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Many hoping for pro-worker State of the Union



By John Wojcik

President Obama is expected to devote much of Tuesday's State of the Union address to income inequality and he will reportedly call for an increase in the minimum wage to \$10.00 an hour.

If so, that would please labor unions, who have long been arguing that the most important problem with the U.S. economy is that the wages of the vast majority of Americans have been falling for 30 years now.

According to the Labor Department, in 2000 the median household income was \$64,000 and today it is down to \$55,640.

Unions say wages for American workers, especially the lowest paid, have to increase and government action is essential to help create good jobs that permit workers to leave behind a life of poverty.

The minimum wage hike the president is expected to call for would affect some 30 million workers, lifting them above official poverty rates and creating many additional jobs with the newly available money they spend.

"Three principles should guide us," AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said on Wednesday: "No one should make less than the minimum wage - that means also ending wage theft and establishing fair minimums for tipped and agricul-

tural workers. No one should go to work every day and still be unable to provide for his or her family. Everyone should be able to bargain for fair living standards and a better life."

If the president calls for a hike in the minimum wage and pursues the policies Trumka outlined, that will begin to close the income gap, but even more will be needed.

Many want to see the president and Congress strengthen, not cut, Social Security, Medicare and

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Medicaid. They point out that cutting these programs, as the GOP and the tea party would like to do, is precisely the wrong way to go, especially at a time when promises to retirees are being broken and defined benefit pensions are becoming a thing of the past.

Obama will propose raising the minimum wage.

It's hoped that the president will make proposals to close the soaring income gap, with its disastrous effects on the 99 percent. One way he could do that would be to call for a massive program of investment in the nation's infrastructure in order to create jobs, as many unions and others have advocated.

An indication that President Obama might go in this direction is that he has invited people from all of the major construction and building trades unions to Washington to hear his speech. There are millions of workers ready and willing to be involved in the rebuilding of schools, airports, roads and bridges. But the president will have a difficult job here. The GOP's recent insistence on cutting funds for high-speed rail out of the federal budget shows how the right wing is committed to opposing infrastructure repair. They have held up a vote on his American Jobs Act since 2011.

Beyond job creation, it is also hoped that the president will explain how closing the income gap requires strengthening the rights of workers on the job. This encompasses a number of critical moves, including strong support for comprehen-

sive, immigration reform.

There is another piece of this immigration reform battle that can be fixed in the shorter term if the president is willing and able to act by executive order to immediately end the daily deportation of 1,000 immigrants. This deportation is tearing apart both the families affected and the economy of the many communities involved.

A critical piece of the battle to close the income gap was mentioned by Trumka in his pre-State of the Union remarks - that is the right of Americans everywhere to join and form unions. Hopefully, the president will re-emphasize his administration's intention to go after corporations that violate these rights by punishing workers who exercise them.

The recent decision by the NLRB citing Walmart for violating almost every major U.S. labor law was a major step in the right direction. The president can use his bully pulpit to explain why actions like that are so important.



John Wojcik is co-editor of Peoplesworld.org.

The fight to save “net neutrality”

By PW Editorial Board

The U.S. Court of Appeals struck down the “net neutrality” rules established by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the case of Verizon v. FCC. Net neutrality is the policy that required broadband providers to treat all Internet traffic equally regardless of the source or consumer.

The Preserving the Open Internet order - which was adopted by the FCC in December, 2010 - mandated broadband providers disclose information regarding their network and services, prohibited blocking lawful content, and forbade “unreasonable discrimination” regarding data or services. The FCC website states, “the ‘Open Internet’ is the Internet as we know it. It’s open because it uses free, publicly available standards that anyone can access and build to, and it treats all traffic that flows across the network in roughly the same way.”

Verizon, appealed the FCC ruling, leading to the decision which effectively allows Internet Ser-

vice Providers (ISPs) such as Time Warner Cable, Verizon, etc. to make deals with content providers like Netflix or Facebook to provide faster or more reliable service. A wide range of organizations, businesses and individuals from across the political spectrum have spoken out against the ruling.

Many labor and civil rights groups have supported the idea of the Internet as an essential utility and called for guaranteeing equal access and broadband development into under-served communities and regions. Journalists and consumer advocates worry that big companies could gain great advantage in reaching consumers by paying for digital access lanes, leaving independent media stuck in digital gridlock.

Proponents of net neutrality say the implications could be even more dire, saying ISPs could also establish “tiered service,” slowing service for basic customers and giving priority to data for premier customers able and willing to pay for improved service.

Internet service providers could establish a tiered service giving priority to big companies.

GOP Gov. Corbett a “no show” on schools

By Ben Sears

Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Corbett, struggling to rescue his re-election campaign, made news here today. Headlines this morning announced that the Governor will propose a \$200 million increase in education funding for public schools across the state in his annual budget address Feb. 4. However, the news met with more skepticism than approval.

The reports suggested that the funding would likely come from reductions elsewhere in the state budget rather than from new revenue. While the Governor’s office was not releasing “any details of the proposal,” sources speculated that \$100 million would come from “reform” in the state and public school employee pension funds.

Such proposals have already been widely panned as “robbing Peter to pay Paul” schemes. A Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) spokesperson observed that the proposed increase would still leave the state’s education spending around \$700 million below the annual levels of 2010-2011, the year Corbett was elected.

Corbett’s political stock appeared to take another hit before the morning was over when it developed that he had canceled a widely publicized appearance at the city’s prestigious Central High School. The cancellation was announced to a crowd of several hundred demonstrators who had gathered outside on the school grounds to protest the Governor’s appearance at an assembly program. Parent activist Helen Gym energized the crowd when she opened the rally by announcing that she had just learned that Corbett had “bailed” and had decided not to show up.

The protest rally was organized by a coalition



of education and community groups and school employee unions. The coalition has conducted a high profile and sustained campaign to bring attention to the devastating program cuts which have followed in the wake of the state budget reductions during Corbett’s one term in office.

A notable feature of the coalition has been the activism of local clergy and they were out in force.. Reverend Alyn Waller of Enon Tabernacle Church in North Philadelphia noted the diversity of the crowd saying, “We are demonstrating our ability to come together around issues. This is not a black problem or a white problem; it is not Christian, Muslim, or atheist problem.” His message for Corbett: “We want the billion dollars back. We have demonstrated today that we can pull people together who have the ability to vote you out!”

Coalition members distributed literature at the rally documenting the staff and program cuts to the three schools that Corbett was expected to visit during the day. None of the schools has a functioning library or any librarian to staff one.

Central High, for example has cut its full time staff from 154 to 112, or over 20 percent since 2011. It has cut its counseling staff from eight to two, or 75 percent. And, as speakers noted, this was at one of the school district’s elite special admission schools.

Gov. Tom Corbett avoided local protests.

GE closing upstate NY plant

By Tony Long

Despite 17 bargaining sessions over a 60-day period, General Electric has decided to shutter its 75-year-old plant here, saying it will move the work to another plant in Clearwater, Fla. Union negotiators had attempted to save the plant, its nearly 200 jobs, and the community whose survival the closing has put at risk. Apparently, the company was just going through the motions at the bargaining table and never really considered any proposal to save the factory, according to union officials.

As reported in the Tampa Bay Times on Jan. 6, "GE demanded an hourly wage cut of \$17.88 for 163 workers, effectively reducing the wage to \$11.12." Clearly with the company seeking such steep wage cuts, keeping the plant in upstate NY was never seriously considered by GE.

A bulletin released by the union at the plant, United Electrical Workers Local 332, states: "Unfortunately, Governor Cuomo's office was nowhere to be found. Despite repeated efforts on our part to engage him, Mr. Cuomo's office never even granted us the opportunity to meet with him or his staff to listen to our concerns and work with us on a plan to save the Fort Edward plant." During one brief conversation with the union, a Cuomo staffer reportedly said, "They want to move to Florida, I can't stop them."

Juan Gelman, una vida marcada por la dictadura

Por Cubadebate

El periodista y escritor argentino Juan Gelman falleció a los 83 años 14 enero en la ciudad de México, donde residía desde hace más de 20 años.

El escritor nació en Buenos Aires en 1930 y salió de Argentina en 1976 para exiliarse en México huyendo de la dictadura militar en su país.

Gelman fue hijo de inmigrantes rusos, se inició en la poesía desde muy pequeño, orientado por su hermano Boris quien fue un lector compulsivo. Abandonó su carrera de Química para dedicarse por completo al destino de las letras.

Durante la época de la dictadura argentina, Gelman sufrió el secuestro de su hija Nora Eva, y la desaparición de su hijo Marcelo Ariel y de su nuera María Claudia Iruretagoyena.

Luego de una intensa búsqueda por varios años, el 7 de enero de 1990 el Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense identificó los restos de su hijo Marcelo, encontrados en un río de San Fernando dentro de un tambor de grasa lleno de cemento. Se determinó también que había sido asesinado de un tiro en la nuca.

Fue hasta 1998 Gelman descubrió que su hija fue llevada a Uruguay por medio del Plan Cóndor, que vinculaba a las dictaduras sudamericanas y Estados Unidos, y que había sido mantenida con vida al menos hasta dar a luz a una niña en el Hospital Militar de Montevideo.

En 2000 la nieta de Gelman, Andrea, fue encontrada y Gelman pudo reunirse con ella.

De su obra poética se destacan las publicaciones Violín y otras cuestiones en 1956, En el juego en que andamos, en 1959, Gotán, en 1962, Los poemas de Sidney West en 1969, Fábulas, en 1970.

En 1997 obtuvo el Premio Nacional de Poesía en Argentina, el premio Juan Rulfo en el año 2000, en 2004 el Premio Iberoamericano de Poesía Ramón López Velarde, en 2005 los premios Iberoamericano Pablo Neruda y Reina Sofía de Poesía, y en el año 2007 el Premio Cervantes.

Epitafio

Un pájaro vivía en mí.
Una flor viajaba en mi sangre.
Mi corazón era un violín.

Quise o no quise. Pero a veces me quisieron. También a mí me alegraban: la primavera, las manos juntas, lo feliz.

¡Digo que el hombre debe serlo!

Aquí yace un pájaro.
Una flor.
Un violín.

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