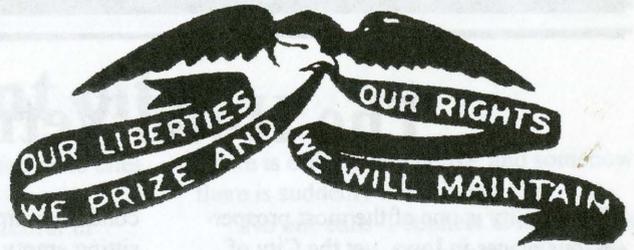


THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



April 2007

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Spring Fever Strikes Prairie Progressives

Kim Painter, Johnson County Recorder and President of the Iowa Association of Counties, stands before the Iowa City Federation of Labor and insists, contrary to rumors, that she supports Fair Share and is unhappy with ISAC's official opposition to the proposed bill. "Important provisions are being demagogued unfairly," Painter tells the labor delegates, who accept her impassioned defense but ask her to take a bolder stand.

Days later one of her fellow county electeds, Auditor Tom Slockett, rises to speak in favor of Fair Share at the ISAC annual meeting in Des Moines. He and county supervisors from Wapello County succeed in bringing the issue to the floor and forcing a vote of all members (not just the county supervisors group that had engineered ISAC's registered opposition). Fair Share fails to win, but the open discussion gives the county officials a much-needed dose of democratic debate.

At the spring conference of Iowa's United Auto Workers, Senator Tom Harkin thunders, "I publicly and openly support Fair Share!" Literally scratching his head, Harkin wonders of Fair Share opponents, "I don't know what they're afraid of."

Consider two groups of Midwestern state, says Harkin: 1) North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas, and 2) Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Missouri. "Which group do you want

Iowa to be more like?" he asks. When the crowd roars for Group #2, Harkin roars back, "Union shops haven't hurt those states one damn bit!"

On the day he was indicted for extortion, Democratic State Sen. Matt McCoy



introduces amendments to water down a bill that would lower the allowable interest rate on car title loans to 21%, down from current rates of over 300%. Sen. Joe Bolkcom responds by describing two forms of credit in Iowa: "one for people like you and me in this room, and one for people who struggle to get by."

By a vote of 32-16, the Senate soundly rejects McCoy's amendments and his attempt to characterize the bill as symptomatic of "a nanny state," a term increasingly popular among Iowa Republicans (as in Sen. Mark Ziemann's objection to a bill authorizing local smoking bans: "We're going down the slippery slope of nanny state, nanny state, nanny state").

On March 15, the US House of Representatives votes 309-114 to prohibit awards of federal contracts to colleges or universities that don't permit military recruitment on campuses. In the minority opposition is Cong. Dave Loebsack, the only member of the Iowa delegation to vote against the prohibition.

Many thanks to our readers for contributing \$1599 since January 1st, and for sending these reasons for subscribing:

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"I was inspired by the 'Regents Appoint Prairie Dog' cartoon."

"No one else has asked me for money lately."

Four new members of the Board of Regents, one less basketball coach, and no new corporate brand for the University of Iowa Community Credit Union.

It's been a good spring in Iowa. ✂

— Prairie Dog

The Hotel Vetro and the Homeless

Iowa City is one of the most prosperous places in Iowa, yet the City of Iowa City appears to be having trouble funding basic needs from its property tax and other revenue. During city council budget discussions in January, some council members argued strongly for the construction of a new fire station in north east Iowa City. I have no way of judging the need for such expenditure, but fire protection certainly falls within the core mission of the city. City staff, however, claimed that the city budget would not allow for the personnel costs associated with a new fire station. Maybe next year, they said. Mayor Ross Wilburn floated the idea of using volunteer fire fighters. How have we come to the point of needing volunteers to fight fires in Iowa City?

While council members lamented our inability to build a fire station, the Iowa City Press-Citizen and the City of Iowa City were celebrating the first anniversary of one of the symbols of Iowa City's prosperity, the Plaza Towers development, known to most people as The Hotel Vetro. The celebratory tone was dampened somewhat when one of its ground floor tenants, Tait's Natural Foods, closed its doors in January. The city council had insisted that developer Mark Moen include a food store in his project, perhaps to provide some healthy privately-owned competition for the member-owned (i.e. socialist) New Pioneer Coop a few blocks away, but the entrepreneurial judgment of city staff and councilors was apparently lacking.

It is not only the ground floor space that is empty, according to press coverage, but the very expensive condominiums on the upper floors. They have been snapped up by absentee owners who only use them a few times a year, on football weekends or when visiting relatives in Iowa City. In its celebratory coverage of the Hotel Vetro, the Press-Citizen neglected to comment on the contrast between unused housing and the crisis facing the homeless during a severe January cold snap. The heated

condominiums in the Hotel Vetro were sitting empty while homeless people were being turned away from the overcrowded and underfunded Shelter House and taking refuge in churches and, presumably, under bridges.

If the Hotel Vetro were a purely private development, it would merely be another familiar case of the contrast between private affluence and public squalor, in this case the inadequacy of public provision for the homeless. The Hotel Vetro is not a purely private development, though, but an example of public-private partnership that goes under the label of economic development. It is in part publicly funded through a clever shell game known as Tax Increment Financing (TIF), which is designed to disguise the public subsidy. During the fiscal year 2006-2007 over \$300,000 in property taxes that would normally go to the city, the county, and the school district will instead be refunded in full to the Moen Group to help fund a bankrupt natural foods store and subsidize absentee owners of luxury condominiums. That is where the city of Iowa City is putting its money in the name of economic development, instead of the homeless shelter and a new fire station.

I can hear the defenders of economic development muttering to themselves, "it's more complicated than that", and they are right in some ways. The City of Iowa City's share of the foregone property taxes is only around \$140,000 dollars this year, which would not pay for the staff for a new fire station, although it would help a lot. However, there is no good reason to believe that there would be no development whatsoever on this plot of land in the absence of a TIF subsidy from the city. Whatever non-TIF development yielded in property taxes would be more than the city is getting now, which is nothing. City economic development staff make their calculations of the benefits of TIFs on the implausible assumption that there would be no devel-

opment at all, or very little development, on the property in question.

More than half of the foregone property taxes from the Hotel Vetro for 2006-2007 would have gone to our public schools and to county government. The state makes up some of the shortfall to the Iowa City Community School District, but not all of it, and the state TIF subsidy to the school district is taken out of the same pot of legislative appropriations as school aid. It is not "free" money, and TIFs undermine the quality of our public schools. The worst victims of TIFs in Johnson County are the recipients of social welfare programs from Johnson County government, which loses more than two million dollars a year to all TIFs. The biggest tax thief in the county is not Iowa City but the City of Coralville, who cause a shortfall in the county budget of over 1.6 million dollars. TIF money used to subsidize the out of town shareholders in the Coral Ridge Mall could be used instead by the county to fund Shelter House, the Crisis Center, The Free Medical Clinic, United Action for Youth, and the Domestic Violence Intervention Project.

The Iowa City City Council apparently regards the Hotel Vetro as a success story, despite their inability to fund the homeless shelter or build a new fire station. They are trying to catch up with our bad neighbors, the City of Coralville, in the race to take money away from children, the homeless, and neighborhoods in need of fire protection. City councilors recently authorized yet another TIF, this time for a new hotel in a development called Hieronymus Square. In the past there have been members of the City Council who put the needs of the people of Iowa City over the special interests of a handful of private investors, but this time the vote was 7-0 for the investors. It is hard to remember a time when the City Council was more beholden to private wealth, and more indifferent to public need. ✕

—Jeff Cox

An issue all Iowans should care about

Why should you care about the Fair Share debate in the Iowa Legislature?

You probably know that Iowa is an Open Shop (so-called "Right-to-Work") state in which individuals who are represented by a labor union do not have to join or contribute to that labor union. Fair Share provides an equitable solution to the problem of free riders that Open Shop creates. All workers represented by a union have to pay at least their Fair Share of the costs the union incurs in administering the contract.

But why is this issue one that all progressives should care about? Well, Politics 101 tells us that states where organized labor is strong tend to elect many more Democrats than states where organized labor is weak. The 22 Open Shop states consist of the Old Confederacy, Plains and Mountain West states. These states typically have the lowest rates of union membership in the country. All 22 voted for George W. Bush in 2004; only Iowa voted for Al Gore in 2000.

So, stronger labor unions in Iowa translate into a stronger Iowa Democratic Party, but that is not the whole story. There is a direct correlation between the strength of organized labor and the rise of progressive politics. As Washington Post columnist David Broder said, in September, 2004:

"When labor lobbied powerfully on Capitol Hill, it did not confine itself to bread-and-butter issues for its own members. It was at the forefront of battles for aid to education, civil rights, housing programs and a host of other social causes important to the whole community. And because it was muscular, it was heard and heeded."

The battle for Fair Share in Iowa is the front line of not just the fight for better paying jobs, or for a stronger Democratic Party. It is the fight to rekindle a progressive brand of politics that has been missing for far too long. Unfortunately, not enough Democrats in the Legislature currently support organized

labor and the Fair Share proposal. Of the 53 House Democrats (one is presently serving in Iraq), there are not 51 votes to pass Fair Share. Despite the hundreds of thousands of dollars organized labor contributed to House Democrats, and the hours that have been spent explaining Fair Share to candidates and legislators, and why it is the top priority of organized labor, a few House Democrats felt free to accept money from labor and withhold their support from Fair Share.

Reflecting this political reality, the House leadership has watered down the Fair Share proposal so that it only covers public sector, not private sector, employees. According to a March 16th Des

"Politics 101 tells us that states where organized labor is strong tend to elect many more Democrats than states where organized labor is weak."

Moines Register article, after meeting in private for four hours, House Democrats could not muster 51 votes even for a public sector only version of Fair Share.

According to the Register, Democrat Dawn Pettengill, "who has told Republicans she opposes the Fair Share proposal, had tears on her face when she left the room..." It causes one to wonder, were those tears caused by guilt for taking \$6,500 from 16 different Iowa labor unions in her campaign and then responding by turning her back on labor over the most crucial labor-related issue in a generation?

The Register said that Democrat McKinley Bailey "walked out in frustration, got in his car, and drove out of the

Capitol parking lot... Bailey came back awhile later and said he'd left the meeting because it was 'pointless.'" One wonders, were the \$7,750 of contributions from 11 Iowa labor unions that he accepted in his campaign also "pointless?"

There are only two possible conclusions to draw: either labor unions gave hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Iowa House Truman fund and individual legislative campaigns without asking these then-candidates how they would vote on Fair Share, or, once in office, some of these House Democrats are perfectly willing to renege on promises they made during the campaign. Pettengill and Bailey are not alone in holding up Fair Share. Labor has identified 9 or 10 House Democrats who have expressed unwillingness to vote for Fair Share.

Please do not misunderstand. I am not suggesting that any elected official should blindly do the bidding of their supporters. As Senator Vinick (Alan Alda) said, "If you can't drink their booze, take their money, and then vote against them, you don't belong in this business." In this instance, though, labor campaign contributions represent promises made to working Iowans, and, regrettably, the breaking of that promise by a few.

There do not appear to be any easy solutions out of this situation. Even if the Legislature manages to pass a Fair Share bill for public sector employees, what happens to private sector unions? Do they continue to be taken for granted and support Democrats unwilling to support them? Or do they cut off campaign contributions and consider finding primary challengers for House Democrats who have adopted House Republican Leader Chris Rants' talking points on Fair Share?

All of this will play itself out in the coming months. For the time being, there will continue to be a lot of anxiety, frustration, and anger shared by legislators and labor leaders. Nobody ever said that being in the majority would be easy. ✕

—Nate Willems lives in Mt. Vernon

Who has the guts to end the war?

At this stage of the game we know very little about the candidates except who has the most money, who sneaks cigarettes, and who just built a mansion to eliminate poverty in North Carolina. It's time to really examine these people. Like my father's friend who was thrown out of medical school for his antics with a cadaver's guts, what better way to get to know the inner politician than to disembowel them and jump rope with their innards? Metaphorically, of course.

We've just passed the fourth anniversary of Bush's splendid little war, peace marchers are counted in the hundreds, and six more American soldiers were just blown to bits in the more secure Baghdad. Hillary wants to do something to end the war, even though her vote to begin it was not a mistake. No bold plan to stop the killing for Senator Clinton. She wants to tinker around the edges and blame the Iraqis for not controlling the savagery we released. Clinton also wants to expand health coverage for poor children. I wonder if my inner child would be covered if I give all my money to the Hillraisers?

John Edwards, tribune of the people, sallies forth from the manse to talk of withdrawing half of our troops now, and most within a year, while intensifying training of Iraqi forces. If I remember my junior high health class, pulling half-way out doesn't do much good, and if training the Iraqis is a panacea, don't you think Bush would be preparing for a victory parade strewn with flowers in downtown Baghdad? At the National Press Club Edwards said, "I do not believe in a Party obsessed with incrementalism, half-measures, and positions based on yesterday's polls." This half-in, half-out plan, and Edwards' "Universal Health Insurance Plan" that is not single-payer but a hodgepodge of public and private insurance, are just the kinds of timid gradualism that he claims to oppose.

Barack Obama has consistently opposed the war. In 2002, as a state senator he spoke against invading Iraq, but for

some reason Bush didn't listen. Obama wants to pull all our troops out by next year. If it is a good idea to end the war in a year, why not now? Strangely, Obama seems to have no healthcare plan, just a laundry list. I like him, but fear his inexperience and the fun that the fascists will have with his middle name of Hussein and the fact that he isn't, shall we say, as lily white as Rush Limbaugh. But he is "articulate, and bright, and clean."

"If I remember my junior high health class, pulling half-way out doesn't do much good."

Where is Joe anyway? Maybe he's still worn out from a hard day mining and then playing soccer. Tony Blair isn't as silver-tongued as Neil Kinnock, so Joe has to pay for his speeches now (that one about Obama must have cost a lot). Biden reminds me of Ted Kennedy: senatorial, serious, and a perennial also-ran. He wants to federalize Iraq and pull our troops out by the end of the year. Iraq is an artificial country, cobbled together by the British after WWI. Does Joe think that establishing Kurdish, Sunni, and Shia areas won't lead to a return to the status quo before the all-knowing British imperialists arrived? That might be better, but shouldn't the Iraqis decide? On health care, Biden supports electronic records and simplifying the system. Hoo boy!

Chris Dodd's thatch of silver hair and self-professed liberalism reminds me of that ad with Al Hunt of the Wall Street Journal that used to run in liberal magazine - "I'm not a liberal, but I play one on TV." Dodd wants to reposition US troops to safe areas and build more nuclear submarines. Has Chris ever read about the failure of colonial wars against guerilla armies? Western armies in safe

havens offer choice targets (Dien Bien Phu comes to mind). I suppose constructing more nuclear subs will help carry the Groton, Connecticut vote in 2008. In a real shocker, Dodd is against people going without health insurance, but offers no solution.

Bill Richardson would set a 2007 withdrawal date, but he, too, blames the Iraqis for the mess that we created. Imagine if Illinois invaded Iowa, imposed a government of Christian fundamentalists from northwest Iowa, and left us all without jobs, electricity, or hope. When we eastern Iowa secularists rose up in arms, who would you blame for starting a civil war? Bill is strongly for affordable healthcare. I read his campaign biography and dropped the book when he casually mentioned hopping in his Alfa Romeo to move to New Mexico to run for Congress. Sounds like the time Bruce Babbitt turned up in Ottumwa in a Volvo.

Dennis the K. Pull out now, universal health, Boy Wonder Mayor. But he needs Bill Clinton's barber to cut his hair on an airplane and to replace his confirmation suit. ✂

— Duncan Stewart will caucus for Henry Wallace.

Who is your preferred presidential candidate?

Prairie progressives want to know! Send your best 250-500 words to:

**PP
Box 1945
Iowa City, IA 52244**

In the silent city

Today is viernes de Luto. Friday of mourning. In English we call it "Good Friday" and it seems strange to me that these two names have such different meanings in my two languages, in my two worlds.

Merida is empty and silent like I have never seen it before. There is no one in the streets. Today I didn't hear the man that rides by my house every day on his bicycle with his trailer selling popsicles playing horrible music on a rickety amplifier and calling out to people in their houses. There were no rusted metal buses cruising way too fast past my window, or even roosters crowing from my neighbor's backyard.

"It's a day of reflection," a friend tells me. "A day to sit and think about your life and all the good things you have. It's the day that Jesus died for us."

As a non-religious foreigner, I graze over that last part in my mind as part of a world I will never fully understand. Catholicism to me is a cultural trait—a quintessential part of the Mexican experience. It's what gives them their values, what guides their behavior and their decisions. It is a part of what makes them who they are, and what makes me love them. Still, I don't belong to their world, and the values instilled in them

since child-hood are not all the same ones I grew up with.

Yet I find something beautiful in reserving a day for reflection. Especially because, de-spite the fact that there is no work today, no one is out sipping beers in the cantinas. They are really at home. Really quiet.

I wake up, put on my tennis shoes and run through the city streets. Running, as I have always told my Mexican friends, is my version of Mass. I ingest my environment through all my senses: I smell the hibiscus trees and the tacos being sold on the street, I see the sky, the architecture, the curious faces of the people I pass. I hear the traffic, Spanish being spoken on street corners, and the rhythm of my soft shoes on the cracked con-crete sidewalks. Something in my rhythm and my breath makes my thoughts have logic and meaning, and when I'm finished my world always makes a little more sense. I feel the sun on my skin and the pain in my muscles and feel alive -- and grateful.

When I return home I clean my new house, which is slowly becoming a physical reflection of myself. I sweep the floors with a Mayan hand-made broom and mop with white vinegar and water the way my mother always tells me to.

There is order in my house, and somehow there is suddenly order in my life.

No one calls. I connect to the internet and find that I have no e-mails. No one is on line and at mid-day, the streets in their silence are calling me. I venture out, and with my first step into the Yucatecan sun I feel the familiar feeling that the heat is falling on top of me, pushing me down into the earth where I will melt into a pool, leaving nothing behind but sunglasses and blonde hair.

In the silent city nothing seems the same. I pass houses and wonder what people are doing inside. Are they praying? Sitting at a table with their families? Sleeping through the afternoon sun? I listen for laughing Yucatecan voices and hear nothing.

The colonial houses seem older and wiser today. They sit in silence with closed doors as if they, too are reflecting. I walk and try to remember how the city looked when I first came here seven years ago, when everything was new and mysterious and confusing. When Spanish was just a series of mumbled sounds and new smells on new street corners excited me in a way I had never known before. I think of what it was like when I didn't know that I would return someday--that this city would slowly become my city, and the streets would feel like home. I remember the first time I smelled Merida's familiar scent, the way it haunted me when I wasn't here and the way it wraps itself around me every time I return and puts my mind and my soul at ease.

I think about the friendships I have had, the ones I've maintained since childhood, and the ones that have returned after my indefinite separation from this city. I think about mistakes and about new beginnings. I think about my family, about my mother's freshly baked bread, and about games of hide-and-seek with my nieces.

I think about the quiet happiness that has filled me since I moved here, and wonder if it comes from this place or if

*In the silent city,
Continued on Page 6*

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*In the silent city,
Continued from Page 5*

it comes from me. I wonder if I will be walking down this same street someday with this same smile twenty years from now, or if I will be somewhere remembering this moment I shared once with the city that treated me so well. I think that maybe it doesn't matter where I am, as long as I am able to carry Merida with me in some small corner of my soul.

I look behind me and suddenly realize that lost in my thoughts I have traveled from one end of the city to the other--from my quiet neighborhood of colonial houses and stray dogs to a new version of Merida peppered with commercial grocery stores, photo shops and modern bars. And I'm still in love.

My friend drives up and pulls over. "What are you doing?" He asks me. I'm not sure how to answer. "Reflecting," I say and smile. And I realize I have discovered the meaning of viernes de Luto, or as I prefer to call it, "Good Friday." ❧

— Anna Kudsk is a former Iowa
Citian living in the Yucatan



April 17

Former President Jimmy Carter
lecture, Carver-Hawkeye Arena,
Iowa City

May 5

ACLU-Iowa conference and
annual dinner, Iowa Memorial
Union, Iowa City

April 21

Iowa Citizen Action Network
Annual Leadership Training,
Johnston

June 3

ICARE annual pancake breakfast,
downtown pedestrian mall,
Iowa City

April 28

Interfaith Worker Justice
Faith and Labor Summit,
Cedar Rapids

June 15, 1987

New York Times decides the word
"gay" is acceptable to use as an
adjective.

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"The heated condominiums in Iowa City's Hotel Vetro were sitting empty while homeless people were being turned away from the overcrowded and underfunded Shelter House."

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