

*Issue #7-October 2007*

*Labor Line is designed to help funders stay current with new developments in the labor movement, and new partnerships between unions and community organizations. It is prepared monthly by the American Rights at Work Education Fund, a grantee of several members of NFG's Working Group on Community and Labor Partnerships.*

## **WAL-MART BREAKS THE LAW, GETS PUNISHED, WINS ANYWAY: RETAILER FENDS OFF UNIONS, THANKS TO WEAK FEDERAL WATCHDOGS WITH FEW TEETH**

Wal-Mart has been the target of a massive campaign, with consumers and activists alike telling the giant retailer that it has a social responsibility. Meanwhile, the company has made use of weak federal laws to fight back unions. This article, by reporters Michael J. Mishak and David McGrath Schwartz, gives the back-story to what the retailer did in Nevada to keep its stores union-free. Read how Wal-Mart, at a cost of a couple of thousand dollars, illegally beat back an attempt to unionize its stores in Nevada:

[Las Vegas Sun](#)

“Wal-Mart's punishment is pathetic: for breaking up its employees' organizing effort, the company had to pay just a few thousand dollars in lost wages to a former employee. The laughable fine is a drop in the bucket for Wal-Mart, which posted profits of \$11 billion in 2006....” Writes Mary Beth Maxwell, executive director of American Rights at Work. Read her entire post here: [Huffington Post](#)

## **IS THERE OVERTIME IN THE 24/7 BLACKBERRIED-WORK-A-DAY WORLD?**

In today's perpetual workplace, where you can carry your office in your pocket, how does one measure overtime? Do current overtime rules make sense in the new blackberried environment? What's a worker to do? Columnist Lisa Belkin's column is food-for-thought. Access it here and read it on your blackberry or Treo phone...

[New York Times](#)

## **OPRAH HEALTHCARE ASSIST: RETIRED STEELWORKER STEVE SKVARA TELLS THE TV AUDIENCE ABOUT HIS STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE**

Steve Skvara, who was forced to retire after 34 years due to a health-related disability, lost a third of his pension and his family's health coverage when the LTV steel mill went bankrupt. "Every day of my life, I sit at the kitchen table across from the woman who devoted 36 years of her life to my family, and I can't afford to pay for her healthcare. What's wrong with America, and what will you do to change it?" he asked Democratic presidential candidates at an August forum in Chicago sponsored by the AFL-CIO. Watch him tell his story on Oprah, as he challenges this year's crop of presidential candidates to do something to help him and countless others.

[Oprah](#)

## **SPEAKING OF HEALTHCARE: NO SURPRISE, WORKERS PAY MORE FOR COVERAGE**

With all eyes on health-care reform, according to this LA Times investigation, employees are paying more of the cost for employer-sponsored health plans. “The average total cost of healthcare premiums for a family of four, including the share paid by employers, now exceeds the amount a minimum wage worker earns in a year,” reports the paper.

[Los Angeles Times](#)

## **WORKER SOLIDARITY ACROSS BORDERS**

The New York Times editorial page suggests a possible remedy for dealing with the immigration impasse. Jennifer Gordon, a professor at Fordham Law School who won a MacArthur genius award for her work with immigrant laborers, proposes linking the right to immigrate not to a job offer from an employer, but to membership in a cross-border worker organization — a kind of transnational union. The organizations would enforce the agreement and protect members’ rights here and in their home countries.

[New York Times](#)

## **THE CONTINUALLY SHRINKING MIDDLE CLASS & RESULTING LEVELS OF INEQUALITY**

As the union movement has shrunk from representing close to 40 percent of private-sector workers in mid-century to just 7 percent today, the middle class is fading with it. Harold Meyerson, who also edits the American Prospect magazine, offers some prescriptions for what to do in his weekly Washington Post column. In a second column Meyerson discusses a poll released this month by the [Pew Research Center](#), which reveals a startling transformation of Americans' sense of their country and themselves. Pew asked Americans if their country was divided between haves and have-nots. In 1988, when Gallup asked that question, 26 percent of respondents said yes, while 71 percent said no. In 2001, when Pew asked it, 44 percent said yes and 53 percent said no. But when Pew asked it again this summer, the number of Americans who agreed that we live in a nation divided into haves and have-nots had risen to 48 percent -- exactly the same as the number of Americans who disagreed....

[Washington Post](#)

## **THIS IS NOT DEMOCRACY: LABOR LAW NEEDS REFORMING**

American Rights at Work released new documentation on how employers exploit the weakness in U.S. labor laws during union recognition elections. The report, by Professor Gordon Lafer of the University of Oregon: "**Neither Free Nor Fair: The Subversion of Democracy Under National Labor Relations Board Elections,**" is available at [American Rights at Work](#).

## **GRANTEE SPOTLIGHT: East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy**

Easy Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy (EBASE) is an Oakland-based organization that engages in coalition building, research, and policy advocacy to win accountable development policies, support low-wage worker organizing, advocate for workplace rights, and organize for equitable public budgets and services.

In recent years, EBASE has made tremendous strides in its efforts to improve conditions and raise standards for hotel workers in Emeryville, California. This campaign paid off in 2005 when the City Council of Emeryville passed a living wage ordinance that specifically increased hospitality workers' wages. This was the first industry-specific living wage law in California and among the first in the country. EBASE's role in organizing around the measure and galvanizing public support was widely reported in local and national media. One local source called the ordinance "the brainchild of EBASE, a worker advocacy group that represents a new kind of thinking in labor." *The Nation* similarly credited EBASE with "convincing voters to pass" the measure. Following the passage of the ordinance, EBASE continued to work with local labor organizations to educate all eligible workers about their rights under the new law and ensure industry compliance. This work resulted in a campaign against two major hotels that continued to violate the law. EBASE organized workers to testify before the City Council and meet with local legislators, held direct actions, and increased media coverage in order to pressure the hotels to comply. When the hotels responded by increasing pressure on undocumented workers, EBASE pushed the City Council to intervene. The Council ultimately passed an injunction preventing the hotels from firing any workers until its investigation was completed.

EBASE and the United Food and Commercial Workers also advocated in support of a policy regulating big-box retail development in Alameda County. The County Board of Supervisors approved a policy in March 2006 requiring a review of the social and economic impacts prior to approval of "superstore" developments. In another effort to expand accountable development, EBASE convened the Oakland Development Policy Roundtable, a coalition of community organizations, labor, and policy advocates, which developed a set of policy proposals for responsible economic development in Oakland. Through a targeted media campaign, EBASE and the coalition ensured that the proposals were considered during the 2006 Mayoral race. Several candidates endorsed the proposals including Ron Dellums, who was elected. Dellums has since invited EBASE and a number of other coalition members to participate on his taskforce on neighborhood organizing. In the coming months, EBASE will work on a campaign to win community benefits in the development of the former West Oakland Army base. As part of this campaign, it plans to organize local residents to pressure the government for a development plan that generates quality jobs and tax revenue. Current and recent EBASE funders include French American Charitable Trust, Marguerite Casey Foundation, New World Foundation, Tides Foundation, Solidago Foundation, Cummings Foundation, Needmor Foundation, and the Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock.

**For more info**, check EBASE's website at <http://www.workingeastbay.org/>

