
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



Fall 2018

A NEWSLETTER FOR IOWA'S DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Don't let them win this war

Old Brick in Iowa City has been the venue for everything from church potlucks, hootenannies, and presidential candidate rallies to a marigold-bedecked Day of the Dead celebration with a live llama looking on. No llama was in attendance, but a public forum sponsored by the University of Iowa Labor Center on September 10, two days before a Board of Regents meeting, had just about everything else. Eighteen speakers and six panelists spoke to a standing-room-only crowd for more than ninety minutes of passion, anger, and nostalgia for a university that once valued transparency, shared governance, and outreach to Iowa communities.

They were gathered to refute the University of Iowa's planned closing of the Labor Center. UI President Harreld made the decision allegedly on the recommendation of the university's deans, based on the premise that students can no longer pay for services that don't benefit them. Speaker after speaker denounced the premise as a false dichotomy, intended to pit students versus workers. An elementary

school teacher talked about Labor Center educators coming to her classroom to talk about the history of child labor. Undergraduate and grad students, many representing the increase in 'non-traditional' students, spoke of the importance of teachers being familiar with the experience of



most Americans. One insisted that students and workers are not enemies. Several alumni credited the Labor Center with helping them get through college, get good jobs, and proudly see their own children attend their alma mater.

Before former Governor Terry Branstad swerved irrevocably to the right, Marvin Pomerantz chaired the Board of Regents. Pomerantz knew the value of public education and made sure the Iowa Legislature did, too. Funding was robust, as was UI's reputation. The decline in state support began under former

Governor Vilsack, exemplified by Regent Michael Gartner's proposal to sell Jackson Pollock's Mural.

After disputes over conflict of interest with Regents President John Forsythe, who was simultaneously President of Wellmark Blue Cross Blue Shield, UI President David Skorton threw up his hands and nabbed the world's best job, President of the Smithsonian Institute.

Sally Mason, the next UI President, made a stab at convincing the Legislature that the university was an engine of economic prosperity as well as an outstanding center for learning and research. Too little, too late. State appropriations have continued to crater. In 2000, 24.6% of university expenses were covered by tuition; in 2018, the estimated tuition and fees will cover about 69.7 percent of the costs (Iowa State Daily, 1/10/18).

While state responsibility for its public universities was being abandoned, the Republican legislature ramped up its attack on working people by decimating collective bargaining rights and making it much more difficult for unions to recertify. Now we see the naked truth behind the closing of the Labor Center. It's a two-step dance of destruction.

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Eliminate labor education, so that people aren't even aware that their rights are being abridged.

The worried Iowans gathered at Old Brick gave it their best shot. They'll keep fighting for the Labor Center.

Maybe they'll fight harder and more effectively than those who fought for the Leopold Center, also flushed down the drain by the Branstad-Reynolds administration. Maybe those fighting to reverse the horror

known as "Medicaid Modernization" will succeed.

These are battles worth fighting, but they are part of a much larger war. In the brutal words of Art Cullen, editor of the Storm Lake Times, Iowa is a victim of 'state capture' by the combined troops of big chemical companies like Monsanto, giant agriculture lobbies like the Farm Bureau, and secret funders like the Koch Brothers empire. If the Iowa statehouse remains in Republican control, the capture will soon be complete. Institutions and services that promote mutual prosperity will

be shuttered, and everything from prisons to IPERS will be privatized. They're attacking your voting rights, too, with the new Voter ID bill that shortens the early voting window, confuses less-informed citizens, and requires identification to combat non-existent fraud.

Most Prairie Progressive readers are reliable voters. This time around, bring your friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers to the polls. What the hell, bring your llama.

—*Prairie Dog*

What is the Democratic agenda for Iowa?

As I write, the election is almost upon us. Now is the time to vote, and get other people out to vote. Win or lose though--whether we take back all three branches of government, or only one or two of them, or none--it will be time to start talking about what the Democratic Party plans to do in government, and what to propose if in opposition

So far the agenda is clear--reverse what the Republicans have done. If possible, Democrats will restore the modest increase in the minimum wage, re-establish some degree of collective bargaining rights, de-privatize Medicaid, re-fund Planned Parenthood, and increase funding for all levels of education. Then we will be back to where we were under Governors Tom Vilsack and Chet Culver. Then what?

One of the great achievements of the most popular political figure in America, and the de facto leader of the Democratic Party, Bernie Sanders,

was his ability to provide leadership in putting popular and affordable proposals on the table in the Democratic Party which have now become part of a national Democratic agenda. Almost all of the candidates stalking Iowa for votes for president in the 2020 caucuses are talking about at least some of them: a \$15 a hour national minimum wage with no exceptions, universal national health insurance (AKA Medicare for all), a trillion dollar green jobs program, and perhaps most important (and most popular), fully funded free tuition for all undergraduates at public community colleges and universities.

Cathy Glasson attempted to bring up similar issues in the gubernatorial primary, but they never got the same traction is they did in the presidential caucuses. Her common sense proposal to provide free tuition in grades 13 and 14, i.e. our community colleges, was treated as a fringe idea. The Gazette editorial board treated her as if she were coming up with some wild idea that would never get

anywhere. The underlying logic appeared to be this: if we do it for grade 12, we obviously cannot do it for grade 13.

Some Democratic candidates for state legislature support free community college tuition. It is time for them to come out and say: "of course we can do it". Part of the problem with Glasson's proposal is that it had no identifiable source of funding. Can we afford it is a reasonable question, and a reasonable answer is "yes". Iowa students spend about 75 million dollars a year in direct tuition payment for grades 13 and 14. In a multi-billion dollar state budget, that amount can easily be found if there is the will to find it. But it will only be done if Democrats persuade themselves and others that it can be done.

There are many working class Iowans working below a living wage who are burdened by student debt, and cannot

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afford to go back to community college to upgrade their job skills and get a better job. In order to do that, they would not only have to sacrifice time from their current job, pay community college tuition, and increase their burden of student debt.

And what about child care? Even in sub-living wage jobs, most working people will not qualify for Pell Grants. Others will quite rightly recoil at the bureaucracy, and stigma, involved in applying for a 'welfare' program. Iowa employers are crying out for employees with better job skills. Free tuition would simultaneously encourage job skills, ease the burden

of student debt, improve upward mobility, and (who knows?) might even produce better informed citizens after they take the required history and social science courses in community college. After the election, Democrats should start making the case for free tuition. If we can do it for high school, we can do it for community college.

— Jeff Cox

Withered and whining

Bobby Kaufmann is not a victim. He may be an aggrieved party from time to time, but victim?

No. His latest grievance was expressed in a letter to the editor of multiple House District 73 newspapers as follows:

"I had warned the organizers of all of the debates this cycle that my family was in a serious bind right now. My grandpa is now living in a memory unit and my uncle had emergency triple bypass surgery. This left me to fill a huge void in the family farming operation. Events would have to be missed."

In the letter Kaufmann focused on the Monday, Sept. 10, Johnson County Task Force on Aging candidate forum. He chose to miss it.

Lyle Muller, executive director of the Iowa Center for Public Affairs Journalism-IowaWatch.org moderated the forum. At the beginning he said the empty seats left for Kaufmann and one other candidate were not a statement of any kind. He hadn't heard back from them after the invitation and hoped they were running late and would appear before the end of the forum. Neither did.

All Kaufmann had to do was give Muller the courtesy of a phone call or email to say he couldn't make it to the forum because of family concerns. We all experience those things and I for one would understand. Most reasonable people would. Instead he blew off the forum like a speck of dust after working a field, failing to show common courtesy warranted for a public figure.

It's not that Kaufmann would have had anything new to say. We know him well. Since Kim Reynolds assumed the governorship Kaufmann repeatedly expressed his support for her and parroted talking points about why there were revenue shortfalls during the 87th Iowa General Assembly. When it comes to the final vote on bills before the House, Kaufmann has been there for the Republican majority on most of them. Where was he as chairman of the government oversight committee when Medicaid began heading south soon after the decision to privatize was made? He was in the back pocket of the Republican governor. It is hard to say whether Kaufmann will hold his seat in the legislature this cycle. Democrat Jodi Clemens has been doing the work of a campaign — putting in the planning, volunteer organizing, fundraising, and voter

contact needed to win people over. There is a lot of excitement about her campaign in the district. Beating three-term representative Bobby Kaufmann has always been a steep hill to climb. Kaufmann got 12,388 votes (73 percent) of 16,889 cast in 2016 running unopposed. When he last had an opponent in 2014, Kaufmann got 8,448 (66 percent) of 12,825 cast. He has the incumbent's advantage this cycle and midterm voter turnout is expected to be better than in 2014 but less than 2016. All of this is to say if readers care about flipping the house, get out there and help Jodi Clemens win.

In the end it's the voters of House District 73 who have reason to be aggrieved about our politics. Republican votes on a host of issues, combined with malpractice on the privatization of Medicaid, created a partisan environment no one asked for. Instead of bucking up and taking the heat that comes with being a public figure Kaufmann withers into a whining persona full of righteous indignation that rings hollow in the homes of people hard hit by Republican policy. Kaufmann, a victim? Suck it up, buttercup.

— Paul Deaton is Solon Senior Correspondent for the Prairie Progressive.

Real Iowa tax reform starts with reality, not spin

It is impossible to comment responsibly about Iowa taxes while ignoring these realities:

- Iowa taxes are tilted heavily to benefit the wealthiest and most powerful.
- Iowa taxes are competitive overall, even low in many cases.
- Iowa taxes do not raise the revenue necessary for Iowa to sustain its most critical public services that offer economic opportunity and quality of life to its residents. As this is the principal function of a tax system, it is the defining practical flaw of Iowa tax policy.

All of these realities were true before a handful of legislators went behind closed doors with whomever they chose — hint: this was not most Iowans — and crafted a massive tax overhaul that Governor Reynolds proudly calls the biggest tax cut in Iowa history.

And nothing in the legislation changes any of those realities, or the coming fiscal nightmare that the law guarantees if not changed.

We're talking about nearly \$1 billion a year if all goes as planned, by 2024. You think 1 percent state aid for K-12 schools is low, and cuts to state universities and community colleges too much? You haven't seen anything yet.

Issues magnified by the 2018 disaster have built up over decades. The Iowa Policy Project has worked with the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (ITEP) over the last 17 years to show how Iowa's system treats taxpayers at various incomes. IPP and

others have noted the massive giveaways in tax credits and unplugged tax loopholes, with too few lawmakers — thankfully, a growing number now — acknowledging the problem.

Those currently calling the shots in Des Moines have sided with Americans for Prosperity and ALEC to make things worse. Whoever holds power in 2019 when the election dust settles will own the responsibility to fix it.

What Iowa needs — as IPP has called for in “A Roadmap for Opportunity” — is a tax system that raises revenue fairly and adequately to meet critical public service needs that benefit all Iowans.

Iowa's system of state and local taxes, like that of most states, is regressive. We tax lower-income people more heavily as a share of their income than we do higher earners. The wealthiest, on average, pay the least share of their income in taxes.

ITEP this month came out with its latest “Who Pays?” state-by-state analysis of state tax systems. Under the new law, the average effective overall tax rate for nonelderly taxpayers in the bottom 20 percent (making below \$22,500 per year) is 12.4 percent. In the middle 20 percent, with an average income of \$50,800, the rate is 10.7 percent. But the average rate drops to 7.7 percent for the top 1 percent of taxpayers, who make \$438,000 or more (on average, \$960,000).

Keep in mind, this is the result of the mix of taxes — income taxes, sales and excise taxes, and local property taxes. The income tax is still marginally progressive, charging a little more as a percentage from the wealthy than the middle and below, but it is the only tax that does so. We are left with an overall regressive system.

While promising much to the middle class in their political talking points, those who promote the new income-tax law fail to acknowledge the tiny savings to a middle-class family by 2021 — just \$5 to \$10 a week. Millionaires, on the other hand, will see on average a \$24,636 cut for the year. Almost half of the tax cuts will go to the richest 2.5 percent of Iowa taxpayers, those making \$250,000 or more.

Iowa is an average-tax state. Even before the expensive tax cuts passed in 2018 to benefit the wealthiest, Census data (2011-2015) show Iowans paid about 2.5 percent of their income toward income taxes, 2.3 percent for sales taxes, which earns us a rank of 20th and 25th, respectively, among the 50 states. Business taxes repeatedly are shown to be in the middle of a very large pack in annual studies by both the Anderson Economic Group and Ernst & Young, prominent business accounting firms.

Iowa's tax breaks are expensive. The new tax law itself this year is projected to cost about \$400 million — about the cost of 10 percent in K-12

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supplemental state aid that has been held to 1.7 percent growth, on average, for nine years. That figure is scheduled to grow to \$479 million in FY2021, and, if revenue targets are met, \$955 million in FY2024. Tax

credits for business passed the \$400 million mark in FY2017, having doubled in four years. Tax loopholes cost the state an estimated \$100 million a year.

These are budget choices for Iowa. The question for Iowans is whether we will demand that our leaders

rebalance our tax code to make it more fair, accountable and capable of producing revenue for sustainable public services, for opportunity for all.

— *Mike Owen is executive director of the Iowa Policy Project,*
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The source of our power

The consequences of the decades-long divestment from and corporatization of our public universities have been well documented. As students face rising tuition and growing debt loads, instruction is increasingly provided by “non-tenure-track” faculty—adjuncts, lecturers, visiting faculty, and others who typically face low wages, unreliable access to benefits, and little job security.

At the University of Iowa, we are no strangers to this crisis. In the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, non-tenure-track faculty members like me constitute nearly half of the faculty and teach well over half of the classes.

I started teaching at Iowa as an adjunct in 2013. For four years, I worked on semester-length appointments, hustling for every class I could get. Even after I signed a contract, my income remained precarious: the College was allowed to prorate my pay if enrollment dropped, or to cancel my class at the last minute, without compensating me for the work I’d already done to prepare. To make ends meet, I worked retail, babysat, and did odd jobs.

In 2017, I became a Lecturer, a position that has afforded me benefits and slightly improved job security—my contract is now renewed on an annual basis. But my salary is only \$27,500 a year. When I hear stories from non-tenure-track colleagues who have been here for decades, who have built programs and won awards for teaching, and yet have never received meaningful raises, I have to accept that this job is a dead end. As much as I love teaching at Iowa, I cannot reasonably commit to this position in the long term.

But change is underway. Last spring, non-tenure-track faculty in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences marched, rallied, and occupied President Bruce Harreld’s office; ultimately, we won a meeting with Harreld and other key administrators. That meeting led to the formation of committees composed of administrators and non-tenure-track faculty members that set about tackling the issues we’d raised.

Our collaboration quickly proved fruitful. In August, the administration agreed to extend full benefits to most visiting faculty, a change that helped more than 70 of our colleagues and their dependents.

After announcing this good news, however, administrators abruptly cancelled all future discussions.

In the months since, I’ve found myself thinking about one of our last committee meetings, during which a dean shared details of the new benefits policy, including, for the first time, its estimated cost. His tone was stern—a warning, it seemed, not to ask for more—so it took a moment to register the significance of what we were hearing: the price he named was less than the sum of his salary and that of the dean sitting beside him. Extending benefits to 70 faculty members and their dependents cost less than the salaries of two administrators.

I reject the idea that the University’s budget should be balanced on the backs of students and the non-tenure-track faculty members who are charged with teaching them; that administrative “flexibility” is more important than creating decent jobs; that asking for a fair contract is greedy. I reject these ideas especially when they come from administrators who make every month what the University pays me in a year.

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Administrators claim they terminated our committees for fear of violating Iowa law governing public sector unions. This excuse strained credulity the first time we heard it (from Bruce Harreld, in the spring, a few days before he agreed to meet with our group), and it strains credulity now. We are not, and have no plans to become, a formal union. And even if we were, Iowa's rigged labor law doesn't prevent university administrators from talking to their employees.

Still, I find this claim revealing, and, in a strange way, thrilling: through direct action, in a matter of months, non-tenure-track faculty at Iowa won meetings with key decision-makers, advanced a policy that benefited dozens of people, and demonstrated our efficacy so plainly that the administration reverted to hiding behind a law meant to punish unions rather than continuing to engage us directly in talks to improve our working conditions.

And this much is clear: the status quo is unsustainable. In their quest for

cheap labor, administrators have turned the subset of the faculty they treat like temp workers into a force essential to the University's operation. This—not any law—is the source of our power. We will continue to use that power to fight to make a better University, not just for ourselves, but for our students. We hope that instead of positioning themselves as obstacles to progress, the administration and Board of Regents will join us in this work.

— *Liz Weiss teaches writing at the University of Iowa; her first novel is forthcoming from the Dial Press.*

Brick by brick

Our Midwestern values instill in us what family and community is all about. Growing up with lesbian parents during the 1990s and early 2000s, I learned at an early age what it feels like to be left out or left behind. I remember watching Republican politicians point the finger at families like mine, trying to pit us against each other while they spent trillions on wars in the Middle East and cut taxes for the wealthy. I know what it feels like to know there are people with power out to get you and your family.

I decided to run for the Iowa Senate because I knew that there were a whole lot of people feeling that way right now in our state and our country. And after knocking on thousands of doors, I have heard first-hand from too many Iowans who feel like their government isn't on the side of

their family or their community. Where Iowa used to lead, instead we're falling behind. If you only look at the rankings of U.S. News and World Report or the topline unemployment rate, you might be able to convince yourself things in Iowa are rosy. But that doesn't hold up if you take a serious look.

Once you actually start talking with folks, you'll hear that health care, education, and workers' rights are being eroded in our state. Our social foundation is being taken apart brick by brick. That's why our community needs a champion who will stand up for our values at this all-hands-on-deck moment for the future of our state — and that's why I'm running to succeed Senator Bob Dvorsky in the Iowa Senate.

From my testimony before the Iowa House in defense of marriage equality in 2011 to co-founding

and leading Scouts for Equality, the national campaign that helped successfully end decades of discrimination in the Boy Scouts of America, I have a proven track record of doing the work and bringing people together. I don't back down from tough fights. I'm willing to speak truth to power.

The truth is that we are in a hard time right now, and the only way through it is to work through it together. That's what family and community are all about: working through the hard times so we can enjoy the good ones. I know we can fix our health care system, fund our K12 schools and reverse cuts to our higher education system, restore collective bargaining rights for working families, raise wages, clean up our water, and enact common sense gun safety reforms.

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With so much work to do, I understand how these fights can seem overwhelming, but what's in the way is the way. Together, we can win these legislative battles and make lives better for the everyday men and women and children of Iowa. But we can't win these fights alone. Our community needs a Senator who will continue to support Democrats across

southeastern Iowa and the rest of the state. I know I can be that leader because I've already done it. As an advocate with our state's LGBTQ rights organization, I helped to protect marriage equality in our state, traveling all over Iowa having tough conversations.

This election is going to define the future of Iowa for generations to come. We all know that the 2016 election was a huge shock for our

state and our country. But we are the ones who will determine if 2016, and what has happened since, was a shocking aberration or if this is our new normal. It's up to us. Please visit zachwahlsforiowa.com to join the campaign for Iowa's future.

— Zach Wahls is the Democratic nominee for Iowa Senate District 37



Oct 27
Last day to mail absentee ballot requests

Nov 5
Last day to vote early

Nov 6
Election Day

Nov 9, 1938
Kristallnacht in Germany

Nov 27, 1978
Harvey Milk and George Moscone murdered in San Francisco

Dec 5, 1933
Prohibition repealed

Dec 10
United Nations Human Rights Day

“Some people are...afraid to bring in a business model. But at the end of the day it's the economic formula that will make us great. And that's the most important thing to get right. And that's what all these activities are really focused on is, to get that right.”

— Teresa Wahlert, Board of Regents
(Cedar Rapids Gazette, 6/16/06)

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and Supporters.*

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