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Under the Radar

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By Ben Becker

UNDER THE RADAR

“[T]o exist, you need an ideology. The question is whether it is accurate or not. And what I’m saying is, yes, I found a flaw.”

—Alan Greenspan in an October 2008 response to whether he feels that his ideology pushed him to make decisions he wishes he hadn’t made.

Chicago Community Center Holds Twenty-Four-Hour Vigil, Protesting against New Parking Meter Policy

In December 2008, the City of Chicago turned over its thirty-six thousand parking meters to Morgan Stanley, which bought the rights to meter revenues for \$1.2 billion. Some estimate the actual worth of the meters, which will belong to the finance company for seventy-five years, at \$5 billion. Upon receiving the meters, the Wall Street giant immediately raised parking fees (up to 400 percent in some locations), installed thousands of new pay boxes, and lengthened the metered hours and days. Morgan Stanley is planning to raise parking rates every year until 2013.

The issue came to a head outside of the Centro Comunitario Juan Diego (a community center on the South Side that specializes in literacy and health care services, as well as tenant activism). To prevent the planned installation of new parking meters outside of their center, community members conducted a twenty-four-hour, around-the-clock vigil and marched on the Chamber of Commerce. The People’s Parking Meter Campaign delivered fifteen hundred petitions to keep the streets clean of meters.

Mayor Richard Daley has defended the move as an expedient way to cover the city’s budget shortfall, but he faces growing pressure from working-class residents who are demanding that he: “Stop the rate hikes [and] make the banks pay for their crisis!”

Police Checkpoints Ruled Unconstitutional in D.C. Community

Community activists in Washington, D.C. scored a precedent-setting legal victory against a checkpoint program set up by the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). The MPD set up the checkpoints last year in the African-American community of Trinidad, after a string of murders in the area. Only drivers with reasons deemed “legitimate” by the police were allowed to pass into the neighborhood. Activists and community members rejected the city’s anti-crime rationale, calling the checkpoints a form of “martial law” meant to protect gentrification in an adjacent neighborhood.

A three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit struck down the checkpoints on constitutional grounds. “This decision is extremely significant because if the government had succeeded in

establishing military-style checkpoints in D.C., it would have been a model used in urban areas around the country,” stated Mara Verheyden-Hilliard, co-founder of the Partnership for Civil Justice, which filed the lawsuit on behalf of four D.C. residents.

Mineworkers’ Strike in Mexican Border Town Enters Third Year

With scarcely more than thirty thousand residents, Cananea is a small copper-mining town with a big labor history. Cananea is immortalized in Mexican labor history as the site of a major strike, in 1906, that precipitated the Mexican Revolution. A century later, a strike that started in July 2007 over health and safety problems is now entering its third year. The anti-labor Calderon government has stood firmly behind the employer, Grupo Mexico, and courts ruled in April 2009 that the company could begin to fire employees. But with appeals pending, the workers are not giving up—even now, as they begin their third year on the picket line.

A Wake-Up Call for Chicago Hotel Guests?

Labor advocates are pushing the Chicago City Council to pass an ordinance requiring all hotels to inform potential customers if their workers have been on strike for fifteen days or more. Workers of UNITE HERE Local 1 at the Congress Plaza Hotel have been on strike for six years—the longest hotel strike in U.S. history—and are among those pushing for the measure.

Among other politicians who have expressed support for the Congress Hotel workers, Barack Obama joined the picket line in 2003 and 2007. During his second visit, he gave a rousing speech expressing support for card check legislation, and vowing to “be back on that picket line as [the] President of the United States.” Considering the White House’s tepid support for the Employee Free Choice Act, many in the labor movement are

closely watching to see if he will keep his promise.

Boston T-Riders Take a Stand against Fare Hikes

Ever since the economic crisis hit, state legislators across the country have been increasing transit fares and cutting services. When the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) announced such plans during the summer of 2009, activists and community members sprang into action, organizing protests and press conferences in opposition. The MBTA held one stormy public hearing on the proposed cuts before Governor Deval Patrick directed the agency to cancel all twelve of the remaining meetings on the matter.

Boston’s T-Riders’ Union and the Party for Socialism and Liberation have declared that “[p]ublic transportation is not a luxury—it is a need,” and called for the MBTA to withhold its debt payments. The MBTA carries the largest relative debt of any transit agency in the country, spending around 30 percent of its budget on debt-servicing. In 2009 alone, more than \$245 million in interest was doled out to the agency’s lenders.

If only Bernie Madoff would have been too big to fail...



Cartoon by Bendib via Minuteman Media