December 2011

Federation news

Solidarity
Chicago unions help repeal Ohio anti-union law
In an open letter to the people of Chicago in the Sun-Times, the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 308 clears up misinformation put forth by CTA management blaming union workers for the agency’s budget deficit.

The letter, signed by President Robert Kelly, says CTA President Forrest Claypool’s claims about the union members “simply don’t add up.” The notion that union employees receive extravagant floating holidays is misleading. Both union and non-union CTA employees receive the same holidays. Yet non-union management employees receive additional benefits, such as fully paid maternity leave and fully paid sick days.

“Great ideas, Forrest—and guess what, your operating employees get sick and have families too—why don’t you extend those same good ideas to your hardworking front line employees?”

After addressing claims of bathroom breaks (rail employees get a total of 30 minutes per day for meals and bathroom breaks) and coffee breaks (during which operators perform safety checks before putting the train into service), Kelly concludes by asking Claypool to discuss the budget face-to-face, rather than through the media.

“We invite Forrest Claypool to sit down with the unions to begin working towards solutions so you can keep the safe, reliable transit service you rely upon and that you deserve.”

Read the whole letter at www.chicagolabor.org/cta.

In a separate letter sent directly to Claypool, CFL President Jorge Ramirez expresses his concern with the administrator’s handling of the looming budget deficit, including pitting the riders and general public against the union workers who provide services. “Your actions suggest you are more concerned with winning a public relations campaign than managing the agency you lead out of a crisis,” he wrote.

The current contract expires July 2012.

With a unanimous ruling by the Illinois Education Labor Relations Board and Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan prepared to seek an injunction against the Chicago Public Schools, CPS agreed to end its controversial campaign to lengthen the school day in an agreement reached with the Chicago Teachers Union last month.

“As the Union has stated numerous times on the record, it does not oppose a longer school day, but it seeks a better school day that is fairly implemented,” said CTU President and Chicago Federation of Labor Executive Board member Karen Lewis. “I am happy to report that the CTU, Board and Mayor came to an agreement to end the dispute over longer school day waivers. This means that we can get back to the important work of teaching our students and discussing how to best improve our school day.”

The union alleged CPS illegally cast waiver votes in 13 elementary schools by inducing support for a longer school day and threatening and coercing teachers to vote in favor of the proposal with monetary incentives. The labor board voted 5-0 in agreement with the union’s complaint.

Now, instead of fighting over the remaining current school year, the union and CPS can sit down in collaboration to discuss how to improve the quality of the school day for public school students.

“Research is clear that a broad curriculum and smaller class sizes are key to improving student performance,” Lewis added. “We look forward to discussing with the Board how to best implement a school day, district wide, that is not just longer, but is also better.”
Voters in Ohio overwhelmingly rejected the controversial Senate Bill 5 on November 8, sending a clear message to Governor John Kasich that right-wing attempts to limit collective bargaining rights for nurses, teachers, fire fighters and other public servants are unacceptable and won’t be tolerated. In Chicago, union members from dozens of local unions joined the effort at the Chicago Federation of Labor’s phone bank operations, helping get out the vote in what turned out to be a landslide 2 to 1 margin of victory for working men and women.

Volunteers in Chicago made more than 90,000 phone calls to union households in the days leading up to Tuesday’s Election Day from Painters District Council 14, IUOE Local 399 and IUOE Local 150 in the Chicago area.

“Talking to Ohioans about repealing Senate Bill 5 made me hopeful that we, as union members and Americans, are turning a corner and rediscovering the role collective bargaining rights play in ensuring economic justice and a strong middle class,” said Joe Healy from Laborers Local 1092 who participated in the phone banking in Chicago. “The enthusiasm among both the callers and the people we called was outstanding. We knew we were doing important work, and we are confident it will pay off.”

Working men and women from across the country pitched in on this effort, the result of which received national attention and set the stage for the recall effort of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker. Earlier this year, working families recalled two Republican Senators who stood with Gov. Walker and his actions to strip collective bargaining rights for many public sector employees.

While efforts fell short of tipping the control of the chamber to Democrats, the landslide in Ohio gives new momentum to the effort to recall the governor. A coalition of working families and other activists need to collect 540,208 signatures by January 17 to force a recall election next year. With more than 300,000 signatures collected by early December, they are on pace to collect more than the necessary number.

Illinois union members have close ties to their neighbors to the north and plan to once again get involved in the recall effort to stand up for collective bargaining rights.

“Chicago’s union members continue to answer the call for solidarity around the country as workers are under attack,” said Chicago Federation of Labor President Jorge Ramirez. “There is no doubt they will once again rise to the occasion to fight back against those who want to weaken organized labor and don’t stand with working families.”

“There is a war brewing from across the country,” said Bob Reiter, Secretary-Treasurer of the Chicago Federation of Labor, at a get-out-the-vote rally in Columbus the weekend before Election Day. “It is for the soul of this nation. The war is everywhere but the frontline is right here in Columbus, Ohio.”

“We need you to win here in Ohio. Wall Street bankers, billionaires and right-wing politicians think they have pulled off the perfect crime,” added Reiter. “They drove this country into a ditch through their greed and recklessness. Now that they have been bailed out, they have planted our fingerprints at the scene of the crime. The economy wasn’t wrecked by teachers, fire fighters, nurses and social workers.”
On December 8, working people rallied at Federal Plaza in Chicago to urge Congress to extend insurance benefits for the unemployed before adjourning for the year as part of a national day of action. Nearly two million workers who have lost their jobs would lose their important lifeline as the extended unemployment insurance benefits expire, including more than 50,000 Illinoisans. Over the course of 2012 an estimated six million more workers struggling to find jobs will lose these essential benefits in Congress fails to take action.

“Millions of unemployed American workers are at risk of losing the only safety net keeping their families afloat,” said Chicago Federation of Labor Secretary-Treasurer Bob Reiter. “They remain unemployed not for a lack of trying but for a lack of opportunities; a lack of jobs. For Congress to turn their backs on them at the eleventh hour would be unconscionable.”

Without action, the impact on families, communities and the economy would be devastating. The average weekly benefit for an unemployed worker on federal extension is about $297, slightly higher in Illinois at $323.62. That amounts to only half of the income needed to cover the most basic necessities of food, housing and transportation as measured by the annual Consumer Expenditure Survey. Those unemployment benefits are pumped back into the local economy immediately, flowing to grocery stores, gas stations, landlords and utility companies. In Illinois, the loss to communities could total $27,378,252 a week. Nationwide, the economy actually grows by $2 for every dollar spent on unemployment insurance.

The rally, organized by the Chicago Federation of Labor and Chicago Jobs with Justice, featured some of the long-term unemployed workers who have tried and tried without success to reenter the job market. In early December, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a decline in the nation’s unemployment rate, a statistic that was aided by thousands of American workers who have given up looking for jobs and have left the workforce.

According to the Economic Policy Institute, the unemployment rate fell in November to 8.6 percent, its lowest point since March 2009, because the share of the population seeking work or working (the “labor force participation rate”) has fallen considerably.

Nationally, nearly 45 percent of jobless workers—more than 6 million—have been jobless for six months or longer. That rate has been at or above 40 percent for almost two years making it the longest period of such high persistent unemployment since 1948. The average length of joblessness is 40.5 weeks—more than nine months—which is nearly double the average duration of joblessness in June 2009 when the Great Recession officially ended.

According to Christine Owens, executive director of the National Employment Law Project (NELP), job creation is not keeping up with the demand for work, only population growth. “That is not enough to create the nearly 11 million jobs we need to get back to pre-recession levels,” she told Senators on the Health Education, Labor and Pensions Committee at a hearing on long-term joblessness this month in Washington D.C. “There are still more than four unemployed workers for every job opening.”

Putting faces to the statistics, the AFL-CIO launched a website to share the stories of men and women who are out of work and looking for jobs. It includes people like Richard from Tinley Park who wrote, “I don’t know what will happen if I’m not employed by the time my benefits run out. I’ll probably be living in my car.... Also [I’ll] have no health insurance if I was to get sick. Never thought this was the life I’d be living. I wish the politicians would understand the severity of the situation out here away from Washington.”

You can read more stories like Richard’s at uistories.aflcio.org.
Public workers again defend pensions

Illinois public employees once again mobilized as a coalition to defend the pensions and retirement security from cuts as legislators in Springfield look for ways to make up for years of under-funding.

Thanks to the work of union families and supporters, SB 512 was stopped in its tracks, at least for the time being.

Tens of thousands of calls and emails poured into Springfield from working men and women across the state, demonstrating labor’s collective strength and solidarity. And thousands flooded the state capitol rotunda for a rally to keep SB 512 from reaching the floor for a vote.

The coalition sent a clear message that any solution must address the heart of the problem: the failure of politicians to make the required contributions to the retirement systems, even as public employees paid their share on time, every time.

Public employees pay anywhere from 8-12 percent of their paychecks to their retirement plans and many are not eligible to receive Social Security.

While lawmakers adjourned the November veto session without voting on major pension changes, influential groups such as the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago continue to push for the changes.

The Civic Committee, whose membership includes wealthy CEOs and prominent private sector heads, has been running a well-funded campaign to push for benefit changes for public employees who stand to collect very modest pensions in retirement.

A legal opinion from Illinois Senate President John Cullerton’s office argues that the changes pushed by legislators and business groups to reduce benefits for current employees would violate the Illinois Constitution. A plan to create a two-tiered system for new employees has already been implemented.

The General Assembly is scheduled to begin a new session on January 31, 2012.

The We Are One Illinois coalition consists of more than a dozen labor organizations representing over 1 million members across the state. For more information about their combined efforts, visit www.weareoneillinois.org.

Watch a video of the pension rally at www.chicagolabor.org/video or by scanning this QR code using your smartphone:

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Chicago budget passes despite protests

Chicago’s aldermen unanimously passed Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s first budget recently, filling a $635 million deficit while making a number of cuts to the city’s services and workforce. Among the casualties are reductions in library services, closure of mental health and primary care clinics, cuts in services for the elderly, homeless, at-risk kids, cuts to emergency 911 operators and more.

“We’re very disappointed that aldermen have voted to reduce access to libraries, cut mental health services, privatize health clinics and cut hundreds of good jobs,” said Henry Bayer, Executive Director of AFSCME Council 31 and Chicago Federation of Labor Executive Board member. “Many aldermen voiced serious concerns about these cuts today. While the vote is over, the work of minimizing these harmful cuts is an ongoing process in which AFSCME and our labor and community allies will be fully engaged.”

AFSCME and other labor and community groups held demonstrations in and around City Hall in the weeks leading up to the City Council vote on the budget.

Organized labor proactively offered savings ideas to the Mayor earlier this year in an attempt to prevent cuts and layoffs. A report from the unions representing city workers highlighted commonsense efficiency measures the city could implement to save $242 million, more than one-third of the massive deficit. While the city adopted some of the ideas, many were not.

Working with the administration, unions were able to lower the initial number of layoffs in the budget. After years of layoffs, furloughs and other sacrifices by city workers, this year’s budget did not seek to strike any type of deal similar to the recent COUPE amendment. More than 350 workers will lose their jobs in the beginning of 2012, mostly union members, and more than 2,000 vacant positions will be eliminated.

The latest round of layoffs means that the city workforce has been cut to the bone, shrinking by more than 10,000 positions in the last 10 years. According to an analysis by the Chicago Tribune, the City of Chicago will employ an estimated 32,300 workers in 2012, a 23 percent drop since 2002.

To cope with the smaller workforce, the City will look at privatization and managed competition for city services. The City has already implemented managed competition between public employees and private companies for recycling service.

“Any step in the direction of privatization must be made with the best interest of taxpayers at heart and in collaboration with the City workforce,” said Chicago Federation of Labor President Jorge Ramirez. “Even in those instances where it might make economic sense, managed competition and privatization need to be done correctly and transparently.”

A bright point in the 2012 budget is a massive public works program to rebuild the 900 miles of the city’s century old water and sewer infrastructure, creating thousands of jobs over the next decade. The program will be funded by an increase in water and sewer bills to households and municipalities that purchase the City’s water.
As more than 2 million nurses, teachers, paramedics and other workers held the largest strike in over three decades across Great Britain, National Nurses United, joined by other union members, held energetic support rallies in six U.S. cities to show solidarity with their embattled British counterparts.

At rallies outside the British embassy in Washington, and British consulates in Boston, Chicago, Orlando, Los Angeles and San Francisco, nurses picketed, and delivered a letter from NNU Executive Director RoseAnn DeMoro to consular officials showing support for the massive British strike.

The United Steel Workers, Teamsters, AFT, ATU, SEIU, AFL-CIO central labor councils, Unite-Here, and members of Occupy DC and Occupy Chicago were among labor and community activists joining the solidarity actions.

The historic British strike was called by the workers to protest brutal cuts to their pensions and retirement benefits.

As nurses and other union members and activists said in the support rallies in the U.S., American workers face similar fights.

Jan Rodolfo, Midwest Director of NNU and Chicago Federation of Labor Secretary-Treasurer Bob Reiter spoke at the rally, along with representatives from UNITE-HERE, Amalgamated Transit Union, Chicago Teachers Union, Progressive Democrats of America, and Occupy Chicago. After police initially blocked entrance to the consulate, consular officials eventually agreed to come down and meet with a delegation.

“This is a political strike against the government of the UK and their efforts to impose dramatic draconian austerity measures and deep deep pension cuts to workers across the UK,” said Rodolfo. “We believe that their fight is our fight and it’s a global fight.”

Secretary-Treasurer Reiter drew a parallel between the fight for workers’ rights today to those more than one hundred years ago with the fight for the eight hour day and the tragedy at Haymarket. “We need to stand up for what’s right in Great Britain and what’s right here in the United States,” said Reiter. “Let’s stand behind our brothers and sisters across the labor movement. Let’s remember, we need to fight for workers’ rights in this country.”

“Nobody is talking about what created this problem,” said Bill Gibbons of the United Steel Workers. “This problem was caused by the abuses on Wall Street. And we stand in solidarity with public sector employees, the workers of the UK and with the global labor movement.”

National Nurses United is leading a campaign, “The Main Street Contract” calling for a small tax on financial transactions in order to rebuild America through job creation, school improvement, affordable housing, healthcare and other building blocks. Read more at www.mainstreetcontract.org.
A coalition of union members, community groups and senior citizens were joined by members of Congress at a rally in Federal Plaza in Chicago to demand that Congress protect retirement security for all generations.

Unions including the Cook County College Teachers Union Local 1600, SEIU Healthcare and others joined the Illinois Alliance for Retired Americans, Jane Addams Senior Caucus, Access Living and other organizations, community and faith leaders rallied to support this important program.

Joining the rally were U.S. Senator Dick Durbin and Congressmen Bobby Rush, Mike Quigley, Danny Davis and Jan Schakowsky.

In a letter to Sen. Durbin, Chicago Federation of Labor President Jorge Ramirez urged him to oppose efforts by the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction to cut the Social Security cost-of-living adjustment and increase the retirement age for Medicare.

“These cuts will have a harmful effect on millions of seniors in this country and threaten the long-term stability and support for Social Security,” he wrote. “Rather than cutting these programs and limiting access for America’s seniors, we should reaffirm our commitment and work to protect them into the future. We ask that you urge the members of the committee to leave Social Security alone and intact.”

The deficit reduction panel failed to reach an agreement by last month’s deadline.

Rally for retirement security

Chicagaoans continuing to struggle with stagnant unemployment and threatened cuts to essential services joined together on November 17 as part of a National Day of Action declaring an “Economic Emergency for the 99%.” More than 2,000 people rallied at the Thompson Center before marching to the LaSalle Street Bridge where 46 were arrested for an act of civil disobedience blocking traffic on the bridge.

The action was a continuation of the Take Back Chicago Week of Action, which brought 7,000 protesters together outside the Art Institute’s Modern Wing on October 10 to take back the jobs, homes and schools taken from working families by the financial institutions that wrecked our economy.

The action was timed with the deadline of the Congressional “Super-committee” that was expected to recommend drastic job-killing budget cuts that would disproportionately impact the city’s and the country’s most vulnerable populations including senior citizens and unemployed veterans.

The action was organized by Stand Up Chicago and brought together union members, unemployed workers, faith leaders, community groups, Occupy Chicago activists and others to call for real job creation, protest proposed job-killing budget cuts, and demand that big banks take responsibility for wrecking the economy.

Bridge-blocking activists call for jobs

Members of SEIU (above), CCCTU (left) and other organizations rally in Federal Plaza
After more than two years of bargaining, contract negotiations between Hyatt Hotels and members of UNITE HERE Local 1 hit a crisis point on Monday, Nov. 21, when Hyatt threatened to cut off health benefits unless workers give up their fight and abandon their boycotts. In response, hotel workers, religious leaders, and health advocates held a press conference in front of Hyatt Hotels’ global headquarters to denounce Hyatt for forcing workers to choose between their families’ immediate medical needs and a fight for their long-term survival.

“My son has suffered from chronic ear problems ever since he was a baby and is scheduled to go into surgery this month. Now Hyatt is asking me to decide between my son’s health and a future where I could lose my job,” says Cristian Toro, who has worked as a banquet server at the Hyatt McCormick Place for eight years.

On November 21, 2011, Hyatt negotiators first informed the union of their intent to cut health benefits, with an insurance cut-off going into effect on December 31, 2011. On Tuesday evening, November 29, Hyatt officials informed the union that they would postpone the cut-off date by 60 days, extending coverage until the end of February.

In the last two years of contract negotiations, Hyatt has refused to budge on crucial demands to curb subcontracting and ease working conditions for housekeepers—demands met by Hilton and other hotel employers citywide. Over $20 million in group bookings have pulled out from boycotted Hyatt hotels nationwide.

This is not the first instance of Hyatt’s labor controversies. In July, Hyatt turned heat lamps on striking workers at the Park Hyatt Chicago during a brutal heat wave. In Boston, Hyatt fired its entire housekeeping staff at three non-union hotels, replacing women who had worked at Hyatt for decades with temporary workers earning minimum wage.

“It’s obscene to use the right to healthcare as a bargaining point,” says Dr. Quentin Young, the former Chairman of Medicine at Cook County Hospital and personal physician to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he was in Chicago. “In this economy, to throw healthcare costs on workers on top of everything else is unfair. As a doctor I call on all medical professionals to honor the Hyatt boycotts.”

UNITE HERE Local 1 and Local 450 represent approximately 1,500 workers at the Hyatt Regency Chicago, Park Hyatt, Hyatt McCormick Place, and Hyatt Regency O’Hare. Contracts for area Hyatt workers expired on August 31, 2009. Since then, area Hyatt workers have carried out several limited duration strikes and other demonstrations, including a weeklong strike in September 2011.
Leucadia project to create 1,000 jobs

More than 1,000 Chicago area construction workers will soon be put to work constructing a new state-of-the-art synthetic gas plant. The Leucadia plant plans to convert as much as 3.2 million tons of Illinois coal and petroleum coke each year to natural gas using a low-emission, environmentally-friendly “gasification” technique.

The project will create more than 1,000 construction jobs and will lead to approximately 200 permanent positions once the plant is operational.

Legislation to allow Leucadia move forward on the plant was signed by Governor Quinn and passed yet another legislative hurdle during the November veto session in Springfield. Proponents of the project say the coal-to-synthetic gas process is a more environmentally responsible way to create energy. It will also develop a currently underutilized, heavily polluted site into an economically productive, job-creating, tax producing property.

CFL Executive Board members named to International posts

Two members of the Chicago Federation of Labor’s Executive Board were recently elected to high-ranking posts within their international unions.

Brian Hickey, Business Manager and President of IUOE Local 399, was recently named General Secretary-Treasurer, the second highest post in the Operating Engineers. He previously served as an International Vice President, a post he was first elected to in 2001.

Hickey has served as Business Manager/President of Local 399 since December 2000.

John T. Coli, President of the Teamsters Joint Council 25 was recently elected to a second full-term as International Vice President of the Central Region on November 18.

Coli was first elected to the Teamsters General Executive Board in 2006 and has been the Secretary-Treasurer and Principal Officer of Local 727 since 1992.

He was also unanimously reelected as President of Joint Council 25 on November 8.

Former Teamsters Local 705 Secretary-Treasurer and Joint Council 25 Trustee Stephen E. Pocztowski, who tragically passed away on July 2, 2011, also won as part of the Hoffa-Hall Slate. Pocztowski remained on the ballot after being officially nominated beside Coli during the Teamsters’ National Convention this summer. He died suddenly following the event in Las Vegas.

CFL Delegates celebrate holidays

Delegates to the Chicago Federation of Labor celebrated the Holiday Season with the annual Delegates Holiday Party following the December meeting at Plumbers’ Hall. The party was co-sponsored by IBEW Local 9 and the Chicago Federation of Musicians Local 10-208.

“This time of year we reflect back on what we are grateful for,” said President Jorge Ramirez. “We’re grateful for our families, our health, and for a strong labor movement here in Chicago that will stand up for working men and women. The delegates to the Chicago Federation of Labor represent some of the hardest working, most dedicated individuals in our labor movement. Because of them, we are able to do the things we do. We wish every delegate and their families a safe and happy New Year.”

Madigan visits Executive Board

Illinois House Speaker Michael J. Madigan addressed the members of the Chicago Federation of Labor Executive Board as part of a Special Order of Business at the group’s December meeting. Speaker Madigan discussed the current situation with the state’s budget and the unfunded pension liability for public employees. He discussed a number of proposals that have been put forth by various groups to help shore up the pension funds, including draconian cuts to current public employees proposed by the Civic Committee. Speaker Madigan also discussed revenue from the recent income tax increase and ways the state can save money on debt service and other financial services.

IBEW’s Terry Allen Joins Board

The Executive Board of the Chicago Federation of Labor voted unanimously at its December meeting to appoint Terry Allen, Business Manager of IBEW Local 134 to the Board.

A member of Local 134 for over 30 years, Allen previously served as business agent and officer of the local.

“We are proud to have Terry’s experience, passion and dedication to the labor movement joining the leadership of our Executive Board,” said CFL President Jorge Ramirez. “There is no doubt he will be an important voice not just for the members of Local 134 he represents, but for all of our brothers and sisters throughout the labor movement.”

Allen became Business Manager in October and replaces former Board Member Tim Foley.
Meeting Notice

CFL Delegates Will Meet On

**Tuesday, February 7, 2012 6:00pm**

Chicago Plumbers Local 130 Hall
1340 W. Washington, Chicago

Delegates must present their current Chicago Federation of Labor membership card or this notice for admission.

We look forward to full representation from your local union to assist the Federation in the development of its policies.

In unity,

Robert G. Reiter, Jr.
Secretary-Treasurer