

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Starting a business should count as work

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"Can you work 32 hours a week?" asked a woman from Wisconsin's unemployment office.

I told her I worked much more than that on calling and meeting with investors and potential advertisers to start my own broadcasting company. I was scrambling after getting laid off by Clear Channel in June of 2014.

"But can you work 32 hours a week?" she persisted.

My severance was running out, and I could have used at least one unemployment check before launching my new talk show. The grueling hours I spent starting a new business would not have counted toward the 80 hours a month Gov. Scott Walker says parents with children should work to get the full benefit of food stamps.

Exasperated, I said to the unemployment office staffer, "What do people do if they're trying to start a business?"

She said I should take out a loan from the Small Business Administration. I said, "Why do I want to go into debt?"

I was selling shares to investors in my company instead. In fact, I found a lot more help from mostly Republican businessmen than from my state government. No unemployment check for me.

But the governor knows that most adults work more than 80 hours a month outside their homes for a boss. Walker's idol, Ronald Reagan, knew that too.

The former California governor was highly skilled at getting the "working class" to focus on welfare and food stamp fraud. As a candidate in 1976, Reagan told a crowd it wasn't fair for some "strapping young buck" to use the food stamp program to buy a T-bone steak."

By 1980, when he successfully ran for president, the term Reagan Democrat was born. Reagan delighted audiences on the stump with a story about a "Chicago welfare queen

with 80 names, 30 addresses and 12 Social Security cards who is collecting veteran's benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. She's got Medicaid, is getting food stamps and she is collecting welfare under each of her names."

It was the politics of focusing on free loaders. It was winning politics.

Gov. Walker and his wife, Tonette, were married on Reagan's birthday. The governor told Nancy Reagan he won his recall election in 2012 on the anniversary of Reagan's death. He admires the way Reagan fired 11,000 air traffic controllers in 1981. During his presidential campaign, Walker spoke of how the Russians were impressed with Reagan's resolve during that labor dispute.

It is easier to get the middle and working classes to look down than up. When George W. Bush advocated for the initial Chrysler and GM bailout in 2008, it was 3 percent of the cost of the bank bailout. But if you listened to conservative talk radio at the time, callers were far angrier about janitors being bailed out by taxpayers than rich bankers who received bonuses soon after Congress authorized more than \$800 billion to save them. It is because average folk can relate to janitors more than they can to rich bankers.

Gov. Walker won big during Act 10 in Wisconsin. Do the math. There were 60,000 state employees at the time and 300,000 public employees out of about 5.5 million people. When the governor told businesswoman Diane Hendricks he would "divide and conquer," he knew what he was doing.

After all, most people don't have Cadillac health insurance or retirement benefits, and they got angry when they watched the protesters on the news complaining about how bad they were going to get it.

Walker's latest proposal on food stamps, or Food Share, will likely get overwhelming support from Republicans as well as Reagan Democrats or Walker Democrats who work a lot more than 80 hours a month for a boss. I would just ask the governor to consider that it is possible to work more than 80 hours a month being productive in ways that are *not* counted by the state.

I learned that when I applied for one week of unemployment while hustling to start a business to survive doing what I like to do. If you struggle with transportation or have heavy responsibilities at home, the 80-hour-a-month work requirement can get complicated.

Free loaders are out there, and I'm pretty sure we all know somebody who fits the bill. But let us remember that one size does not fit all.

Mitch is a Madison, Wisconsin based commentator, broadcaster and standup comic.

The Mitch Henck Show is broadcast live 8-11a.m. Monday-Friday at www.madisontalkers.com.

Watch Mitch's Daily Video Blog, "Two Minutes With Mitch," weekdays at madison.com.

Contact Mitch at: mhenck61@gmail.com