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Chemical spill causes state of emergency

By John Case



More than 100,000 homes, businesses and hospitals in nine counties around Charleston, W. Va., are without water due to a chemical leak into the Elk River, which serves as a primary drinking water source for an estimated 250,000 to 300,000 people. Governor Earl Ray Tomblin announced a state of emergency today, banning the use of water except to flush toilets or put out fires in some of the counties. President Barack Obama issued an emergency declaration for the state, triggering immediate federal aid to the residents. Federal Emergency Management Agency and the state Air National Guard were coordinating efforts to get water to the affected area.

The West Virginia legislature has been shut-down. Schools had been ordered closed today in Kanawha, Putnam, Boone, Jackson, Clay and Lincoln counties as of last night. Effects of consuming the chemical were described as severe vomiting, skin rashes, and possible fatality. Wastewater treatment officials had little knowledge of the leaked chemical and were cautious predicting its health impact in the water supply.

A state Department of Environmental Protection spokesperson said, the chemical, known as “4-methylcyclohexane methanol,” is a “sudsing agent” and used in the processing of coal.

Hours after water company officials said their treatment facility -- which is near the leak site on the Elk River -- could handle the leak, the governor announced, “Nobody really knows how dangerous it could be. However, it is in the system. It’s just so important, according to the health department, as well as [the water company]: Please don’t drink, don’t wash with, don’t do anything with the water.”

Freedom Industries, a chemical manufac-

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turer for mining, steel and cement industries, is responsible for the spill. DEP investigators discovered the chemical was leaking from the bottom of a storage tank, and had overwhelmed a concrete dike meant to serve as “secondary containment” around the tank after receiving complaints of a

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strange odor. The chemical “was going over the hill into the river,” according to Mike Dorsey, director of emergency response and homeland security for the state DEP. Dorsey told the Charleston Gazette, “Apparently, it had been leaking for some time. We just don’t know how long.”

Freedom Industries had not “self-reported” the leak to regulatory agencies as required by law and have made no public comment so far.

Ironically, just two days after what editorial writers called an “uplifting State of the State” address to the opening of the West Virginia legislature, the governor vowed to not “back down” in fighting the Environmental Protection Agency’s efforts to enforce the Clean Water Act for mountaintop removal mining operations. He also announced a billion dollar construction project on a modern “cracker” plant for processing shale gas from hydraulic fracturing (fracking) drilling.

After the announcement that no water should be used to drink, cook or wash with, residents swarmed grocery stores, convenience stores and

anywhere else with bottled water and shelves were quickly depleted. Fistfights erupted over water in a local Walmart.

It is not clear how much flushing of water pipes will be required to rid the system of the toxic chemical. The WV-DEP spokesperson said, “It could take some time ... to get the system flushed clean because some of these pipes go out as far as 60 miles.”

Water was being transported into the affected counties, and emergency officials said they planned to set up distribution centers. The Charleston Gazette reported that Col. Mike Cadle at the state Air National Guard said 51 tractor-trailers loaded with water were headed to West Virginia from a Federal Emergency Management Agency facility in Maryland. A cargo aircraft was sent to Martinsburg, W. Va., near western Maryland, to pick up the water and fly it back to Yeager Airport in Charleston.



John Case writes for Peoplesworld.org.

Snowden and our civil liberties

By PW Editorial Board

We add our voice to the many - including the New York Times and the UK Guardian - calling for clemency for Edward Snowden, the whistle-blower who exposed the National Security Agency’s massive domestic spying program. The NSA’s unprecedented invasion of Americans’ privacy included collecting phone and email records and other personal information of millions of ordinary citizens.

The NSA mass surveillance operation is a continuation of a renewed undermining of civil liberties launched with the misnamed USA PATRIOT Act, enacted in 2001 following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Among other things, the PATRIOT Act authorized warrantless government searches of phone, email and financial records. Starting in 2002 the Bush administration ordered the NSA to conduct widespread wiretapping of Americans’ phone calls without any court orders. In 2008, additional legislation provided immuni-

ty to telecommunications companies who cooperate with such government programs.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration has continued these kinds of unconstitutional actions. Those who are demanding Snowden’s head have set up a false opposition between protecting safety and protecting civil liberties. In the wake of Snowden’s revelations and the furor that they have unleashed, President Obama appears to be having second thoughts. He is reportedly preparing to announce reforms that would curb the NSA abuses. That is welcome. But it would not have come about if Snowden had not made the NSA’s unconstitutional spying program public.

Those who argue that Snowden should be severely punished for breaking the law miss the point. The information that he exposed is vital to the preservation of our democracy. For his service and his bravery he deserves thanks and a normal life - not a life in prison or having to run from prosecution.

Snowden deserves thanks and a normal life - not life in prison.

San Francisco college wins accreditation round

By Michelle Kern



City College of San Francisco has regained accreditation, for now. With a Jan. 2 injunction Judge Curtis Karnow blocked last summer's action by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) stripping the college's accreditation. The disaccreditation would have gone into final effect July 2014 and would have effectively shuttered the school, which has served thousands of students for decades. Karnow's injunction delays the move pending a court decision on a lawsuit brought by San Francisco City Attorney Dennis Herrera against the disaccreditation.

After hearing two days of arguments, on Dec. 26 and 30, Judge Karnow noted in his ruling that the "consequences would be catastrophic" if the ACCJC were allowed to finish the disaccreditation process.

The city's lawsuit asking for the disaccreditation to be overturned cites improper procedures, conflict of interest and political bias on the part of the agency, and claims harm to the city as a result. Karnow came after Herrera filed the lawsuit for the second time, after weeks of a delaying efforts by the ACCJC in response to the first filing. The outcome of the lawsuit will be the final say on whether CCSF retains its accreditation.

American Federation of Teachers Local 2121 at CCSF, as well as the California Federation of Teachers, had also filed lawsuits, both of which Karnow dismissed.

Karnow also dismissed a request in Herrera's

lawsuit to block the ACCJC from sanctioning any of the other 111 California community colleges for the duration of the lawsuit. Meanwhile, a request from the ACCJC to drop all of the lawsuits against it was denied as well.

Prominent political allies emerged to praise the court's decision. They included U.S. House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., who noted, "We're in a situation where it's really important for others who are weighing different equities about City College to understand what the commitment is from this community at all levels to City College. There's never been a complaint about the education at the school." Congresswoman Jackie Speier, D-Calif., said, "Finally, a decision that makes sense: Judge Karnow sided with the students by blocking ACCJC's misguided effort to punish City College."

AFT President Randi Weingarten said in a statement on the outcome of the hearings that Karnow "understood in no uncertain terms that closing the college - especially when the accreditation concerns are so debatable - would be catastrophic and harmful to students, teachers and the city. He recognized that the allegations brought by the city were sufficient to take the case to trial and, in the meantime, keep the school open."

Closing the college would be catastrophic to students, teachers and the city.

LOCAL NEWS

LOCAL CONTACT

contact@peoplesworld.org

St. Louis unions giving to charities big time

By St. Louis Labor Tribune & PAI

When most Americans think of labor unions, they think of union members campaigning for causes - such as restoring the middle class - or politicians. But unions are really a lot more, and a look at their charity efforts in the St. Louis area shows it.

That's because unions really are people helping people, and never is that more evident than when unions and their members step forward to aid those in need.

Be it regular charities, frequent United Way campaigns or aid to communities that disasters hit, union members go above and beyond the call of duty to aid others. But nobody's ever tallied it all up, until the St. Louis Labor Tribune stepped forward.

The total, and it's incomplete, is astounding. It's also typical of unions nationwide.

To be precise, St. Louis unions gave at least \$2,844,276.00 in cash and voluntary services to at least 440 organizations, charities and individuals last year. The contributions were in either cash or unionists' skills and talents in free services provided because there was a need and because it was the right thing to do.

And that's just from the 22 unions that responded to the newspaper's survey. When you realize there are over several hundred union locals in our area alone, one begins to grasp the enormity of help our unions provide, free, never asking for anything in return.

La "historia de dos ciudades" que se vive en NY

Por Terrie Albano

Durante su discurso de inauguración del 1 de enero el nuevo alcalde de la ciudad de Nueva York, Bill de Blasio, se comprometió a enfrentar como prioridad principal la obscena diferencia en la distribución de la riqueza en la Gran Manzana. Él la había llamado una "historia de dos ciudades" a lo largo de su campaña, pero en su discurso de inauguración reafirmó que el fin de las "desigualdades económicas y sociales que amenazan con desbaratar la ciudad que amamos" no era un discurso barato para ser elegido, sino el principio básico del programa de su administración.

Los otros altos funcionarios de la ciudad que acaban de asumir su cargo, la defensora pública Leticia James y el Contralor Scott Stringer, también hicieron promesas similares, aunque ampliaron aún más su alcance. James, la primera mujer de color elegida para ocupar un cargo oficial que abarque toda la ciudad de Nueva York, criticó las políticas en favor de Wall Street que aplicó el alcalde saliente Michael Bloomberg y han llevado a "una edad dorada de la desigualdad, en la que refugios para desamparados y proyectos de urbanización decrepitos para personas de escasos recursos han sido olvidados para dar paso a brillantes condominios de varios millones de dólares".

Stringer dijo que iba a seguir

una agenda progresista y basada en la "responsabilidad fiscal" que pueda "levantar a todos los neoyorquinos", recalcando que los dos elementos no son mutuamente excluyentes.

Nueva York es una ciudad excepcional, pero sus problemas no son únicos. Lo que de Blasio describió como la "crisis silenciosa" de las disparidades en materia de riqueza afecta a todas las ciudades de Estados Unidos. De hecho se trata de un tren fuera de control que amenaza con crear un caos, no sólo para los sectores urbanos, sino para ciudades y suburbios, reservaciones y pueblos por igual. Para este escritor procedente de Chicago, donde el actual alcalde se ha ganado el título de "Alcalde del Uno por Ciento", la promesa de cambiar las políticas que favorecen a los súper-ricos es música para los oídos.

Sin embargo, la crisis no se ve igual en todos los lugares. Detroit -una ciudad que también podría ser descrita como singular- se enfrenta a una quiebra provocada por años de desigualdades raciales y de clases, condiciones económicas y sociales que quizás en el detalle sean muy diferentes de las de Nueva York, pero todas las ciudades están luchando, de un modo u otro, en áreas de interés público, como educación pública, pensiones, impuestos, empleo y salarios, vivienda asequible y prejuicios raciales en las políticas de aplicación de la ley y de la justicia penal.

NATIONAL CONTACT

Editorial: (773) 446-9920 Business: (212) 924-2523
Email: contact@peoplesworld.org