

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



December 2014

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Wage Theft: Iowa's number one crime

It might seem hard to believe but some Iowa employers are regularly stealing from their employees. It's a problem in Johnson County and across Iowa. A recent Iowa Policy Project report suggests that unscrupulous Iowa employers are robbing Iowa workers of \$600 million annually.

Iowans work hard for every dollar they earn. It should not be stolen from them by their employers.

In the fall of 2013, Kossiwa Agbenowossi worked at the Outback Steakhouse in Coralville. She worked hard 7 days a week, scrubbing the dining area, kitchen, and bathroom to support her children. Months and months passed without her being paid for her work.

Thanks to the tenacious organizing work done by the Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa, Kossiwa finally got paid for the 49 days of work cleaning the now out-of-business steakhouse. After waiting a year-and-a-half to be paid, Agbenowossi received the \$2,346 an Outback cleaning subcontractor owed her.

This is a classic case of wage theft, when workers aren't paid the wages they are legally owed. Studies say it's a growing epidemic in Iowa, and across the country.

The difference in this case is that Kossiwa had the incredible support

of the Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa. They organized public protests at Outback, and filed complaints on her behalf with the U.S. Department of Labor and Iowa Workforce Development. Most cases of wage theft do not result in the worker getting paid.

Wage theft affects us all. Not only are these employers taking advantage of their employees, they are also not paying withholding taxes, worker compensation, or unemployment insurance. They are cheating the system while good employers and every taxpayer subsidize this deplorable practice.

Iowa has some of the weakest wage enforcement laws in the country with virtually no penalties or enforcement when cases are reported to Iowa Workforce Development. Until last year the department had just one wage investigator to address concerns of our state's 1.3 million private sector employees. That's why last year Iowa Senate Democrats insisted on and got funding to add a second wage investigator.

Iowa Senate Democrats have introduced and approved legislation several times over the past few years to establish better safeguards to ensure Iowans get paid and allow investigators to more easily go after businesses that fail to pay what they owe. The bills called for better record

keeping, stronger penalties and retaliation protections for workers.

Unfortunately, these legislative efforts have been stymied due to intense lobby efforts by some of Iowa's largest and most powerful business associations including the Iowa Association of Business and Industry, the Iowa Grocers Association, and the Federation of Iowa Insurers. They have fought the legislation for six years. Moreover, it has no support from Governor Branstad, House Republican Leader Craig Paulsen, or most Republicans. They appear to not care that taxpaying Iowa workers are getting their money stolen from them.

The vast majority of Iowa's employers is honest and ethical and has nothing to worry about. The legislation simply requires them to provide the terms of employment to their employees in writing and keep a copy on file. This protects both the employer and the worker if there is a disagreement.

It is long past time to protect Iowa workers from the disgraceful practices of some Iowa employers. It's time to get tough on wage thieves!

To learn more about the problem of wage theft in Iowa, visit <http://www.iowapolicyproject.org/wagetheft.html> ✂

--State Senator Joe Bolkcom
lives in Iowa City.

I Blame the Media

"America has two problems - money and media." – former Queen of Talk Radio Randi Rhodes, sadly no longer on the air.

How is it possible that Iowans gave Tom Harkin's U.S. Senate seat to Joni Ernst? Theories and statistics abound as to why and how the unthinkable happened. I blame the media.

According to a recent article in Salon, the national press makes up a narrative that they like. The narrative never changes, it is locked in, impervious to facts. In 2014 the chosen narrative was: The GOP was going to win the Senate because the sane GOP "establishment" was taking back the party from the crazies. Tea party candidates like Joni Ernst were held up as examples of effective moderate Republicans. Gaffes by their opponents were pounced upon and exaggerated *because they fit the narrative*. This is consistent with what happened in Iowa.

Ernst was groomed to look and sound moderate. Nothing could be further from the truth, yet she was not found out by the majority of voters even though she has a record of some very right-wing statements and votes in the Iowa senate. The implications of this are downright scary.

Ernst was guilty of crazy talk about personhood, killing the EPA, and using her gun against the U.S. government, the latter a comment she made in front of a group of supporters, the NRA. You would think the media would find that comment at least as interesting as Braley's comment to his supporters, a group of trial lawyers, merely pointing out that Chuck Grassley is not a lawyer, but you would be wrong.

Ernst's extremist views, being named in a sexual harassment suit, and

handing out lucrative contracts to her father's business in a clear conflict of interest while Montgomery county auditor got mentioned, but she didn't have to answer for any of them because the media were too busy talking about those "very effective" hog castration ads, chicken fights, and the one Braley "gaffe" (media term for a true statement by a politician).

Ultimately, Ernst made fools of the Des Moines Register and the rest of the Iowa newspapers by telling them to f-off, not showing up for interviews after they so politely coddled her through the campaign. There was no real consequence to her for avoiding the press, if in fact anyone other than political junkies even knew about it. So I blame the media for not providing adequate coverage of the issues.

I concede that many voters know what Joni Ernst is all about and agree with her. But in some cases, this is likely attributable to another aspect of the media problem, namely the brainwashing and right-wing propaganda machine.

It is a myth that no one watches TV or listens to the radio anymore. 53 million people in the U.S. listen to Talk Radio. 91% of Talk Radio Programs are Conservative - not because people want it that way, but because Clear Channel says so. Corporate-produced and disseminated programs - Limbaugh, Hannity, Savage - are being forced upon our communities. We have no choice in the matter.

In Iowa there are 16 radio stations that broadcast right-wing talk. Seven of those pollute the political discourse with 12 to 24 hours a day of pure garbage. 7 Iowa stations air 6-9 hours daily of corporate-sponsored advertisements for right-wing ideology. Advertising works.

Walter Lippmann, journalist turned propagandist during WWI, remarked how easy it was to get people to believe anything. He said people tend to believe "the pictures in their heads" rather than make decisions by critical thinking, and that voters were largely ignorant about issues and policies, lacked the competence to participate in public life, and cared little for participating in the political process. To the extent that this is true, I believe this phenomenon is worsened when there is a relative scarcity of accurate information available. Today, it's not that the information is not out there, but it is barely discernible over the din of the disinformation machines: corporate-owned media.

That is why we need public funding for media, and a robust media reform movement.

Progressives tend to ignore the right-wing media problem because we don't listen to it or access it, and it's easy to forget that it's there. Doesn't everyone listen to NPR and read the NY Times? Every now and then something uber-crazy pops up like the "birthers" movement, and we're all shocked. Where do people get these ideas, we ask. They get it from right-wing media and it is disseminated through the regular media, making a fruitful national conversation of the issues impossible, and consequently making governance impossible.

Nicholas Johnson, former FCC Commissioner and author of *How to Talk Back to Your Television Set*, said, "whatever your first priority may be, media has to be your second priority. With it you at least have a chance of accomplishing your first priority. Without it, you don't have a prayer."



--Trish Nelson is the editor of blogforiowa.com

Firing Up the Base, and the Voters Too

Senator Bernie Sanders stole the show at the Johnson County Democratic Fall Barbeque. The only partisan speech to Democratic loyalists that I can think of to rival Sanders's performance was by Harold Hughes, who in the early 1980s electrified hundreds of Iowa Democrats in the old Veterans auditorium in Des Moines with his extended comparison of America under the Reagan administration with Sodom and Gomorrah, complete with allusions to who might end up being turned into a pillar of salt.

What the two speeches had in common was moral passion. Iowa Democrats in the 1980s were horrified by the direction the nation was taking under Reagan. Iowa Democrats in 2014 are horrified by the direction the nation is taking under the people that Sanders defined as "the billionaire class:" the Koch brothers and the oligarchs of Goldman Sachs who are buying up both political parties, the Walton family who are accumulating unbelievable wealth on the backs of the underpaid workers at Wal-Mart, the disciples of Ayn Rand like Alan Greenspan who have reshaped government regulation of corporations to serve the interests of the billionaires.

"How much is enough?" asked Senator Sanders, referring to the 84 billion dollars accumulated by the Koch Brothers, and comparing their desire for even more money to a craving for alcohol. He perhaps underestimates the genuine libertarian idealism of many of the billionaire class, but he doesn't underestimate the destructive nature of their program for America, or their virtually complete takeover of the Republican party, which is matched by a campaign by "moderate" oligarchs from the Walton family and Goldman Sachs to purchase the Democratic Party.

Democrats on the losing end of elections tend to overestimate the popularity of right-wing ideas, but

Senator Sanders is having nothing to do with that argument. The Koch brothers' agenda is deeply unpopular, he argued, supported by no more than 10% of the population. The number of Americans in sympathy with extreme right-wing ideas on the economy is larger than that, but certainly no more than a quarter of Americans really want to privatize public schools, social security, and Medicare, and end government regulation of corporations, the environment, and working conditions.

Why, then, did the Koch brothers' candidate Joni Ernst defeat mainstream Democrat Bruce Braley, who had plenty of money and was not a bad candidate? To quote the much-quoted James Carville, "it's the economy, stupid." Senator Sanders had the Fall BBQ crowd on their feet and clapping as he laid out a program for the Democratic Party to deal with an economic crisis that he believes threatens not only the livelihood of the American people, but the very integrity of democracy itself. America needs, he said, a one trillion dollar jobs program to generate good jobs at good wages. We should rebuild the economy around renewable resources in order to reverse global warming, repeal Citizens United in order to restrict the campaign influence of the billionaire class, break up the large financial institutions rather than bail them out, raise the minimum wage to a living wage, reverse trade policies such as NAFTA that have devastated the lives of American workers, and create a national health insurance program that covers all Americans.

These policies are popular with the American people, and we know how to put them in place. They were obviously popular with the 250 Democrats present, many of whom are relatively conservative by Democratic Party standards. Why then, in an afternoon of speeches that took nearly three hours, was Senator Sanders the only speaker to stir up the audience with ideas that are both

popular and practical? The contrast with Bruce Braley was striking. An experienced congressman, popular with the party base, with plenty of money, simply had very little positive to say. The Democratic achievements that he stressed, Social Security and Medicare, were put in place by Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. Other than those achievements, Braley could do little more than raise very legitimate fears that Joni Ernst would do everything possible to roll back the gains that women have made in the last generation.

If the Koch brothers' ideas are winning elections, it is because American wage-earners simply do not believe we are in a recovery now, and do not believe that their standard of living has been addressed by the Democratic party's response to the Great Recession of 2008: the bank bailouts, the home foreclosure program, the tepid stimulus, the Affordable Care Act. One of the most telling responses to Senator Sanders's speech came when he said that he voted for the Affordable Care Act (three people clapped), but supports National Health Insurance for all Americans (half the audience on their feet cheering). None of these economic shortcomings is helped by the presence in our communities of yet another generation of veterans from the failed Afghan surge, not welcomed as heroes at home but instead facing unemployment, low wages, and inadequate care from the Veterans Administration.

Democrats lost because the party leadership failed to deal with the Great Recession of 2008. Senator Sanders is pointing the way to a restoration of the Democratic Party's once proud status as the natural party of government. If the Fall BBQ is any evidence, Democrats are in a mood to listen to him. ✨

--Jeff Cox

John Deng Down the Memory Hole

Last October I attended a small rally held outside Iowa City's City Hall in solidarity with Michael Brown and those protesting his killing last August by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Two of the rally's organizers told the gathering that an unjust police killing of a Black person "could happen here in Iowa City."

How soon terrible tragedies and crimes can be obliterated from local memory! Five and a half years ago, an off-duty white Johnson County Sheriff's Deputy happened upon a scuffle that started when an angry white 63-year-old University of Iowa electrician named John Bohnenkamp stomped out of a bar to assault a badly inebriated and homeless 26-year-old Black man named John Deng in a parking lot just south of downtown Iowa City. Bohnenkamp was furious because Deng had dropped some bottles he had been picking out of a dumpster. The electrician was further infuriated when Deng defended himself with a small pocket knife.

The altercation ended when the deputy killed Deng, who could barely stand, with a single shot to the upper torso (the standard police "shoot-to-kill" target area). The fatal blast occurred at the urging of Bohnenkamp, who repeatedly defied the deputy's order to step away. The electrician was never arrested or charged, but state law required an investigation of the shooting.

The rally organizers last October can be forgiven for knowing nothing about John Deng. After a brief flurry of protest, the Deng shooting largely disappeared from liberal Iowa City's collective consciousness. Any chance that it might reemerge as an issue was nixed in late September of 2009. That's when Johnson County Attorney Janet Lyness made publicly available the Iowa Attorney General

office's investigation. As is generally the case with police shooting inquiries (e.g. the St. Louis Grand Jury report on the Brown killing this November), the report was a whitewash. Focused largely on the task of discrediting the purportedly outlandish claims of two eyewitnesses, it skillfully evaded the incident's richly racialized nature.

The speed and completeness of the Deng killing's descent down the local Orwellian memory hole might seem ironic, surprising, and/or disappointing. Hadn't famously liberal Iowa City's Democrats recently and strongly supported Barack Obama twice (in the presidential Caucus of January 2008 and the presidential general election eleven months later) in his campaign to become the nation's first technically Black president? Hadn't the bright blue campus town's many liberals felt that they'd struck a blow against racism by leading the nation in the effort to put a Black family in the White House?

I was neither surprised nor disappointed. As I had determined from hundreds of voter contacts with liberal Iowa City Obama fans during the long Iowa presidential Caucus campaign of 2007 and early 2008, few of the future president's many enthusiastic local backers seemed particularly interested in confronting racism deeply understood – as a pervasive societal and institutional force beneath and beyond the skin color of candidates and policymakers. Most of the many white Iowa City liberals I spoke to combined personal pride in their support for a (certain kind of) Black presidential candidate with remarkable indifference to the fact that Iowa possessed the nation's worst racial disparity for incarceration and to the plight of the growing lower-class Black population living under conditions of segregated poverty and police harassment on the city's Southeast

Side. If anything, the carefully white-pleasing, "post-racial," and "Black but not like Jesse" Obama seemed to offer local white Democrats a convenient way to congratulate themselves for supposedly transcending racism in the realm of presidential politics while turning a blind eye to persistent lived institutional and societal racism within and beyond their own community.

There's some good local race news to report six years later. Most of the many young anti-racist activists and protestors who have demonstrated in Iowa City against the killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown may not know about John Deng. But they have learned a great lesson from the Age of Obama: it's not about who's sitting in the White House and the suites, it's about who's occupying and marching in the streets – including the streets of Iowa City, where I marched last November 25th with more than 200 mostly young adults to protest the non-indictment of Michael Brown's killer. The current wave of anti-racist activists are newly inoculated against the virus of identity- and candidate-centered politics. They are battling racism and related evils beneath and beyond major party electoral extravaganzas, with a much deeper understanding of the forces at play and the stakes involved. It's a welcome development. ✨

--Iowa City author Paul Street was Vice President for Research and Planning and Research Director at The Chicago Urban League between 2000 and 2005. His latest book is *They Rule: The 1% v. Democracy* (Paradigm, 2014).

"A system cannot fail those it was never meant to protect."

--W.E.B. DuBois



- Dec 20, 1989** US invaded Panama
- Dec 25** Federal Holiday
- Dec 31, 1999** US gave back the Panama Canal
- Jan 12, 2000** Britain ended its ban on gays in the military
- Jan 19, 1920** ACLU was founded
- Feb 1, 1960** Lunch counter sit-ins began in Greensboro, NC
- Feb 2, 1995** Iowa native Simon Estes became the first Black to sing in an opera in South Africa
- Feb 7, 1950** Sen. Joe McCarthy claimed a list of 205 Communists in US government
- Feb 11, 1990** Nelson Mandela was released from prison
- Feb 19, 1940** Smokey Robinson was born
- Feb 21, 1965** Malcolm X was assassinated

Ryan's Rules

It seems like everyone wants to analyze the mid-term elections. Here's an analysis from someone in the trenches, someone who was recruited to be a poll watcher.

Did I say poll watcher? We Democrats don't really do that, anymore. Now, it's called "legal observer." Legal observers were to watch closely for people who were denied the right to vote, and to watch for provisional ballots. But we were not told what to do with the list that voters sign along with the auditor's log. Remember that list? We copied the names and sent them back to a central point where other volunteers could update lists of those who have already voted so that we didn't call them or knock on their door, but to focus on those who have yet to show up at the polls. We didn't use them this year.

Democrats would have done much better had poll watchers continued the work of the past. As it is, my precinct had no one turned away, and we had no provisional ballots. I could have managed to multi-task this project, watch for provisional ballots and people turned away, plus submit names to a central location.

It's hard to believe that an app has not been devised to produce a method of real-time tracking of voters. I hope to see this by the 2016 elections. I do know of a few door-knockers on

Election Day who were frustrated by contacting people who had already voted. Those are wasted contacts. Further, as simple as it seems, that sort of contact can irritate and alienate some voters.

The Secretary of State has yet to produce the real numbers (it takes almost two months – the current occupant of the office makes little difference), but exit polls show that 37% of the electorate were Republican, 32% Democrat, and 31% no party. Democrats didn't produce like they have in previous elections.

I have run a legitimate Get-Out-The-Vote program on a county-wide basis. As a new committee precinct person, I volunteered to be in charge of GOTV. I had no idea that my predecessors just set aside the printouts and didn't do anything with them. I solicited friends, fellow union members, relatives, and just about any other warm body to help make telephone calls. Our result was amazing. Crawford County ended up with all Democrats holding county elective offices except one. It's been many years, and Crawford County is back to being run by Republicans, but I learned some valuable lessons from being extremely involved in the process.

There are three rules to a successful campaign. First, control the issues.

Ryan's Rules Continued on Page 6

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE is Iowa's oldest progressive newsletter. It is funded entirely by subscriptions from our readers. Editor for this issue: Dave Leshtz. We appreciate your support.

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Never let the opponent get the first or last word. Don't get put on the defensive. If a lob is thrown, slam it back with impunity. Branstad is great at this. Have you ever seen him apologize for anything? Yet, Braley apologized for stating a fact at a Texas fundraiser. "If you help me win this race you may have someone with your background, your experience, your voice, someone who's been literally fighting tort reform for thirty years, in a visible or public way, on the Senate Judiciary Committee. Or, you might have a farmer from Iowa who never went to law school, never practiced law, serving as the next chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee." There was absolutely no reason to apologize for this statement. Now, Hatch's gubernatorial campaign for some unknown reason decided to stump on raising the gas tax. Not a peep out of Branstad on this issue, until after he won the election. Hatch

could have learned from Mondale's failed presidential campaign, telling voters that he planned to raise taxes.

Second, do whatever is necessary to keep from naming your opponent. Even bad name recognition is name recognition. I saw a sign this past October/November that said: "Joni Ernst - Iowa Job Killer." Subliminally, that phrase could very well read: "Joni Ernst - Iowa Jobs."

Finally, Lex Hawkins, former Chairperson of the Iowa Democratic Party in 1960, said "you have to get your own people out first." Democrats didn't do that this year. I received a ton of emails encouraging me to vote and send money. Rarely did I get a message that provided talking points I could share with others. Social media has now replaced shoe leather in getting the message out. I still believe face-to-face shoe leather is not outdated.

But the mistakes mentioned above belong to the individual campaigns. The state party failed us in the procedural process. Is it because Democrats are getting short on volunteers? I have to admit, I didn't volunteer as much this year as I have in the past. But I have seen so many Twitter photos with scads of people. I thought they were volunteering, not just taking advantage of photo ops. It appears I may have been wrong.

Democrats need to use technology to help win elections, but in the end, hard-working volunteers that get people out to vote for their candidates is what wins elections. I'm waiting for someone to create that app so that I can once again volunteer to poll watch in 2016. ✨

--Marty Ryan has been a Democrat since 1964.

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