



## WALMART UPRISING

By Marc Mancini

On November 23, 2012, otherwise known as “Black Friday,” over 500 Wal-Mart workers across the country went out on strike as a response to years of unfair treatment. There were over 1,000 different solidarity actions that took place across the country involving a diverse crowd of unions, community groups, and Occupy activists including an act of civil disobedience at a store in California that led to the arrests of nine Wal-Mart employees.

Those actions were led by the group known as OUR Wal-Mart (Organization United for Respect at Wal-Mart). OUR Wal-Mart is an association of Wal-Mart workers who come together to share experiences and train, develop, and promote ideas and actions protesting Wal-Mart’s record of intimidating employees who speak up against injustice at work. Although a separate organization, they do have the support of the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), and while organizing Wal-Mart workers in a union is a goal, it is not an immediate demand at this point.

Here in Pittsburgh, a group of about 150 people demonstrated in front of the Wal-Mart in the Waterworks shopping plaza to stand in solidarity with Wal-Mart employees. The store management hired a security force for the day--3 police officers who informed protestors that they were not allowed to distribute handbills in the parking lot. Protestors sang “holiday carols” and chanted in front of the store. Towards the end of the demonstration, a contingent of protestors went inside briefly, chanting, “Hey Wal-Mart do some good! Treat your workers like you should!” before being thrown out by the police officers. The demonstration was organized by members of the UFCW Local 23 and One Pittsburgh.

So why are Wal-Mart workers now beginning to speak up? There are few better examples of the increasing economic inequity between the top 1 or 2% and the rest of the world. As the world's third largest public corporation, Wal-Mart is the biggest private employer in the world, with over 2 million employees. It’s also the largest retailer in the world. In the United States alone, Wal-Mart employs 1.4 million workers. In 2009, it generated 51% of its \$258 billion sales in the U.S. from its grocery business. It also operates 8,500 stores in 15 countries under 55 different names.

The Wal-Mart Corporation is so wealthy that it literally has more than the entire GDP of some third world countries. According to thinkprogress.org, the 6 Walton family heirs to Sam Walton’s fortune have a net worth equal to the bottom 30-40% of Americans. Between 2007 and 2010, while median family wealth fell by about 38%, the Walton’s wealth rose from \$73 billion to \$90 billion.

In addition to its immense wealth, Wal-Mart is notorious for union-busting and threats to those interested in unionizing. Employees are usually shown anti-union propaganda when hired, which misinforms employees about unions and their rights as workers from the very beginning. Supervisors are trained to listen and observe any kind of “union activity,” such as seeing groups of two or more employees discussing work-related issues. When an employee does speak up about injustice or unfairness at work, they are often disciplined or fired.

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# Right to Work is Bull

By Jeff Cech

Right to Work legislation, characterized by its incredibly misleading name, is a shadowy and rarely understood bunch of political bull shit. It’s defined inaccurately by both Democrats and Republicans who use the controversial set of laws to mislead their constituents and pander to business interests.

Michigan’s governor Rick Snyder and other like-minded Republicans have been quoted calling Right to Work legislation, a step forward in terms of workplace fairness and equality. They claim that it bars “closed shops” that force workers to pay union dues. Since this is completely untrue, they’re either bull shitting or they have no idea what Right to Work legislation does. Or both.

Right to Work eliminates “union shops.” It **does not** eliminate “closed shops,” which were banned in 1947 under the Taft-Hartley Act. A “closed shop” would require a

worker to join a union and pay dues in order to be hired. A “union shop” works a little differently. Employers can hire union or non-union workers. After being hired, workers are required to pay the union for their services, but that does not necessarily mean full union membership dues.

The 1988 Supreme Court Case *Communication Workers of America (CWA) v. Beck* established a set of guidelines for dues collection referred to as “Beck Rights,” named after a maintenance worker who sued the CWA to stop the use of funds generated from dues for political and organizing work. Since then, workers in union shops who wish to withhold the portion of dues used for political contributions and union organizing work can do so. These “core dues” are intended to cover essential services for workers like collective bargaining or grievance procedures.

In a Right to Work state, workers can withhold even their “core dues” when they’re employed in union organized workplaces, but they still get full access to union services.

This loophole to exists because the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), the labor law of the land in the United States, is based largely on exclusivity of representation. Even in right to work states, only one union can represent workers in a bargaining unit, and “direct dealing,” which is a term used to describe an agreement made between an employer and a union represented employee regarding matters within the scope of subjects covered by a collective bargaining agreement without the union’s knowledge is illegal.

So, under the NLRA, unions are straddled with a “Duty of Fair Representation.” This means they have to give equal services to all workers in a union organized shop, even if that means giving their services away for free to workers who refuse to pay for them (also known as “free riders”). And make no mistake – these workers *do* use the union’s services.

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## BILLBOARD WARS

By Bram Reichbaum

In December, the City of Pittsburgh enacted a 10% tax on revenues generated by advertising billboards— to some, a natural response to strangled public budgets and the need to get profitable corporations to pay their "fair share."

"We've been looking at different areas for money," said City Council President Darlene Harris to Occupy Pittsburgh Now. She and Councilor Natalia Rudiak sponsored the tax because property values (and therefore property taxes) in Pennsylvania do not reflect a parcel's capacity to generate ad revenue, so billboard companies typically pay little in tax.

The estimated \$2 to \$4 million proceeds from the billboard tax are earmarked for purchasing police and emergency vehicles, which currently come out the city's operating budget rather than its fund for capital improvements.

But to others, the billboard tax marked an escalation in what they consider a longstanding "vendetta" against Lamar Outdoor Advertising, which became politically supercharged during the era of Mayor Luke Ravenstahl.

"The Pittsburgh City Council ordinance is wrong-headed and driven by bitter politics rather than sensible policy," states the website of State Sen. Jim Ferlo, a prominent Ravenstahl supporter and member of the mayor’s 5-member Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) board.

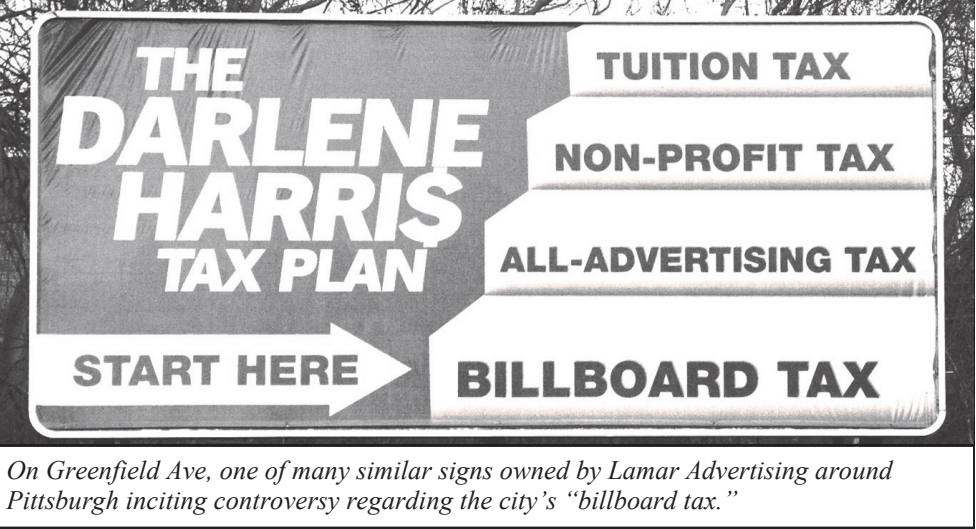
Ravenstahl has remained a consistent supporter of new eye-catching advertising displays and digital billboards, despite controversies surrounding their use, as a matter of encouraging economic development and creating a vibrant, "open for business" atmosphere in Pittsburgh.

The 10% billboard tax, similar to those already in use in Philadelphia and New York City, was approved by the nine-member City Council unanimously. However, Mayor Ravenstahl returned the legislation unsigned and un-vetoed. In Pittsburgh, a bill returned as such becomes law automatically -- but sometimes this signals a mayor's reluctance to enforce the measure. The city's "lost and stolen handgun" regulation, for example, was returned unsigned by Ravenstahl and remains unenforced.

Lamar Advertising, which holds a virtual monopoly on billboards in the Pittsburgh region, spurns the measure as political and has declared its intention to fight it in court on First Amendment "free speech" grounds. It has also used its own billboards to criticize Harris and Rudiak for "raising taxes." Sen. Ferlo has written that "the City clearly does not have the legal authority under the Local Tax Enabling Act to adopt such a revenue measure."

The city's relationship with billboarders has been fraught with tension since the 1930's, when civic associations went on campaigns to eliminate the "visual blight." However, that

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# PA Prison Reform - Not Enough

By Kate Luce Angell

The U.S. has the largest prison population in the world, both by actual figures and per capita with 1 in every 100 citizens in jail. Until recently, the growth of what critics call the prison industrial complex—the confluence of for-profit prison and prison service companies, “tough on crime” politicians, and lengthy mandatory sentences for many minor offenses—seemed unstoppable.

But prison reform may finally be coming to PA, forced onto the agenda by the state’s ongoing budget crisis, and the growth of state prison costs, which have tripled over the last 30 years.

In October, the state legislature passed House bill 135, the second of two related bills that authorize a number of corrections reforms. The first, State Bill 100, was signed into law by Gov. Corbett this summer.

Together, these bills increase the state’s focus on rehabilitation, offer alternative sentencing programs, and keep more technical parole violators out of prison. The state estimates that these measures will reduce our prison population by 4,000 and save \$370 million.

Critics point out that this isn’t much compared to PA’s almost 50,000 inmates and prison costs of more than \$2 billion, and that the reforms are extremely modest. Much of the savings of the measures are theoretical, and a majority of the funding that reform advocates wanted invested in communities and drug and alcohol treatment instead went to the police and various local probation groups.

And although Gov. Corbett has promised not to build new prisons, a \$600 million expansion of the State Correctional Institute of Graterford continues.

Layne Mullett, a member of Decarcerate PA, a coalition for the end of new prison construction, the reduction of the prison population, and the reinvestment of money into communities, said that the legislature’s efforts were a start, but that the new laws were already “compromised” in ways that would make them even less effective.

“We need to stop building prisons. If you build a prison, they’re going to fill it,” she said.

Still, the ballooning cost of building and maintaining prisons has caused even staunchly pro-prison politicians to rethink the build-it-and-fill-it approach that has



prevailed since the 1980s.

There’s also a growing body of evidence that while increased incarceration might have helped slow the rise of crime in the 1980s and 90s, it’s now contributing to more, not less, crime.

This seems especially clear in light of the way the American culture of incarceration has left 1 in 15 black children with a parent in jail, often for non-violent offenses like receiving stolen property or being involved in small-volume drug transactions. The incarceration of black men is so disproportionate that now 1 in 3 can expect to spend some time in jail during their lives. And “zero tolerance” policies and police presence in middle and high schools have pushed more and more minority teens into what critics have called the “school-to-prison pipeline,” where small infractions at school set youth up for a lifetime of trouble with the law.

Social scientists say the net effect is the destruction of families and communities and long-term damage to their economic status that continues to be felt for generations.

In PA, taxpayers foot a bill of between \$35,000 and \$42,000 for each prisoner, while education and social services, 2 things that have been proven to help keep young people out of jail, have suffered massive cuts under Gov. Corbett.

So prison reform advocates aren’t celebrating yet. Mullett said that while there are signs of change, it’s grassroots movements like hers that “get things done.”

“In the absence of a strong movement, change will be a longer process,” she added.

Many argue that prison reform also needs to extend to what’s going on inside PA’s prisons. Pennsylvania has been a leader in the use of solitary confinement as punishment for unruly behavior, despite abundant evidence that even a few days in such conditions result in the deterioration of a prisoner’s mental health.

In 2000, for example, PA started isolating prisoners in some prisons in the Long-term Segregation Unit (LTSU), where they were in single cells alone for 23 out of 24 hours, often with no reading materials or other possessions.

The state’s prisons also have a bad track record when it comes to the care of prisoners with mental health problems. In just one example, in May 2011, at the State Correctional Institute at Cresson, a prisoner called John McClellan, Jr.

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## RTW is Bull

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The resulting economic drain is designed to weaken unions to the benefit of corporations and other large employers as well as the political opponents of organized labor. And, in that light, President Obama’s statement that, “These so-called Right to Work laws, they don’t have to do with economics. They have everything to do with politics,” makes sense. On the other hand, his statement that Right to Work legislation is an attempt “to take away your rights to bargain for better wages and working conditions,” is false.

Right to Work legislation leaves all but a single matter of collective bargaining intact; they simply remove the possibility of negotiating for a “union shop.” Instead, Right to Work states extend the Taft-Hartley ban on “closed shops” to include “union shops” and leaves only “open shop” bargaining units on the table.

However, it’s difficult to explain “Beck Rights” and have a discussion about the Taft-Hartley Act in the form of a sound-bite, so the Right to Work debate is oversimplified until it becomes inaccurate. But, poor communication does not explain all of the bad information regarding the impact of Right to Work laws.

On Fox News’s program *American Newsroom*, Penn State Financial Group's Matt McCall argued that Right to Work laws result in higher wages and reduced unemployment. “If you look from 2001 to 2011, look at the right-to-work states. Inflation adjusted compensation rose for employees, private sector employees, about 12 percent versus the non-right-to-work states only increased by 3 percent.”

McCall’s figures come from the Mackinac Center for



Public Policy, largest conservative state-level policy think-tank in the nation, which happens to be based in Michigan (the 24<sup>th</sup> state to pass Right to Work laws as of December 11, 2012).

Refuting the Mackinac numbers, a scientifically controlled study conducted by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), a nonpartisan think tank that works to bring clarity to economic issues like Right-to Work, concludes that, "right-to-work" laws are associated with significantly lower wages and reduced chances of receiving employer-sponsored health insurance and pensions.” In fact, they found that Right to Work brings with it reductions of about 3% in wages and health benefits for both union and non-union workers. It also cuts deeply into pensions and retirement plans. The EPI’s results are supported by a report from the

Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress published in June 2012. Using data from the Bureau of Labor

Statistics, the report shows the average wage in a Right to Work state was \$42,465, compared with \$49,495 in other states.

With workers taking a loss in compensation, only corporations and other large employers stand to benefit from Right to Work laws. To reintroduce fairness into the system, unions could be granted the right to bill “free riders” for services like legal assistance during a grievance procedure to slow the financial bleed that results from Right to Work. So far, these attempts have failed because they run up against the “Duty of Fair Representation.”

Those who push Right to Work legislation have woven a fine web that continues to deceive many workers. And, now that it’s passed into law through the Republican controlled state government in Michigan, where there are 700,000 union members, action in Harrisburg seems far more likely. Especially since we know that Corbett is full of it.



# Rising Workers

(Continued from page 1)

On average, a Wal-Mart employee is paid \$10-\$11/hr., forcing many employees to rely on public assistance programs to survive. Wal-Mart persistently employs mostly part-time workers, making it difficult for employees to find full-time, steady work. The company refuses overtime pay to its workers whenever they can.

Wal-Mart receives huge tax breaks and public subsidies, ignores environmental laws and regulations, manufactures products using sweatshop labor in countries where human and labor rights are completely ignored, and monopolizes entire towns by driving out small businesses, leaving Wal-Mart without competition in many communities.

The company avoids safety standards, as demonstrated recently in a factory fire in Bangladesh that killed 112 garment workers. Wal-Mart also uses its immense wealth to pay off politicians. Recently in Mexico, a story surfaced indicating Wal-Mart was bribing public officials to build more stores in the country. Wal-Mart is also a major founder of ALEC, the organization that promotes anti-union, voter ID and “pro-business” legislation. Yet Wal-Mart continues to grow and dominate the retail and grocery industry, and in order to compete, other retailers are basically coerced into following their practices and standards, which can be summed up as: low wages, little or no benefits, part-time work, and no unions.

The recent actions at Wal-Mart have also inspired workers in other industries. Indeed, as I write this article, fast food workers in New York City have gone on strike demanding better pay and working conditions under the “Fast Food Forward” campaign. They seek to double the average pay to \$15 an hour. Black Friday’s action is not the last one Wal-Mart will face.

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# Sign Tax Signals Controversy

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old feud took an electric turn in 2007.

The city's new Parking Authority headquarters at the corner of Liberty and Grant St. Downtown was designed to incorporate a giant, curved digital advertising display as well as several long, narrow "ticker" displays. These elements were criticized during public hearings at the city's Planning Commission, and were removed from the finally approved plan. However, those advertising elements quietly reappeared in an "amended" plan, without hearings or votes at the Parking Authority, at City Planning or in City Council, and without competitively bidding out the contract for them.

While the building and its display were under construction, Council member Patrick Dowd filed a protest appeal against the signs as a private citizen in Common Pleas court. Four other members of Council rushed to join their own appeals to his. Lamar sued the Council members in Federal court for conspiracy and violations of the Sunshine Act, and the four other members responded with their own subpoenas to discover how exactly the electronic billboard came to be re-approved.

Meanwhile, local bloggers came to question Pat Ford, the city "development czar," also URA director and Parking Authority chairman under Ravenstahl, and to question Ford's wife, mayoral Press Secretary Alecia Sirk, regarding holiday gifts given by Lamar executives to them in the past. In response, Ford went to newspapers alleging a "smear campaign" against him originating at the city Housing Authority, which he also chaired. The Housing Authority had recently received a letter from the federal department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) warning that its board chair ought not be employed as URA director for fear of conflicts-of-interest.

The URA took Ford's suggestion to refer the matter to the State Ethics Commission and to grant him a paid leave of absence, though this ultimately resulted in an inconclusive review and Ford's fiery resignation from what he called Ravenstahl's "culture of deception and corruption." He now works 35 miles away as director of the Business Development Corp. (BDC) of the Northern Panhandle of West Virginia. Councilor Dowd and Lamar Advertising settled in Common Pleas court on the revocation of the initial sign permit and a "restart" of the public processes to approve such a digital billboard, and the federal case was dropped.

The digital displays were rejected at the city Zoning Board on multiple grounds and finally dismantled.

Darlene Harris was on Council as this all unfolded, but was not among those councilors calling for investigations, filing appeals and suing in court. "We didn't fight them on that," Harris points out, disputing that she is grinding a political axe against Lamar. "The fight was already there. It was somebody else's. All it had to do with, we had to take a look at different laws."

However when legislation eventually arrived to "fix" Pittsburgh's "outdated" regulations on digital billboards, Harris successfully amended it in a way which drew the wrath of Lamar, which had been expecting new laws to be more favorable to the industry.

Lamar also holds the advertising lease on City transit shelters. Those specialized advertising displays both generate public revenue and impact the public transit information provided there for riders. Harris says she is looking forward to renegotiating that contract when it comes up soon.

And when Lamar requested the right to upgrade its mammoth and decrepit neon tubing display atop Mt. Washington with a modern digital LED screen, Council President Harris was more interested in Lamar doing something about its rust-eaten property. "If they don't take care of it, we can take it down," she warns.

The sign may represent a valid public safety hazard. Harris tells a story of earlier this year, when she and Ravenstahl traveled to New York City to lobby bond ratings agencies to raise the City's credit rating. She and the Mayor were sharing a limousine when traffic unaccountably snarled and had to be re-routed—an old billboard had fallen onto the street in front of them, causing significant property damage.

City Government Affairs Manager Paul McKrell elected to "neither confirm nor deny" this ironic billboard misadventure to Occupy Pittsburgh Now. Instead he asked, "Do you really think anyone will care?"

These so-called 'billboard wars' of Pittsburgh involve corporate influence on government, profits versus common needs, our shared visual environment and now basic cleanliness and public safety. It appears nobody has won them yet, but from them we can learn something about where our public officials stand.

# Activate Yourself

## 5 Easy Ways to Make Activism Part of Your Daily Life

By Vincent Mach

This year, why not strive for a change that not only benefits yourself, but also benefits the world around you?

### 1. Read up on issues that interest and affect you

Sure, you’re already reading this publication, but educating yourself is an ongoing effort. One of the best ways to do this is to read up on issues that are relevant to your interests and that affect your well-being. Check out a variety of sources that cover local, state, national, and world news. Read a variety of opinions, read with a critical eye, and always consider the source.

### 2. Talk about the issues that affect you

Conversing with others about relevant issues is one of the easiest ways to be an activist. If you hear someone bring up your hot button issue, listen to what he or she has to say about it first. If the speaker feels heard, and if you are genuinely interested in his or her opinion, a conversation can begin and you have a chance to share your perspective. Speak with conviction but be respectful. Take the opportunity, if it arises, to have multiple conversations about the topic after you establish the common ground; if you have divergent opinions but find one point you agree on then you have laid the foundation for future discussion on the topic.

### 3. Vote (especially in local elections)

Voting is still one of the best and easiest ways to be an activist. Activist voting involves researching the positions of candidates and making an informed decision. Since you

have already identified your top issues, and have become an expert by having conversations about the issue with a variety of people, take that expertise and use it to analyze the voting records of incumbent candidates. If they are first-time candidates, look at their previous life experience, work, volunteerism, etc. Remember, your vote carries the most weight in local elections. The policies shaped by city and county officials will affect you on a more regular basis than those shaped by your senator or president. For this reason you should examine local candidates with even more scrutiny.

### 4. Communicate with elected officials

For an activist, voting is just the first step in governmental participation. The next, and arguably more important step, is keeping open a line of communication between you and your representatives. Write to them, call them, visit them. It’s your right as their constituent! Letting your elected officials know what your concerns are can and will help them decide how to vote. If your hot topic comes up in a bill, contact your legislator and let him or her know not only that it is important that they vote your way but why it is important and how it might affect others around you. Whether your representative votes your way or doesn’t, be sure to thank them for their time. Like any other person, presenting your opinions to them may not sway them at first, but building the relationship over time may help them see how your causes might benefit their other constituents. This open line of communication to hold representatives accountable is what makes our democratic process work.



### 5. Put your knowledge into action

If you integrate the former suggestions into your daily life, you will quickly become a wealth of practical advice when it comes to being an activist. Don’t keep it to yourself; share it with those around you. Lend your voice to your local neighborhood organization. If no such organization exists, start one. These small groups of people are the foundation for democracy and activism. When people get together and start talking, they are giving themselves a much more powerful voice to speak out than if each person spoke out on his or her own.

**Have an activist new year!**



# A New Kind Of Unionism

By Steffi Domike

United Steelworkers (USW) Local 3657 recently hosted two workshops on “A New Kind of Unionism;” one at the November 10<sup>th</sup> Occupy Pittsburgh Teach-in at Pitt and the other at USW headquarters on December 4<sup>th</sup>. Ten people attended the first workshop and 35 came to the second. What is this “new kind of unionism?”

As USW Education Department facilitators explained, it’s actually not new at all. It’s about “one big union,” OOPS! That is the century old slogan from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Before the IWW, the unions that made up the American Federation of Labor (AFL) were craft unions that represented workers with similar skills who had banded together to negotiate for better wages and working conditions for their groups. But the vast

majority of workers were not skilled and were excluded from these organizing efforts.

In the 1930’s, the Committee of Industrial Organization was formed within the AFL to push for industry-wide organizing but the crafts fought hard to preserve their form of organization. This led to a rancorous split in the American labor movement. The committee became the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), headed up by the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) which initiated the United Steel Workers of America (USWA).

For over a century, the Steelworkers have fought to win good, family sustaining jobs in Western Pennsylvania and to create social services to give us all a fair shot at success. We created a middle class here once, and together we can do it again.



**Fight Back Pittsburgh** is the community union of United Steelworkers Local 3657, hosted by our local Organizing Committee. We’re not just fighting for good jobs for Steelworkers; we’re fighting for a better community for all of us. But, we need you to join us. Come to the **Fight Back Pittsburgh** launch on Monday, January 7, 2013 and join us.

You don’t have to work in a steel mill to join Fight Back Pittsburgh. You just need to believe that we need an economy that works for all of us and that together we can stand up and fight back to win a fair deal for working people in our community.

**Fight Back Pittsburgh** is part of the United Steelworkers Associate Member Program and we work a lot like a local union. We’re a grassroots, democratic organization that works together to fight in our neighborhoods, in our local government, and in our workplaces for change and to improve our lives. We plan to meet monthly. We’ll be funded by small dues contributions paid by our members. We’ll take action based on the ideas and proposals of rank-and-file members.

Working class people in Pittsburgh are under attack! We’re facing high unemployment, low wages and poor working conditions, and cuts to essential public services like transit and education. Meanwhile a handful of big companies are getting rich by driving down wages for workers and not paying their fair share of taxes.

Get involved in this exciting new project! The inaugural meeting of Fight Back Pittsburgh is Monday, January 7 at 6:30 PM in the Lobby Conference Room of the USW Headquarters (60 Blvd. of the Allies, Pittsburgh PA). All Steelworkers and USW Associate Members are welcome!

If you want more information on **Fight Back Pittsburgh**, be sure to check us out online at [www.FightBackPittsburgh.org](http://www.FightBackPittsburgh.org) or shoot us an e-mail at [info@fightbackpittsburgh.org](mailto:info@fightbackpittsburgh.org).

Mike Check Says:



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## Prison Reform Shortfall

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was found hanging from the sprinkler system, dead in his cell in solitary confinement.

As an April 2012 article in The Nation points out, McClellan seems to have been a victim of Pennsylvania’s punitive isolation policies. Small infractions were followed by longer and longer periods in “the hole,” which in turn caused increasing depression and more behavior problems. Before his death, he had complained for months to his father, a former policeman, of harassment and death threats from the guards.

McClellan is only one inmate whose requests for mental health services seemed to motivate SCI Cresson’s chief psychologist, James Harrington—currently named in several civil rights cases brought by prisoners—to treat him with even more severity. But the use of

solitary confinement as a punishment that may have driven McClellan to his death continues to be standard policy in the state of Pennsylvania.

With the need for reform in our state’s prisons so extreme, the recent legislation passed in Harrisburg may seem modest to the point of insignificance.

But any sign of change is hopeful. Angus Love, executive director of Pennsylvania Institutional Law Project in Center City and a supporter of prison reform, said he was happy to see a Republican-controlled legislature pass any bill that improved the prison system. “That, in itself, is a significant triumph.”

For more on Decarcerate PA, go to [www.decarceratepa.info](http://www.decarceratepa.info)

## More About PA’s Prison Reform Bills

By Kate Luce Angell

While even small reforms in PA’s prison system have been seen as encouraging by prison reform advocates, SB100 and HB135 also enacted one change that is unambiguously negative: no more early release for good behavior.

According to John Wetzel, Secretary of PA’s prisons, this change is based on a belief in “truth-in-sentencing”—or the belief, as Wetzel says, that “offenders will serve 100% of their minimum sentences.”

But like much of the rest of these reforms, the change is not based on what’s best for Pennsylvanians or what might actually alter our prison system for the better—it’s about money.

The truth is that pre-release, a popular program begun in the 1970s that motivated many prisoners to display good behavior in hopes of getting their sentences shortened and returning to their homes and families, was cut because it’s expensive.

Wetzel admitted as much in statements to the state’s correctional community. “A lot of resources are spent on the pre-release review, approval and placement process; and yet only one-third of those offenders reviewed for pre-release actually even get approved for pre-release. And of those on pre-release, one-third of them fail.”

That means those 2/3 of prisoners who applied for early release, who had been getting to go home because they worked to keep themselves together in our state’s prisons, will now have to stay in their cells months longer.

**OPN** is committed to serving, informing and educating the 99% of the greater Pittsburgh area.

By fulfilling this mission, OPN can influence public debate and contribute locally to the international goal of economic and social justice for all.

**OPN is:**

Kate Luce Angell  
Jeff Cech  
Ray Gerard  
Tom Jefferson

**Photos:**

Tom Jefferson  
Jeff Cech

**Illustrations:**

Ray Gerard

**Contributing Writers:**

Steffi Domike  
Vincent Mach  
Marc Mancini  
Bram Reichbaum

**Contact / Send Submissions to:**

occupypittsburghnow@gmail.com  
opnnews@gmail.com

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