
Interview: Juanita Walton

Auto Is 'Very Large Part Of St. Louis Community'

State Rep. Juanita Head Walton (D) represents the 81st District in the Missouri General Assembly, which encompasses North St. Louis County. She is the president of the Missouri Legislative Black Caucus Foundation and Secretary of the National Order of Women Legislators. In 2004, she endorsed Lyndon LaRouche for President in the Missouri Democratic Primary, and invited the candidate to speak in St. Louis along with other legislators. Representative Walton sponsored legislation in 2004 to reform the election laws in Missouri, to return to a system of paper ballots. She serves on the Veterans, Appropriations for General Administration, and Higher Education Committees in the Legislature.

Representative Walton was interviewed on May 27 and May 31, by Richard Freeman.

EIR: On May 13, you sent a letter to members of Congress, along with Rep. John Bowman and Rep. Craig Bland, entitled a "Resolution Urging Congress to Take Emergency Action to Save the Economy and the Auto Industry." What do you think is the importance of taking such an action?

Walton: Before I answer, I'll add that those other two legislators are auto workers: [Rep. Craig] Bland works for Ford, and [Rep. John] Bowman works for DaimlerChrysler. Being a legislator and a state rep in St. Louis County, north county,¹ I have an awful lot of constituents who are working at Chrysler, GM, and Ford, and also retirees. In fact I have an aunt who is a retiree from GM, who lives in my district. So it will affect, in terms of the downfall of the automotive industry, my community tremendously. One of the things which we've just had recently, within the last three years in north county, is Ford talking about closing the plant here in Hazelwood. It's not in my district, but I have a lot of Ford employees that live in my district that work there at that plant.

And of course not only would it affect those employees who work at that plant; there are residual jobs also in terms of the parts suppliers, other companies that feed off of that auto industry, or that plant.

EIR: There is also a plant in the city of Wentzville?

Walton: The plant in Wentzville is a General Motors plant. The city of Hazelwood has a Ford plant. The city of Fenton, which is in St. Louis county, has a DaimlerChrysler plant. I

1. "North county" and "south county" refer to the north and south legislative districts within St. Louis County.

have constituents and retirees that work, or worked, at all of them.

EIR: So there is discussion of closing the Hazelwood plant?

Walton: Yes, and at this point in time I think they are going down to one shift, and probably they're going to close the plant. I had worked at that plant when I worked for St. Louis Community College. At that time, and I think also today, they still make, the Ford Explorer.

So, that industry is a very, very large part of the St. Louis community, and we need to feed it, and let it continue on, and that's why I am asking Congress to step in, and try to make sure that the industry does not go under.

EIR: Do you know how many people work at the Hazelwood plant?

Walton: I think it was in the thousands.

EIR: Part of a resolution that you will introduce, talks about the idea that, to stop the liquidation of the physical productive capacities, and to retool these plants, they produce things for rail or water projects. What is your thinking on that?

Walton: That is something that Ford and GM auto makers would do all the time. They would shut down the plant, retool, and come up with another product. So that's something that can be done, it can be easily done, but you have to have the desire to continue on and support that industry.

EIR: When does your legislature come back into session?

Walton: January.

EIR: So this is a resolution that would be raised in January?

Walton: Right. Also, we may be able to file it in September when we have a special, or veto, session.

EIR: Are there possibilities of more cosponsors?

Walton: Oh, yes. If I get the word out, I'm sure I'll have an awful lot more people. I think you talked to John, and I brought it up with Craig, because I knew Craig worked for Ford, and would be very supportive of that. But if I had time to really get around, and let folks know what's going on, I'm sure we'll have a lot of support.

EIR: In terms of things that could be built, I know that the discussion is to build water systems, rail systems, and other infrastructure. Tell me a little bit about the situation with infrastructure, because I know that is something you've been extremely concerned about in the state of Missouri.

Walton: Well, I'll just talk about our infrastructure here in terms of the city of St. Louis; that infrastructure was built years ago, in the 1930s. They are collapsing, they need to be addressed, and nothing is really happening because, I guess people are looking at, "Hey, we don't have money for these things, fix it when something happens," rather than working on it now and preparing. It's those type of things.

When I say infrastructure, I mean the pipes that our water system runs through. On occasion you'll have a sink-hole where the street would just collapse. So we have issues there. In fact I understand they have a lot of tunnels beneath the city of St. Louis. . . . Of course we had a lot of breweries in St. Louis that utilized tunnels and caves. We need to improve our infrastructure, we need to improve the plumbing, how our water is being done

Our transit system, in terms of our Amtrak that we have, is partially funded through the state, and probably other sources, or has been partially funded through the state; we can have a better transit system in terms of commuting and getting our people through. . . . We also have a light-rail system.

EIR: Where does it run?

Walton: It doesn't run in my neighborhood, I can tell you that. Our light-rail transit system starts in Illinois, and runs across the Mississippi River to St. Louis city, and then to the airport. It's almost like a straight line . . . it runs east to west, and it starts in Illinois. And now they are in the process of expanding that light-rail system, and they are expanding it to Clayton, which is west of the city of St. Louis, almost at the border of the city limits. . . .

EIR: Has there been discussion of expanding that?

Walton: They are doing some expansion right now, and that's taking it out to Clayton. Now that may be fine, but we also need to be taking it out to north county, we need to take it to south county, other places too, where the people live. Two hundred thousand African-Americans live in North St. Louis County, and need that transportation.

EIR: But they're not taking the rail system to north county next?

Walton: No. The people instrumental in making that decision didn't come up with north county, and I thought: This is where the workforce is, these people need to get to work. . . . Amtrak hasn't been very dependable. They are using the line of Union Pacific, and if Union Pacific has a freight train that needs to get through, then you have to stay and wait for them to carry their freight.

EIR: The sense of the resolution you've introduced, is to build a high-speed rail corridor between Chicago and St. Louis, which would carry people at about 125-150 miles per



EIRNS/James Cameron

Missouri State Rep. Juanita Walton at a 2003 press conference in St. Louis, introducing speaker Lyndon LaRouche. She has filed a resolution in the legislature, calling on Congress to take "emergency action to save the economy and the auto industry."

hour or higher. This is also something that is being called for by a midwest government group called the Midwest Regional Rail System. What do you think are the benefits, how might that benefit the state of Missouri?

Walton: I think it's an excellent idea, and of course, it would be for economic development. I don't know how many hours it would be to get from one place to the next. How long do you think that would be?

EIR: From Chicago to St. Louis is 260 miles.

Walton: It's a five hour drive.

EIR: By high speed rail it would be two to two-and-one-half hours.

Walton: Half the travel time.

EIR: Do you know what the unemployment rate is, roughly, where you are?

Walton: No, I don't.

EIR: But you can tell it's there?

Walton: I know it's there. And another thing they have, is they have people who have had jobs, at higher salaries, who've been downsized, whatever, and they're getting jobs at lower dollars. . . .

EIR: Aside from the auto industries, what companies have been suffering the most in your area? Have you had some

other plants closings?

Walton: St. Louis used to be headquarters for several companies, and then a lot of those companies moved out of St. Louis. Southwestern Bell used to be headquartered here, and they moved to Texas. There were about seven or eight companies that were headquartered here that moved out, I can't remember them all.

EIR: Those jobs, they just moved them out?

Walton: Yes.

EIR: There is the idea of globalization, shipping American jobs to places where there's cheaper labor . . . lower infrastructure, sometimes it's not even existent, like in the *maquiladoras* in Mexico. How do you view this?

Walton: Well, if we don't try to do a better job at globalization, we're all going to be unemployed, or most of us. It would hinder our working class. It would hinder our unions that we have, and when I say working class, it also is beginning to hinder our white collar positions, in terms of our programmers and data-base management people. Those jobs are going to India now.

EIR: And do you see effects of manufacturing companies, as they shut down to globalize, go to other countries?.

Walton: Our steel industry is non-existent.

EIR: Let me ask you, just to shift ground a little bit, I know that your Governor, Matt Blunt, has a proposal to cut Medicaid. Could you tell us what is involved with that?

Walton: Well, it's already passed, and been signed, and approximately 100,000 people in Missouri will be cut off from Medicaid.

EIR: And this will affect elderly, disabled? What will happen to the dental, and podiatry, and things like that?

Walton: It will be wiped out.

EIR: When did he propose this?

Walton: It was legislation that was introduced, passed through the House and Senate, and he signed it in April.

EIR: Has it gone into effect already?

Walton: Yes, he's already signed it. Normally they wait—I'll go back; I don't think they plan for it to start until maybe the Fiscal Year, July 1. Normally, when you have bills, and the governor signs them, they go into effect Aug. 28. But since he signed it already, I believe they probably plan for it to start at the beginning of the new Fiscal Year.

EIR: What will this do? How will it impact the population?

Walton: People will not have services. What do you do if you don't have services? In fact I have this young lady who is a doctor, who is a member of an organization I'm involved with, and she says that she had a patient who had cancer. He

was on Medicaid, and with those cuts, he would not be eligible, any longer.

EIR: Really? So what would happen to the patient? Just do it on his own, or put money on the credit cards, to pay for it?

Walton: Whatever way they can kind of come up with something, if they can. And this person is very disappointed, because they voted for Blunt.

EIR: Do you know of other things that might have gotten eliminated as a result of the cuts?

Walton: Well, I won't say eliminated, but I know of cutbacks in terms of mental health.

EIR: So before, you could get some coverage on mental health if you were on Medicaid, and now that has been reduced?

Walton: It's been reduced, yes. . . . Social services, health, and mental health have been reduced drastically.

EIR: Many of the hospitals get a very large percentage of the money from Medicaid, and Medicare. To your knowledge, has this affected, or will this affect in some way, the hospitals?

Walton: If they were getting money from the state, yes. You'll have people coming in there, they'll probably want to service them, and they won't have any way to have it paid. The hospital is in the business of making money, pay for the workers, cover the expenses, overhead.

EIR: Have there been hospital closedowns?

Walton: Well, they got rid of the public hospitals. They are all closed. Homer G. Philips, that was the black hospital that they had here in St. Louis. . . . So the hospital was basically dismantled in terms of cutting programs here and there. They had a nursing program, they had all kinds of programs there. So they dismantled the hospital, cut down on services, and closed the hospital eventually.

There was another public hospital, Hospital No. 1, that was closed. And St. Louis County had a hospital, called St. Louis County Hospital—they closed that—which was located in Clayton. . . .

EIR: Can you see some of the effects of the Medicaid cuts? Obviously, someone not getting cancer treatment is one of those?

Walton: Normally what happens, is you see people who have mental problems, who are not able to get services, or get treatment, just leave them out on the street in the community. And you have families who have no resources or anything to assist their relatives.

EIR: We spoke earlier of unemployment?

Walton: Well, actually, what normally happens with unemployment, in terms of African-Americans, they are cut first, and have a higher percentage of unemployed. You can look

at the foreclosure rate here in St. Louis. I think we were number one in bankruptcies here.

EIR: In the state?

Walton: No, in the country. We have an awful lot of bankruptcies that are done here in St. Louis and in the state.

EIR: Are many of the bankruptcies African-Americans?

Walton: They don't discriminate on that one.

EIR: Wow. What happened to the real estate market? Did prices go up a lot, like the rest of the country?

Walton: No. It's gone up; it went up, like 7% in terms of appreciation, in terms of the homes. But it didn't really go up a lot. I think what happened is: unemployment; legal gambling.

EIR: Do you have a lot of casinos in the state?

Walton: In St. Louis we have one in Alton—which is ten miles from where I live—which is in Illinois. Then you have the President Casino, which is downtown. Across the river in Illinois is Casino Queen. Then you have in the city of Maryland Heights in St. Louis County, Harrods; and then in St. Charles County on the Missouri River, Ameristar. That's five. And they've got approval for another one, I think it's Jefferson County or south county, one of the two. That's the sixth coming.

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EIR: So you see this as a scourge, just to keep people losing their money there?

Walton: People are losing their money from gambling, from mismanagement, in terms of living for today, not planning for tomorrow; and unemployment.

EIR: One of Missouri's United States Senators, Kit Bond, a Republican, has supported Amtrak. Have you worked with him, or your state's other Senator, Jim Talent, on any of these questions?

Walton: I really had not worked with them on those questions, and those questions pretty much had been directed towards the governor's race, rather than the U.S. Senator's race. Or if they were addressed, you know you have to have resources to get your message across. In fact, I tell people, in terms of our Governor, he won on the three Gs: God, Gays, and Guns. And that's what they got. The whole Republican party played it that way, and won on those three Gs. And you had those evangelical Christians that go out to vote, based their vote on at least the Gays and God.

EIR: These are wedge issues, hot-button issues.

Walton: Yes, and people go out and vote on those single kind of issues where they don't think about "how is this going to affect me if I lose my job?" or a person gets sick, and on and on. How is this going to affect me?

EIR: If you had a Senator in your office, what would be the sort of things that you would say should be done as first steps?

Walton: Our people need jobs, and once they have jobs, of course they're going to stimulate the economy. People, especially African-Americans, need jobs. And of course, some of the things that you can do to help stimulate the economy in terms of jobs, is our transportation system, our infrastructure, on and on, in terms of, you know, our manufacturing we've gotten away from helping our people have jobs. They have to have them.

EIR: How have the policies of Bush and Cheney affected this?

Walton: Of course, I didn't vote for them. I just felt that nothing was going to get better if they continued on. I wasn't pleased with them getting us into this war over in Iraq. And I just can't believe how the people have bought into this stuff. And when I listen to them talk, they don't even have the facts right. But they're gung-ho on this war thing.

EIR: In terms of some of the work on the water systems, now you have the Mississippi River, and there are projects right now before the Army Corps of Engineers to rebuild locks and dams on the Upper Mississippi River as well as on the Illinois River. This affects the Missouri waterways system. What do you think of that type of thing?

Walton: I think it would be an excellent thing to do, provided that they fund it.