

# Monthly News Digest

EVENTS OF  
MARCH 2006

## LOCAL AND REGIONAL

**Anne Braden dies.** Over 300 people crowded into the small St. George Episcopal Church, Anne's church, and overflowed into the adjacent gymnasium, to bid a last farewell to legendary civil rights activist Anne Braden. She died at age 81 after more than half a century of work against racism and in support of all forms of civil rights. Although vilified by the pillars of the community in her early years, she was vindicated by the social changes she did so much to bring about, and in her later years was widely hailed as a hero by the community. (C-J 3/7, 3/8, 3/11)

**Labor rally; anti-labor bills defeated.** Thousands of union members and their supporters, in a rally on the steps of the capitol in Frankfort, learned that the anti-labor bills they had come to protest had been defeated. The House Labor and Industry Committee voted down governor Fletcher's proposals to make Kentucky a "right-to-work" state and to repeal the prevailing-wage law, which requires contractors to pay the typical wage in a county to people working on public projects. The right-to-work proposal was voted down 11-3 and the prevailing wage bill lost 12-2. At the rally, house speaker Jody Richards introduced the other committee members who opposed the measures. Supporters of the bills said they would try again in future sessions. (C-J 3/7, 3/8)

**Anti-war rally.** To protest the Iraq war, hundreds of T-shirts were hung on lines stretched between poles along Hurstbourne Parkway. Interspersed among the T-shirts there were handmade signs with messages such as "I will miss my life," "I played the guitar," and "I loved banana pudding." Some 150 to 200 protesters accompanied the display. The event was organized by Louisville Peace Action Committee. Protests also took place in many other cities throughout the country and abroad. (C-J 3/19, 3/20)

**Social workers rally for funding.** About 100 social workers and their supporters rallied in Louisville to urge the state General Assembly to provide more funds to hire more social workers. Opposition from social workers led the state to back off from a plan they said would weaken their efforts by transferring supervisors and managers to the field to do case work. (C-J 3/6)

**Immigrant rights rally.** More than 400 people participated in a rally for immigration reform and against stricter immigration laws, in front of the Federal Courthouse in Louisville. The newly-formed Kentucky Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform, based in Lexington, is planning additional actions. (C-J 4/5)

**Retreat mining.** The death of two Harlan County coal miners led to a movement to ban retreat mining, which involves cutting away and recovering the coal from the pillars that support the mine roof as miners withdraw from a mine. A study ordered by Gov. Fletcher recommended that the practice continue, but with some additional safety measures, better training of miners, and more rigorous

monitoring of roof stability. (C-J 3/9)

**Toxic air pollution control.** State senator Dan Seum introduced a bill intended to kill Louisville's Strategic Toxic Air Reduction (STAR) program by forbidding local regulations more stringent than those of the state, but it was modified so that the Louisville Metro Council could pass it by a 3/5 vote, and this version passed. (The council had supported the program by 13-11.) In the House, Rep. Reginald Meeks introduced an amending bill that would require a study of costs and benefits of the new toxic air program, and this also passed. The Ford Motor Co. claimed it would cost them as much as \$50 million to comply, but this figure was strongly challenged by Metro Air Pollution Control District officials and environmentalists. The city offered assurances to Ford that they would not suffer economically. (C-J 3/9, 3/10, 3/15, 3/19, 3/24)

## NATIONAL

**Patriot Act renewed.** The House of Representatives voted 280-138 to renew the USA Patriot Act, thus prolonging 16 provisions of the act that were due to expire March 10. The act, passed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, gives the government greater scope in its data-gathering and surveillance activities. All Kentucky House members voted for renewal. Earlier, a senate filibuster had required the White House to accept some restrictions on the gathering of information, but the bulk of the provisions remain intact. One such provision required the administration to inform Congress of how the FBI uses the act's expanded police powers, but when he signed the bill, President Bush issued a "signing statement" saying that he did not feel obliged to obey that requirement. (C-J 3/8, 3/25)

**Immigration issues.** Throughout the country, immigrants and their supporters have been demonstrating for their rights. In early March, over 100,000 marched in Chicago, and there were smaller rallies in many other cities, including Louisville. A bill introduced by Rep. James Sensenbrenner (R-Wis), which passed the House in December, calls for 700 miles of fencing along the border with Mexico, and would have made it a felony to be in the country illegally, or to help someone who is., but these measures were stricken from the original bill by the Senate Judiciary Committee. (*Chicago Tribune* 3/13, 3/14; *SF Chronicle* 4/3) ➤ An Associated Press/Ipsos poll found that 56% of Americans favor some kind of legal status for undocumented immigrants so they can stay in the United States. Also, 51% think that immigrants make a contribution to society, 2/3 think they take jobs Americans do not want, and 51% think entering the country illegally should be considered a "minor offense." However, 41% opposed giving any kind of legal status to undocumented immigrants. (C-J 4/3) ➤ A report by the Pew Hispanic Center estimates that there are between 11.5 and 12 million illegal immigrants working in the United States, or about

one in every 20 workers. Mexicans make up 56% of them, with 22% from other Latin American countries. (C-J 3/8)

**Abramoff sentenced; DeLay won't run.** Former lobbyist Jack Abramoff, convicted for defrauding Indian tribes and other lobbying clients, received the minimum sentence, 5 years and 11 months. His business partner Adam Kidan received the same sentence. They were also ordered to pay restitution of over \$21 million. Abramoff also agreed to cooperate in a corruption probe of Rep. Tom DeLay. (C-J 3/30) >Former House Majority Leader Tom Delay (R-Tex.), who had close ties to Abramoff, said he will not seek re-election. He has been indicted for laundering campaign funds, funneling illegal corporate donations to Republican candidates. (C-J 4/4)

### INTERNATIONAL

**Milošević found dead in cell.** Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević, on trial before the UN war-crimes tribunal in The Hague for genocide and other war crimes committed in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, was found dead in his cell. An autopsy indicated a heart attack was the cause. (C-J 3/11)

**French protest youth labor law.** Between 200,000 and 400,000 youths, union members, and their supporters held more than 100 demonstrations during March, protesting the government's new youth labor law. The law permits an employer to fire workers under age 26 without notice or explanation during their first two years of employment. It was intended to ease the high rate of unemployment among French youth, by encouraging employers to hire them. Some 26% of Frenchmen under age 26 are unemployed. French workers are used to having "full time contracts," which provide long-term job security. Without them, they usually cannot get bank loans or apartments. But prime minister Dominique de Villepin said the law was necessary to "bring the French labor market into the modern era," and workers must give up the social welfare system they have long enjoyed. (NYT 3/19, 3/28; FT 3/17, 3/27; Guardian 3/29)

**Workers take over Portuguese factory.** Workers at the Afonso garment factory in northern Portugal spotted a truck belonging to Mallet and Tusk, the factory's Swiss parent company backing through the gate, to take the machinery to low-wage Slovakia and shutting down the plant, in violation of a law that requires negotiation with employees before any changes in employment terms. They rushed back to the factory, blocked the truck, called the police, took over the plant, and resumed production. In 2005, Europe, including Portugal, was required by WTO regulations to open its markets to textiles from China, which has devastated the European textile industry. Mallet and Tusk officials claimed that Portugal's "outdated" labor laws, aimed at job protection, have "marred" the Portuguese business climate. (C-J 3/20)

**Incident in Bolivia.** Explosions in two La Paz hotels caused two deaths and seven injuries. Police arrested Lestat Claudius, a U.S. national, and his companion Alba Ribeiro, of Uruguay. A U.S. plot was first suspected, but later discarded. Earlier, the pair had set off a dynamite charge at a Peru-Bolivia border crossing, and Claudius had been arrested in Argentina in 2005 for attacking an ATM machine and sending dynamite and a threatening note to an

Argentine judge. (LaJornada 3/23)

**Spain: ETA calls a halt.** The Basque separatist organization ETA, responsible for 800 deaths over a 40-year period, announced a permanent cease-fire, and a willingness to sign a permanent peace accord. There have been previous talks between ETA and the Spanish government, but this is the first time ETA itself has declared a permanent peace. Reaction in the Spanish parliament was generally positive, although some doubted ETA's sincerity. The organization has not carried out any attacks in over three years. (LaJornada 3/23)

**World Water Forum.** The fourth World Water Forum was held in Mexico City (the first one was held in Morocco in 1997). Some 11,000 delegates from 130 countries met for a week behind closed doors, while 10,000 protestors marched outside. At the end, delegates signed a non-binding document pledging to work toward universal access to safe water. However, many objected to the emphasis on building large dams and irrigation systems (the position of the World Bank and corporations), which often favor large landowners at the expense of small farmers. Others, including many of the protestors, objected to the stress on privatization. Privatized public water systems have been lucrative, but the private sector earns more by selling bottled water to people in developing countries who do not have drinkable tap water. One delegate called this "a sort of stealth privatization." Many said access to water was a human right, but Germán Martínez, director of the Mexico City water system said "What we really have to do is get people to pay for their water." The forum was sponsored in part by private companies; a major sponsor was Coca-Cola. (AP 3/16; Aljazeera 3/17; Food First)

**Peruvian election.** Peru will hold presidential elections on April 9, and two of the three leading candidates have pledged to block a free trade agreement with the United States. They are Ollanta Humala, the front-runner, who promises a "revolution" for the poor, and center-left candidate Alan García, a former president. Favoring the agreement is pro-business candidate Lourdes Flores. Exporters of fresh fruits and vegetables want the free trade agreement, but thousands of small farmers and others have protested against it. (Reuters 3/31)

**Chad: Sudan, war, and rebellion.** The 3-year-old war in Sudan's western Darfur region has forced 2 million people from their homes, and about 200,000 have fled to refugee camps in neighboring Chad. Meanwhile many Chadian soldiers have deserted and joined an alliance of rebel groups also in eastern Chad. There have been raids from Sudan, which the government claims is aiding the rebels. The UN has a peace-keeping mission in the area, and the Security Council has extended its mandate to September 2006. (allAfrica.com 3/9, 3/21, 3/26i)

*Compiled from the Courier-Journal, NY Times, Chicago Tribune, La Jornada (Mexico), alJazeera (Qatar), Financial Times, Guardian (UK), San Francisco Chronicle, Reuters, and all-Africa.com, sometimes via Portside*  
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