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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Hope Amid the Gloom

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

Is the end of the war in sight?

I don't mean Iraq. I'm talking about the war against working people in the U.S. that has taken such a vicious economic toll over the past three decades.

Even as Americans by the thousands sign up for jobless benefits in this horrendous holiday season, or line up to declare bankruptcy, or stand sorrowfully aside as their homes are foreclosed upon, there are some slender reasons to hope.

On Friday, George W. Bush, in the slapstick final weeks of his disastrous presidency, grudgingly announced that, yes, emergency loans would be made available to prevent the collapse of the U.S. auto industry. He looked like a boy who had been forced to eat his spinach, or drink his castor oil.

But the economy is in such an awful state that even the most backward administration of our lifetime recognized that risking the chain reaction of a complete auto industry meltdown was not an option. (The Bush deal is unfairly onerous to auto workers, but the loans will serve as a bridge to the Obama era, when, presumably, a more equitable arrangement could be worked out.)

Mr. Bush's announcement came a day after it was learned that President-elect Obama had chosen Representative Hilda Solis of California, a fierce advocate of workers, to be his labor secretary. The Obama administration also is committed to moving quickly on an economic stimulus package that could reach \$1 trillion over two years.

These are developments that portend a radically different environment for the nation's workers. From Ronald Reagan's voodoo economics to Henry Paulson's \$700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program, we've put the mighty resources of the national government overwhelmingly on the side of those who were already rich and powerful.

Ordinary workers have suffered. It took years to get a lousy little boost in the minimum wage for the working poor. Attempts to expand health insurance coverage were fought almost to a standstill. Guaranteed pensions vanished. And the maniacs who set fire to the economy with their incendiary financial instruments (yet another form of voodoo) were hot to privatize Social Security.

As Andy Stern, president of the huge Service Employees International Union, told me on Friday: "We've had a 25-year experience with market-worshipping, deregulating, privatizing, trickle-down policies, and it has ended us up with the greatest economy on earth staggering, and with the greatest amount of inequality since

the Great Depression.”

The contempt for workers over this long period has hardly been hidden. Until Mr. Bush was forced by circumstances to tap the TARP program for the auto industry loans (small potatoes compared with the gargantuan Wall Street bailouts), the administration had gone out of its way to keep the program’s hundreds of billions of dollars reserved for the elites of the financial services industry and their associates.

These elites, of course, were the geniuses who ruined the most powerful economy on earth. When Citigroup went into yet another swoon last month, the rush to rescue it was breathtaking. Posses don’t come more elegant: the outgoing treasury secretary, Hank Paulson; the incoming treasury secretary (and president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York), Timothy Geithner; and a former treasury secretary (not to mention Citigroup board member), Robert Rubin.

They materialized magnificently, armed with hundreds of billions in taxpayer bailout cash.

Leo Gerard, president of the steelworkers union, summed up the government’s attitude nicely when he said: “Washington will bail out those who shower before work, but not those who shower afterwards.”

Working people have been treated like enemies, a class to be preyed upon. Labor unions were ferociously attacked. Jobs were shipped overseas by the millions. People were hired as temps or consultants so benefits could be denied.

All of this may finally be changing. It remains to be seen how strong a voice Ms. Solis will have in the Obama administration, but she is pro-worker to her core, a politician who actually knows what it’s like to walk a picket line.

And there have been other promising developments. More than 200 laid-off workers staged a successful six-day sit-in at a factory in Chicago this month, demanding and eventually getting severance pay and benefits that they were owed by law.

A more substantial victory occurred in Tar Heel, N.C., last week when workers, after a brutal 15-year struggle, succeeded in organizing the notorious Smithfield Packing slaughterhouse, the largest hog-killing and processing plant in the world.

These are shaky steps in the overall scheme of things, to be sure. But at long last, they are steps in the right direction.

Gail Collins is off today.

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