it seems incredible but it is merely an extension of the war



on the disabled that began many decades ago with the Americans with Disabilities Act that dramatically and predictably increased



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unemployment among disabled people. These new efforts will cause more devastation and hardship in ways that the Department of Labor surely understands if anyone there has a modicum of economic intelligence.

The Secretary of Labor [said](#) in a statement: “With this proposal, the department expects that many workers currently paid subminimum wages under Section 14(c) will move into jobs that pay full wages, which will improve their economic wellbeing and strengthen inclusion for people with disabilities in the workforce.”

In fact, that is not what happens. There is a reason for the subminimum wage: it makes employment possible. Without it, many of these people will sit at home and become more dependent on welfare only. These kinds of legal changes wreck lives! No one can convince me that these agencies do not understand this. They surely do.

Why, then, do they do this?

Let me pause to tell a quick story from my childhood. My first real job at the age of perhaps 14 was working in a department store after school hours to clean up the place. I vacuumed and waxed. I picked

pins out of carpets in the changing rooms. I cleaned bathrooms and crushed boxes out back. Then I locked up the place and went home.

In this job, I worked with a young man named Tad. He had a misshapen face and an odd walk and spoke in an awkward way. I'm sure his condition had a name but I do not recall it. I only recall that he was a great friend with a sweet spirit. He wasn't very productive but I took him under my wing and we worked together. I would assign him tasks and we would dance and sing together while we worked.

We both earned the minimum wage. At that point in my life, I really did not care about the wages. I just wanted something to do that was exciting. And this was an exciting job.

One day we came in and there was a new sign up from the Department of Labor that announced a higher minimum wage. Tad was super-excited. He said that we were both getting a raise. I was skeptical simply because I knew that money does not grow from trees owned by bureaucracies. The money came in the door from customers and was then paid to employees. So I had my doubts.

The next day I came in to do my work but Tad was not there. I asked management where he was. The owner explained that with the higher minimum wage, he could not make it work to have us both working. I was a better worker so I kept my job but Tad could not. "We only hired him in Christian charity in any case," he explained.

So that night I worked alone. So too for every night after. I knew for sure that Tad must have been very sad to not have his job anymore. I never called him though. I didn't really have his phone number. Plus, I felt a sense of guilt that I had a job and he did not. There was nothing I could do about it.

A year later, I made an inquiry about what he was doing. Then I got the sad news that he had died. I have no idea whether and to what extent his loneliness and idleness contributed to that but it might have. Regardless, it is extremely sad to me that he likely spent the last year of his life without a job.

For many families, this becomes extremely personal. Millions of kids in this country are afflicted with difficult problems such as autism that make them not independent. Still, they desperately need jobs, even if they are simple ones. To make that possible, they should be able to work at any price, even at zero wages if possible. They need the dignity that comes from productive work.

I'm very close to one such person, the sweetest and kindest kid you will ever know but he cannot live alone and must be constantly monitored because otherwise he becomes confused and shuts down due to his form of autism. He works in a library in a special program and arranges the books. He is very good at it but it is hardly a normal job. He benefits from the subminimum wage without which he would not have any work hours at all. His job is what makes him feel like an adult, and feeling that way is the key to his happy life.

This entire topic is deeply frustrating to me because we've seen many decades of terrible policy as it pertains to disabled people, starting most especially with the huge Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. I was very early in my work, in journalism school, and was tasked with examining this legislation. In doing so, I was working closely with the top sponsoring organizations and the very wealthy benefactor who was pushing it.

Upon close examination, I realized a number of points.

First, it was obvious to me that by massively increasing payments to people with disabilities, it would disincentivize normal work life and boost unemployment.

Second, by weaponizing disabled people with litigation powers to claim discrimination, it would make them less likely to be hired because the legal risk was too high.

Third, by demanding all sorts of physical changes to buildings, it would cause the disabled community to move gradually from a position of public empathy to become a huge source of annoyance

from people who otherwise would have been thrilled to help them in any possible way.

All of this was obvious to me by looking at what was coming. I explained this in great detail to the heads of the lobbying organizations and then personally to the rich benefactor who was pushing this legislation so hard. They immediately flagged me as the enemy and shut me out of further access to documents and legislators. In other words, this act was going to pass one way or another.

Meanwhile, I was absolutely certain that the act would be terrible for the disabled community about whom I cared a great deal.

Sure enough, two MIT economists documented the following in a 1998 [paper](#): “Although the ADA was meant to increase employment of the disabled, it also increases costs for employers. The net theoretical impact turns on which provisions of the ADA are most important and how responsive firm entry and exit is to profits. Empirical results using the CPS suggest that the ADA had a negative effect on the employment of disabled men of all working ages and disabled women under age 40. The effects appear to be larger in medium size firms, possibly because small firms were exempt from the ADA. The effects are also larger in states where there have been more ADA-related discrimination charges. **Estimates of effects on hiring and firing suggest the ADA reduced hiring of the disabled.**” (my emphasis)

Absolutely no doubt about it. The new rule will do the same. It's like this ongoing effort to squeeze disabled people out of the workforce. It is tragic. One could say this is an example of good intentions gone bad, but we have decades of research plus basic economic logic showing the ill-effects of such interventions. At some point, we have to observe that these people just do not care. That is simply cruelty under the guise of caring.

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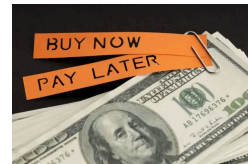
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