RE: LIVING WAGES AND STACKABLE APPRENTICESHIPS AND CREDENTIALS (May 10, 2023)

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When we talk about the optimal wages a registered apprenticeship should yield and the structures that should be permissible in the design of registered apprenticeships, there are nuanced issues that come into play. These issues can lead to unintended consequences that need to be considered before advocating for actions that could unintentionally undermine our common goals and aspirations. I would like to shed light on two such issues.

**ISSUE 1:** We have to acknowledge that *apprenticeship* is not synonymous with *union* and the *apprenticeship system* is not anonymous with the *labor movement*. There are many industries across the country that participate in the apprenticeship system but are not organized and, as such, the workers have no guarantee of collective voice or power to influence wages, working conditions, or anything else.

I trust that the labor movement is serious about advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion, tackling occupational segregation, engaging more women and low wage workers, and assuring all workers of a living or family sustaining wage. But proposals insisting on a guaranteed, universal wage calculation at the conclusion of an apprenticeship, or a “one size fits all” approach to the design and structure of apprenticeships and career pathways, is not realistic or fair in a society based on capitalism *and* will make it even more difficult to make the apprenticeship system equitable, available, and accessible to new and emerging industries.

There is no question that there are advantages to workers represented by a strong and effective union. Personally, I believe that Early Care and Education (ECE) needs to be organized if early educators and care workers are ever to receive the same benefits and economic security as K-12 teachers (for example). But in the meantime, if we are sincere in wanting to branch out and include new and emerging sectors that are unorganized, we cannot adopt policies and practices that inadvertently punish those industries for the fact that the labor movement has not prioritized them.

For example, it would be magnificent to guarantee that within the RA system ECE workers earn *at least* a living wage. But at the present time, the ECE workforce has no collective voice or power to move toward achieving that goal, and the labor movement has been unable to address the issue on any significant scale. As such, adopting such a policy will only serve to exclude the large, diverse, female-dominated, historically marginalized population that comprises the ECE workforce.

The economic system in this country has created a stranglehold that keeps ECE workers in poverty. Once we tackle the challenge of dismantling that stranglehold, hundreds of thousands of ECE workers will be instantly on a trajectory toward middle class opportunities and economic stability and mobility.

At that point, instituting a requirement of living wages at the conclusion of an apprenticeship program would be a welcome and realistic policy. But until the RA system, and the labor movement within it, commits to *solving* the national child care crisis that prevents millions of workers - and women, in particular - from engaging in the world of work, then such a policy is both punitive and exclusionary.

**ISSUE 2:** In the face of the national child care crisis, there is a movement toward requiring that unionized industries wanting to receive particular federal funding must provide child care to their workers as one of the support services critical to enabling a functional workforce. In some ways, this is a laudable and necessary step forward because without quality child care provided by well-trained, highly skilled early educators - no workers in any industry can go to work.

But the unanswered question is: how will we make sure that the ECE workers relied upon to provide quality early education and child care for children of working parents are receiving wages, apprenticeship opportunities, and benefits commensurate with union members who benefit from their labor? For the labor unions to fight for their members but **not** the workers in essential industries that enable those members to take union jobs, is to perpetuate an inequitable, discriminatory, and unjust economic and social system with severe consequences for historically marginalized communities.

I invite and challenge the Department of Labor and the labor movement to fight for *all* workers to earn living wages, to benefit from collective bargaining agreements, and to be treated as worthy, respected workers deserving of representation. But until that time, we need to recognize that requirements related to guaranteed wages and a “one size fits all” model of apprenticeship program design - which may make sense in the universe of organized labor - will significantly undermine the efforts of those of us developing quality, rigorous RAs for industries not yet organized, many of whom represent precisely the diverse communities that the RA system has been unable to engage in sufficient and proportionate numbers.