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Workers fight back vs. wage theft

By Marilyn Bechtel

Victoria Aquino's life has changed dramatically because she and others are fighting back against the wage theft that is rampant among low-wage workers, and especially among young workers, immigrant workers and workers of color.

On the job as many as 13 to 16 hours a day, on call 24 hours but paid for just 8, Aquino used to be the sole caregiver for half a dozen patients living in a small care home. "I was just like a prisoner," she told low wage workers and their supporters who gathered on the steps of San Francisco City Hall Nov. 18 to mark the National Day of Action Against Wage Theft and to pledge a stepped-up struggle for just treatment of all workers.

Now, Aquino works just the eight hours she's paid for - though she says her employer still needs to hire more workers - thanks to the struggle she waged with help from the Filipino Community Center, La Raza Centro Legal, and the Women's Employment Rights Clinic at Golden Gate University.

Speakers noted that some form of wage theft affects 68 percent of U.S. low-wage workers, with workers losing, on average, over \$2,600 a year or about 15 percent of their annual earnings. It takes different forms among retail workers, caregivers, construction and restaurant workers, day labor-



ers and others. Common forms include not paying minimum wage or overtime, forcing workers to work off the books, misclassifying employees as independent contractors, and not paying them at all.

Speakers also pointed out that wage theft hurts families, too, and creates unfair competition for responsible employers, while stopping it is an important form of economic stimulus, providing working families with money they spend in their

T H I S W E E K :

- **Workers fight back vs. wage theft**
- **Editorial: The GOP doesn't care about hungry families**
- **Can anybody beat Rahm?**
- **Latinoamérica: Blanco republicano**
- **Chants tell worker's stories**

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communities.

Donna Levitt of San Francisco's Office of Labor Standards Enforcement said her agency has collected about \$4 million in back wages for some 2,500 workers since the city's minimum wage law took effect six years ago. "San Francisco is a na-

The Alliance is proposing a Low-Wage Worker Bill of Rights.

tional model for strong labor laws; we work very hard to be a national model for strong labor law enforcement,” she told the crowd.

Arrayed on the City Hall steps, and sharing their stories from the podium, were workers from La Raza Centro Legal’s Day Labor Program, the Chinese Progressive Association, Filipino Community Center, Young Workers United, and others making up the recently-formed Progressive Workers Alliance.

Joining them were several San Francisco supervisors and their representatives, as well as speakers from unions in the city, including SEIU and Unite Here!

The Alliance is proposing a Low-Wage Worker Bill of Rights including job creation, fighting wage theft, promoting responsible employers, protecting social services, and equal treatment for all workers.

Actions were also taking place across the country. In Houston, Texas, a “Justice Bus” was slated to stop at local businesses allegedly engaging in wage theft. In Memphis, Tenn., the Workers

Interfaith Network planned to fill a shopping cart with items workers can’t afford because of wage theft, and stage a dramatization of an employer taking a string of 130 \$20 bills from a worker’s pocket, representing the average annual amount taken from workers through wage theft.

In El Paso, Texas, the Paso del Norte Civil Rights Project was holding a “Worst Employer Awards” to highlight the area’s worst violators of workers’ rights, while in Albany, N.Y., Make the Road New York planned a press conference in the state capitol to press passage of a state anti-wage-theft law.

During a Nov. 17 press conference, Kim Bobo, executive director of Interfaith Worker Justice said “This Thanksgiving, as a nation we are struggling with how to boost the economy,” Bobo said. “What better way to stimulate the economy, put more money back into neighborhood businesses, than to assure that workers are paid all their wages?”



Marilyn Bechtel writes for the People’s World.

The GOP doesn’t care about hungry families

By PW Editorial Board

One in four children are in danger of going hungry every night says the U.S. Department of Agriculture in a new report on “food insecurity.” The report, tallying numbers for 2009, indicates the rate has not changed for the second year in a row. For both years, 45 million people in the U.S. went to sleep on an empty stomach.

The numbers tell a terrible tale of undernourished bodies and minds, the long-term consequence of which will be felt for decades.

As the report on American hunger hit the news, Congress in its lame-duck session is under pressure to pass the Hunger Free Kids Act, already approved by the Senate but still requiring a thumbs up from the House. The \$4.5 billion bill, however, due to GOP demands, will be paid for cutting back a food stamp increase approved last year in the economic recovery act.

Yes, that’s right: some hungry families will go hungry, so that other hungry children can eat. Perhaps this make sense to the corporate fat cats and their Tea Party fan clubs and their “get-a-job” mentality.

It doesn’t to us. For every one job offered today, there are five job seekers, according to government reports, to say nothing of the tens of millions who are not in the official job market.

Recently Over 1,100 health and children’s and nutrition organizations sent a letter to Congress demanding that the Hunger Free Kids Act be passed.

The Obama administration has promised that should this happen, administrative and other measures will be taken to put the money back before the cuts go into effect in 2013. Included in this pledge a goal to increase access to Supplemental Assistance Nutrition Program resources, the official name given now to the food stamp programs. The Obama administration’s goal of ending child hunger by 2015, a once realizable objective, may now fall to the unfortunate compromises made to pass this and other necessary legislation. This issue will grow far worse when the Tea Party moves in to Washington in January.

But the fight will not be forgotten; the lesson will be learned. The battle for tomorrow is being shaped by the cuts to help the hungry today.

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Can anybody beat Rahm?

By John Bacthell

Can anyone beat Rahm? That's the question on the minds of many Chicagoans. Rahm Emanuel, former White House chief of staff to President Obama, officially announced his candidacy Nov. 13. He hopes to win the Feb. 22 mayoral primary outright and avoid a runoff. To do so he'll have to defeat a broad field of candidates. In some ways the primary is Chicago's corporate elite vs. the people. Beating Rahm is a tall order.

The Chicago electorate is 40% African American, 38% white, 17% Latino and 5% Asian American. Anyone hoping to win will have to build a coalition that unites communities. While discussions are taking place among activists and in organized labor to formulate a people's agenda to both judge and push the candidates, the necessary unity hasn't yet begun to crystallize.

Many are looking for a repeat of the Harold Washington election of 1983 when a multi-racial coalition helped elect the progressive, reform candidate as the city's first African American mayor. Such a development now is complicated by the presence of multiple candidates, including in the African American and Latino communities, that can end up splitting the primary election vote.

The two most progressive voices in the field capable of rallying a broad coalition are US Rep. Danny K. Davis and City Clerk Miguel del Valle.

Davis, from Chicago's west side African American community, made an appeal for a broad multi-racial grassroots coalition in announcing his candidacy Nov. 14.

"You don't have to be rich, you don't have to be wealthy, you don't have to be high in the penthouse, all that you have to be is highly motivated and involved to make a difference," said Davis, who has a long history of progressive politics.

Davis, former US Senator Carole Moseley



Braun and Rev. James Meeks, a state senator and pastor of Salem Baptist Church, all have support in the African American community.

Braun is remembered from her days as a Senator. Meeks, whose reactionary views on school vouchers and gay rights have riled many, was introduced in his official announcement by the former head of the state Republican Party, Andy McKenna.

Miguel Del Valle has long been a leading independent voice since his days in Harold Washington's administration. He became the state senate's first Latino elected official. He is an advocate of equitable education funding and opponent of government corruption and patronage.

The candidacy of Gery Chico, President of the City College system and an advocate of expanding charter schools and vouchers, will impact Del Valle's ability to consolidate support in the Latino community.

The most promising possibilities for breakthroughs for labor and forces independent of the Democratic machine appear to be in the City Council races.

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Chants tell worker's stories

By Art Perlo

Health care workers at four Spectrum nursing homes in Connecticut have been on strike since April 15. Over 100 workers and supporters rallied at Spectrum's Birmingham facility in Derby on November 13. The rally was livened with picket line chants:

Monday, Tuesday -- working short

Wednesday, Thursday -- working short

Friday, Saturday -- working short

All day Sunday -- working short

Disrespected -- all the time!

Mandated -- all the time!

Another chant reflects the unity of the workers:

Hey Hey, what do you say? 1199 is here to stay!

Housekeeping, what do you say? 1199 is here to stay!

CNAs, what do you say? 1199 is here to stay!

Dietary, what do you say? 1199 is here to stay!

For our children what do you say? 1199 is here to stay!

For our residents, what do you say? 1199 is here to stay!

Speaking at the rally, District 1199 President Carmen Boudier expressed optimism that the workers will prevail. But she warned that, having been on the picket line through a long, hot summer, the workers would now face winter conditions, with court hearings not scheduled until January. Boudier will be receiving the People's World Amistad Award at a program Sunday, Dec 5 at 4PM at Hillhouse High School in New Haven. For tickets call 203-634-8664.

Latinoamérica: Blanco republicano

Por Emile Schepers

Las elecciones del 2 de noviembre dieron a la derecha republican control sobre la Cámara de Representantes mientras redujeron la mayoría demócrata en el Senado. Además, ha ofrecido a los Republicanos un sentido renovado de confianza, algo que se expresa con planes atrevidos y reaccionarios para la política extranjera y doméstica.

Resulta especialmente peligroso esto en términos de la política norteamericana hacia Latinoamérica.

Mientras la administración Bush se encontraba ocupada en otras partes, la clase trabajadora en América Latina, con sus aliados, los campesinos, indígenas y otras minorías, y la juventud, lograba grandes avances. En Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia y Nicaragua han llegado al poder gobiernos radicales. Han erigido a la ALBA (Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América) como contrapeso a la hegemonía regional imperialista norteamericana. Hasta el momento del golpe de estado hondureño de junio de 2009 este grupo consistía de Antigua y Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, San Vicente y Grenadines, y Venezuela.

Fuera de la ALBA también llegaron al poder gobiernos de tendencia izquierdista en Argentina, Brasil, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Paraguay y Uruguay. Por medio de mecanismos de integración regional como MERCOSUR y UNASUR, colabora este otro grupo de países amistosamente con el grupo ALBA por

realizar los sueños de los grandes protagonistas de la historia latinoamericana como Simón Bolívar y José Martí, cuyo temor siempre fue la de que una vez independiente de España y Portugal, caería la región bajo otra hegemonía igual de opresiva y predominante: la de EEUU.

La hegemonía norteamericana se ha resentido en América Latina de varios modos: arreglos comerciales profundamente desiguales que han mantenido ricos a las corporaciones norteamericanas, y pobres a millones de latinoamericanos; una lista interminable de intervenciones militares directas; y apoyo a algunos de los déspotas más repugnantes que nunca se ha visto en este mundo, entre ellos Duvalier, Trujillo, Ríos Montt, Stroessner, Pinochet, Videla y más.

El proyecto "Bolivariano" busca revertir esa historia. Y por eso, en Latinoamérica ya brilla como luz de esperanza para millones de trabajadores, campesinos y agricultores, indígenas y otras minorías, para los pobres del campo y de la ciudad, y para la juventud.

Pero ninguno de estos gobiernos de izquierda y centroizquierda goza de un poder seguro salvo en Cuba (y hasta Cuba se mantiene a la guardia). La derecha acaba de ganar la presidencia en Chile. El presidente izquierdista de Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, fue derrocado por un golpe de estado. El primer ministro Gonsalves, de San Vicente, está enfrentando intrigas en su contra confeccionadas en EEUU y Bretaña.

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