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Labor Day: Fighting for the dream

By John Wojcik



As they do every Labor Day weekend millions are firing up the grills for the last big summer holiday. The economy is giving workers a lot more to think about, however, than burgers, football and car races. And the latest unemployment figures, up to 9.6 percent, officially, from 9.5 percent last month are only one of the big concerns.

First, the worry about jobs: People like many of the janitors who live in California, for example, will be lucky if they can pay the September rent after the barbecue, if they have one at all this weekend.

Two weeks ago, in Los Angeles, custodial contractor ABM laid off janitors who clean Century Plaza Towers and 2000 Avenue of the Stars, both owned by JP Morgan Chase and both home to some of the richest tenants in L.A.

In protest, two weeks before their Labor Day weekend, 57 of their co-workers at Century Plaza walked off the job. They had difficulty understanding why JP Morgan, a company that took \$95 billion in taxpayer bail-outs that they helped fund, was laying off their friends.

Nationally, there are only 2.9 million job openings for 25 million people.

“Wages are growing at less than half the rate at which they expanded immediately prior to the

recession and the deceleration occurred across almost all major occupational groups,” said Larry Mishel, president of the Economic Policy Institute. “And with unemployment expected to remain elevated for many years to come, we do not expect the suppression of wage growth to ease any time soon.”

During the last expansion for business in the country, which began in 2002 and lasted until the start of the recession in 2007, productivity grew

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but hourly compensation for workers fell.

The jobs that are open are at the very bottom of the wage scales. They pay closer to the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour than to the May, 2009 median wage of 15.95 an hour.

The pressure that working full-time and still

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having to live in poverty puts on workers is enormous. Around the country, however, even on this holiday weekend, many are putting up a fight.

2000 low-wage food service and hospital-ity workers at Hyatt hotels walked off the job on Sept. 2 and 3 in Chicago, Los Angeles, Honolulu and Toronto. They were protesting not just frozen wages but staff cuts, reduced hours and excessive injury rates. Anne Marie Straessel, a spokesman for their union, Unite Here, said “the huge profits Hyatt is raking in show they are clearly taking advantage of this recession to squeeze their workers.” The company, she said, is stalling on talks with the union and workers at many of the hotels are working without contracts.

The labor movement has decided that the first step in containing and hopefully turning around the crisis for workers is preventing a Republican takeover of the Congress in the 2010 mid-term elections. They plan to dramatize this by joining with a coalition of civil rights and economic justice groups in a march on Washington Oct. 2

where hundreds of thousands are expected to turn out. Going into the Labor Day weekend 6,000 buses were already reserved. Filling that many buses alone translates into 300,000 marchers.

Steelworkers are among the many union members knocking on doors.. Denny Lauer, from Local 2-1229 said he is knocking on doors to urge re-election of Democratic Rep. Steve Kagan. “He’s a physician who has been with us on every important piece of job-creating legislation,” Lauer said.

Despite all the difficulties however, Labor Day is the time when millions of workers put out their American flags to display the love they have for their country.

“Patriotism means more than lip service,” said Richard Trumka. “It means taking action to ensure that working people have the good jobs they need to support families - creating an environment worthy of the American dream.”



John Wojcik writes for the People’s World.

Don’t let bullies win

By PW Editorial Board

They claim to be defenders of democracy and the Constitution, but their actions betray them.

Nobody likes bullies. Their thing is to intimidate, to make people cower and run for cover. Sometimes they are successful. Other times brave souls challenge them and force them to turn tail and run. Right now there are bullies that are turning a planned Islamic center in lower Manhattan into an inflammatory issue. If it were not for them, the center would be a non-issue.

New Yorkers, by and large, are very tolerant and democratic-minded. The city and its people allow space for diversity and difference.

So, the decision to establish an Islamic community and cultural center in lower Manhattan didn’t stir the city up, save for ex-Mayor Rudy Giuliani, the Murdoch-owned New York Post and others of that ilk.

Apparently, this collection of phonies decided the topic could be opportunistically exploited for political advantage in the near (November mid-term elections) and longer term.

Otherwise, how do we explain their failure to

address the inadequate health care and compensation provided to first responders at Ground Zero on 9/11? Why didn’t they speak out with the same passion for the families of the victims of 9/11?

They claim to be defenders of democracy and the Constitution, but their actions betray them, as evidenced by their efforts to deny people of Islamic faith their freedom to worship in a place of their own choosing. In their hands, our most venerable national symbols, documents, traditions, legal precedents, and rights are putty to be shaped and reshaped to advance the interests of their corporate supporters. This gang will stop at nothing to turn our democratic heritage into a weapon to eviscerate democracy, manipulate public opinion, and, above all, crush President Obama.

They could care less whether an Islamic center with a mission of tolerance, respect and mutual understanding is established. It has meaning for them only to the degree that the manufactured furor can erode support for the president and Democratic candidates this fall. We can’t let them!

Judge rules for LA clean trucks program

By Marilyn Bechtel

In a major step forward for better air quality around the nation's ports, U.S. District Judge Christina Snyder ruled Aug. 26 that the Port of Los Angeles is within its rights to implement a Clean Trucks Program that makes trucking firms responsible to maintain their own fleets of clean trucks. Judge Snyder's ruling came in a lawsuit brought by the American Trucking Associations, which contended the port had no right under federal law to regulate the trucking industry's labor practices. Among its provisions, the LA Clean Trucks program requires trucking firms doing business with the port to sign concession agreements including hiring their drivers as employees.

At present, many drivers are forced to work as "independent contractors," buying and maintaining their own trucks and averaging just \$10 to \$11 in take-home pay. Some 95 percent of the country's 110,000 port trucks now fail to meet the Environmental Protection Agency's current emissions standards. "This victory bolsters the standing of burgeoning clean port programs across the nation," said Natural Resources Defense Council attorney Melissa Lin Perrella, who argued alongside the port at the trial. "Millions of people live in port communities across the country and are forced to subsidize the outdated port operations with their lungs. This decision allows the Port of Los Angeles to continue introducing cleaner trucks while getting dirty ones off the road and sets the stage for healthier communities nationwide."

LA Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa called the decision a sign of "real progress ... now we can finally move forward with our Clean Trucks Program, a model for ports around the nation." Calling the judge's decision "really clear," Valerie Lapin, a spokesperson for the Coalition for Clean



and Safe Ports, said it opens the way for Oakland and other ports to move forward with similar programs. "We've waited long enough," she said. "It's time to put an end to this toxic pollution that's causing asthma and cancer and forcing the drivers to work in exploitive conditions." The nationwide coalition of over 125 organizations of environmentalists, port workers, residents, public health officials, faith and labor organizations works for sustainable economic development at ports around the country.

Lapin added that ATA's announcement it plans to appeal makes passage of H.R. 5957, the Clean Ports Act, introduced into Congress by U.S. Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., late last month, even more urgent.

The legislation, would clarify federal law so local governments can fully implement market-based solutions to protect public health, cleared the way for drivers to unionize. However, the American Trucking Associations immediately filed suit, claiming that under federal law, the port had no right to require that drivers be hired as employees.

LA Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa called the decision a sign of real progress.

Mott's strike takes national stage

By Dan Margolis

As of August 30, the 300 workers at the Mott's plant in Williamson, N.Y., have been on strike for 100 days. The strike started on May 23, after the company, owned by Dr Pepper Snapple demanded surprisingly big givebacks, including a freeze on all pensions for current workers and now for any new hires. Further, they demanded the workers agree to a jump in health insurance copayments and a cut in the company's contributions to workers' 401(k) plans.

Most shockingly, Mott's is demanding a pay cut of up to \$2.50 per hour per employee. The workers are represented by Local 220 of the Retail Workers and Department Stores Union. RWDSU Canada held its convention in early August, and raised \$5,000 for its brother union in New York State. The locals strike fund has now reached \$100,000, with more money coming in routinely from other supporters. The more money in the strike fund, the longer and harder the Mott's workers are able to fight.

The New York City Council weighed in on the matter, sending a letter signed by 34 members, to Larry Young, president and CEO of Dr Pepper Snapple.

According to the Local 220, the strikers "have extended our picket lines to Bowman Apple Products and National Fruit, both in Virginia, and American Bottlers in Chicago.

Workers remain optimistic that they can beat the corporate behemoth.

Veteranos de guerras de Irak y Afganistán apoyan centro Islámico

Por Joel Wendland

En una carta de apoyo a la Primera Enmienda a la Constitución, veteranos de las guerras de Irak y Afganistán han enviado una carta abierta a los organizadores del Centro Comunitario "Park 51" en el Bajo Manhattan en el cuál expresan su sentimiento de que el esfuerzo por construir ese Centro "luce tan Americano como nada".

"Park 51" es el nuevo nombre del centro comunitario que, además de instalaciones deportivas y culturales, contiene una sala de oración para los musulmanes del centro. Recientemente este centro ha sido objeto de ataques por parte de los líderes del Partido Republicano y sus ideólogos, entre ellos Sarah Palin, Pat Buchanan y Newt Gingrich, que argumentan en coro de que no se debe permitir la construcción de este centro en Bajo Manhattan porque ese sitio fue objeto de ataque del 11 de Septiembre del 2001. A pesar de la oposición del Partido Republicano, tanto la dirigencia política de la ciudad como la mayoría de sus residentes han apoyado este proyecto.

La carta de los veteranos de guerra aparece después de que el Alcalde Bloomberg y el Presidente Obama hicieran contundentes declaraciones a favor de la libertad religiosa de todos los estadounidenses. Los autores de la carta, cuyo sitio de Web es Vote-Vets.org, integran una organización

que aboga por los problemas de los veteranos de guerra y apoya a los que han conseguido cargos electivos, e insta a los organizadores de Park 51 no abandonar el proyecto. La carta pide además al grupo que la distribuya a cualquier parte interesada "para que sepan que los veteranos de guerra vemos este caso como un importante punto de la Constitución y de seguridad nacional". Los veteranos citan su juramento como miembros de la Fuerzas Armadas "de defender la Constitución" como una razón básica por qué defender el proyecto.

La carta señala la hipocresía de los opositores al proyecto: "A pesar de la palabrería sobre la importancia de proteger la Constitución y permitir el libre mercado sin restricciones, esa misma gentes lucha contra el derecho de la comunidad de comprar propiedades y rendir culto libremente. Nuestro deber de defender la Constitución, indican ellos, no termina porque nuestro servicio en las Fuerzas Armadas se ha terminado. Depende de nosotros defender el derecho de todos los norteamericanos de gozar de las libertades constitucionales que otros al alrededor del mundo no tienen. Por eso estamos de pie defendiendo ese derecho."

La carta completa se puede conseguir allí y se les animan a los veteranos a firmarla y distribuirla.

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