

PEOPLE'S WORLD

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January 31, 2015

California lawmakers seek to restore social services funds

By Marilyn Bechtel

With California's corporate and income tax revenues rising, many Democratic state legislators are eager to restore the massive funding cuts suffered by human services programs in recent years.

But on Jan. 9, as he proposed a state budget with general funds expenditures just over \$113 billion, Governor Jerry Brown, a Democrat now starting an unprecedented fourth term, strongly cautioned against "exuberant overkill" in spending, and left most recession-era cuts to social services programs in place.

Brown's proposal represents a 1.7 percent increase over last year's budget.

The stage is now set for months of struggle over how the state will address conditions in which one in four Californians live in poverty and California ranks 46th among states in per-pupil spending on K-12 education.

Arguments for increased spending got a further boost Jan. 13 as the Legislative Analyst's Office predicted revenues will grow even more than Brown anticipated.

While Democratic legislators praised the governor's proposal to spend nearly \$8 billion more on K-12 education and community colleges, many also urged much greater funding for social ser-



vices.

State Senator Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, pointed out that the severe cuts of recent years have left "working families, students, children, the disabled and elderly" without urgently needed help.

"The best investments are those that respond to the critical needs of families at the bottom of the economic ladder and provide working people access to education, training and other programs that can help them get ahead," Leno said.

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Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins, D-San Diego, called Brown's message "a realistic and practical starting point." She said the governor's proposals to increase support for K-14 education, workforce development and In-Home Supportive Services to elderly and disabled Californians reflect the As-

The 65 percent majority of Democrats in the Assembly are just short of the two-thirds needed to increase taxes.

sembly's priorities.

Many Republicans also noted the state's improving financial situation, but sharply criticized what they called continuous increases in state spending in recent years.

Democrats hold a 67.6 percent majority in the state Senate. Their 65 percent majority in the Assembly is just short of the two-thirds majority needed to increase taxes.

An issue not in the budget message is how all remaining uninsured Californians will be covered regardless of immigration status. A bill to that effect was introduced last fall by state Senator Ricardo Lara, D-Bell Gardens.

Unions of state workers and teachers were also quick to weigh in.

Kathryn Lybarger, president of AFSCME Local 3299, the largest union at the 10-campus University of California system, called the budget message "the beginning of a long overdue conversation about the future of California's public colleges and universities." While she said the pro-

posal doesn't provide funding or reforms needed to improve access and quality or prevent tuition increases, she said the union is ready to work with Gov. Brown, the legislature and the UC administration to achieve a final budget meeting those criteria.

In a statement, California Federation of Teachers President Joshua Pechthalt urged the governor to work to make temporary taxes benefiting education, approved by voters in 2012, permanent. He also called for full restoration of social services.

Brown also seeks to reduce a \$72 billion unfunded retiree health care liability by negotiating with state workers' unions for employees to pay more and invest more years of service to receive the benefit.



Marilyn Bechtel writes for Peoples World.

Only tackling the root causes can end the cycle of violence

Sam Webb

One of the young men who killed 12 people in Paris was tortured at Abu Ghraib.

It was reported that one of the young men who was part of the horrific and ghastly attack that killed 12 people in Paris was radicalized by the torture and brutality that occurred at Abu Ghraib. That tells me that these unforgivable atrocities emanate, in the first place, from the real conditions of everyday life.

Thus any solution, if it hopes to end the cycle of violence and counter violence that grips and scars the modern world has to uproot these real conditions, that is, exploitation, oppression, poverty, racism, discrimination, torture, war, alienation, etc. and the structures, policies, and people that create and sustain them.

What won't help - in fact, they're a fool's errand and a demagogue's soundbite - are sweeping (and groundless) condemnations of Islam, or any other religion or people. Nor is the further militarization of already heavily armed police and security forces and more invasive spying an answer.

Nor should we hang our hopes on the projection of even greater military power in distant lands

to make us safe. Look where that has got us since we launched our "War on Terror" in the wake of 9/11! And finally, let's not turn our country into a fortress that turns immigrants into enemies and democracy and civil liberties into something that we can no longer afford.

As counter intuitive as it may seem to many people at this moment when feelings are running high, only a sharp turn to peace and non-violence, to substantive equality for all, to full human solidarity and universal love, and to dissolving the real conditions that generate and reproduce violence daily and hourly, both here and around the world, stands a ghost's chance of extricating humankind from this awful and seemingly intractable situation.

If this feels like too big a challenge, too steep a hill to climb, we might want to reflect on the life of Dr. Martin L. King Jr., whose commitment to overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges never faltered and ultimately proved victorious.

Labor expects bold action from Obama on overtime pay



By John Wojcik

When President Obama spoke to the nation in his annual State of the Union Address, there was one thing I would be paying close attention to: whether or not he discusses overtime pay for workers,” said Ross Eisenbrey, vice president of the pro-labor Economic Policy Institute (EPI) in a statement he issued.

“President Obama needs to go bold with the upcoming revision of overtime pay rules expected shortly from the U.S. Department of Labor,” said AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, at a wage summit in the nation’s capital a few weeks ago.

Overtime pay has increasingly moved to the top of labor’s agenda because millions of people are working overtime and not getting paid for it. Between 1979 and 2013, according to the EPI, productivity in America grew by 64.9 percent but during that time wages remained flat with the median worker seeing a real (inflation-adjusted) hourly wage increase of just 6.1 percent.

The Department of Labor, under orders issued by President Obama last March, is expected to announce early this year its intended update of the overtime salary threshold, which currently sits at \$23,660 per year, or just \$455 per week. “This cur-

rent threshold is below poverty level for a family of four and must be changed,” Eisenbrey said.

Under federal overtime rules, workers making less than \$455 per week are entitled to overtime protection. Ever since the enactment of the first federal overtime law in 1938 the salary threshold was updated every few years. The last “routine” adjustment to the salary level, however, was made by President Gerald Ford in 1975. Overtime protections have been steadily eroded since then by inflation.

Trumka has said that just to make up for inflation the threshold should be raised to \$51,168. “The spotlight is now on raising wages,” he declared. “Raising wages is the key unifying progressive value that ties all the pieces of economic and social justice together”. “We think that the president has a great opportunity to show that he is behind that agenda by increasing the overtime regulations to a minimum threshold of \$51,168. That’s the marker.”

There is concern that the Labor Department is looking at a lower figure, however, somewhere in the neighborhood of \$42,000. Adopting the lower figure would mean that at least two of the six million that would be covered under Trumka’s figure would be left with no overtime protection.

According to EPI, American productivity grew 64.9 percent over a 34 year period, while wages remained flat.

Hope is the root of activism

By Rev. Jim Conn

During the recent holidays, my wife Susan and I managed to make it to a couple of public demonstrations for justice. In between the various gatherings with friends and religious observations, we also attended a pair of arts events. One was a theater piece focused on the historic Central Avenue of early African-American Los Angeles. The other was a post-modern, experimental movement set, produced by our friend Suchi, who teaches dance at Scripps College in Claremont.

Yes, we celebrated the holiday festivals with religious experiences, friends, activism, and art. You would expect religion and friends from a minister, of course, and maybe political actions - but art?

I believe that aesthetic experiences carry the power to sustain activists. The classic periods of social upheaval almost always come with parallel movements in the arts. In my lifetime, the rise of the United Farm Workers union brought El Teatro Campesino - the agitprop crew who mirrored back to the farm workers the conditions of their work and the oppressive practices of their bosses. The civil rights movement was accompanied by music - not only by well-known performers but by the people on the picket lines themselves.

These experiences sustained our social change work by giving us a reflection of ourselves and our efforts, providing inspiration and self-evaluation. They did then, they still do. As Suchi puts it, "Art [is] sustenance for the long struggle that we are waging for justice, racial equality, fairness. I see the performance very much as a moment to cry, grieve, mourn and reflect on what gives us strength.

¿Cómo ve el pueblo cubano las medidas tomadas por Obama?

Bartolomé Sancho Morey

Basta darse un paseo por La Habana: Calles, Mercados, Cafeterías, etc. etc. para darse cuenta que en general el pueblo cubano, ha recibido con optimismo y esperanza, el anuncio de que a partir del 16 [viernes] de Enero, entraron en vigor las tímidas medidas que el pasado 17 de Diciembre 2014 fueron anunciadas por el presidente Barack Obama, que eliminan algunas restricciones al comercio, y en lo que respecta a la prohibición de los Estadounidenses de viajar a Cuba, Aunque no se suprime [lo cual se requiere aprobación del Congreso], se eliminan algunas restricciones para los viajes de la minoría de "privilegiados" ciudadanos estadounidenses y residentes permanentes en ese país que califiquen dentro de las doce categorías autorizadas, tales como los límites a los gastos que los viajeros de EE.UU. pueden realizar en Cuba, de igual forma les permite usar tarjetas de crédito y debito, y autoriza a las líneas aéreas y a las agencias de viajes organizar visitas y contratar servicios de compañías de seguros. Sin embargo no se aprobó viajar a la isla por vía marítima, ni tan siquiera para esta minoría de los norteamericanos y residentes [empresarios, diplomáticos, etc.] permanentes extranjeros autorizados.

Por otra parte, entre las medidas que se anuncian esta que el límite en el envío de remesas aumentara de los 500 a los 2 mil dólares trimestrales.

Las regulaciones no modifican, las fuertes restricciones existentes para la transportación, marítima de mercancías, aunque a partir de este

momento, barcos que transporten alimentación, medicinas, equipos médicos y materiales para situaciones de emergencia desde terceros países con destino a Cuba, no tendrán que esperar 180 días para tocar puertos estadounidenses, como hasta ahora.

Sin lugar a dudas la medida "al margen de ideologías" más valorada y mejor recibida por el pueblo cubano, ha sido la inesperada y tan anhelada puesta en libertad, por el gobierno de Obama, después de más de 16 años de sufrir injusta condena de los tres héroes cubanos antiterroristas, acusados falsamente de ser espías, [dos de ellos condenados cadena perpetua], a través de un vergonzoso, injusto y amañado juicio celebrado en la ciudad de Miami, refugio de la mafia-terrorista-cubano-americana.

Si bien las medidas anunciadas constituyen un paso en la dirección correcta, no es menos cierto que queda un largo camino que recorrer para desmontar muchos otros aspectos del bloqueo económico, comercial, financiero y no menos importante la prohibición [turística] de viajar a Cuba de decenas de millones de estadounidenses ansiosos, maxime después de más de medio siglo de tal "incomprensible" e ilegal prohibición de conocer a sus vecinos [El pueblo cubano] y disfrutar de la privilegiada naturaleza, cultura, hospitalidad y tranquilidad que ofrece la isla del Caribe.