

Occupy Pittsburgh Now

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Governor Receives Backdoor Award



On May 12, Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett snuck through the back door of the Pittsburgh Opera's Headquarters on Liberty Ave in the Strip District.

The Corbetts entered at the rear to avoid hundreds of protestors at the main entrance, who were demonstrating their outrage at the idea of the Pittsburgh Opera honoring the governor and his wife with a lifetime achievement award for their "support of the arts and education" after the Governor cut nearly \$1 billion from Pennsylvania's education system.

Jessie Ramey, an American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) New Faculty Fellow at the University of Pittsburgh, helped break the story of the Pittsburgh Opera's decision to honor the Corbetts in her blog, Yinzercation. "These cuts have crippled local school districts, which have been forced to slash arts education," said Ramey on May 10. "And look at what is happening right here in Pittsburgh: our flagship arts school, CAPA, is cutting private music lessons. Taylor Allderdice is laying off its marching band director. Elementary schools across the district are losing music, art, library, and language instruction." Ramey's blog went viral and in one week received more than 14,000 hits, up drastically from her average of a few hundred.

Ramey's blog was just part of the outrage stirred on the web around the event. Pittsburgh Opera spokeswoman Debra Bell told reporters they received 100 phone calls, 350 emails and

600 Facebook messages about it.

At the event, protestors, some in Viking helmets and dressed as famous opera characters, shouted "Shame!" at the attendants rolling up the Pittsburgh Opera's Headquarters. As they exited their Bentleys, Mercedes, Cadillacs and BMWs, valet parking attendants dashed to get in the driver's seats, apparently afraid that a renegade demonstrator would attempt to steal one of the luxury cars.

Men in tuxedos, and women in glamorous gowns and high heels pranced into the opera house. Some tried to confront the outspoken crowd, while others shrugged and said, "I didn't vote for him."

Inside dinner was served at \$750 a plate to the 400 guests, which means the Opera grossed a total of \$300,000. But there are other, more well-established financial ties between some of the Opera's supporters and Gov. Corbett. A quick glance at the board of directors will supply a list of Corbett's campaign contributors, from General Director Christopher Hahn, and Opera Board member James R. Agras (also the CEO of Triangle Tech, which contributed \$2,500 to Corbett in December 2011 even after the governor's massive cuts to education), to Board Chair Michele Fabrizi.

Fabrizi's ties to Corbett and Pennsylvania state politics are especially intricate. Fabrizi is the President and CEO of MARC USA, an advertising firm based in Pittsburgh. According to the Pittsburgh Business Times (PBT), the firm had held the advertising contract with the PA Lottery since 2002, until another major marketing firm based in Pittsburgh, Brunner Inc, won the contract in a bid last fall. Surprisingly, however, just as Brunner already started work on the project, the state decided to revert back to MARC USA and extend the firm's contract for one year. Fabrizi then issued this statement to the press: "MARC USA is thrilled to continue our work with the Pennsylvania Lottery to benefit older Pennsylvanians. We look forward to helping the Lottery to achieve the kind of record-breaking results it has

enjoyed since our partnership began in 2002."

Brunner, on the other hand, was less "thrilled," and told the PBT they were "extremely disappointed."

"One day, you're told you have a \$185 million contract for five years and a short time later you're notified that you do not... We had countless decisions made based on



that. Obviously, there were hiring decisions – we've had people move to Pittsburgh, we have recruiters' fees. We're disappointed and a bit stunned."

Not to worry for Brunner Inc. however: the state (that's us, the taxpayers) will be compensating them for their expenses.

The Pittsburgh Opera also shares corporate sponsors with the Corbett campaign. The 2011-2012 Opera season's sponsor was PNC Bank, and the production sponsor was natural gas driller EQT. Both of which, especially when private donations from top executives and board members are included, have filled Corbett's coffers handsomely.

Ultimately, it appears that the gala was a very glamorous opportunity for corporate sponsors to meet their political benefactors at an exclusive event for the very wealthy.

Despite the controversy surrounding the award, Debra L. Bell from the Pittsburgh Opera believes that the governor deserves to be recognized for stopping a state proposal to cut the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts (PCA) budget by 70 percent, and in some cases, even standing up to members of his own party. With Susan Corbett as the head of the PCA, Bell seemed to be certain Corbett's motives were not compromised and his decisions were

simply made in the interests of the greater good. The PCA is providing \$73,000 to the opera this year.

Corbett may have saved the Opera, but he is destroying education and the arts in public schools. Barbara Litt from Pittsburgh wrote on Facebook, "Thanks to these budget cuts, both my kids (in Pittsburgh Public Schools) are losing their instrumental teachers next school year. Where will future musicians come from? Only those whose parents are well off and value private music lessons enough to get instruments for them will be able to study. My sign at the rally said 'We want our band teachers back! Some cuts don't heal.'"

Protestors and parents of public school students aren't the only ones who are disappointed. Charlie Humphrey, Executive Director of Pittsburgh Filmmakers and Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, resigned from his seat on the board of the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council (GPAC) after the organization jumped to the defense of the Pittsburgh Opera's decision to honor the Corbetts. In his letter of resignation Humphrey wrote that he will not "serve an organization that panders to the forces of government."

The spotlight may have been on Corbett May 12, but the real star was backdoor money in PA politics, and how it's helping to push the state's students out to the curb.



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“The Transit Conversation” Could Be More

By Jeff Cech

The conversations about transit funding I’ve had in the last six months have involved a lot of people with a stake in Pittsburgh’s transit system.

But these conversations are separate from “the transit conversation,” which doesn’t include me or most of the people I’ve talked to, and which takes place behind closed office doors, where Governor Tom Corbett argues that “everyone will have to make sacrifices.”

This argument has resulted in fare hikes, route reductions, and drivers making contract concessions, giving up pay and benefits, all sacrifices of transit workers and transit riders. What sacrifices have corporations and the rich been asked to make?

Modest and sensible suggestions for raising transit revenue—many recommended by the Governor’s own hand-picked advisors—have been stalled while The Port Authority (PAT), drivers and riders in Allegheny County stand to lose everything under a top-down political structure that regards their jobs and lives as unimportant.

As of now, it seems like the governor is looking to bust the drivers’ union, and replace our public sector transportation with privatized lines. As a neo-liberal, he thinks privatization must always be for the best—regardless of what his constituents think.

This is not only a shame; for the city of Pittsburgh, it may yet become a tragedy, but it is still an avoidable one. I believe that all parties involved locally share similar interests, and if we break down the barriers between the Allegheny County employees who work in offices, those that punch clocks, and the activists fighting for transit, we could move the legislators in Harrisburg enough to take the necessary steps to fix our city’s transit funding crisis.

That’s why I’m arguing for more immediate change in government that can occur with a simple change in attitudes about the way we behave as a society. The way to save transit now is with participatory, equitable, democratic governance in Allegheny County. Instead of the “transit conversation” behind closed doors, we need one that includes ALL the stakeholders in the community. And if we open our eyes to the systemically erosive policies dumped onto us by the governor’s office, it’s clear everyone in the public sector, including those who work in the Port Authority offices, will find themselves out of work in time. The entire workforce needs to stand up together because we can’t let blue collar and office



labor be divided to the ends that an entire sector is conquered. The workers united will never be without a ride.

The following quotations are from notes of actual conversations I’ve had. Some are from group meetings others are from individual conversations I’ve had with PAT CEO Steve Bland, PAT Spokesperson Jim Ritchie, Amalgamated Transit Union Rep. Mike Harms and two transit activists from Pittsburghers for Public Transit (PPT), Molly Nichols and Alicia Williamson. Laid out, these quotes will serve as my argument that we would benefit from a more inclusive transit conversation, rather than “the transit conversation” we have (or don’t have) right now.

Note, these quotes are taken out of context, and the following is not a real conversation.

Nichols: *The rally we had, last year, in front of the Port Authority board meeting. It was cold, it was Wednesday before Thanksgiving, there were Port Authority people there on the streets with us.*

Williamson: *Yeah, to a certain extent. I mean, a Steve Bland has never come out. On the other hand, when they had the public hearing, they weren’t at all adverse to us having a rally outside, and they totally accepted us mic checking the public hearing. And some were, well, Steve Bland had a straight face the whole time, but some people were like, alright!*

Ritchie: *For us, anyone who cares about the issue needs to be involved, and should understand the facts, and should have access to Port Authority, but one thing we talk about in the meetings that we have with all of our stakeholders is that, a lot of times, people will listen to other groups and believe what the other groups have to say about the issue of public transportation and funding more than they will what Port Authority has to say.*

Nichols: *And I think that’s always kind of been the approach. Because there were people from Port Authority who reached out to Occupy, you know, and they’re fine with us going out and agitating. They need us there to do that pushing for them so they can look respectable and civilized to the legislators and other people who are going to come up with funding solutions for them. And I think that’s just a PR move.*

Harms: *Unless we reach more of the 99% and get into the streets...*

Ritchie: *You mean carrying a sign?*

Cech: *Yeah, what would it take to get a sign in your hand, Jim?*

Ritchie: *I don’t have anything against being out there...There’s some things that are difficult for us to do, you know, we have a board of directors we have to report to...we have to pick our spots and that’s one reason why the stakeholder effort has been important to us. You know a couple of years ago we didn’t have these kinds of relationships.*

Cech: *Mike, how are the drivers handling this stressful period?*

Harms: *No one knows if they’re going to have a job...We still have 98 drivers out from the last cuts and their unemployment is running out...Moral? There is no moral...the leaders we have in [Harrisburg] right now don’t have the stones to [lift the tax break for wholesale fuel and close the Delaware Loophole]...so the union takes the blame. I’m tired of hearing it.*

Bland: *There’s not enough in the union contract [to balance the Port Authority Budget on]...[even at] eight dollars an hour, but do you want to pay a bus driver minimum wage? I don’t want to ride that bus.*

Imagine, if you can, where this conversation could lead. Why don’t we agree to pick it up after the transit rally at 3 p.m. on June 8th at the corner of Stanwix St. and Fort Pitt Blvd?

Occupy the Board Room

By Patrick Young

This spring, the 99% is confronting corporate executives on their own turf—their shareholder meetings.

A coalition of unions, NGO’s, community organizations and local Occupy groups have taken to a new method of confronting the 1%, one that takes on the oft-repeated line that companies aren’t responsible to anyone but their shareholders. The coalition project, 99% Power, is targeting major multinational corporations in support of ongoing campaigns that communities are fighting across the country. They’re targeting Walmart, Verizon and the oil company Tesoro for their abuses of workers; GE for tax dodging; Bank of America for funding dirty coal; Sallie Mae for profiting off of student loans; and dozens of other companies.

The project kicked off on April 24 at the Wells Fargo shareholder meeting in San Francisco. More than 1,000 people showed up to shut down the meeting in protest of the bank’s role in home foreclosures. Eight people were arrested but 30 protesters, all of whom had bought a single share of stock in the company, made it inside. In the end, the meeting was cut short by more than an hour as CEO John Stumpf left without taking any questions from investors.

Similar disruptions have followed. Here in Pittsburgh, protests of the Bank of New York Mellon and EQT shareholders meetings spearheaded by One Pittsburgh caused major disruptions to those



meetings, the latter resulting in at least two arrests.

Dozens of Steelworkers attended the shareholders meeting for the oil refiner Tesoro wearing their bright blue nomex coveralls and hard hats. The Steelworkers were there to protest the company’s decision to cut workers’ benefits in order to make up losses incurred during a deadly explosion at the company’s refinery in Anacortes. Seven workers were killed in that blast. In the face of protest, CEO Greg Goff also declined to take questions from the floor and he called the meeting to a close in just 12 minutes—the shortest shareholders meeting on record. Following the meeting, the Steelworkers unfurled a giant banner with the picture of Goff and images to represent the seven fallen workers, reading “Tesoro: We won’t pay for your mistakes.”

99% Power’s “shareholder spring” activities are scheduled to continue over the next several weeks. At the end of May the Steelworkers are teaming up with Occupy Dallas to drop in on the ExxonMobil shareholders meeting in Texas and they’re teaming up with a group of NGO’s including the Rainforest Action Network and community groups to protest Chevron’s shareholders meeting in San Ramon, California.

The tactic of protesting at shareholders meetings is certainly not new. Community groups, labor unions, and environmental organizations have been holding demonstrations at shareholders

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The Future of Pittsburgh's Water

By Kate Luce Angell

Surrounded by 3 rivers, Pittsburghers have never had to worry about having enough water. While some of the western states are pumping the largest freshwater aquifer in world, the Ogallala aquifer, to extinction, or like California, are having to pipe in water from hundreds of miles away to fill their citizens' needs, Pittsburghers are more likely to fear too much water than not enough. And while more than 3 and half million people die every day from diseases they contracted from the water they use, because of water treatment and sanitation, Pittsburghers haven't had to worry much about that from their water.

But as with another natural resource that our area has in abundance, Marcellus Shale natural gas, the days of taking water for granted are coming to an end.

Experts predict that, as world population increases, global temperatures rise and more water becomes contaminated from industrial, consumer and agricultural waste, water will become "the new oil"—a resource whose availability and price will determine virtually everything else. The UN considers access to "safe, clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation" a human right, and scores of countries have enshrined this right in their constitution—although not the U.S.

But by 2040, the UN also predicts that demand for water will outstrip supply by 30%. Even though water is regarded worldwide as a public resource, the pressure to monetize water for private profit is already mounting. About 95% of water companies worldwide remain public, but that number is falling. In 1990, 51 million people got their water from a private company; by 2002, 300 million did.

Profit isn't the only motivator driving water privatization. Water systems are what is known as a "natural monopoly": whoever controls a system has an unchallenged monopoly, since it's not economical to construct a duplicate system.

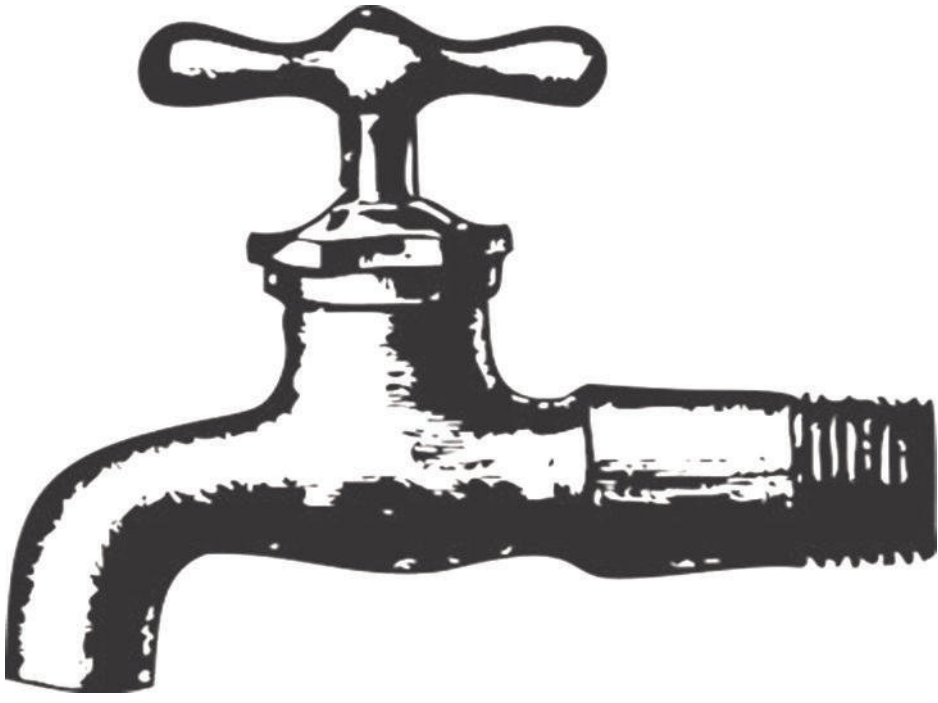
But whether private or public, most organizations in the U.S. that control water—including our own Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority (PWSA)—are overseeing systems that are outdated, sometimes by more than 100 years, and investment in updating them has fallen hopelessly behind. Since city and state governments are under intense pressure to make up huge budget shortfalls, they are looking hard at anything that could bring in funds, and public assets are tempting targets.

For example, Wisconsin governor Scott Walker included in his Budget Repair Bill a clause that would allow the state to sell off its power plants without voters' approval in a no-bid sale, "for any amount that the department determines to be in the best interest of the state."

Pittsburgh has considered privatizing public assets too. Mayor Luke Ravenstahl said in 2011 that he's talked to Representative Mike Turzai, R-Bradford Woods, about the possibilities of privatizing the PWSA. Rep. Turzai supports the sale of PWSA through public auction, and Pennsylvania American has openly stated that it is interested in talking to the city about PWSA.

Patrick Dowd, city councilman of district 7, has been vocally opposed to privatization—but he has also been critical of PWSA, on whose board he sits.

He cited the authority's aging infrastructure, its lack of executive leadership (it's been without one since 2010), and its substandard performance reviews



as requiring immediate improvements, but also pointed out that Pittsburgh's water abundance has bred complacency.

"Water really is an asset, and we've taken it for granted," he said when contacted by OPN recently. The cost of water doesn't cover what it costs to renew the whole system, he added.

"People let our assets get to a dysfunctional state and then say, 'See, we need to privatize!'"

Dowd is confident that with good leadership, PWSA is the best option to shepherd Pittsburgh's water—but that it must get its house in order.

"We can do a better job. But if we, the board, don't step up and find an executive director, then we might be in trouble.

"Whoever steps into the leadership role there, they are going to take an oath to PWSA, not to stockholders," he added. "The best people to make decisions about our water system are the people who are using it."

That opinion echoes one of the central concerns of groups concerned with water control worldwide: that privatizing water takes a public asset out of the hands of those people most concerned, and makes managing water for the benefit of those people a lesser goal than profit.

Privatization isn't necessarily a disaster: water in France and the UK has been controlled by private monopolies for decades. But studies show that privatization is no cure-all, and that private companies do no better job than authorities. Privatization also tends to result in higher rates and declining service, because private companies must make a profit, pay dividends and pay taxes.

While the Mayor's office did not return calls for this story, in the past he has stated he remains "open to all options for better serving customers."

For now, talk about privatizing PWSA remains just that. But despite Pittsburgh's abundance of water, this natural community resource can't be taken for granted anymore.

99% Shareholder Spring

(Continued from page 2)



Young leads demonstrators at Tesoro's shareholders meeting

meetings for decades. Just four years ago, for instance, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) held a mass demonstration at Verizon's shareholder meeting in Pittsburgh in protest of the company's aggressive opposition to efforts of Verizon Wireless workers to unionize. They marched 300 people, mostly CWA members, to the Westin and arranged for all of them receive tickets to the meeting and confronted top management from the floor.

In some cases activist shareholders have even engaged in more sophisticated tactics, putting forward shareholders' proposals to be voted on, challenging the election of members of the board of directors, and even teaming up with big money

investors to mount proxy fights challenging the direction of the companies.

But this year's wave of demonstrations at shareholders meetings seems to have brought a new level of energy and excitement to efforts to hold companies accountable. In years past, it would be a dramatic showing to see a few dozen or even 100 protesters at a shareholder meeting for a major multinational corporation. This year hundreds, and in some cases, thousands, of people have been turning up. And with their rising numbers, the level of confrontation at these meetings has also increased. Protesters are regularly 'mic checking' CEO's from the floor—Verizon CEO Ivan Seidenberg was mic checked at least 7 times by different groups of protestors inside the company's meeting this year.

The increased level of activity has not gone unanswered by the 1%. Companies are increasingly moving their shareholders meetings to remote places, away from protestors, and increasing the level of security. More than 150 activists who bought a single share of stock to attend the Wells Fargo shareholder meeting were denied entry this year, prompting calls for a Securities and Exchange Commission investigation to whether or not the meeting met legal requirements for a publicly traded company.

But even with increased levels of security and corporate efforts to clamp down on resistance at their shareholders meetings, these actions are a valuable tactic. In the past, these meetings have

been corporate pep rallies where top executives brag about their companies' progress and huge returns while basking in positive press coverage. Now, corporations see them as a legally required nuisance where top managers are exposed and worry about public relations damage control.

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Q & A with Dr. Leslie Sklair

On Friday, April 13, 2012, Occupy Your Mind’s featured speaker was Dr. Leslie Sklair, Professor Emeritus in Sociology at The London School of Economics and author of *The Transnational Capitalist Class* (2000) and *Globalization: Capitalism and its Alternatives* (2002).

Dr. Sklair’s work focuses on defining the workings of what he terms the capitalist global system, and how the dominance of this system and the consumerist worldview on which it depends has helped promote the idea that there is no alternative, that “globalization is a force beyond human control.” As Dr. Sklair says, “Fatalism is both profoundly mistaken and profoundly immoral.” He is confident that global capitalism is even now “sow[ing] the seeds of competing alternative global systems” that will address what he considers global capitalism’s two most serious crises: the widening gap between classes worldwide and its ecological unsustainability.

As a follow-up to his speech on the environment and corporate power, OPN asked him a few questions about his view of the future of the labor movement.

OPN: *What do you see as the future of workers' rights, both internationally and here in the U.S., in a transnationalist system?*

Sklair: I certainly see the struggle for labor rights (it is always a struggle) in the USA and transnationally as pivotal to getting out of the present crisis, both in the short term and in the long term, and key in achieving a better, fairer and more satisfying economic, political and cultural system.

OPN: *You speak in your work of signs that people are generating alternatives to global capitalism, calling them “green shoots.” Can the fight for labor rights be a part of the “green shoots” you cited, or is such a movement pointless because it operates in consumerist worldview? What do you see as the future role for traditional labor unions?*

Sklair: Yes, every victory for labor rights is another “green shoot” in the continuing struggle for a better world. However, the issue of labor rights must, in my opinion, include everyone who is exploited by the present capitalist system, not just factory workers—important as they are—but everyone who labors for their everyday existence and does not live off the profits from other people’s labor. There is certainly a role for labor unions, particularly in environmental and civil rights struggles. Don’t forget that in the 1950s and 1960s the AFL-CIO, under the leadership of Walter Reuther, joined forces with the emerging green movement in the USA, particularly against air and water pollution, and argued strongly that the impending environmental crisis must be taken into account in union negotiations with employers and government. This is still relevant today, e.g., in the fracking campaign in Pennsylvania and globally (I find that fracking is starting in the north of England). In my view, it is absolutely crucial that the labor movement unites workers inside and outside genuine unions, including the unemployed and domestic workers of all kinds.

OPN: *Do you think workers' rights would move forward as a movement separate from a capitalist economic system, or within it?*

Sklair: Yes, of course, the movement for workers' rights has to co-exist with the capitalist economic system. It moves forward by demonstrating that workers, not capitalists, represent the true and best interest of communities, large and small, and that each and every success of workers' rights and citizen rights campaigns is worth fighting for.

OPN: [Note: Transition is a movement that focuses on creating communities that are geared toward sustainable living and ecological resilience.] *Considering your support of the Transition efforts, do you see labor becoming more valued because of the pooled products of that labor (bread, for example) or would the individual worker become more valuable in such a system?*

Sklair: Yes, that’s a good way of putting it. Any example of workers taking the productive process successfully into their own hands (as in transition enterprises and producer-consumer co-operatives) helps to destroy the myth that capitalist globalization is the best and only efficient form of society, globally and locally. Margaret Thatcher, a very cunning politician, argued that there is no alternative to neoliberalism, and a lot of people believed her. Our task is to demonstrate that the alternatives that we believe in can and do work to the benefit of all.

OPN: *What's the relationship of history to the transnational capitalist system?*

Sklair: This is a very problematic issue, and my books address the question at length. In a nutshell, I argue that the ongoing electronic revolution that started in the 1960s has changed the nature of capitalism, so it is capitalist globalization as well as the capitalism of each country and community. We need to understand in order to change the system. We can do this democratically in most countries and communities, by electing enough honest politicians, who are not bought by corporate funding and who represent the interests of the 99 percent. However complicated and problematic this might be, I think it is our only chance of bringing about a better world for everyone on the planet. Even the fat-cat capitalists with their huge bonuses we read about might be happier in a fairer system.

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