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Demonstrations, nationwide strike rock Egypt

By Dan Margolis

As Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was preparing to announce he would not seek another term in office, more than 1 million people turned out in Cairo's Tahrir Square to protest his teetering government. The military refused to take action against demonstrators.

Demonstrations took place across the nation, with more than 250,000 people coming out in Sinai. In Cairo, protesters held a mock trial of Mubarak, and then burnt him in effigy.

A general strike, to continue until Mubarak's government falls, was called by the newly formed Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions.

The AFL-CIO, America's main labor federation, along with nearly all the rest of the world's trade union movement, has thrown its weight behind Egypt's pro-democracy demonstrators.

More specifically, world labor is in solidarity with the Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions and its call for the nationwide general strike, aimed at bringing down nearly three decades of Mubarak's dictatorship.

"The people's movement for democracy in Egypt and the role unions are playing for freedom and worker rights inspires us and will not be forgotten," Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, said in a letter to the Egyptian organizers.



Trumka's letter was to Kamal Abbas, the general coordinator of the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services, and Abu Eita, leader of the Real Estate Tax Authority Workers. Both organizations have been instrumental in pulling together the FETU, which Trumka welcomed into the international labor movement.

RETAW, the first independent trade union formed in Egypt in more than half a century, had been in a legal grey area: the government has nei-

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ther banned nor accepted its application for recognition. CTUWS was the target of government attacks over the past few years. In 2007, several of its offices, including its national headquarters, were shuttered, but a 2008 court ruling forced the regime to allow the Center to function.

The labor movement is in the heart and soul of the Egyptian people's revolution.

FETU's first act was to plan the nationwide general strike. A letter circulated by the CTUWS gives a flavor of the demands. "The Egyptian people call to overthrow the regime," it reads.

The letter called for the release of all arrested people, the end of the state of emergency imposed by Mubarak and prosecution of those responsible for corruption and the shooting of protesters.

More fundamentally, CTUWS calls for the dissolution of the nation's legislature and the constitution of a "national salvation government with the participation of all the political powers" and an "association" to "draft a new constitution for establishing a civil state which observes human rights."

A Jan. 30 press release announcing the formation of the FETU stated that "the labor movement is in the heart and soul of the Egyptian people's revolution and its emphasis on the support for the six requirements as demanded by the Egyptian people's revolution."

According to Sharan Burrow, general secretary of the International Trade Union Confedera-

tion, "This is a hugely important step for all Egyptians, who have for so long been denied the right to democratic representation at work."

"Independent unions, which the regime refused to recognize, have organized thousands of local strikes, sit-ins and protests in recent years, and have been a moving force behind the massive mobilization of Egypt's people that we have been witnessing in recent days," she continued.

The AFL-CIO is a member of the ITUC, which represents 176 million workers in 151 nations.

The World Federation of Trade Unions, which represents millions of workers in dozens of countries, also sided with Egypt's workers, saying, "The working class of Egypt is leading this struggle and we wish them success.

The strike will continue, organizers say, until Mubarak goes and demands are met.



Dan Margolis is a writer for the People's World.

GOP economic plans signal class war

By PW Editorial Board

They got elected by saying the word "jobs" a lot during the worst recession since the Great Depression, though they voted against every job-creating program offered by the Democrats in the last two years. Now the Republicans want to sneak in their real anti-working families agenda.

Detailed analysis of House Republican economic proposals reveals an extreme agenda that few Americans would have knowingly voted for.

A leading Republican plan to end Medicare would begin by giving Medicare beneficiaries a voucher to buy health insurance in the private market where the rising cost of care would quickly outpace the value of the voucher. Within decades Medicare beneficiaries would be receiving about one-fourth the value of medical benefits they currently receive.

Left unexplained is how seniors would pay for additional costs of care created by the Republican plan. Further, the plan fails to detail how health insurance costs would be kept under control.

Further, the Republican economic plan seeks

to destroy Social Security. First, the Republicans would slash Social Security benefits by 16 percent and then a few years later by 28 percent - under the guise of restoring "solvency."

The plan would also divert some \$1.2 trillion in public funds to what have proven to be essentially risky private retirement accounts, essentially ensuring that guaranteed Social Security would end and force seniors to rely on the good will of Wall Street bankers like the Lehman Brothers and investors like con artist Bernie Madoff to keep their money safe.

But Republicans call for new tax cuts for the very rich and powerful corporations, eliminating the "earned income tax credit" for low-income families and doing nothing for small businesses.

Republicans would provide an average of \$1.7 million more in tax breaks for millionaires, while putting in jeopardy the retirement security of the vast majority of working families who now or will rely on Medicare and Social Security in their retirement.

Republicans are pushing economic proposals few Americans would have knowingly voted for.

Illinois legalizes same sex unions

By Pepe Lozano

With a landmark bill signed into law here by Democratic Gov. Pat Quinn Monday, same-sex couples will, for the first time in Illinois history, share many of the legal protections that are now granted to married couples.

With the signing, Illinois becomes the 16th U.S. state to give spousal rights to gay and lesbian couples, and the sixth state to recognize civil unions.

"Today is an important day in the history of our state because today we are showing the world that the people of Illinois believe in equality for all," Quinn said as he signed the bill among hundreds of supporters during a ceremony in a Chicago auditorium. "We look forward to individuals and businesses from across the country choosing to move to Illinois where we believe that everyone is entitled to the same rights," he said. "We believe in liberty and justice for all."

The new law, the Illinois Religious Freedom Protection and Civil Union Act, was passed by the state Legislature in December and goes into effect June 1. It will allow same-sex and heterosexual couples to enter in civil unions.

These couples will share many rights given to married couples including the ability to share a room in a nursing home, adoption and parental rights, pension benefits.

In 2000 Vermont became the first state granting civil unions and in 2009 it passed a law allowing same-sex marriages.

Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, New Hampshire and the District of Columbia also issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples.

"Illinois is taking an historic step forward in embracing fairness and extending basic dignity to



all couples in our state," John Knight, director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Project of the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois, told Reuters.

Illinois State Rep. Greg Harris, a Democrat from Chicago who is openly gay and was the main sponsor of the Illinois bill, told the Chicago Tribune, "This is making sure that at a time of life when people need government to support them, that it will be there and treat one set of neighbors equally as the next set of neighbors."

Harris noted there's more to be done because there are powerful forces out there that want to turn back the clock.

Activists say Congress' recent repeal of the U.S. military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy has helped gay rights advocates push for same-sex marriage laws nationwide.

While the Illinois law was a long time coming, advocates say, it's one more step toward full equality for same-sex couples. They say the next goal is to have the federal government recognize same-sex couples, whether through civil unions or marriage.

The repeal of the U.S. military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy has helped gay rights advocates push for same-sex marriage laws nationwide.

UFCW takes on non-union megastores

By Marilyn Bechtel

Members of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 5, a 33,000 member union in northern California, work in retail grocery and meat, wholesale meat and food processing, agriculture, retail drug, clothing and jewelry and many other professions.

The union says the year 2011 poses unprecedented challenges for its members working in the grocery industry. Major contracts with Safeway and Lucky, covering a large percentage of Local 5 members, will expire in October. Meanwhile, non-union operators like Walmart, Fresh and Easy, Target, Henrys, Sprouts and Trader Joe's have announced plans to move into or expand operations in northern California. Many of these companies have said they plan to move into "food deserts" - areas that have not had grocery stores in years.

Local 5 says the answer to meeting the multiple challenges of achieving a good grocery agreement lies with its members.

Its Neighborhood Grocery Initiative is a multifaceted effort to mobilize members and community to confront employers who don't want to recognize the efforts of Local 5 members who have made northern California one of the most profitable places in the U.S. to sell groceries. The local says it will take on employers who try to drive down conditions by opening non-union. And it will work with communities and cities to make sure grocery jobs coming in will offer residents the same wages and benefits that have been fought for in the area for over 70 years.

Dirigentes Latinos: ¡Manos fuera del Seguro Social!

Por Pepe Lozano

Varios de las principales organizaciones sindicales y de abogacía latinas, representando a más de 50 millones de personas por toda la nación, están reuniendo sus fuerzas para informar a la gente sobre la importancia de proteger al Seguro Social. La coalición "Latinos por una Jubilación Segura" fue formada para enfrentar las más recientes amenazas de recortar los beneficios de Seguro Social o de aumentar la edad de jubilación. "Esta es una cuestión de importancia crítica, en especial para la comunidad latina," declaró Lilian Rodríguez López, presidenta de la Federación Hispana, durante una rueda telefónica de prensa este 19 de enero. "Vemos muy claro el impacto de la situación económica actual y cómo está afectando a latinos y realmente a todos los norteamericanos," dijo.

Además de la crisis hipotecaria, latinos han perdido miles de millones de dólares en ingresos de jubilación, subraya Rodríguez López. "Imponer recortes o aumentar la edad de jubilación bien pudiera condenar tanto esta generación que generaciones futuras a una penuria horrible, y eso es absolutamente inaceptable," dijo.

Los latinos que se jubilan tienen mucho que perder, dijo Héctor Sánchez, director ejecutivo del Concilio Sindical por el Avance Latino, que también participó en la conferencia. "Sin los beneficios de Seguro Social se triplicaría la tasa de pobreza entre latinos de tercera edad," dijo. "Cualqui-

er recorte aplicado al Seguro Social constituirá un asalto a la comunidad latina y toda la gente trabajadora".

Reiteraron los participantes en la rueda telefónica que el Seguro Social, beneficio que a la mayoría de la gente ya les resulta muy modesto, jamás ha contribuido al déficit federal.

Dijo Jeff Cruz, director ejecutivo de la nueva coalición, "Latinos por una Jubilación Segura", que esperan forjar una coalición aun mayor con aliados en las organizaciones sindicales, pro derechos civiles, y de jubilados. También se está organizando una serie de reuniones comunitarias bilingües por toda la nación. Ahora el reto es seguir con gran atención lo que pase en el Congreso y luego movilizar a la gente, urgiéndolos a comunicarlos a sus senadores y congresistas la gran importancia de proteger al Seguro Social, dijo.

Brent Wilkes, director ejecutivo de LULAC [League of United Latin American Citizens] dijo que abrirse un camino hacia la legalización para los inmigrantes también aumentaría los ingresos al Seguro Social.

La coalición Latinos para una Jubilación Segura está constituida de distintos grupos latinos importantes de abogacía que acaban de lanzar su plan, "Proteger al Seguro Social: Un dispositivo por fortalecer al Seguro Social para todos los norteamericanos".

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