



CAPITOL LETTERS

The inside scoop on what's going down in D.C.

That Democratic donkey galloped out of the gate in January, taking Congress on a wild, 100-hour legislative ride, completing the initiatives in the New Direction for America program. Since then, however, workers have waited patiently for their agenda to move while Congress has done little but kick around Iraq funding bills.

Among the labor-endorsed legislation still idling in Congress is the Employee Free Choice Act, which would give workers, not employers, the choice of whether to have a secret election to form a union. One piece of legislation that finally moved, when it was stuffed into the Iraq-funding bill at the end of May, was an increase in the minimum wage. It would rise for the first time in a decade from \$5.15 to \$7.25 an hour.

For low-wage workers, it was a six month wait from when the bill to increase the rate was first introduced. But that's only for those poor workers in states that hadn't already taken matters into their own hands. More than half the states had already increased their minimum wage rates, with Washington paying \$7.93, Oregon, \$7.80, Connecticut \$7.65 and California, Illinois and Massachusetts \$7.50.

The concept has such popular appeal that voters in six states approved referendums increasing their minimum wage last November, and in each of those, the rates are to be tied to the cost of living so that as inflation rises so will the minimum wage pay. No more decade-long waits for the lowest-paid in those states to get raises. They are Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, Montana, Nevada and Ohio.

Oregon and Washington — which already pay more than the \$7.25 Congress is considering — also adjust their rates based on inflation.

Trade secrets

The House Ways and Means Committee made a deal on trade with the Bush administration in May but kept it in the top secret Congressional closet. Committee leaders held a press conference to say they'd reached an agreement, then refused to tell the American people — or even the whole Congress — the terms.

The Ways and Means Committee apparently felt the details were just too much for the American people to handle. Among other things, those details describe exactly how the Administration would allegedly enforce labor and environmental safeguards newly added to the proposed Peru and Panama free trade agreements in an effort to get the Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress to vote for them.

Ways and Means needs to focus on the "ways and means" to make trade deals fair, not just free for the working people of this country. The nation's leaders need to create a trade climate that revitalizes manufacturing. In addition, they must end currency manipulation, subsidies by foreign governments, violations of workers' rights and environmental degradation breaching international standards — all of which combine to rob Americans of their jobs.

Finally, there can be no trade deal secrets in a self-governing democracy. Trade may be good under certain conditions, but most Americans don't want to exchange their party preferences for practices as secretive as those of the Politburo.

Guest immigrants

"Guest workers" have been included in the immigration compromise bill released with much fanfare in May. Described as a bargain reached in negotiations among the White House, Democrats and Republicans announced at a news conference by the bi-partisan duo of liberal Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) and conservative Jon Kyl (R-AZ), the proposal includes a method for the current 12 million undocumented workers to obtain citi-

zenship and a "guest worker" program to accommodate hundreds of thousands of additional foreign workers.

The odd thing about a "guest worker" program is that most people are one or the other — guests or workers. And in the case of this program, the fact is that they're neither. They're 21st Century slaves. When the current guest worker operation was described to House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel, he put it this way, "This guest worker program is the closest thing I've ever seen to slavery."

The problem for a "guest" worker is that if he complains about his employer abusing him, he's sent packing back to his home country — no way to treat a guest or a worker.

A study by the Southern Poverty Law Center called "Close to Slavery: Guest Worker Programs in the United States" found: "Bound to a single employer and without access to legal resources, guest workers are:

- routinely cheated out of wages;
- forced to mortgage their futures to obtain low-wage, temporary jobs;
- held virtually captive by employers or labor brokers who seize their documents;
- forced to live in squalid conditions; and,
- denied medical benefits for on-the-job injuries."

The labor, immigrant and civil rights communities stand united in their belief that reform must protect the human and civil rights of immigrant workers. They insist that the legislation must protect foreign workers against exploitation, while at the same time ensuring the right of American workers not to have their wages driven down by employers profiting from conditions that enable them to abuse immigrant workers.

The immigration compromise proposed in May contains no decent protections for "guest workers" and thus no wage protections for American workers.

Toronto Calling

Women's Conference to be Largest Ever

The USW International Women's Conference, scheduled for September in Toronto, Canada, is expected to be the largest Women of Steel gathering in the history of our union.

Local unions are showing much interest in the conference, which will be held from Sept. 23-26 at the Sheraton Centre in Toronto, the capital of Ontario. Registrations arrive daily.

Women from around the globe will meet to set a course for their future activism and to discuss important issues including trade, politics and the need for international solidarity.

"Strong unions need women," said Leeann Anderson, assistant to International President Leo W. Gerard.

"At this conference, we intend to light a flame of enthusiasm and activism and build the skills necessary for women to participate as fully as possible in the upcoming elections, to confront the trade crisis facing both of our countries and to raise our voices on a host of other issues facing the union," Anderson said. "We also intend to enact a program of engagement so our energy and passion carries forward into the future."

Delegates will have an opportunity to enhance their activist skills in the many workshops being offered, to meet their district director and to hear from influential speakers including Gerard.

Gerard is encouraging every local to send a woman to what he called the union's "most high energy conference."

"As our union faces and surmounts the challenges before us, we need the strength, activism and passion of women to succeed," he said.

Located on the northwestern shore of Lake Ontario, Toronto is the largest city in Canada. It has a reputation as one of the world's most multicultural cities.

Union members are encouraged to celebrate both Toronto's diversity and the many cultures within our union. There's no better place to do it. See you there.

Travel and Passport Notes

What are the new passport rules? If flying in and out of Canada, delegates will need passports or a receipt showing you have applied for one. If driving, only a picture ID and birth certificate are needed this year.

Is there still enough time to get a passport? You are advised to apply right away because normal turnaround time is roughly eight to twelve weeks. The expedited procedure with turnaround time of about four weeks is recommended.

Where can I apply for a passport? Passport applications are typically available online, at U.S. Postal Service locations and at county courthouses. Passports are delivered through the mail.

What documents are required for a passport application? Social Security number, birth certificate, passport picture and application fee.

What should I do if it's too late for me to receive my passport in time for the conference? Fly into Buffalo, N.Y., rent a car and drive the two hours north to Toronto. The conference hotel is easy to locate.

Photo by Scott Marshall



Black Trade Unionists Call for Working Family Policies

Picture this: a stronger, more diverse labor movement that pushes our nation to have an economic and political system that values workers' rights, offers health care for all and delivers on promises of a stable retirement.

That's the agenda the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists presented during its 36th annual convention held recently in Chicago, where USW's Director of Civil Rights Maxine Carter and Vice President Fred Redmond were among the 1,200 attendees.

About 40 Steelworker members also attended the event that featured an appearance by Democratic presidential candidate U.S. Sen. Barack Obama and a day of planning strategy for turning out the vote next year.

Redmond, who with Carter sits on the CBTU executive council, said highlights included spending time with USW members and other union leaders.

"Discussing common challenges, planning for the 2008 elections and learning about how we can continue to grow the labor movement so that it is more diverse and stronger are so important," Redmond said.

CBTU was formed in 1972 to be an independent voice of black union workers. Today, more than 50 unions, including the United Steelworkers, are members of the coalition.

In recent years, the group has worked to reverse the damage done to minority workers who have been hit especially hard by the massive loss of manufacturing jobs. In 2004, some 55 percent — 168,000 — of the nation's union jobs lost were held by black workers.

"We have to embody in our planning the right of workers to join unions; the right to bargain collectively; the right to have access to universal health care; a fair trade policy as opposed to a free trade policy, so that all of us can benefit from the fruits of our society," said CBTU President William Lucy, who also is Secretary-Treasurer of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Workers.

Carter, who served as the presiding officer on the convention's opening day, said it's vital that the issues get discussed.

"Our members and the others who attend are inspired to continue the conversation back home in their local union halls and in their neighborhoods where action really begins," she said.

www.usw.org

For more on the CBTU convention, visit www.usw.org and listen to POWERcast Episode 19.