

PEOPLE'S WORLD

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First Energy locks out workers

By John Wojcik



It was just after sunrise only three days before Thanksgiving, that security guards clamped locks on the gates at FirstEnergy in central Pennsylvania, barring 150 workers from their jobs. The company took out the chains and wrapped them around the gates, the workers say, in order to wrest from them massive concessions in retirement benefits, retiree health care and working conditions.

"They got what was our last, best and final offer," said FirstEnergy spokesman Scott Surgeoner, after the lockout that is keeping workers at home and hurting the economies of many Pennsylvania towns, including Altoona, Bedford, Edensburg, Huntingdon, Lewistown and Shippensburg.

"They did nothing but bargain in bad faith, intending all along to lock us out," said D. Michael Langford, president of the Utility Workers Union of America, which represents the workers. The union is asking that peoplesworld.org readers, along with everyone else, send messages to FirstEnergy's top executives, demanding an end to the lockout.

Contact CEO Tony Alexander at: alexandera@firstenergycorp.com, 330.384.5793 (phone), and 330.384.5669 (fax). Contact Human Relations VP Lynn Cavalier at: cavalierl@firstenergycorp.com, and 330.384.5826 (phone).

Workers have thrown up picket lines and have attracted support from people in the towns. "This is something out of a Christmas Carol by Dickens," said Camillo Santo, a community supporter. "The bosses showed no mercy, even during the Christmas season. The workers' families have faced rough sledding because of this and continue to do so. The bosses want to bust the union and replace these brave workers."

The support extends not just through the lo-

T H I S W E E K :

- **First Energy locks out workers**
- **Amiri Baraka: 1934 - 2014**
- **Youth battle for social change in St. Louis**
- **Maestros de Puerto Rico negocian con funcionarios**
- **Judge rules for marriage equality in Sooner state**

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cal towns and throughout the 13 million member AFL-CIO but into the councils of international labor unions as well. IndustriALL, which represents 50 million workers in 140 countries in the mining, energy and manufacturing sectors and Public Services International, which represents more than

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20 million workers in 650 unions in 48 countries, have rallied behind the locked out workers. They have sent statements to Alexander and Cavalier, demanding an end to the lockout.

The lockout is not the first time FirstEnergy has been in the news. It is the company that actually caused the massive blackout in the Northeastern part of the country back in 2003. It was a FirstEnergy transmission line failure in Ohio that triggered the massive blackout that the union says happened because the company took advantage of lax regulations during the Bush administration.

“Utility giants had the approach of keeping all systems running until they actually break down and this was the way they treated wiring, poles, transformers and substations,” explained Donald Wrightman who was union president in 2003. “Meanwhile, the workforce is slashed to the bone and replacement parts are not kept in supply.”

Bob Fronek, president of the UMW Local 270 in Cleveland, said that, in preparation for deregulation during those Bush years, “Utility companies slashed their workforces by a third or more, ramping up for deregulation.”

Unions say that both the lockouts and the blackouts should surprise no one. And more, not fewer skilled workers are needed, they say to rebuild the entire energy infrastructure. Prior to the lockout, FirstEnergy had already announced last summer that it was closing several Pennsylvania power plants. The union stepped in to try to stop the closure by complaining to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. The Blue Green Alliance, a joint union-environmental group backed the union and sent its own letter to the commission. The letters expressed concern, of course, about the fate of workers but also said consumers “deserve assurance” that the firm’s closure of the plants “will not artificially inflate prices or harm reliability” of electricity in the area.

Langford is again reminding consumers of the links: “It was only in 2003 that failures in FirstEnergy’s transmission and generation systems cascaded out of control, quickly forcing 256 power plants throughout the eastern U.S. and Canada offline.”



John Wojcik is co-editor of Peoplesworld.org.

Amiri Baraka: 1934 - 2014

By PW Editorial Board

Amiri Baraka, was a poet, playwright, critic, and revolutionary activist who helped shape American political and cultural life since the late 1950s. For over 50 years he and his wife Amina Baraka played pivotal roles in African American culture, and political activism.

A wordsmith of extraordinary power, Baraka helped birth the Greenwich Village beat movement and then founded, along with Ishmael Reed, Larry Neal and Askia Toure, the Black Arts Movement. Baraka was shaped by and helped shape the main currents of his day. Like W.E.B. Du Bois, his views evolved. His views traversed the political universe, ranging from an early left liberalism to cultural nationalism to a communist outlook influenced by an admiration of the achievements of China. He later criticized the nationalist views of his younger days including anti-Semitism.

A central concern throughout was the equality and dignity of African Americans. Baraka in-

sisted on political action throughout his life and was one of the founders, along with Richard Hatcher of the National Black Political Assembly which gathered 3,000 participants in Gary Indiana, in 1972. Electoral activism was an essential part of a wider united front effort that he viewed as essential to social transformation. Touting the effectiveness of united front coalitions, he often in recent years pointed to the election of Barack Obama. Amiri Baraka was a force in Newark politics and helped elect the city’s first black mayor, Kenneth Gibson. His son, Ras Baraka, serves on the Newark City Council and is a candidate for mayor. He was named Poet Laureate of New Jersey in 1992, a position abolished by the New Jersey legislature after one of his poems accused Israel of foreknowledge of 9/11.

Baraka, a writer with a biting wit and a rare intelligence, insisted on a truthful art that reflected and helped challenge the contradictions of real life. He will be missed.

Electoral activism was seen as an essential part of wider united front efforts.

Youth battle for social change in St. Louis

By Elyse Vesser

In a society where the national student debt totals \$1.1 trillion, it is more important than ever to lift young activists up and support them in their efforts to organize and create social change. Young Activists United St. Louis (YSTL), a St. Louis non-profit, does just that.

Periodically, YSTL recognizes a new young leader as director of the organization. The year 2014 marks a change in leadership from UMSL student Alice Floros to student and Show Me15 fast food Organizer, Rasheen Aldridge.

"What's so great about YSTL is that they help you develop into an organizer, whether you're already active or you're like me, and didn't even know what organizing was a year ago," Rasheen Aldridge remarked in his speech at the organization's ceremoniously themed "New Year, New Organizer" fundraiser at Blank Space on January 11.

YSTL, which celebrated its second birthday in June, has named many accomplishments within the past year. Focusing on higher education issues, the organization launched its student debt campaign in the fall of 2012. The campaign began with a student debt conference in which Missourians of all generations gathered to talk about student debt, tuition hikes, and financial literacy in schools. Subsequently, YSTL organized several actions around student debt.

Another point of pride for the organization is the time and resources that it puts into young leaders. Over the past year members attended trainings that included the National Student Power Convergence, a direct action training by United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), and the Midwest Student Debt Conference.



YSTL has also given students a platform to talk about their personal experiences with higher education issues. In 2013 member Emily Koehler, accompanied by members of the United States Student Association, attended a meeting with Sallie Mae CEOs and Executives to present demands about improving conditions for student borrowers.

Koehler has student loan debt from Sallie Mae, and has used her involvement with YSTL to become a part of a larger activist movement.

"Young Activists United makes it a priority to not only develop young leaders in St. Louis, but also presents them with opportunities to collaborate and advance across movements," she says.

The recent year also marks a growth in media coverage for the organization and its members. Both Koehler and member Derek Wetherell received national attention for their student debt stories in a recent Wall Street Journal article, while YSTL Campus Coordinator Courtney Hayes shared her experience in the Riverfront Times.

In the coming year, Aldridge plans to continue to expand YSTL's membership. "I'm excited for the new year and some big plans that we have in the works," he says. "I'll be focusing on recruiting more Community College based students from STLCC, Harris-Stowe, and UMSL."

The \$1.1 trillion student debt is the group's main priority.

Judge rules for marriage equality in Sooner state

By Christopher Looper

On Tuesday, January 14, many LGBT and equality activists received a big but gleeful surprise when U.S. District Court Judge Terence C. Kern ruled the Oklahoma state amendment limiting marriage as a "union of one man and one woman" unconstitutional at the federal level.

Judge Kern found this statement within the state constitution to be in violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which has been in effect since 1868. Even though the Fourteenth Amendment has clearly been a part of our constitution for over a century, it has taken a considerable amount of time for this decision to come, given how the almost decade old ban became official in November 2004.

It's not yet sunny skies and smooth sailing in the Sooner state, however. Citing the halting of same-sex marriages in Utah, Kern has declared the ruling stayed pending appeal. This means that the opportunity for same-sex marriages in Oklahoma is not yet guaranteed in the near future.

If the same-sex ban is proved unconstitutional in both Utah and Oklahoma, it will be a hard fought and long awaited victory for the many LGBT members of these states, although the LGBT community still faces discrimination in many other fields and in many cases have no legal defense when discrimination occurs.

Maestros de Puerto Rico negocian con funcionarios

Por Dana Coto AP

Miles de maestros en huelga se congregaron el miércoles en la capital de Puerto Rico y sus líderes se reunieron con funcionarios del gobierno para hablar sobre los cambios recientes al sistema de jubilación, los cuales detonaron un paro laboral de dos días.

Muchos maestros viajaron desde las lejanas ciudades de Mayagüez y Aguadilla, en el occidente de la isla, hasta el Departamento del Trabajo, donde se sostuvo la reunión en el último día de la huelga. Después de horas de protestas, líderes sindicales y funcionarios del gobierno anunciaron la creación de una comisión para estudiar alternativas a una ley aprobada la víspera de Navidad que ordena pasar de un plan definido de prestaciones a un sistema de contribución definida, entre otros cambios.

Aída Díaz, presidenta de la Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico, dijo que tiene confianza de que se puede alcanzar un acuerdo, pero advirtió que de lo contrario ocurrirían más huelgas.

"Tan pronto como pensemos que se está perdiendo nuestro tiempo, nos levantaremos de la mesa y tomaremos las calles", dijo a reporteros después de la reunión.

Se espera que miembros de la comisión se reúnan el jueves para comenzar a hablar sobre las posibles soluciones para salvar el plan de jubilación de los maestros sin recurrir a

los cambios perfilados en la ley.

William López, un maestro de Matemáticas de 52 años de Bayamón, dijo que no comprende por qué los maestros están siendo blanco para ayudar a solucionar los problemas económicos de Puerto Rico.

"El gobierno nos quiere quitar las cosas, pero podemos encontrar otras soluciones, como disminuir los salarios de legisladores", agregó, señalando que los legisladores de la isla están entre los mejor pagados en una jurisdicción de Estados Unidos. A López y otros maestros les preocupa que una reducción en sus pensiones los dejará batallando económicamente en una isla con un alto costo de vida. "Nos están condenando a jubilarnos en la pobreza", dijo Luz Gallardo, una maestra de Historia de 43 años en Santurce. El gobernador Alejandro García Padilla ha dicho que el sistema de pensiones tiene un déficit de 10.000 millones de dólares y se quedará sin dinero en 2020 si no se hace nada. Señaló que está abierto a ajustes, pero que no revocará la ley. "Esta medida es un importante componente de nuestro plan estratégico para asegurar la salud financiera de Puerto Rico", indicó.

La Asociación de Maestros de Puerto Rico publicó una carta abierta a los padres y tutores de los estudiantes, diciendo que es la batalla más importante de la historia de los profesores.

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