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Activists of every stripe unite in ICE civil disobedience



by Michelle Zacarias

Activists blocked Congress Street in the financial district Tuesday morning Feb. 16, as rush hour traffic came to a halt. Community organizers from various coalitions gathered in an act of solidarity, locking arms in front of the Regional Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Field Office downtown. They propped two stepladders in the middle of the street and used several boxes filled with garbage as weights to chain themselves down. Dozens of supporters and participants cheered on the sideline as cops showed up to the scene. Bystanders joined into anti-deportation chants, screaming out ‘Dismantle ICE! Defund Police!’

The gathering, which activists originally promoted as a “Coffee and Struggles” discussion event on Facebook, was expanded to include an act of civil disobedience in order to bring attention to the ongoing immigration enforcement raid crisis.

In the last several months Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has conducted a nationwide campaign to deport undocumented citizens in the country, many of whom arrived fleeing the growing violence in Central America. Hundreds of thousands of undocumented women and children have made the journey across the southwest border in the last several years. While

the Obama administration has been noted for its tough stance on deportations, it was not until November 2014 that ICE announced the enactment of the Priority Enforcement Program (PEP). Under the PEP plan, ICE commenced a series of raids, consequently setting off a wave of fear amongst undocumented people and their family members.

The anti-deportation event on Tuesday marked a significant moment in coalition-

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building for immigrants' rights in Chicago. The participating organizations are all part of various social movements dedicated to the empowerment of vulnerable populations, many of which are primarily run by college students and younger

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community members.

Assata's Daughters, an intergenerational collective of Black women and girls named for the African American revolutionary Assata Shakur, released an official statement about the importance of remaining unified in the face of oppression, saying: "Undocumented people in Chicago and nationally are living in fear daily of being taken from their homes and away from their families. We, as Black American community organizers, can relate to that fear.

Our communities experience that fear when Chicago Police Officers patrol our neighborhoods, stop and frisk us, occupy our schools, and arrest us in mass (sic)." The statement elaborated on the parallels of black and brown criminalization from law enforcement officials, citing it as an intersectional struggle for all people of color.

Acts of civil disobedience serve not only to interconnect various social movements, but can also highlight critical issues directly affecting marginalized communities of color. Many demonstrators have been working behind the

scenes in order to address the frequent violation of civil and human rights that occur during raids, both on the street and in workplaces and homes. During the list of grievances read out loud at the protest, activist cited the frequent use of unnecessary force against unarmed immigrants by ICE officers.

Christian Zamarron, 26, is one of the coalition members who confronted ICE staff inside the headquarters during the demonstration. He has spent several years being involved in activism, and hoped that Tuesday's actions sent a clear message "Stop the raids. Stop deporting our families and harming members of our community." Zamarron noted that he himself is not undocumented but that he felt it was important to remain in solidarity with his fellow comrades, "I view those attacks as an attack on myself and my family."

It was not immediately clear whether additional civil disobedience actions were in the works.



Michelle Zacarias contributes to Peoplesworld.

Chicago parents in 160 neighborhoods join teachers in demanding school resources

By Roberta Wood

Today in 900 schools across the nation, educators and parents "walked in" to their own schools to show their neighborhoods and the world "a united front in the fight for public education and the schools all our children deserve," according to the action's national organizers, the Alliance to Reclaim our Schools. The Alliance is a coalition of school workers' unions - AFT, NEA and SEIU - with several national education advocacy groups.

The Chicago Teachers Union is barred by recent state legislation from negotiating on issues beyond employee compensation but the CTU's flyers nevertheless demanded smaller class sizes, less testing, racial equity across schools, and fully-funded Special Ed, libraries, school nurses, art, music, and after-school programs.

The Board's policies are pushing out high seniority teachers, the union says, threatening the loss of experienced educators, particularly African American teachers, from the school system.

The mayor's negotiators say there is no money

to pay the teachers pensions, but the union's suggestions of alternative revenue sources - a stock transaction tax, re-allocation of surpluses sitting in the mayor-controlled Tax Increment Financing Funds and suing bankers who were paid hundreds of millions for fraudulent deals - have been brushed aside.

Special Ed teacher Teach has nine children in her classroom. Their challenges range from emotional disorders to learning disabilities to autism. With the assistance of a "fantastic" aide, she stretches her time to six additional special needs students who drop into her classroom during the school day. Her kids lack sufficient special books, designed for their needs, as well as manipulatives, essential teaching aids that help children learn in alternative ways.

Teach noted that special needs kids can't meet their potential without appropriate resources, yet their needs don't get much attention when schools over all are under resourced.

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AFL-CIO holding off on presidential endorsement

By John Wojcik

The AFL-CIO, the nation's largest labor federation, has decided that it will not endorse a candidate for the presidency of the United States at its executive council meeting here next week. The announcement of this decision, made yesterday by AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, follows months of intense lobbying for labor support by both former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont.

Major unions that are part of the federation have already endorsed Clinton while others have come out for Sanders. Many other unions have endorsed neither of the two and there is almost a 100 percent certainty that no union will endorse a Republican in the national election next November.

The AFL-CIO has repeatedly called out Republican candidates for their attacks on immigrant rights, their attacks on refugees based on their religious beliefs and their stance against raising wages. The federation released a video in which Trumka exposes what he called the divisive campaign run by billionaire Donald Trump.

Trumka said yesterday that although the 2016 election will be a major focal point for discussion at the executive council meeting that opens Feb. 22 here no presidential endorsement will be made.



“From the very start of the presidential contest,” he said in a statement, “we have been clear that we have an endorsement process in place, and that we will continue to follow that process in accordance with our constitution.”

“Most importantly,” he declared, “We will further elevate the Raising Wages agenda and hold all politicians accountable to it.” The AFL-CIO initiated a full-fledged national Raising Wages Campaign in the nation’s capital last winter.

There has been some speculation that the federation might endorse a candidate at the winter meeting of its executive council here since many individual unions have already come out for either Clinton or Sanders.

“We continue to encourage affiliated unions to pursue their own deliberations with their members and come to their own endorsement decisions, if any, through open and rigorous debate,” Trumka said.

Noting that some unions have and others have not endorsed he added, “Our country is engaged in a vigorous national debate about our next president and we look forward to a robust discussion of the issues at our council meeting.”

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Unions demand that Senate consider Obama's choice

By Mark Gruenberg

The Amalgamated Transit Union and the AFL-CIO are demanding the Republican-run U.S. Senate do its duty and hold confirmation hearings and a vote on whomever President Obama nominates to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kent., says Obama should leave the decision on who will replace the late Justice Antonin Scalia to the next president. But Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, chair of the Judiciary Committee - which will hold the hearings - is less dogmatic. He'll wait to see whom Obama nominates.

"Sen. McConnell and the GOP presidential candidates are politicizing Scalia's passing and disgracing our Constitution," said ATU President Larry Hanley. "They have it backwards. The American people took a presidential vote in 2012 and McConnell and his cohorts can't pick which election counts" when it comes to having a president pick High Court nominees.

As the intellectual leader of the court's conservative bloc, his death leaves the fate of a number of key cases up in the air.

Besides the Scalia vacancy, Obama or his successor could nominate, and send to the Senate, other Supreme Court hopefuls. Three other justices are at least 77 years old.

Obama heads to Havana, Pope calls Trump's wall un-Christian

By C. J. Atkins

It hasn't been the best couple of days for the GOP. First up was the White House's announcement that President Obama would be on his way down to Havana next month for a meeting with Raul Castro. When Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio got the news, they flipped out.

And if this latest step in Obama's turnaround of U.S.-Cuba relations wasn't bad enough, the Republican presidential slate took another hit on Thursday. For a gang that is always eager to trot out their religious credentials in order to shuffle Evangelicals along to the polls, it had to be a disappointment when no less an authority than Pope Francis himself called their frontrunner Donald Trump un-Christian for his proposal to build an anti-immigrant wall along the border with Mexico.

Turning the page on blockade and isolation

Obama's announcement that he will be making the trip to Cuba is the latest in a series of moves aimed at normalizing a relationship that has been fraught with tension for more than a half-century. Since their historic handshake at the funeral of Nelson Mandela in South Africa in December 2013, Presidents Obama and Castro have been setting a brisk pace in turning the page on decades of tension between the two countries.

While the trade blockade imposed since 1960 remains in place, and Republican lawmakers vow not to lift it, the arrival of Obama in Havana will stand as the most important marker so far in rebuilding links between the Cuban and American people. Campaigns are underway to pressure

lawmakers to take the last big step in ending the unnecessary confrontation between the U.S. and Cuban governments.

Building bridges, not walls

In a mid-air press conference aboard the papal plane as he was flying out of Mexico, the Pope told reporters that, "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian."

The Pope was clear that he was not telling American Catholics how they should be voting, but his stances against racism, income inequality, and in favor of labor rights have garnered him the admiration of religious voters in the past. He said he would not get involved in the U.S. election, but referring to Trump's ideas about sealing borders and registering Muslims, the pontiff remarked, "I say only that this man is not Christian if he has said things like that."

Engagement and compassion

The actions of President Obama and Pope Francis amount to a resounding rejection of both the foreign and domestic policy agendas being put forward by Republican leaders in this election.

They are more than just a rebuke of the hatred and division being sown by the GOP's top candidates though, and the importance of the examples they are setting goes beyond November 2016.

They show the kind of progress that is possible when engagement is valued over confrontation and compassion takes precedence over fear.

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