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**The Union for the
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In My Opinion: In the Real West Wing, No Action on Outsourcing

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CWA President

The popular TV series *The West Wing* became almost a reality show on April 21 when it featured CWA fighting to keep information technology jobs from being outsourced overseas. While I've joked that I'd have liked to have had George Clooney play my part, it was great to see this issue elevated to prime time and our union spotlighted for our real-life role in protecting good American jobs.

Only the day before the show, CWA members were on hand at the Sprint shareholder meeting in Kansas City to rally and press for an investigation of the impact of offshoring on Sprint's brand name. Meanwhile, other CWAers were preparing to make outsourcing an issue at IBM, GE, and AT&T shareholder meetings.

And that same week, CWA was in bargaining with SBC Communications where, among various employment security issues, we were pushing to give our members the DSL tech support work that is being done in India and the Philippines.

Offshoring of jobs is nothing new, but it has become a hot topic now that the jobs of highly educated and skilled white collar workers, even professionals such as radiologists, accountants and journalists, are being sent to cheap labor areas around the world.

The issue was not as high-profile when it was mainly manufacturing jobs that were going abroad. Of course, we were told that displaced factory workers would be able to retrain and move into information age technical and service jobs as we moved into a new technology era.

But then white collar customer service and back-office jobs began joining the blue-collar exodus. And when the smoke cleared from the dot-com implosion, we saw tens of thousands of computer programming and network engineering jobs

streaming to India and more recently Russia, China and other nations.

In a widely quoted prediction, Forrester Research says about 3.3 million technical and service jobs will be shipped overseas in the next 15 years. But University of California at Berkeley researchers have an even bleaker estimate, saying as many as 14 million American jobs may be at risk to offshoring in the next few years.

The Bush administration, which has presided over a net loss of 2.8 million jobs, speaks of doubling the number of people receiving retraining assistance. Besides the obvious first question - retraining for what? - there is another question: where's the money? There is not a single penny budgeted for training, and in fact the Bush budget effectively cuts worker retaining programs by about \$1 billion.

The administration's philosophy was summed up by its chief economist, who called global outsourcing "a good thing." He and other free-trade cheerleaders cite an 1817 economic theory that jobs lost to low-wage producers overseas are offset by new jobs supposedly created by domestic investment from labor savings here at home.

But nobody can tell us what those new jobs might be since employers have become ever more creative and adept at offshoring jobs that we never dreamed would leave our country. Where there's a will there's a way, as they say, and you can be sure that American business has a powerful will to find every means to drive down labor costs.

In contrast to the Bush response, Senator John Kerry has proposed several measures, such as requiring companies to disclose plans to send jobs overseas, limiting federal contracts solely to companies employing U.S. workers, and ending tax breaks for companies that move jobs offshore. He has also sponsored legislation to require telephone customer service agents to identify their locations.

There is no easy, all-encompassing solution. Probably the real answer is the one expressed by CNN's Lou Dobbs, who has become a leading media critic of shipping jobs abroad. He thinks it is a matter of making job destruction through outsourcing socially unacceptable.

It's true that media attention has caused some companies to retreat from plans to move jobs overseas. The Indian government and trade associations that promote outsourcing are mounting public relations and lobbying initiatives to counter the public backlash, which has spawned bills in at least 40 state legislatures to ban contracts to companies that outsource.

I'm old enough to remember a time when mass layoff announcements were considered shameful, a sign that a

corporate chief executive had failed in his business plan and was letting his workers and local communities down. Now the reverse is true - Wall Street applauds when companies cut what they so coldly call "head count."

With all of the media and public attention focused today on outsourcing, maybe we're beginning to return to a time when American citizens hold business accountable for being socially responsible.

One thing is clear: The best way to change America's policies and public attitude about keeping good jobs in this country is by changing, this November, the crowd that inhabits the real West Wing.

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