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Lessons from the grassroots for 2012

By Joelle Fishman



Last fall's municipal elections here made history. The implications, if heeded, bode well for 2012.

When the new 30-member Board of Aldermen was sworn into office on New Year's Day at the Hill Career High School, the auditorium was packed. This was no ordinary inauguration. It marked the largest number of new elected officials ever here, and the largest number of union members and pro-union community residents ever to take office at the same time. Their composition, including many African American, Latino, women and youth is the most representative of the city's population.

New Haven's new governing body is the product of a reawakened activism throughout the city. Union workers at Yale University, the dominant employer in the city, led the effort neighborhood by neighborhood, ward by ward, door knocking since last spring to find out what was on people's minds and lay the groundwork for 15 primary challenges to incumbent aldermen. When 14 won it was a stunning victory. In the general election a total of 21 aldermen elected are a part of the labor-community movement.

Anger and dissatisfaction was widespread at the lack of investment in neighborhoods compared to downtown, the lack of jobs for commu-

nity residents created by big new development, and the shocking number of youth killed in street violence.

At first people shrugged off the home visits saying that nothing will ever change. But as the summer wore on and attitudes shifted, more and more residents began joining the team of door knockers in their wards. The idea became contagious that participation and unity can win positive change. Across the city over 400 people, many for the first time, and many youth, made the commitment to knock on the doors of their neighbors and

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make the case for why they should come out and vote.

There was electricity in the air at an overflow

The fact that these candidates had learned their leadership skills within the union became a positive factor.

rally before primary election day. No one could remember a campaign rally with such a diverse turnout truly reflecting every section and population of the city including the youth. This composition was duplicated on a larger scale in December at a community gathering held to develop the grassroots agenda that will guide the priorities of these aldermen going forward.

As the bigger challenge of governing unfolds, leadership-building at the ward and neighborhood level to establish permanent organization that can mobilize year round will be the test.

It was the relationships built during door knocking that negated an all-out effort aided by the media to discredit the movement by claiming that union members holding public office would only represent their union's agenda and not the agenda of the neighborhoods. Residents could see for themselves that the agenda is one and the same. The working class values of these candidates were clear. The fact that these candidates had learned their leadership skills within the union became a positive factor. The tactic fell flat.

This leadership is already being tested with attempts to create racial divisions by the old po-

litical structure. They are going onto the offensive to support the priorities set out by the community. At a jammed crowd of students and parents protesting at the Board of Education and a big community meeting demanding that the Q House, a closed youth center, be re-opened, the newly elected aldermen provided direction and a unity message.

The lessons learned in this election will be critical for the 2012 elections.

The presidential campaign and the open U.S. Senate seat in Connecticut provide the bigger context. The right of workers to a voice at work with union representation, the role of government for the common good, the equal rights of racially oppressed people and women, the chance for youth to earn, learn and live are all at stake in 2012.

It will take the leadership of the labor movement, the mobilization of the community, and tireless one-on-one conversations about whose interests each candidate represents, in every election district across this country, to win this epic election battle on the side of working people.



Joelle Fishman chairs the Communist Party PAC.

The dream today

By PW Editorial Board

Forty-eight years after his "I Have a Dream" speech, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. would be furious. His anger would be aimed at right-wingers, in particular the Republican presidential candidates, who, under the guise of limited government, say it's OK to ignore the racial inequality that continues to plague America today.

The stepping up of racism by the ultra-right over the last 30 years has prevented America from keeping its promises of racial justice and equal opportunity for all.

The cause, as Campaign for America's Future columnist Isaiah Poole points out, is the racist and systematic denial of funds to educational institutions that serve Black and Latino youth, re-segregation of the schools, skyrocketing tuition at the nation's colleges and universities, and, we might add, the entire prison-industrial-criminalization complex.

In addition, a major cause of inequality today is the weakening of the political rights of minorities. The systematic push by the Republicans for voter ID laws, for example, amounts to nothing less than the elimination of the right to vote for millions of Blacks, Latinos, seniors, youth and poor people.

The cause is the racist failure to invest in economic development and jobs in communities of color across the country, and economic policies that allow the offshoring of manufacturing jobs.

The cause is the racist elimination of public sector jobs.

The cause lies in union-busting. The cause lies in all the attacks on the economic rights of minorities, designed to push down the wages of the entire working population.

In addition to moral righteousness, ending racial and economic inequality is in the economic interest of the 99 percent and is the best way to fix our ailing economy.

Allowing the continuation of second-class economic status for people of color drags down the entire economy, hurting everyone.

Taxing the rich, ending the failed and racist "war on drugs," enacting immigration reform and strengthening the safety net, including Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare, are also critical in reducing racial disparities and will, at the same time, improve everyone's lives.

These are the things Dr. King would be fighting for today. These are the things for which we all must fight if we are going to bring Dr. King's dream closer to reality.

Allowing the continuation of second-class status for people of color drags down the entire economy.

Missourians push to cap payday loan interest rates

By Tony Pecinovsky

There are over twice as many payday loan stores in Missouri as there are McDonald's and Starbucks combined," Robin Acree, executive director of GRO-Grassroots Organizing, said as she talked with this reporter outside of the Missouri State Capital last year.

"There is one on damn near every street corner," she continued.

"And the Republican-controlled [state] House and Senate refuse to do anything to reign in these parasites, parasites that prey on Missouri's most vulnerable."

There were an estimated 1,040 payday loan stores in the Show-Me-State.

Acree's organization, which is based in Mexico, Mo., was founded 12 years ago by a single mom on welfare who said she was tired of being ignored by Missouri politics and politicians.

Darryl Howard, an African American public sector union member, has filed for bankruptcy due to his payday loan debt. Twenty-five percent of his \$10 an-hour wages are garnished by payday loan companies, which are allowed to charge exorbitant interest rates. He is stuck in a cycle of debt, with over \$15,000 owed to payday loan companies.

Howard's situation isn't that uncommon. Like many low-income workers, as his bills mounted, he borrowed money from one payday loan store to pay the bills, and then borrowed from another payday loan store to pay off the other.

He started receiving harassing phone calls, and found out the hard way that payday loan companies "will do anything to hunt you down," including "show up at work."

Missourians' For Responsible Lending, a statewide coalition, has recently started collecting signatures to place on the November ballot an initiative to cap short-term payday loan interest rates at 36 percent. Current interest rates are capped at 1,950 percent, while the average annual



interest rate is 444 percent.

According to recent poll data, Missouri voters overwhelmingly support capping payday loan interest rates, which is probably why pro-industry front groups have begun funneling money into anti-initiative activities.

Seventeen states currently cap payday loan interest rates at 36 percent, the federal limit for active duty service men and women.

Nationally, payday loan companies - and other "parasite" industries - are feeling the heat as the U.S. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which is designed to safeguard borrowers from unscrupulous lenders, recently became fully functional with Obama's recess appointment of Richard Cordray as its new director.

For the first time in U.S. history, nonbank entities - like payday loan companies - will be subject to oversight to ensure consumer protections.

In fact, the day after Cordray's appointment, the bureau launched its nonbank supervision program, indicating payday lending as a top priority.

Capping interest rates would mean payday loan customers, like Darryl Howard, will have a better chance of getting out of debt and staying out of debt permanently, something we can all support in these tough economic times.

Payday loan companies are feeling the heat as the U.S. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau became fully functional with Obama's recess appointments.

Opposition grows to Emanuel on free speech, assembly

By John Bachtell

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel has created a firestorm by introducing new city ordinances that activists and legal observers say will have a chilling effect on First Amendment rights to free speech and assembly.

What are dubbed the “sit down and shut up” ordinances were submitted to City Council in anticipation of demonstrations surrounding the May 19-21 G8 and NATO Summits being hosted by the city. In addition to heads of states and military leaders, thousands of protestors are expected, including peace and justice activists, trade unionists, environmentalists and representatives of NGOs.

Emanuel is invoking the specter of “violent anarchists” to demand the hasty approval of the protest restrictions by council. However the ordinance changes would in fact be permanent.

The pending legislation is being accompanied by a public fear campaign. The Chicago police Department is gearing up for mass arrests. The Illinois State Crime Commission is offering a series of “hardcore training” workshops including “combat stick fighting” while the Chicago police make preparations for sharpshooters who can “shoot the head off a nickel from 500 feet.”

The City Council is set to act on the measures on Jan. 18. But based on the initial information session with administration officials Jan. 12, there is already significant opposition.

“It’s an affront to the right to free speech. Government is telling you what you can write on a sign, who’s allowed to carry those signs and what kind of [sound] amplification you can use. For every 100 people, you have to have a parade marshal,” said Alderman Scott Waguespack, who represents the 32nd Ward.

Concede ley boliviana derechos a la naturaleza

Por Blake Deppe

En Bolivia ya está por aprobarse la Ley de Derechos de la Madre tierra, que concederá a la naturaleza los mismos derechos y protecciones que ya gozan los seres humanos, según PV Pulse.

Para los dirigentes de ese país sudamericano, esta legislación es parte de una campaña sin precedentes por promover un cambio significativo en actitudes ambientales que busca parar la destrucción ecológica.

Concederá la legislación nuevos poderes legales al gobierno, permitiéndolo monitorear y controlar la industria en el país.

Crearé 11 derechos distintos del medio ambiente, entre ellos “el derecho a la vida y a existir, el derecho de seguir los ciclos y procesos vitales libres de la alteración humana, el derecho al agua pura y al aire limpio, el derecho al balance, el derecho de no sufrir la contaminación, y el derecho de no modificarse ni alterarse genéticamente las estructuras celulares,” según el Huffington Post.

Pero, de los 11 derechos enunciados, la medida que es potencialmente la más controversial para algunos y la más esencial para otros es “el derecho de no ser afectado por proyectos de megainfraestructura y desarrollo que afectan el balance de ecosistemas y a los comunidades locales de habitantes”.

El año pasado el Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores de Bolivia, David Choquehuanca, dijo que “la situación fue seria”.

Expresaba Choquehuanca su preocupación por la “insuficiencia de los compromisos de reducción de gases invernaderos hechos por los países desarrollados en el Acuerdo de

Copenhague”. Alega él que los expertos han pronosticado un aumento de temperaturas de “hasta cuatro grados [centígrados] sobre los niveles preindustriales”.

Pero quizás no hay ningún defensor del medio ambiente en Bolivia más comprometido que el primer presidente indígena de ese país, Evo Morales. Luchador bien conocido por la protección ambiental, Morales de dirigió a la prensa en 2009 diciendo, “Si deseamos proteger a la humanidad, entonces tenemos que proteger al planeta. Esa es la próxima gran tarea de la ONU”.

Las palabras de Morales habían seguido inmediatamente a la resolución de la Asamblea General de la ONU a declarar como “Día Internacional de la Madre Tierra.”

El Partido de Morales, el Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), tiene una mayoría en ambas cámaras del parlamento. No se espera fuerte oposición a la nueva legislación.

Mientras tanto, Undárico Pinto, dirigente de la Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (agrupación que ayudó a escribir la nueva ley) hizo subrayar la importancia de “permitirle al pueblo reglamentar la industria a nivel nacional, regional y local. Las leyes existentes no tienen fuerza suficiente. [Esto] nos ayudará”.

Para Bolivia, la preocupación ambiental corre muy a fondo, y dado su lugar en las creencias indígenas allá, la Ley de la Madre Tierra no solo es otro pedazo de legislación, pero más bien una idea de suma significancia.

“Nos enseñaban nuestros abuelitos que pertenecemos a una gran familia de plantas y animales.”