An Injury to One is an Injury to All!

WEDNESDAY
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Teamsters fight back against pension cuts

A half mile from their union hall over 220 retired members of Teamsters Local 346 gathered at Holy Family Catholic Church in Duluth’s West End last Thursday to fight for their pensions. Congressman Rick Nolan joined them to say he was in their fight with them.

This isn’t just a Teamster’s fight, however. They’re one of the unions under the knife now but 200 multi-employer pension funds covering 1.5 million American workers could be in jeopardy for a number of reasons. One reason is the Multi-employer Pension Reform Act (MPRA) of 2014 signed into law as part of the omnibus spending bill. MPRA gave trustees the green light to slash pensions.

A couple decades ago the Teamsters Central States Pension Fund (CSPF) was one of the best union pension funds in the nation. Teamsters were retiring at age 48 after 30 years of service to a signatory employer and taking home pensions in the $3,000 a month range. CSPF trustees say those days are over as the Chicago-based fund has been in critical status for some time. But Teamster Retiree Chapters have created Committees to Protect Pensions to fight back and are saying it is CSPF managers and trustees, the Wall St. fund managers they used, and the federal government that fell asleep at the wheel and caused most of the financial problems.

In October CSPF trustees notified some 273,000 retirees in 38 states that their pensions would be cut by as much as 50 to 70 percent. But their idea of a “rescue plan” will ultimately affect 400,000 Teamsters and decimate the pensions of many young members working today. Trustees filed an application with the U.S. Treasury Department to begin cutting benefits for current and future Teamster retirees on July 1, 2016. About 15,000 retirees live in Minnesota with 1,500 in northern Minnesota and northwest Wisconsin.

Teamsters decided they had to fight back as they have with meetings across the nation like the one at Holy Family. The Duluth meeting was a chance to educate retirees about the pension cuts because CSPF has given little information.

Retired Teamster Local 346 Secretary-Treasurer Sherm Liimatainen is part of this area’s leadership group fighting the pension cuts. He has traveled to Ohio, Illinois, and Wisconsin to help the fight back effort.

“We have been betrayed by our fiduciary agents,” Liimatainen told the gathering about the CSPF trustees. “They failed to protect us from Wall Street predators.” He said Wall Street firms charged exorbitant fees, then used Teamster pension funds to shore up weak funds that they had created for their rich VIP investors.

Now Central States trustees are telling retirees that their rescue plan is the one and only solution and want retirees to vote “yes” for it in a Participants Ratification Process. But opponents of the plan say the whole idea of their vote is bogus because no matter how retirees vote, the Treasury

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Building Trades pickets and solidarity at the Fleet Farm being built in Hermantown will mean paychecks for members of Cement Masons Local 633 and Laborers Local 1091.

The contract for the huge square footage of concrete floors has been taken away from non-union HTP Flooring and re-awarded to union Bruce Contracting by Fleet Farm. Pickets had brought the job to a standstill because Teamster Local 346 members employed by Arrowhead Concrete would not drive across the picketline.

Pickets get Fleet Farm concrete to be union

Two weeks of solidarity and pickets at the Fleet Farm project in Hermantown have resulted in the concrete floor contract being taken away from non-union HTP Flooring and awarded to Bruce’s Contracting of Backus, which is signatory with Cement Masons, Plasterers & Shophands Local 633 and Laborers Local 1091.

The unions were notified on Friday that “HTP Floors is no longer associated with the Mills Fleet Farm project” by Andy Pickar, Project Manager/Contract Administrator for Widseth Smith Nolting.

“This is huge for our members,” said Dan Olson, Laborers 1091’s Business Manager. “We can’t thank those Teamster Local 346 concrete truck drivers enough for honoring our picket line and refusing to supply concrete.”

The unions also had to fight off charges brought against them by Fleet Farm for what they said were illegal pickets.

“We’ve been through this before and we knew we were within our rights but we had to get some folks at the NLRB to understand that,” Olson said.

Like Olson, Cement Masons 633 Business Representative Mike Syversrud was pumped about the contract going union.

“These situations are never easy and they don’t always work out for us so it’s great when they do,” Syversrud said. “Thanks to all the picketers who helped and the ones who honored it. It will be nice to be able to send our members to work in the middle of the winter. Those Teamsters rock!”

Teamsters are the only Building Trades union that have it in their contracts that they don’t have to cross picket lines. Other union members from IBEW Local 242 and Operating Engineers Local 49 had also honored the pickets.

Picketers were out at 6:30 a.m. during the coldest weather of the winter. Temperatures were -15 to -20 below most mornings. The photo above shows a fish house that was the only shelter for them after the temperature in 38 states that their pensions would be cut by as much as 50 to 70 percent. But their idea of a “rescue plan” will ultimately affect 400,000 Teamsters and decimate the pensions of many young members working today. Trustees filed an application with the U.S. Treasury Department to begin cutting benefits for current and future Teamster retirees on July 1, 2016. About 15,000 retirees live in Minnesota with 1,500 in northern Minnesota and northwest Wisconsin.

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Greg Lesczynski’s expression was typical of many Teamster Local 346 retirees at the Jan. 21 meeting about their proposed pension cuts. Next to him is Rick Braun who is signing a petition against the cuts. Braun said he was informed his pension will be reduced by 60.6%. He said he found the meeting “inspiring” in that maybe the cuts could be stopped or lessened. These retirees were co-workers for decades in food distribution warehouses for Twin Ports Grocery, Gateway, and Fleming foods.
Trumka: They can be beat us if we let them divide us on race and class

By Mark Gruenberg
PA Staff Writer

WASHINGTON DC—Saying of the economic and political elite, “When they divide us up, they can beat us. When they stick together, they can’t.” AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka declared workers of all races, classes and genders must unite to reclaim the U.S. future.

That means uniting around a common agenda of raising incomes and equality for all, regardless of race, color or sexual orientation, Trumka said. His comments came during a Q&A session at the opening of the AFL-CIO’s Martin Luther King Conference, Jan. 15-17.

“Change The Rules, Be The Power” revolved around organizing, politics, issues and activism and openly discussing race, class, income and equality for all, regardless of race, color or sexual orientation, Trumka said. His comments came during a Q&A session at the opening of the AFL-CIO’s Martin Luther King Conference, Jan. 15-17.

As Trumka said then, and repeated at the conference, “a (union) brother shot a union sister’s son.” Brown’s brother is a United Food and Commercial Workers member.

One activist described taking 150 union, progressive and philanthropic leaders to interview prisoners at San Quentin, to let them hear and feel the real impact of mass incarceration often for non-violent offenses — on prisoners, their families and communities.

When those prisoners are freed after serving their terms, that speaker added, they can’t get mainstream jobs, including union jobs, because they must go to “check the box” that said they were formerly in prison.

Another pointed out unions endorsed the Cleveland District Attorney whose grand jury did not find fault with a police officer’s fatal shooting of a 12-year-old African-American boy, “armed” with a plastic toy gun. She said there had been six such shootings in Cleveland, and no indictments. She demanded unions should ask themselves why they’re backing that DA.

Politics came in for its share of analysis, too. One dimension was to call out the lies that the economic and political elite use to divide workers from one another, through educating workers and their allies about such tactics. Such divisions “give politicians excuses to go after groups of people” and “help corporations reap record profits are our expense,” said Durazo.

The other was to emphasize issue-driven politics, not politicians and endorsements. And even when workers and their allies endorse politicians, they must follow up and hold their feet to the fire after the polls are elected, speakers said.

They didn’t do so with President Barack Obama (D) after his 2008 win, many admitted.

“As my Italian grandfather said, ‘To trust is good. Not to trust is better,’” said Trumka.

Attendees also frequently blasted GOP presidential poll leader Donald Trump for peddling hatred. But speakers also criticized Obama for not living up to his own promises, particularly on comprehensive immigration reform. “To me, it is disrespectful that he (Obama) introduced the Secure Communities program to round up the undocumented “and that he’s deporting more than 1,000 families a day,” said immigration activist Ju Hong, who gained national attention for disrupting an Obama speech almost two years ago.

Many speakers emphasized workers of all races, genders and classes “should have each other’s back,” as one speaker put it. If we don’t, “There’s something wrong with us,” Gebre said.

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Citizens in Action Jan. 30

The free and open 18th annual Citizens In Action training Saturday, Jan. 31 in Duluth will educate you on how to make democracy and government work better. Start being part of the solution at the Copper Top Church, Skyline Blvd/Mesabi Avenue beginning at 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. A free lunch and snacks are served.

This year’s theme of “Meet. Talk. Find A Way” will feature a keynote speech by Duluth Mayor Emily Larson at 10 a.m.

At 10:30 “Steps for Citizen Involvement” will feature Julie O’Leary, Em Westerlund, and Janet Kennedy.

A Precinct Caucus training will take place from 11:30 to 12:15, followed by a brainstorm session with tables having facilitators on a number of topics for citizen involvement.

From 1:00 to 2:30 a coffee and conversation session allows participants to speak with government leaders in attendance.

Sheet Metal Workers’ Local 10 Retirees’ Luncheon

Tuesday, Feb. 2, 1:00 p.m.

Greenery (Holiday Inn next to Sneaker’s)

I.U.O.E. Local 70
Monthly Arrowhead Regional Meeting

Tuesday, Feb. 9, 2016, 5:00 P.M.
Duluth Labor Center, Hall B

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The calendar has flipped to 2016 bringing us again to a presidential election year if you haven’t noticed. Beyond the bluster that corporate media has been feeding on for a year telling us we need more presidential “entertainment tonight,” conservative interests like the Koch Bros and their friends (okay, they probably don’t care if they have any friends) are at work doing everything they can to get the results they want on Nov. 8.

They are going about winning your vote in ways that the candidates haven’t got to yet. Well, some of them haven’t.

Have you noticed that the stock market has dropped 10% since we started the year? I’m so jaded I don’t think that’s a coincidence. I think Koch Bros et al can manipulate the DOW when it has a better chance of serving them than a few million or billion would. Were you feeling a little comfortable at how your nest egg was doing before 2016 hit? Get ready, they’re going to bust your chubbi little piggy bank. They always do. Old money and big bucks always win. Oh, they’ll let you get comfortable for a while and have you reading the Wall Street Journal in your slippers but they’ll pull the carpet out from beneath you, say in a presidential election year, your slippers will go with it and you’ll have bare feet touching a cold bare floor. Again.

Whispers of “a recession is starting” are being heard from conservative corners. Its the fault of 8 years of a Democratic White House, of course.

Americans for Limited Government had a post by Robert Romano that took exception to Obama’s SOTU statement that the U.S. “right now, has the strongest, most durable economy in the world. Anyone claiming that America’s economy is in decline is peddling fiction” Obama said.

Romano: “All the while, the tea leaves of an imminent recession are everywhere. One has plunged in the $26 a barrel territory. The S&P 500 is testing its 1,800 support levels. China continues to implode. 10-year treasuries just crashed through their 2 percent support level. And even a former Dallas Federal Reserve President says the central bank is ‘out of bullets.’ Heck, it’s been eight years since the last recession.”

The IBEW once published a great graph showing the difference in unemployment and the budget deficit if a Republican or Democrat is in the White House. “Just The Facts, Folks” covered from 1969 to 2000, when IBEW quit doing it unfortunately. Unemployment (think labor surplus = even lower wages) hit 8.5% under Ford, 9.7% under Reagan and 7.5% under Bush I. Carter was 5.8%, Clinton 3.9%.

From 1970 to 1997 we had budget deficits that bottomed out at $290.4 billion in 1992 as Bush I went out the door. By 2002 Bush II had moved the numbers around by $522 billion to the highest budget surplus in U.S. history at the time of $232 billion. We started watching our stocks and Bush II “won” twice and blew that surplus. Again.

The attacks against unions have also really accelerated to say they can’t even take care of their own so don’t support their candidates. Elsewhere in these pages the story about the troubles multi-employer pension funds are having is a well orchestrated affair made possible in another perfect conservative storm. The beleaguered Teamsters Central States Pension Fund has lost another $1.2 billion in assets just this year in the DOW’s drop their Committees to Protect Pen- sions say. Government and Wall St. have worked well together again. Watch out for your Social Security Trust Fund. It’s too big to ignore.

Problems with our unionized postal service are Congress-driven.

The Supreme Court is working for national public right to work in the Friedricks case which will allow workers to get the benefits of union membership without paying dues. Couple that with “if unions can’t even deliver pension why do we need them” and you realize how scary this presidential election year is for a lot of us in the middle class.

Thank the gods Bernie Sanders is coming to town to push after this issue has gone to press. A lot of us need to hear from someone who wants to be president and doesn’t think he has to please the likes of Koch Bros. et al to have a chance.
Are charter schools incubators or are they really Charter Schools, Inc.?

By Randi Weingarten
President, American Federation of Teachers

...When you hear the words "charter school" what comes to mind? High expectations? High student attrition? Low achievement? Lack of transparency?

There’s no right or wrong answer because charter schools, like other public and private schools, vary widely. The top-ranked high school in Louisiana is a unionized charter school. On the flip side, a recent study of students enrolled in online charter schools found that they lost 180 days of learning in math over the 180-day school year. (You read that right.)

Charter schools are publicly funded schools with flexibility in program design and operations. The late AFT President Al Shanker was one of the first proponents, believing public school teachers could incubate innovative ideas, sharing successes and learning from setbacks. That was our goal in creating University Prep, a charter school in the South Bronx that the United Federation of Teachers co-founded with Green Dot Public Schools when I was UFT president. Now in our eighth year, 98 percent of students graduate, and almost all go on to college. The goal was never to undermine the many extraordinarily strong public schools—or to close or make it harder for traditional public schools.

Unfortunately, some charter proponents have shifted the intent of charters from incubating ideas and sharing successes to competing for market share and taxpayer dollars. A charter group in New York recently ran deplorable ads suggesting they care more about equity than Mayor de Blasio does. The reality is that some charter school operators want to take public funds, yet behave like private entities that can play by different rules.

Charter schools tend to enroll fewer students with disabilities, fewer English language learners, and a less-poor population of students than do nearby public schools. Reuters has reported on practices some charter operators use to "get the students they want." Some require character references from a religious or community leader, entry exams, or completion of lengthy forms (often only in English). A Philadelphia charter school accepted applications only one day each year — at a suburban country club.

Some charter schools reportedly "counsel out" or expel students just before state testing day. Recent exposes revealed that the Success Academy Charter Schools chain has suspended or expelled children as young as kindergarteners — often for minor infractions — at a rate seven times higher than elementary students in New York City’s public schools.

A new report revealed more than $200 million in fraud, waste and mismanagement in the 15 states examined by the U.S. Senate. The U.S. Department of Education this fall awarded $71 million for charter schools in Ohio — whose charter schools are notorious for financial and ethical scandals and academic results that lag far behind traditional public schools — prompting an outcry from the state auditor. Federal officials have since placed restrictions on the funds.

Since 1995, the Education Department has awarded more than $3 billion to create and expand charter schools throughout the country, despite warnings by its inspector general that the department has provided inadequate oversight of federal funds sent to charter schools. These failings hurt the charter school operators who are trying to operate aboveboard with students' best interests in mind. And rampant charter expansion undermines traditional public schools. A proposal to "charitize" half of the public schools in Los Angeles would not just disrupt the public school system; it would destroy it. Neighborhood public schools would be bankrupted. These schemes, also playing out in Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and elsewhere, aim not to supplement public schools but to supplant them. There must be robust debates about proposals that so radically privatize public education.

"Charter" does not mean "better." A well-regarded Stanford University study found that 25 percent of charter schools perform significantly better than traditional public schools, while 31 percent produce academic results that are significantly worse.

Hillary Clinton, a longtime supporter of charter schools, was recently lambasted when she called for accountability for all public schools. She noted that some charter schools “don’t take the hardest-to-teach kids, or, if they do, they don’t keep them. And so the public schools are often in a no-win situation, because they do, thankfully, take everybody, and then they don’t get the resources or the help and support that they need to be able to take care of every child’s education.” She’s right.

The public education landscape is enriched by having many options — neighborhood public schools, magnet schools, community schools, schools that focus on career and technical education, and charter schools. They all must be held to educational, financial and ethical standards, particularly now, given that half the children in public schools are poor. This is a solemn responsibility to both students and the public.

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Michelle Bowker and Mike Emerson have been selected from a field of 16 candidates to be the Duluth Federation of Teachers’ nominees for this year’s Minnesota Teacher of the Year (TOY) competition.

Bowker has taught in Duluth Public Schools for 29 years. Her parents were both teachers and between the three of them they over 89 years of teaching experience.

“I’m here because of a love for stories,” Bowker told those attending the banquet. “My parents read to me and I read everything I get a hold of. I have a problem with hoarding of books – you should see my classroom.

Currently teaching at Myers-Wilkins Elementary, Bowker said a student once expressed their gratitude to her by saying, “You always listen to me.” That has stuck with her. After being laid off after her first year of teaching Bowker said she was in the “root or run” mode and decided to stay in teaching because of her great colleagues at Nettleton.

“I stayed because of the stories every child brings to the classroom of their hopes, their dreams, and their family,” Bowker said. “We do hard things. Learning is messy, it doesn’t happen overnight. We build community out of messy classrooms.”

She said those in attendance to go back to their classrooms and pick out their hardest kid and learn his story.

“Share your story – kids don’t see teachers as having problems and frustrations, they think we have it made,” Bowker said. She ended with a quote from Kate DiCamillo: “Stories are light. Light is precious in a world so dark.”

Bowker is a past Arrowhead Reading Council President and is a Past President of the Minnesota Reading Association and is still a member of both organizations. She is co-leader of the Myers-Wilkins World Beat Drumming Group.

Michael Emerson has worked for the Duluth Public Schools for seven years as a Culinary Arts Instructor at the Secondary Technical Center, Duluth East High School and Denfeld High Schools.

Former owner of the Duluth Athletic Club, Emerson brings 18 years of business management experience to the classroom. He received the Bridge Award as Duluth Business Leader of the Year in 2005. He has brought his experience in the hospitality industry to train and promote opportunities for many high risk and special needs students in the classroom.

He said he was in the classroom because of his knowledge in his field but he was reaching out to students as was done for him when he was a student.

“Most of my students have trouble learning,” Emerson said. “Most have never seen an ‘A’ or even heard ‘great job.’” But an amazing transformation takes place and positive changes can be seen in troubled students “if they have someone in their corner.”

Emerson said each year he takes students to the culinary school in Minneapolis to learn more. Many of the students are on administration’s radar for poor grades, poor attendance, and bad behavior. Many have never had a sit down dinner before and they come back with tangible skills and understand the content of their classroom better.

“Then we see better attendance, less of an achievement gap, and better graduation rates,” Emerson said. “I’m honored to play a role in my students’ success.”

Emerson has served as a member of the Greater Denfeld Scholarship Committee, the Jack Moon Scholarship Committee and with Lifehouse, a refuge and resource center for homeless youth.

New City Council President Zack Filipovich presented proclamations to the nominees from Mayor Emily Larson proclaiming January 14 Michelle Bowker and Mike Emerson Day in Duluth. Larson was hosting a Mayor’s Reception for the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday at that time.

Chepelnik said this is the second year the DFT has nominated for the TOY award after seeing very few teachers in northern Minnesota nominated.

“It’s a lot of work (for nominees and the committee) to accumulate information for the competition,” Chepelnik said.

Educators in Minnesota that are considered for Teacher of the Year are vetted by a selection committee representing state leaders from education, business, and government who will choose the winner at a banquet in May. Chepelnik said.

The award is underwritten by Education Minnesota, the union of 70,000 educators in Minnesota.
Teamster’s Central States Pension Fund one of many in trouble...from page 1

Congressman Rick Nolan and Sherm Liimatainen share a light moment before Nolan addressed Teamster retirees Jan. 21. He said he was sad to be there because the proposed cuts to their pensions is “shameless and un-American...because the rich and powerful get what they want in this oligarchy.”

They are pushing the Keep Our Pension Promises Act (KOPPA, H.R. 2844) which would replace MPRA that opened the door to pension cuts. KOPPA would instead shelve the PBGC by closing two tax loopholes used almost entirely by wealthy estates to reduce their tax burdens. Senator Bernie Sanders is carrying the KOPPA bill as S. 1631 in the Senate.

Another bill, the Pension Accountability Act (S. 2147, H.R. 4029) would restore fairness and credibility in the voting process for pension cuts that may lead to models.

Nolan, Liimatainen, and current Teamster Local 346 Secretary-Treasurer Rod Alstead told Teamster retirees at the Duluth meeting that their fight isn’t over.

“We can fix this thing,” Nolan said. “By God, if we found a way to fix Wall Street when they needed it, we can fix the pensions of those who paid into them.”

On Monday there was to have been another important meeting in Two Cities with Ken Feinberg, the Treasury Department’s Special Master of Implementation for the CSPF application to slash pensions. That meeting was canceled because of the storms that hit the east coast.

Alstead told those gathered at Holy Family that their voices would be heard by Feinberg and all other parties involved in the CSPF “rescue plan.” He promised them that everything they had heard would be submitted for the record and he was proud of the Congressional delegation that represents them for their support.

“Local 346 and the Teamsters can’t control what happened at the Central States Pension Fund because we don’t sit on that board,” Alstead told the gathering. “But we do sit on the Minnesota Highway Heavy fund with Teamster Locals 120 and 160, and I can tell you that pension is 93 percent funded. We sit as trustees and we’ve done well. We will continue to fight this race to the bottom or in 10 to 20 years everything will be gone.”

Retired IBT Local 346 Secretary-Treasurer Pat Radzak said he was sick about what was happening to their retirees. “We told them forever to let wage increases go and put everything they could into their pensions so they’d have secure pensions,” Radzak said. “And look what they got for it. It’s just not right.”

Nolan said he and Kaptur have met with Feinberg. He said he can’t predict what Feinberg will do but he’s cautiously optimistic in a good decision for retirees. Nolan called Feinberg “a good man with good judgement who is donating his time in the interest to come to terms with the pension fund. Feinberg did repair work on the World Trade Center attack.

“We have 10 or 15 years to fix this thing so let’s step up now and finally do it,” Nolan said. “They don’t even know if (the CSPF plan) will work, so why the hell do it? Let’s take the time and do it right!”

“Pensions are paychecks, not handouts,” Kaptur has said.

“If the United States of America could bail out Wall Street, whose risky behavior robbed pension funds of workers’ hard-earned benefits, they’ve earned over a lifetime of hard work across our nation, surely we can find a way to restore retired workers’ earned pensions. There are other solutions working their way through Congress that don’t pick the pockets of workers and retirees to pay for financial losses for which they bear no responsibility.”

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters has no control over the CSPF and is on record opposed to the pension cuts, and supports KOPPA and the Pension Accountability Act.
10 Euros look at financial transactions tax

Antidotes to Inequality: ~TOO MUCH ONLINE

If you buy a stick of gum at any corner store in America, you’ll pay a sales tax. If you buy a stack of stocks on Wall Street, you pay no tax at all, one reason why financial industry movers and shakers make up about 20 percent of the nation’s richest 0.1 percent. White House hopefuls Bernie Sanders and Martin O’Malley are both pushing for a “financial transaction tax” to end this preferential tax treatment for Wall Street. Legislation introduced by Sanders in the U.S. Senate would place a 0.5 percent tax on all stock trades, a 0.1 percent tax on bond trades, and 0.005 percent levy on derivative speculation. How much revenue could such tiny tax rates raise? Lots. A 0.01 percent tax on all financial transactions, the Tax Policy Center says, would raise $185 billion over 10 years.

Could such a levy on financial speculators actually become enacted into law? Some encouraging news on that front came from Europe on December 8. Germany, France, and eight other European nations came to what they described as a “core” consensus on implementing a financial transaction tax.

That consensus represents a major victory for the economic justice activist groups working for a meaningful tax on financial speculation — and a major defeat for the global financial industry. Financial heavy-hitters in Europe, notes Institute for Policy Studies analyst Sarah Anderson, had argued for loopholes that would have completely exempted derivatives trades and applied the tax only to the net value of securities transactions at the end of each trading day. The new European consensus rejects both of these loopholes.

Observers expect a final European financial tax agreement sometime midway through 2016. That agreement will apply to both buyers and sellers in financial transactions, and that feature will give the new tax an impact that goes far beyond Europe’s borders. “A U.S.-based hedge fund,” as Anderson explains, “will be taxed on trades with a German firm.”

Divided we fall...from page 2

“It’s all connected,” added Greg Sandana, executive director of the Asian-Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), an AFL-CIO constituency group. “The same people who are incarcerating us are those who are fighting unionization. The same people who are fighting unionization are those who are fighting against the Fight for 15. "The same people who are fighting Fight for 15 are those who fight comprehensive immigration reform, and the same people who fight immigration reform are those who are closing public schools and replacing them with charter schools."

Gebre, too, criticized both parties for catering to prejudice, lately against Syrian refugees. Gebre, himself a political refugee who walked across the Sudanese desert from his native Ethiopia 30 years ago to board a ship for the U.S., said “some ‘liberal Democrats’ went on the dark side” on that issue, joining the Republicans in trying to ban the Syrians.

Opposing the influx of refugees, inaction on comprehensive immigration reform and mass incarceration — and the inability of people to get decent jobs when they get out because of that box on an employment form — hurts workers and unions, speakers pointed out.

Of the refugees, immigrants, African-Americans and Latinos, “These are our future members,” Gebre commented.

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LABOR WORLD NEWS. WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 27, 2016

PAGE 7
New report chronicles past year’s efforts to raise wages, improve work

By Kenneth Quinell
AFL-CIO Blog

Marking nearly one year since the first-ever Raising Wages Summit, the AFL-CIO Jan. 20 released a new report detailing the successes, struggles and path ahead to raise wages for working people.

"Fighting for a Better Life: How Working People Across America Are Organizing to Raise Wages and Improve Work" finds that income inequality has shifted from a problem we discuss to a problem we can solve. The report points to clear and unequivocal steps for a path forward. The central conclusion is that America is ready to move beyond the discussion of income inequality and is beginning to write new rules that will shape the economy.

"One year ago, we made clear that raising wages for all working people was our number one priority," said AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka. "In 2015, we came together in collective voice and action and made significant progress.

The report goes well beyond direct wage increases, highlighting successes that demonstrate the all-encompassing nature of the raising wages agenda. Numerous organizing victories, paid sick leave laws in multiple states and municipalities and new protections against wage theft if five states are outlined as part of the wage bill. And minimum wage protections against wage theft are building on raising wages.

The report also outlines hurdles to further victories and challenges that remain as the raising wages agenda grows.

In December 2015 alone, the report shows, President Barack Obama and Democrats in Congress were forced to fight off six amendments to the budget that would have rolled back protections for working people. And while the unemployment rate continued to fall last year, wage growth showed only modest improvement before grinding to a halt.

The 9-page report says workers hit the streets for causes ranging from decent pay to undoing two-tier wage systems to health and safety. In a record year of contract bargaining, 2015, the average worker won a 4.2 percent annual raise.

Some of the lowest-paid workers got double-digit percentage raises, it adds. And two-tier wage systems are on their way out in the auto industry with the UAW winning a 45 percent raise over the life of its FiatChrysler contract for lower-paid workers there.

Even the strike was revived to some extent — and it succeeded. Among others, the report cites successful teachers strikes in Chicago and Washington state, the USW's success when the major oil firms forced them to strike over safety and the ongoing Fight for 15. That includes successful 1-day strikes by fast food workers.

As a result, even low-wage and non-union firms such as Walmart had to raise wages for their low-paid workers, the report claims.

Even with modest wage growth and significant gains for working people in 2015, the report is a reminder that more work is needed in order to keep raising wages a priority in political and economic conversations.

But 2016 is another matter, the report warns. "The landscape in 2016 looks very different than it did in January 2015," it explains. "The torrent of intolerance and hate unleashed by would-be presidents -- the report doesn't name names -- is designed to sow fear and division.

“Although the victories and the momentum of the raising wages movement in 2015 demonstrate that collective action works, we are still far behind where we need to be and where we can be,” Trumka said. “In the year ahead, we will continue to push for a comprehensive economic agenda that puts working people first. Raising wages is not a hobby, it is our mission.”

Read the full report at www.aflcio.org/content/download/174433/4152655/RaisingWagesReport2015.pdf (Press Associates Inc. contributed to this story)

Screen Actor Guild Awards: The Union alternative to the Oscars

By Don McIntosh
The Northwest Labor Press

(PAI)–Leonardo DiCaprio and Cate Blanchett are union members. So are Clare Danes, Louis C.K., and Peter Dinklage. They’ll all be in Los Angeles Jan. 30 as nominees for their union’s highest honor — the Screen Actors Guild Awards.

Unlike the better-known Academy Awards, SAG Awards are decided exclusively by their fellow practitioners: All 116,741 members of SAG-AFTRA get ballots and can watch the entries online. SAG Awards are also unlike the Oscars in that they are for film and television, and include categories that honor outstanding performances by entire casts, not just individuals.

With a gala dinner, an auction, and sales of bleacher seats to the red carpet affair, the event also raises funds for the SAG-AFTRA Foundation, which funds a children’s literacy program and provides scholarships and health and financial aid to members and their families.

“Yes, it’s glitzy and glamorous, but really it’s about celebrating our union,” says SAG-AFTRA board member Mary McDonough, Lewis, a Portland, Oregon voice actor and dialect coach. She’s especially excited this year about the nominations for “Trumbo,” a true-to-life film about Hollywood radicalism, and for performances in “The Big Short” and “99 Homes,” both which are about financial fraud in the mortgage industry.

You can watch the 22nd Annual Screen Actors Guild Awards live Saturday, Jan. 30, 6-8 pm (CST) on TNT and TBS. And there’s another reason to watch: The history of the Oscars — the Motion Picture Academy Awards.

Everyone’s heard of the Academy Awards but few know the anti-union origins of its sponsor, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio boss Louis Mayer founded the Academy in 1927 by to prevent unionization in the film industry. As an invitation-only professional organization, the Academy was meant to be a more prestigious alternative to unionization. With separate branches for producers, actors, writers, directors, and technicians, it would settle workplace disputes and eliminate the need for unions and strikes — while remaining controlled by producers. From 1927 to 1933, the Academy functioned as a company union. In competition with the Screen Actors Guild and other unions, it developed a standard contract covering terms and conditions of work.

Hollywood unionized anyway in 1933, and company-controlled unions were outlawed in 1938, but the Academy continued on as a way to promote the film industry. To this day, its membership is self-selecting, and secret.

If the insurance company has told you and your comp claim to KISS OFF!

"Employee’s work environment did not in any way increase the risk of injury."

"There is nothing to suggest that the injury arose from any workplace activity."

In December of 2013, the Minnesota Supreme Court decided a case called DYKOFF vs. EXCEL ENERGY. Since then employers and insurance companies have interpreted the ruling very broadly and used it to deny injured workers the benefits they deserve.

We do not believe that eliminating a broad range of comp claims was the intent of this decision. We do believe that most of the workers, who have been rejected, will get fair benefits in the end.

If you have received a "benefits denied" (or KISS OFF!) letter using some of the reasons shown in quotes above, give us a call. It costs you nothing to meet with us. We can help you understand where your comp claim stands in light of the Dykoff Decision.

Falsani, Balmer, Peterson, Quinn & Beyer
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723-1990 • 1-800-723-2048 • falsanibalmer.com
1200 Alworth Building (306 W Superior St) • Duluth

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