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**"Do political parties matter
anymore?"**

Letter to the Editor:

*(In response to R.A. Shackles letter (March, 2012 FAN)
(Editor's apology: Actually, R.A. Shackles had forwarded
an email to FAN that someone else had written, so we apologize
for crediting him as the author.)*

I'd like to respond to R. A. Shackles' letter in your last issue. He raises some great points and concerns and I highly applaud the spirit of the letter, but it would serve readers a little better had he probed the issues he cited a bit further.

He seems a bit irritated by the "Occupy Wall Street" protesters, praises the availability of produce and consumer items he can purchase at big box retailers such as Wal-Mart or Meijer, defends their quest for profit, and calls the occupiers "greedy" in turn. I see no point in attacking him or the profit motives of various retailers. His points are generally valid and at the heart of many consumers. But in turn, I think a better regard for the motives and values of the protesters deserves broader recognition and support.

It was not the ultimate goal of the "Occupy Wall Street" protests to call for an end to corporate profits or an end to capitalism for that matter. Instead, at the heart of the issues the protesters are raising is the sense that we seem to have lost our representative government to the will of big banks and large corporations. It is important to realize that the protesters came from a cross-section of the American population. There were unemployed people, working people, the poor, the middle class, and students, many of whom are burdened with high student loan debt. They were not a batch of "dirty hippies" or perennial left-wingers. They were peaceable, but not always welcomed by municipal authorities, which has been very unfortunate and is a violation of constitutional rights to petition for redress.

Historically, the U.S. employed Keynesian (John Maynard Keynes) economic principles that called for a government to be frugal in times of surplus and pump money into the economy during times of recession or depression. Beginning in the 1930's, the government instituted programs like the WPA, and during the Nixon administration, the CETA program that put people to work at state and even local levels doing jobs in and for the public sector. Some architecturally beautiful schools, post offices, and libraries were built during the Great Depression. Derelict buildings were also removed by WPA employees. Our national parks and state forests were improved, trails and even housing facilities were created by the CCC. Many unemployed people found jobs working for cities, counties and public schools and performed highly valued services to their communities in meaningful ways. This was not welfare, but real work. When the CETA program ended, many were taken into full time long-term employment. The goal of pumping money into the economy through a trickle "up" instead of a "down" economic system resulted in far more good than the trickle down system, which has not done anything sustainable or resulted in a significant drop in unemployment rates.

So why hasn't our President and the Congress instituted some programs similar to the WPA, CCC or CETA during an economic crisis which has seen devastating unemployment and home foreclosures? Surely, we can look around our communities and envision many projects that require attention, need doing but don't have money or people to do them. In simple terms, there has been no evidence of a will to do this at any level of government. We only hear calls for more tax breaks and less regulation of big corporations and those enjoying the highest incomes. We tried this and it blew up in our faces.

From 1947 to the late 1970's, we enjoyed an income growth that kept pace with inflation and didn't see a widening gap between the incomes of the rich and poor. Many people purchased homes and the boom period of home building took place. Conservatives in government continued pushing for less and less regulation and as this and the giving up the industrial base of our economy happened, the income gap increased. We can now take note that many corporations have a 200 percent difference in the wages received by those at the top and the people doing the actual work. And this trend seems to continue.

I do not believe we will see any public works programs, not only because there is no will to implement it in Washington, but also it would cost a lot to get it going. If the President or the Congress could pass such a program, the financing for a works program would have to be sought from Wall Street banks. With all the money we owe for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the interest they would charge the government would be criminal usury and might approach 20 percent. No government, or person for that matter, likes taking a loan at that rate. So it appears Wall Street will sit on their cash while Congress tries to come up with schemes to make them more.

The War on Poverty is over; HUD ended it for all intents and purposes in the 1970's. The housing market is the worst it has ever been. The real estate market is glutted with foreclosed and unoccupied homes and retail spaces. The economy is incredibly stagnant. Driving down Eight Mile Road proves that America has steadily given up its former industrial base and thousands of lives were devastated, and a major city ruined as well. This didn't happen over night. It began in the 1980's and continued since then. The gap between rich and poor has grown ever wider.

Here and elsewhere in our nation, people who have never once applied for a dime of public assistance in their lives have had to do so. Food banks and various charity organizations are besieged with families calling

for help.

These people are not lazy or unwilling to work, as some falsely believe. Like everyone else, they hope for a better life, healthcare, a decent retirement. They do not like finding themselves at the bottom of society's ladder. If you question this, then attend a food drive at a local church and talk to people who line up for help. Ask them to tell you their story. If you would take time to look at the grim statistics that go with recessions, you will see that homicide, suicide, spousal and child abuse rates soar and families are stretched to breaking points.

Will reliance on conservatives, liberals, the Tea Party, or perhaps Ron Paul be sufficient to turn the country around? The answer is definitely no. It is sad, but we may have reached the point where the usual political boundaries between parties have become meaningless. Shackles' statement that our politicians as well as corporations are "greedy," is really only a statement of part of the problem. The problem is, neither our government, nor we the people has control of the economy. Wall Street has our politicians sewn up in their pockets. I am not optimistic this will change soon.

The Occupy Wall Street movement called for redress of our economic system, an end to bigger tax breaks for the very rich, a return to a government by and for the people, and a fair distribution of wealth. They have also pointed out that CEOs and top executives here in the U.S. make more than 200 percent more than the bulk of their employees. More than they do in any industrialized nation. In spite of any cynicism toward the motives of the people behind this movement, it has caused politicians of all stripes to sit up and take notice. Politicians do respect numbers, and if people turn out to petition for redress, they will take notice. And I've got news for you. A class struggle is taking place in spite of denials to the contrary.

Shackles needs also to realize that when a community allows a Wal-Mart or similar big box retailer into their community that major tax abatements and infrastructure improvements such as roads, sewers, increases to the electricity grid, and water availability need to be made. Our communities, not only those in Michigan, but all over the U.S., are too ready to grant the tax breaks, hang the power lines and build the roads, often at no cost to the retailer. For some retailers, these tax breaks will become a big chunk of their profit margins, surpassing the profits generated off the sale of consumer goods. So while we enjoy our access to a bigger variety of produce, imported foods and goods produced overseas, our communities must foot the bill. We, the working people, the consumers, and the real taxpayers must pay. Cities and states should not have to outbid one another to offer the most tax breaks and lowest wages to attract a big box store or a factory. We are giving everything to them, but receiving very little in return.

Clearly, something must be done. Think about it. Do we have politicians who truly speak for the working people anymore and take our interests to Washington? The answer is an emphatic NO. If the Occupy movement spreads more, as we've seen here at the mall and in front of the Bank of America in Muskegon County, then I believe this is a small step in the right direction. We will, however, need to find far better representatives who will fight for our rights and our jobs in government. The rich need to pay their fair share, and corporations need to realize that paying taxes is part of good citizenship. If we are stuck with the idea of corporate personhood (a completely bad idea in my opinion) then we should rightfully demand they become better citizens. Furthermore, if we are not going to reclaim our ability to make goods and create wealth for not only stockholders, but also ourselves, then this rotten system has to change.

If we allow our present economic course to continue, we will probably not see any truly significant rise in employment. For most of those who have found jobs are working for significantly less than they were paid on their former jobs. It is factually borne out that the majority of those who get laid off during a recession never recover the wages lost and get back to what they once had earned in better times. Many have relied on credit card debt as a temporary fix, and after the bad mortgages that were handed out, this is another crisis heading toward us. Some of those who found work after a long layoff during this recession aren't even making a quarter of what they once did. They and their children as well can look forward to working longer, harder, and for less pay and benefits. The American dream of home ownership and getting their children into college will be lost to them. We will operate like many Third World countries do with vast discrepancies between rich and poor.

Do what you can in your own community. One doesn't necessarily need to attend every protest, though it sure wouldn't hurt to add your voice. Make some donations to a local food pantry. There's a place to start. Sit down and have an honest conversation with someone who can't find work. Ask every politician who runs for office, regardless of their party, what they plan to do to take back control of the economy and how they will fight for a better standard of living. Will they bar the lobbyists from the doors of their offices? Will they reject super PAC campaign funds? What will they do to help us take our country back? I want an answer from every politician who seeks my vote. Unless they give you an honest answer without "ands" "ifs" or "buts," do not vote for them regardless of their party. Without showing the numbers and voicing our opinion, R.A. Shackles is right. You can't hope for much to come out of Washington.

– Eric Glatz, Fruitport