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Workers cry out for higher minimum wage

By John Wojcik and Mark Gruenberg

From Pittsburgh to Peoria to Portland and from Washington to Detroit, workers came out this week to demand a hike in the federal minimum wage.

The minimum wage campaign, stepped up last week by the Service Employees and Jobs With Justice - with the AFL-CIO and other unions joining in - intends to win three 85 cent increases in the current \$7.25 hourly federal minimum for this year and the next two years and then regular increases indexed to inflation. There has not been any increase in the minimum wage since 2006.

Thousands of people attended the rallies July 24 at 34 locations across the country combined. Speakers included local politicians in Toledo, Ohio, and minimum wage workers in many cities. Clergy and union leaders also joined in, with particularly pointed comments coming from Bob Soutier, president of the St. Louis Central Labor Council.

After voicing labor's strong support for the increase, Soutier noted Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., backs the hike. But all three Republicans vying to oppose her this fall opposed increasing the minimum wage. The moderator in a republican primary debate asked the three GOP candidates to name the federal minimum wage figure - and they couldn't.

The four Chicago rallies, one of which was a humorous street theater in front of a Wal-Mart just west of the Loop, were later combined into one mass march that drew more than 1,000 people. The crowd descended on the Chicagoland



Chamber of Commerce, demanding its members - many of whom employ minimum-wage workers - support the minimum wage increase.

The Chicagoans had a political angle, too: They began with a "trolley tour" of Dunkin Donuts shops, emphasizing Bain Capital's exploitation of its minimum-wage workers. Presumed GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney owned and ran Bain.

Elsewhere, including Kansas City, Mo., Peoria, Ill., and Minneapolis, advocates marched to local offices of Republican lawmakers - Sen. Roy

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Blunt and Reps. Bobby Schilling and John Kline, respectively -- to demand they back the minimum wage hike. Besides SEIU and Jobs With Justice,

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unionists at the rallies came from the UAW, the Teamsters, Workers United, the Teachers, and the Steelworkers, among others.

At Kline's office, more than 50 demonstrators appeared, some holding signs challenging the lawmaker to live on minimum wage, \$290 a week.

Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., the top Democrat on Kline's GOP-run panel, and Senate Labor Committee Chairman Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, have introduced the minimum wage hike bill, but it's expected to go nowhere in this Congress. That didn't stop the advocates.

"One hundred fifty people turned out in 106-degree heat" for the St. Louis march said Lara Granich, director of Missouri Jobs With Justice.

That's also where minimum wage restaurant worker Joe Wicks told the crowd that earning the minimum at a chain restaurant often meant he had to "choose between gas for my car and groceries for my family." He also pointed out that restaurant workers survive on the "tipped minimum wage." That's \$2.13 an hour in almost all states and it hasn't been raised in 20 years.

"Minimum wage is basically impossible to

live off of," added Mallory Curran of Lakeville, Minn., a single mother who is separated from her husband but unable to afford a divorce.

In Cleveland, a minimum wage cable TV installer told how must work 20 hours a week of overtime to pay the rent and keep food on his family's table - and that's at Ohio's higher minimum of \$7.70 hourly.

"We talked about how we should keep the pressure on" Congress even if it doesn't raise the minimum this year, said Cathy Kaufmann of SEIU1199Ohio Hospital and Health Care Workers, who helped organize events in Cleveland, Cincinnati and Toledo.

A minimum wage worker who puts in 40 hours a week barely takes home \$15,000 a year, while the average CEO of a Fortune 500 company earns more than twice that in a single day.

According to the National Employment Law Project there is not a single state in the nation where a full-time minimum wage worker could afford a two-bedroom apartment.



John Wojcik is PW labor editor.

Racism is behind voter ID laws

By PW Editorial Board

What is really behind the rash of new voter identification laws?

A new scientific poll undertaken by the Center for Political Communication at the University of Delaware says it's race. They don't use the term "racism" but instead refers to "racial resentment."

The poll reveals that the new voter ID laws have their strongest support among those "who harbor negative sentiments toward African Americans." Coincidence?

Non-African Americans who took the poll were also asked a series of questions devised to measure "racial resentment" and the results showed that "support for voter ID laws is highest among those with the highest levels of "racial resentment."

One of the two lead researchers, Paul Brewer, is quoted as saying, "These findings suggest that Americans' attitudes about race play an important role in driving their views on voter ID laws."

The poll found that the biggest racists just happen to be Republicans and conservatives (they have "the highest 'racial resentment' scores"). Unlike the Democrats and liberals, however, Republicans and conservatives in general are all for the ID laws "regardless of how much 'racial resentment' they express."

The poll also supported the views of U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder that these ID laws are a throwback to the days of Jim Crow.

What can one conclude from the release of this polling information? It is fair to say that we now have the numbers to show the impact of racism is still wide spread in this country but that it is concentrated in the Republican Party and the conservative movement. This movement's leadership seeks to politically institutionalize a new version of Jim Crow.

The Democrats and liberals have problems with racist attitudes as well but they are personal individual manifestations and not part of the ideological program of Democratic Party.

A further conclusion is that there is more at stake in the upcoming elections in November than just a possible change in which party controls the Congress or the presidency. What is at issue is the nature of the type of country we are going to have. The Republicans, the party of racism and reaction, seek to undue all the democratic gains of the civil rights movement, especially the right to vote.. A Democratic victory will throw a roadblock in front of this attempt and open the way for the American people to struggle to increase and deepen democratic rights in the future.

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“Let them eat cake,” says king as Swaziland plunges into crisis

By Emile Schepers

Tensions are rising in the small Southern African kingdom of Swaziland (population 1.2 million), as unionized teachers and public service workers face off against the security personnel of Africa's last absolute monarchy. There are economic roots to the country's problems that are similar to those of other African nations, but dissidents charge that the irresponsible attitude of the King, Mswati III is making the situation infinitely worse.

Swaziland is overwhelmingly agrarian, and 75 percent of the population consists of subsistence farmers, while some work in the mines and other industries of neighboring South Africa. There is some mining (coal, gold, iron, and formerly asbestos) but by far the biggest industry in Swaziland is the cultivation and processing of sugar cane.

The Sugar represents 59 percent of all agricultural output, 18 percent of GDP, 24 percent of manufacturing output, 35 percent of agricultural wages, 18 percent of manufacturing wages, seven percent of exports, and 58 percent of all Swazi exports to the European Union, which, after South Africa, is Swaziland's main trading partner.

Sugar cultivation and processing are dominated by large-scale enterprises, mostly rooted outside the country. Big players in Swazi sugar include the CDC (originally the Colonial, later Commonwealth Development Corporation) owned by the British government, and the royal family.

At the same time, food prices have been rising. King Mswati's government has relied on regional and international lending agencies. But in February the IMF told the king that there would be no more loans unless austerity was applied.

Basic services are falling apart. Schools are closing, and service workers wages drastically cut. Swaziland has the highest rate of HIV-AIDS in the world; a shocking 41 percent of adults are infected, but health facilities are closing.

Mswati has expensive tastes. He has purchased expensive luxury automobiles and accepted a gift of a private airplane from unknown



sources. His thirteen wives are known for their lavish shopping habits, which can't be satisfied in the capital, Mbabane, but require jet setting.

The king has demanded traditional forms of tribute from his subjects, including cows for his birthday. And now three of his wives and their entourage are off to Las Vegas.

Opposition to Mswati's royal despotism has been arising through the trade unions. Demands include increased wages and union rights, as well as democratic reforms. The Communist Party of Swaziland is calling for the end of the monarchy and the declaration of a democratic republic. Others call for a constitutional monarchy with limitation of the powers of the king and a democratic parliament.

A teachers' strike has been met with refusal to negotiate by the government, and increasing violence from the authorities. The government announced that any striker not back at work would forfeit their job.

The teachers' strike continues, now supported by nurses and taxi drivers. The strikers are calling on workers worldwide to show their solidarity. At writing, the king has left for South Africa. The Communist Party suspects a move to be away when harsh repression comes down, and has asked that the South African government place sanctions on the Swazi royal family.

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California water issues make headlines again

By Marilyn Bechtel

The long-simmering struggle over how California's water resources are allocated took center stage again this week as Governor Jerry Brown and U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar unveiled the latest plan to shift more water from the northern part of the state to the more arid south.

The controversial plan, announced at a July 25 press conference in Sacramento, calls for two parallel 37-mile underground tunnels, each 33 feet in diameter, to carry water from the Sacramento River - the state's largest - to pumping facilities in central California. Water would then flow through canals to areas stretching from the San Francisco Bay Area south all the way to San Diego, bringing more water to southern California cities and irrigating millions of acres of agribusiness farmland in the Central Valley.

The plan also includes restoration of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, the state's greatest wetland.

While water users would pay the \$14 billion tab for the tunnels, taxpayers would pay for restoration of the Delta, through funds from the federal government and part of an \$11 billion water bond slated for the 2014 ballot.

The new project is similar to a "peripheral canal" Brown proposed in 1982, during an earlier term as governor, which was rejected by voters. In 2009 the state legislature passed Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's Comprehensive Water Package, which observers say lays the basis for a massive water diversion project that doesn't require voters' approval.

Residents of the Delta, area Native American tribes, environmentalists, family farmers, fishers, and a number of elected officials strongly oppose its construction.

Obama y Romney priorizan campaña con electores indecisos

Por Prensa Latina

El presidente Barack Obama y el virtual candidato republicano Mitt Romney priorizan las acciones de campaña hacia los electores indecisos durante los 100 días previos a las elecciones de noviembre próximo.

Entrevistas con docenas de votantes en estados claves como Florida, Missouri, Ohio y Virginia muestran cuán complicada puede ser la decisión de votar y lo equivocados que están los estrategas de campañas de ambos partidos al respecto, señala hoy el diario The Washington Post.

Estas conversaciones con los electores evidencian también lo poco que influyen en los indecisos las campañas de prensa, los anuncios y ataques verbales virulentos.

Después de meses de publicidad pagada por los republicanos, la mayoría de los votantes apenas conocen que Mitt Romney ejerce la religión mormona y es un empresario rico, agrega el rotativo.

Según las encuestas más recientes, Obama aventaja a Romney 46 a 45 por ciento a nivel nacional, mientras en los estados decisivos para los comicios, las cifras varían.

En Ohio Obama supera a su rival republicano 48 a 37 por ciento, en Missouri Romney gana las intenciones de votos con 51 a 42 por ciento, mientras en Virginia tienen un virtual empate con 44 por ciento cada uno.

En Florida el mandatario tiene un punto de ventaja (46 a 45) sobre el exgobernador de Massachussets, agrega el rotativo.

Otras noticias

El senador republicano por el estado de Utah, Orrin Hatch, llamó hoy a mantener las rebajas de impuestos

aprobadas por la administración de George W. Bush que vencen en diciembre próximo.

Hatch, principal figura de su agrupación política en el Comité de Finanzas de la cámara alta, dijo en el habitual mensaje semanal del Partido Republicano, que el vencimiento de dichos recortes tributarios sería un golpe para casi todos los estadounidenses.

El senador señaló que en apenas cinco meses, las familias de clase media y los empresarios que generan empleos enfrentarán un incremento masivo de los impuestos, a menos que el presidente Barack Obama y el Congreso actúen en consecuencia.

Hatch respondió así al presidente de Estados Unidos, Barack Obama, quien en su mensaje semanal por radio e internet instó hoy a la Cámara de Representantes, controlada por los republicanos, a aprobar un proyecto de ley para prorrogar las rebajas impositivas a la clase media.

El miércoles pasado los demócratas del Senado lograron que se aprobara el proyecto de ley sobre recortes fiscales, con una votación de 51 a 48, pero los republicanos reiteraron que lo bloquearán la semana próxima en la Cámara de Representantes, donde tienen mayoría.

Los republicanos sostienen que las reducciones deben ser ampliadas para todos los sectores.

El actual jefe de la Casa Blanca favorece que los más ricos paguen mayores tributos y se mantengan las ventajas fiscales para la clase media, con el fin de reactivar la economía y afrontar el abultado déficit público, que para 2012 se prevé alcance más de un millón de millones de dólares.