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Oklahoma suffers quakes after fracking



By Blake Deppe

Residents of central Oklahoma are enduring what they describe as a swarm of earthquakes that have shaken their homes and rattled their nerves. Not far from there, fracking operations are ongoing, continuously disturbing both the environment and people's peace of mind.

On July 24, about 500 people in the Oklahoma town of Edmonton attended a meeting with regulators and research geologists in order to voice their concerns. They have noticed the increasing frequency of quakes in an area that used to have no seismic activity at all. It is no coincidence, they believe, that the central part of the state is home to many fracking wastewater disposal wells.

Scientists say the injection of wastewater into the ground could be triggering manmade earthquakes. Fracking involves blasting water, sand, and chemicals into underground rock formations to bring oil and gas to the surface. They believe that fluid then increases pressure beneath the ground and helps to lubricate faults, encouraging seismic disturbances. Pumping that waste into the earth at high pressure, they add, doesn't help matters.

"I've experienced dozens, maybe a hundred, earthquakes," said Edmonton resident Mary Fleming, who noted they shake her house peri-

odically and cause cracks in the plaster inside her home. "The house rocks. The bed lurches." She was one of the many who raised their hands when residents were asked whether a recent tremor jolted them awake early in the morning.

The citizens urged the Oklahoma Corporation Commission, which regulates the oil and gas industries, to ban or severely restrict the wastewater wells, which have likely contributed to most of the 230 quakes the state has recorded so far this

T H I S W E E K :

- Oklahoma suffers quakes after fracking
- Supreme Court ruling robs workers of united voice
- Wage hikes leave restaurant workers shortchanged
- La gente y la naturaleza antes que las ganancias
- West Coast dock workers battle take backs

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year. Two days after this meeting, in fact, a magnitude 3.6 earthquake was recorded southwest of the town of Guthrie by the U.S. Geological Survey; that's not a high enough magnitude to cause major damage, but it's certainly not a microquake, either.

Protestors demanded the Oklahoma Corporation Commission ban or severely restrict the wells.

Austin Holland, a research seismologist with the U.S. Geological Survey, remarked, "This state is experiencing an unprecedented level of earthquake activity." He said the agency is closely monitoring the quakes to see if they worsen, and furthermore to determine conclusively whether they are being caused by fracking. "We're having more earthquakes here, including magnitude three, than the western U.S." He admitted, "We do see some cases where there is a pretty clear link between fluid injection and the earthquakes."

Another possibility, he thought, is that this is due to a combination of human-caused and natural effects; perhaps even a perfect storm of factors. "We can tell that sometimes very large rainfalls or changes in aquifer levels can cause earthquakes. Just the natural changes that occur. We could be looking at a combination of that, combined with changes in the amount of wastewater that is disposed of, and natural stress changes. There are all sorts of different [possible circumstances] that we are looking at."

William Ellsworth, a geophysicist with the U.S. Geological Survey who has published more than 100 papers on earthquakes, said the worst

part is that, even after scientists have established a link between seismic activity and fracking, no state besides Ohio factors this into its drilling operations. In 49 states, there is no seismic risk assessment required for injection wells. "Nobody is talking to one another about this," he said. "I'm worried that one day, an injection of wastewater into the ground could pierce an unknown fault somewhere that's five miles from a nuclear power plant."

"This swarm of earthquakes is very robust," said Holland. And there could be a chance that somewhere in this series of tremors, a more destructive quake could occur. "In 2011, we saw a foreshock, a bunch of earthquakes, a large main shock, and then it settled down for a couple of days." In the same way, "it is certainly possible that we could see a large earthquake in this [current] sequence." Either way, the current quakes show no signs of slowing. "We continue to see seismic activity in the area," he concluded.



Blake Deppe writes for Peoplesworld.org.

Supreme Court ruling robs workers of united voice

By Mark Gruenberg

In a decision that will rob unions of millions of dollars and thousands of members, the U.S. Supreme Court voted 5-4 to legalize "free riders" in cases where state or local governments and individuals jointly employ caregivers.

The court split along partisan lines, with all five Republican-appointed male justices in the majority and the four other justices - Elena Kagan, Stephen Breyer, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor - dissenting.

Justice Samuel Alito's majority opinion in Harris vs. Quinn, a case involving caregivers from Illinois, said Illinois violated the workers' First Amendment rights to free speech by requiring them to pay "agency fees" - money to cover costs of collective bargaining and contract administration - to the Service Employees, the union a majority voted for. "A state may not force every person who benefits from this group's efforts to make payments to the group," Alito said.

At least 20 other states have similar arrange-

ments where government workers whom the union represents, but who do not wish to join, must pay agency fees, Kagan's dissent noted. So do many local governments. She predicted there could be a mass exodus from the unions, not just of the agency fee payers, but of members.

The laws of economics, letting them be free riders while still compelling unions to represent them, would lead to those departures, she predicted.

Latest data show the U.S. has 1.14 million personal care aides and 807,000 home health care aides. It does not say how many the states employ and, of those, how many are free riders. Women are an overwhelming majority of the affected workers.

SEIU was the only union to comment immediately after the ruling.

"No court case is going to stand in the way of home care workers coming together to have a strong voice for good jobs and quality home care," said SEIU President Mary Kay Henry.

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Wage hikes leave restaurant workers shortchanged

By Mark Gruenberg

Massachusetts and Michigan states' legislatures recently voted to hike their own state minimum wages.

But there's one big flaw in the two measures, according to the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC), the union-supported group that is campaigning to raise restaurant workers' pay nationwide: Increases in the tipped minimum wage were too small.

The federal minimum wage for workers who depend on tips is \$2.13 hourly and it hasn't risen in more than 20 years. Employers are supposed to make up the difference between what a worker gets in tips, on top of that \$2.13 hourly sum, and the regular minimum wage, now \$7.25 hourly. But employers routinely cheat the tipped workers out of the difference.

Raising the tipped minimum would help close the wage gap, especially for restaurant workers, who are among the poorest-paid nationwide, ROC co-founder and co-director Sayu Jayaraman says. Seven states have eliminated the tipped minimum, bringing all workers under the regular minimum wage, she adds. Their restaurants are thriving, she notes.

Massachusetts and Michigan did not raise the tipped minimum enough, Jayaraman adds. Specifically, Massachusetts increased its tipped minimum wage from its current \$2.63 an hour to \$3.75. Michigan raised its tipped minimum by a dollar an hour, to \$3.50.

Massachusetts now has an \$8 hourly minimum wage for other workers. That's 75 cents above the federal figure of \$7.25, which itself



hasn't risen since 2006. Michigan's overall minimum would rise to \$9.25. The new Massachusetts minimum would rise to \$11 hourly by 2017. Unions, President Obama, and congressional Democrats are campaigning for a hike to \$10.10 by 2016.

Michigan's hike went quickly through a GOP-dominated legislature - and GOP Gov. Rick Snyder signed it - to head off a worker-led union-supported referendum that would have given low-wage workers in the Wolverine State an even larger raise, Jayaraman adds.

Nevertheless, the two minimum wage wins are signs of success nationwide of the growing movement of hundreds of thousands of low-wage workers - fast-food workers, retail workers, Walmart workers, warehouse workers and others - who demand a living wage of \$15 hourly, decent benefits and hours and the right to organize without employer interference.

"This law is not a win for many Michiganders," Jayaraman added. "Through intense lobbying by the National Restaurant Association and other interests, more than 160,000 tipped workers in Michigan, over 74 percent of whom are women, are stuck with a base wage of \$3.50 an hour - less than \$1 per hour increase over their old wage - and still far below the poverty line."

The federal minimum for workers who depend on tips is \$2.13 hourly.

West Coast dock workers battle take backs

By PAI

With their six-year contract about to expire, talks being held in San Francisco between the International Longshore and Warehouse Union and the managers of Pacific coastal ports are going down to the wire.

But there's a big difference between now and the time when the port managers locked out ILWU just over a decade ago: Barack Obama, not George W. Bush, is president. One other difference, but with probably less impact: ILWU was then in the AFL-CIO. Today, it's not.

The Pacific Maritime Association, managers of the 29 West Coast ports - including the nation's busiest, Los Angeles-Long Beach - are battling to cut the number of jobs under ILWU control, make the 20,000 workers pay more for their health care, and allow further automation.

Talks will go beyond the June 30 contract expiration. ILWU's West Coast longshore workers handle 44 percent of all incoming U.S. seaborne freight. A shutdown stops supply lines. (story continues after video)

"We've got an excellent negotiating team and solid support from longshore and clerk members who mapped out their priorities and gave us their marching orders to secure a good contract," ILWU President Bob McEllrath said when bargaining began on May 19.

The union set four key priorities for negotiators: Maintaining health care and retirement benefits, management respect for ILWU jurisdiction, fair raises and better safety conditions.

La gente y la naturaleza antes que las ganancias

Por Juan Lopez

Creo que hoy en día es más necesario que nunca —y posible— que el partido y sus miembros participen en el movimiento obrero.

Es necesario porque el movimiento obrero —si bien es la fuerza progresista más grande, más fuerte y mejor organizada del país— es actualmente demasiado pequeño para los desafíos que enfrenta la clase obrera y el pueblo de nuestra nación. Es posible porque —a diferencia del anticomunismo tenaz de antaño que estaba condicionado por la Guerra Fría y el macartismo— la experiencia de los últimos años ha mostrado que las puertas están abiertas para los luchadores honestos con energía positiva e ideas progresistas, incluso miembros de nuestro grupo. Para reforzar mis argumentos me gustaría llamar brevemente la atención sobre los aspectos más destacados de la convención de la AFL-CIO del año pasado, a la que tuve el privilegio de asistir. La convención de la AFL-CIO proyectó una agenda y una visión orientadas a transformar el movimiento sindical, sus socios y aliados en una fuerza popular formidable del siglo 21 en favor de la justicia económica y la democracia. Participaron delegaciones de la mayoría abrumadora de los sindicatos de nuestro país, así como representantes de los grupos comunitarios progresistas y de los principales movimientos sociales del país, incluidos los de derechos civiles, inmigrantes, la mujer y la juventud.

La convención de la federación laboral:

Modernizó una agenda de hoy en día (similar a la organización general del Congreso de Organizaciones Industriales (CIO) de la década de 1930) cuando tomó medidas para promover la organización de todos los trabajadores ya sea cubierta por un convenio colectivo o no, y sea protegida por las leyes laborales y sociales o no. Se comprometió a defender más enérgicamente la lucha por la igualdad de las personas de color, los inmigrantes, las mujeres, los jóvenes, la comunidad LGBT y otros grupos oprimidos. Tomó medidas para colaborar más estrechamente con los grupos comunitarios y movimientos sociales progresistas. Reconoció la importancia estratégica y el esfuerzo hercúleo que se necesitará para derrotar a la camarilla republicana derechista en las elecciones de 2014 y 2016. Mostró nuevos niveles de independencia política. Destacó iniciativas trascendentales de los últimos años para fortalecer la cooperación internacional las organizaciones laborales, incluidas algunas fusiones.

Con franqueza, líderes y militantes reconocieron —como lo expresó el presidente de la AFL-CIO Richard Trumka— que "tenemos que cambiar la forma en que operamos de una manera significativa para salir de la crisis que nos encontramos". Además añadió: "pero esta crisis también nos ofrece una oportunidad amplia y enorme". Tal vez la palabra "crisis" sea demasiado fuerte, pero esto también podría decirse de las organizaciones populares progresistas en general, incluyendo nuestro partido.

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