
WORKERS SOLIDARITY

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Casa del Pueblo Fights Displacement in Echo Park

By Tom Wetzel

Echo Park is a diverse, predominantly Latino working-class neighborhood not far from downtown Los Angeles. Over the past several years rents and housing prices have skyrocketed. Speculators buy buildings and use various tactics to flip them, such as spurious owner move-in evictions. Rents are doubled or tripled. Rents for a one-bedroom are now as high as \$1,200 a month.

Echo Park is built over a hilly terrain. The storefronts lining Sunset Blvd are the community's "Main Street." Nearby is a pleasant park built around a lake. Echo Park's urban location makes it attractive to younger, mostly white, professionals, working in financial or entertainment industry offices in places like Burbank or downtown Los Angeles. They can easily drive to the "hip," new restaurants and stores in Silverlake, a heavily gentrified neighborhood immediately to the west. With this market of potential new residents, landlords and speculators have a motive to evict low-income residents for those who can pay higher rents.

Corporate interests and some city council members are backing recent proposals to "up-zone" Sunset Blvd, which would allow construction of multi-story buildings with apartments over stores. If implemented, this would pave the way for a major influx of investment that would add expensive apartments, and replace the small businesses serving the working class community with chains or upscale stores.

With a growing population and economy, a number of working class neighborhoods in central Los Angeles have come under displacement pressure in the past six years.

Maria Arroyo, a tenant organizer at Inquilinos Unidos (Renters United), told me her group has been "overwhelmed" by the upsurge in evictions, with Hollywood, Echo Park, and the area north of USC being the "hot spots." "In most of the old buildings," Maria said, "what they have been charging is in the range of \$400 to 600 a month, it could be from a single to a two-bedroom. We are talking about [the landlords] jumping the rent by \$400 from one month to the next."

I asked Maria what approach Inquilinos Unidos uses. "When we find out they are trying to evict someone, we try to step in to save the whole building. If it's one apartment, I'll see the others eventually. So I start by telling them I need everybody together," Maria said. "I tell them, if it's a group, you can avoid retaliation against you." People, especially immigrants, often don't know their rights under the rent control law, so they just leave if the landlord tells them to.

Organizing out of a storefront in a mini-mall on Sunset Blvd, the Casa del Pueblo

Cooperative in Echo Park is trying to develop a community land trust as an anti-displacement tactic. I talked with Juan Ramos and several other Casa del Pueblo members. "If the poor are pushed into the ghettos, into areas to the south and east [of downtown], these are often areas that are more polluted and isolated, and even there there aren't many vacancies," Juan said.

A few months back Casa del Pueblo called a community meeting where various housing strategies were discussed. The people at that meeting decided they liked the community land trust approach best. A community land trust is a cooperative that develops resident-controlled housing, such as housing co-ops, and retains ownership of the land under the buildings. This enables the community to ensure that the housing will remain permanently affordable.



About 200 non-profit housing corporations exist in the greater Los Angeles area. But these may have a self-perpetuating board of directors and are often run by a conventional managerial hierarchy. These organizations "are controlled by the professionals," Juan said. "We don't want to be like that. We want the community in control."



Casa del Pueblo is not just a housing organization but has a broader perspective of community autonomy and self-determination. "We have positioned ourselves [politically] within a broader global uprising of the poor, third world, indigenous and geographically displaced," the group says (www.casadelpueblocoop.org). "By exploring our history from a radical perspective that emphasizes individual and communitarian autonomy, we strive to break cycles of violence and destruction and develop new modes of interaction for a viable, sustainable future." The Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico is one influence, and Casa del Pueblo sells fair-trade coffee and craft products from Chiapas.

Casa del Pueblo has after-school tutoring and an alternative health and nutrition program. The health program is motivated by the fact that low-income people often do not have health insurance, Juan said. Casa del Pueblo is also a community space for cultural events.

The Casa del Pueblo project is an example of an effort to develop a self-managing institution — and one situated in the context of a particular class struggle, the struggle against eviction and displacement.

8 Myths about the Sweatshops

By National Mobilization Against Sweatshops (NMASS)

Over a hundred years ago the term "sweating system" was used to describe how big garment manufacturers contracted work out to smaller firms employing low-wage immigrant workers. These small garment contractors "sweated" as much labor as possible out of workers, forcing them to work long

hours at starvation wages in unsanitary and unsafe factories. To fight these sweatshop conditions millions of workers around the country fought for an eight-hour day.

Today we are witnessing a widespread return to 19th-century conditions. The return of sweatshop conditions is hitting youth, women, people of color, and immigrant communities the hardest. Violations of basic labor laws — governing minimum wage, child labor, overtime, safety and health — are spreading. More broadly, firms in all sorts of industries are relying on subcontracting networks similar to the "sweating system" in garment. Today's sweating systems span the globe. Workers in full-time positions with pensions and benefits are being downsized and replaced by contract labor. Downsizing means that fewer workers have to do more work. The rise in lower-paying temp, contract, and part-time jobs means more people are trying to hold down more than one job. Overwork in some communities means lack of work in others, as corporations hire less full-time employees. The U.S. economy is coming to look like one big sweatshop.

To put an end to the spread of sweatshop conditions like inhumanly long work hours, we need to build a new labor movement aimed at transforming the sweatshop system.

1. "There are no sweatshops in the U.S."

Sweatshop exploitation is not an overseas problem. The worst kinds of working conditions — indentured servitude and slavery — exist right here in the United States. For example, in 1994, 72 Thai slaves were found working 22 hours a day under threats of physical violence inside a barbed-wire compound in El Monte, CA. Workers in many industries (auto, toys, electronic, even data processing and services) are caught up in new global sweating systems. Long hours are spreading across the country, regardless of industry, community, trade, income, or skill level. Repetitive motion injuries are on the rise.

2. "People work in sweatshops because they want to."

To justify brutal conditions and low wages corporations and employers claim that sweatshop workers are grateful to have jobs. Some argue that sweatshop conditions are acceptable in immigrant cultures. Corporations also claim that downsizing, subcontracting, contingent labor, and longer hours are necessary for their survival. In reality, people only work in sweatshops when they have no alternative. Many workers are organizing against sweatshop conditions. In 1993 immigrant workers led a successful seven-month community campaign against sweatshop conditions at Silver Palace, one of the largest and most profitable restaurants in New York's Chinatown. In many other communities across the country

the employers' sanctions provision of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), simply expands the pool of workers trapped in sweatshops and makes it harder for them to organize. This cheap labor pool drives down the working and living standards of other workers.

The real cause of the spread of sweatshop conditions and sweating structures is the employers' drive to cut labor costs so that they can maintain or raise their profits. Anti-immigrant hysteria simply divides working people and deflects our attention from the systemic roots of the problem. Saying that undocumented workers cause sweatshops is like saying that slaves cause slavery.

4. "The government is taking care of things."

Health and safety violations, fire hazards, child labor, 70-100 hour work weeks with no overtime pay, subminimum wages—all of these sweatshop conditions are illegal and yet they are spreading. The Secretary of Labor's main response to the problem has been to "ask" employers to police themselves. The government continues cutting budgets for labor enforcement agencies to the bone. In addition, legislation like the employers' sanctions provision of IRCA and other anti-immigrant measures are forcing more immigrants to seek employment in illegal sweatshops because they have no alternative. Ending the spread of sweatshop conditions and protecting the bottom-line human rights of working people are not leading priorities for politicians or the government.

To be continued

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What is Class?

by Tom Wetzel

Class shapes the prospects in life that people have, and how they look at the world around them. A janitor or retail clerk is likely to be more interested in universal free health care than a corporate executive or lawyer who can buy their own private health care services.

When you look for work, do multiple job offers flood in? Unless you're Michael Jordan, probably not. There are always more job seekers than job openings. Wage-earners

have no means of securing their livelihood independent of employers. This can put people in a pretty desperate situation. Owners of economic assets are in a better position to hold out for their terms in hiring than those who don't own anything.

The best way to understand *class* is to think of it as a structure of power over workplaces and economic activities. And ownership of assets is the most important structure that divides society into different classes.

There is a tiny but very rich elite who own the bulk of this country's economic assets; they own the banks, big apartment complexes, most of the stocks and bonds of the corporations, and so on. This is the investor or capitalist class.

To make sure their companies are run profitably, the capitalists hire people who can plan and manage the work of everyone else. This role is performed by the *techno-managerial class* — managers and their top professional advisers. Lawyers who help to break unions, engineers who design work processes to control workers, etc. These people have much less power and money than the capitalists, and sometimes have conflicts with them. The bosses we deal with day-to-day are mostly the techno-managerial class. These people may have some small property holdings but mainly their life prospects are based on their work.

This class grew to prominence with the rise of corporate and state hierarchies in the 20th century. Their class power is based on a relative monopolization of planning and the levers of decision-making. They get their positions from things like university degrees, expertise and connections.

The working class are all those employees who are subordinated in the economy and who don't manage others.

Class boundary lines are fuzzy and there is some disagreement about exactly who should be included in the working class. In *The Working Class Majority*, Michael Zweig tallies the working class as 62 percent of the U.S. population. Zweig doesn't include most lower-echelon professional workers like graphic designers, application programmers and school teachers. Zweig leaves them out because they have more autonomy in their work. However, in the 19th century blue collar craft workers had a lot more autonomy than most workers do

the U.S. population. Zweig doesn't include most lower-echelon professional workers like graphic designers, application programmers and school teachers. Zweig leaves them out because they have more autonomy in their work. However, in the 19th century blue collar craft workers had a lot more autonomy than most workers do today. The lower echelon of professional workers usually don't participate in management of others. An important question is this, Will they support other workers in struggles against the bosses?

Americans sometimes refer to the better paid part of the working class as the "working middle class." This is because we're taught to define class in terms of income. So, the "middle class" are those with maybe enough income to buy a house and car — a so-called "middle class lifestyle." But the income people have is really just an effect of how much power they have in the economy. That's why understanding class as a power structure in the economy is a better picture of how things work. The huge and growing inequality in wealth and income in the U.S. is rooted in differences in power between the classes.

The class system generates constant conflict because people resist being dominated and taken advantage of by the bosses. To make plans and make your own decisions in your life is a human need — it is the need to self-manage your life, to chart your course in cooperation with others around you. But the class system denies to the working class the power to control the decisions that affect us.

It is because workers are a subjugated class that we are ripped-off — forced to sell our time to employers, to work for the profit of the firm.

This exploitation has gotten worse over the past two decades in the U.S. Despite big increases in productivity, the average real hourly wage for non-supervisory workers, adjusted for inflation, fell 12% from 1973 to 1998. This is the longest period of decline in the real wage rate in American history. Job stress has increased for many people, and job injury rates have gone up. More people lack health insurance or have less health coverage. Anger and discontent are now widespread.

The strongest resistance that workers have offered to the class system historically is through unionism. Through collective action, solidarity and organization, workers can enhance their position, and challenge the power of the dominant classes. To do this today, working people face various tasks, such as developing more effective

unions, run directly by and for workers; also, developing cross-industry solidarity and links between workplace and community organizations.

Class politics is not limited to the politics of the labor movement but includes the various strands of struggle that emerge in working class communities.

There are class struggles in areas of consumption such as housing. When capital is poured into working class neighborhoods, to build luxury condos for professionals and managers, new office buildings, fancy stores and restaurants, the run-up in rents can push the working class out. Struggles against this, against rising rents, and occupying buildings to have a place to live — these are examples of class struggle over housing.

To be continued...

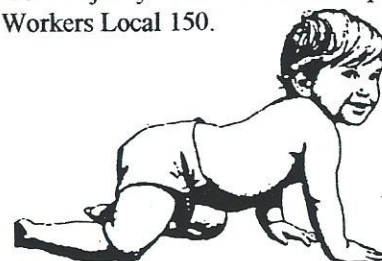
Direct Action Gets (Some) of the Goods by Mike Harris

When a greedy employer refused to revise its snow-day policy, workers decided enough was enough and took some good old fashion direct action.

Workers at the Rocky Mount, North Carolina Cummins' Consolidated Diesel plant were concerned about having to drive on hazardous roads during severe ice and snow storms. In spite of a declared state of emergency by the Governor on January 25 -28th, the management opened the plant for production. This was the straw which broke the camels back. The workers have been engaged in a struggle with management over this issue for the past 4 winters

Workers directly confronted the plant manager on the shop floor giving him an earful for 45 minutes. After this action the plant manager revised the policy in a more favorable manner for the workers. While agreeing to eliminate attendance penalties, workers were denied the use of vacation time. Use of vacation time is still being fought for.

The Rocky Mount Cummins' Consolidated Diesel workers do not yet belong to any union. They have organized themselves into the Workers Unity Committee. This committee is a non-majority status union that is part of United Electoral Workers Local 150.



A Boss is like a diaper . . .
Always on your ass and
usually full of shit.

Workers Solidarity is published by the Workers Solidarity Alliance (WSA).

Submissions of articles, cartoons and graphics are welcomed. Submissions should be either mailed or emailed to the addresses below. All signed articles do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the Workers Solidarity Alliance.

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Fighting for Workplace Justice in Bushwick, Brooklyn

In factories across Bushwick, workers routinely suffer abuse. Workers are not permitted to leave their machines to use the bathroom without permission of a supervisor. Factories are unsafe and unsanitary. The right to organize, receive minimum wages, overtime pay are violated routinely and impunity by local factories and workers who demand these rights face severe retaliation.

The Workplace Justice Project/Make The Road By Walking is helping to fight against these sweatshop conditions. The group meets weekly to share experience and strategize collectively on how to ensure workers' rights at work are respected.

Make The Road By Walking
301 Grove Street, Brooklyn, New York 11237
718-418-7690

Readers Corner:

From Paul Encimer, Piercy, CA

The wobs (members of the Industrial Workers of the World) have it right when they say the working class and the bosses have nothing in common. The root of our current wage slavery is in the current relationship between employer and employed. The difficult task is how to alert workers to their role as economic victim, and how to do so without appearing like some irrelevant relic out of labor history or like an advance agent for a union bureaucracy. How do you approach the working

people around you in a way that inspires them to struggle and throw off their shackles. I live in a small, rural community where the problem of class is almost invisible.

Small business is the rule for most of the employed. The largest blocs of employees are in health, education and auto upkeep. In industrial terms there is logging, but the work in my area was always done in small contract crews and hardly exists now anyhow.

The radical task is to remove ourselves from the divisive employee-employer relationship. We do so by forming collectives, cooperatives and partnerships. The Wobs response to this situation is to do what they can with independent affinity group unions inside the industrial whale. Yet, the tacit support that industrial unionism gives to industry flies in the face of what we've learned as environmentalists, namely, that capitalism and the state cannot be trusted with the natural world.

I think the military provides an illuminating parallel. Here we have an institution, the Military-Industrial Complex, that is a sibling of the Global Warming Industrial Complex -- which is a destructive dead end. The battlefield is one of the most dangerous places in the whole industrial system: friendly fire, chemical agents, experimental vaccines, etc. But our workplaces aren't far behind in unfriendliness and harmfulness. Liberation would beckon, however, when people saw the big picture and organized at a level where the Economy was the Ecology and the Union was the Community.

The opinions expressed in Readers Corner are those of the writer and not necessarily those of the WSA

International News

Against "the two poles of terrorism"

by The Federation of Workers' Council and Unions in Iraq - FWCUI, Baghdad

A group of armed gangs belong to Muktada Al Sadr have attempted to evacuate factories and workshops in order to turn them into bastions and military positions to fight the American and Italian forces inside Nasiriyah city. Both Aluminum and Sanitary Supplies factory workers in Nasiriyah have refused to evacuate their work places despite many threats made to their lives; declining from turning them into battle fields which would mean either destroying them or open them for robbery and

looting. They insisted on remaining inside their factories in order to defend them.

This brave and firm position of workers in Nasiriyah is a practice that workers would endeavor to generalize in all areas facing military confrontation between the US troops and the armed militias confronting them, despite all pretexts and motivations.

The civilians will make sure to block the armed militias from turning the peaceful residential areas into centers for attacking the US, British, and other forces, and also to prevent the occupying forces from remaining inside the cities and residential areas.

We completely reject the turning of workers' and civilians' work and living places into reactionary war-fronts between the two poles of terrorism in Iraq; the US and their allies from one side, and the terrorists in the armed militias, well known for their enmity to Iraqi people's interests, from the other. We will confront the attempts of these militias aiming at disturbing the security and stability of the population, and curtail their attempts to push society into civil war and further destruction and pain.

Spanish CNT on the attacks of the March 11th

by the Permanent Secretariat of the National Confederation of Labor (CNT)

In Madrid, we have been killed again this 11th March. We, workers, simple people, are the victims once again, this time torn to pieces and in the wildest way. We, workers, simple people, are always the victims of all sort of terrorism, the obvious and the disguised one; we are victims of precariousness, of unemployment, of poverty, of manipulation, of the inappropriately called work casualties, we are hostages and cannon fodder in all wars, in all confrontations of interests, of all fanaticism's, of all powers. We are victims of the decisions, the interests and aims of minorities alien to us and who use us as a shield and exchange currency.

In Madrid, in Iraq, in Palestine, in Israel, in Afghanistan, in New York, in Chicago, in Vitoria, in Russia, in Chechnya... they kill us everywhere, and we have been killed for causes which are not ours.

Who the people are behind this particular atrocity is irrelevant, they have hit the weak, the ones who are not

able to negotiate, the ones who have no power of decision. They show their disdain to the working class, the simple people.

If we had any hope that such brutality would not be used, the facts have removed it. We want to say clearly that only workers, simple people, those who have no escort nor armored car, those who do not decide the lives and futures of others' are able to mourn our dead ones; we can say, loudly and with real pain, that we are with the victims and their families, because so we are.

A hug, no words, with the heart, to all those directly affected.

Their world destroys us, let us build ours.



Toronto Metropolitan Hotel Workers:

Workers employed by the luxurious Metropolitan Hotel in downtown Toronto, Canada have been engaged in a struggle against poor working conditions, contract violations and victimization. These workers have taken the struggle into their own hands with the support of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) and others.

During the winter a mass delegation of rank and file hotels workers walked to Hotel Employees, Restaurant Employees (H.E.R.E.) Local 75 office to deliver a letter and demand that the President, Union Staff and the Elected Representatives follow their collective agreement thoroughly due to the systematic violation of basic workers rights by their employer –Metropolitan Hotel. Since then the workers have continued their self-organized struggle.

Their self-organized struggle continues, both on the job and in the community.

Below we publish parts of a statement issued by the Workers Committee.

SOLIDARITY for RESPECT, DIGNITY AND JUSTICE!

This is a message from the Metropolitan Hotel Workers Committee. Our Committee is made up of current and

former workers who have joined together to demand respect, dignity and justice from hotel management and the Union that represents us. There have been a lot of lies spread about our Committee and we want to take the opportunity to clear the record.

THE TRUTH: We want a strong Union

A union is only as strong as its members. A strong union is responsible to those members and not management. We want our Union to represent us in an open, accountable and democratic way. We want an end to management and union collaboration against workers. We want full disclosure of income from union officials. We want the union to clear up the grievance backlog and to stop refusing to file grievances. We want workers to be provided with copies of the collective agreement along with work schedules and seniority lists ...

We want respect for our rights as workers

We want an end to management harassment. We want basic human rights respected in the workplace. Proper meal and rest breaks must be provided. No worker should be victimized for speaking his or her own language to other workers. We want an end to false allegations by managers against workers as a way of intimidating them or driving them from their jobs.

...

THE METROPOLITAN HOTEL WORKERS COMMITTEE (416) 969-0672 or visit the MHCW website at <http://metropolitanhotelsworkers.org/>

Ben Davis Workers Take Off Work to Protest Concession Demands

By a San Francisco Correspondent

About 100 garment workers, wearing red UNITE shirts, were circling in front of Kaplan's, a clothing store on Market Street, chanting in English and Chinese. The workers, mostly Chinese women, had walked off the job to do informational picketing, informing customers of their struggle with their employer, Ben Davis.

Ben Davis is a maker of work shirts and work pants. The Ben Davis factory in San Francisco is a unionized operation, recently transferred from UFCW to UNITE. Even so, their wages had been so low that they were slated to get a pay raise due to the new city-wide minimum wage of \$8.50 an hour that

was approved by San Francisco voters last November. Ben Davis Inc. is a profitable company that could afford to grant the pay increase but Frank Davis, the company's owner, would rather not see any reduction to the bottom line.

To reimburse him for the raise to \$8.50 an hour, Frank Davis is demanding that workers pay half the costs of their health coverage; and this will only cover the employees, not their family members. The company is also demanding cuts to vacations and sick days.

Davis is threatening to relocate the manufacturing operation to Mexico or China or some other third world country if the workers refuse to go along. The workers have voted to authorize a strike. Because the company makes workwear, the company may also be susceptible to a boycott, given that they have mainly working class customers.

Chicago: Congress Hotel Workers Struggle Continues

By Max Lavene

On June 15th of last year the workers at the Congress Plaza Hotel went on strike. The workers at the Congress are represented by Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) Local 1. Despite being an AFL-CIO union, the local is somewhat democratic; it uses the shop steward system rather than have union professionals make all the decisions and, although there is often a strike captain on duty, lets the workers direct their own picket lines.

Also, the bargaining committee is made up of rank-and-file workers. While certainly not self-management, Local 1 is better than most of today's unions.

The reasons for the strike are clear. Workers want the hotel to raise wages to \$10 an hour, the same as other downtown Chicago hotels have done. They also want the hotel to pay more for health insurance to keep up with rising medical costs. The response by the hotel has been to push for a 7% wage cut, and to reject covering any insurance premium increases. When asked to justify their actions, hotel management cite the hit to the hotel industry after September 11th, but cannot provide any financial information to prove their case. The hotel declared an impasse and subcontracted out the union jobs to minimum wage scabs. This line of action was so blatantly illegal, even the bureaucratic and pro-boss National Labor Relations Board has filed a complaint

against the hotel, which is still pending.

So, the rank-and-file voted 90% to strike until the hotel brought their conditions in line with the rest of the city. For the first six weeks the picket line ran 24 hours, then was bumped down to 4AM to 11PM. The strike has been tough on the workers, many of whom have had to struggle to keep food on the table.

Many Chicago activist groups have come out in solidarity with the workers. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and Union of Industrial & Textile Employees (UNITE) locals have walked the picket line, reform groups such as ACORN and Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (which fights for affordable housing and a living wage) have also come out, as have revolutionary groups such as the Chicago Anarchist, Anti-Authoritarian, and Autonomist Coalition and members of the local Industrial Workers of the World

Union calls for solidarity have been effective. Widespread solidarity and gutsy civil disobedience have made the local media receptive to the hotel strike. This combination has resulted in the turning away of about a million dollars worth of business, as well as getting advisories put up on Hotels.com, Travelocity.com, and Expedia.com, according to Lars Negstad, a union spokesperson.

The principal owner of the Congress is international capitalist Albert Nasser. The main source of his massive income is as a garment supplier for anti-union corporations, such as Wal-Mart. According to a report to be released by HERE May 3rd, after a Philippine subcontractor went union, Nasser's Gelmart Industries moved production to China and Guatemala where workers complain of poverty wages and high quotas. Because Nasser doesn't make most of his cash from the Congress Plaza Hotel, he has been able to hold out on the workers demands.

The union has organized solidarity actions with Gelmart's Philippine contractor, and the union workers are still fighting it out every day. It is crucial that we support the Congress strikers and beat back the bosses.



Who We Are

The WSA is an anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian organization of activists who believe working people can build a new society and a better world based on the principles of solidarity and worker and community self-management.

Our view is that such a society will be brought about only by working people building their own self-managed organizations from the ground up. Not from the top down.

In building workplace and community organizations that are run directly by their members, we not only create more effective fighting organizations in the day-to-day struggles, we will also be laying the foundation for a new society self-managed by working people.

If you are interested in joining the WSA, please contact our National Office, 339 Lafayette Street-Room 202, New York, NY 10012
Tel: 212-979-8353 or email: wsany@hotmail.org

JOIN THE MILLION WORKER MARCH ON WASHINGTON D.C. SATURDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2004

Workers Solidarity Alliance has endorsed this March and are asking everyone to attend. Contact W.S.A. if interested in being part of anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian workers contingent.

Extracted from Call letter:

Dear Brothers and Sisters

We chose Saturday, October 16, 2004 for this march. This mobilization is being proposed in response to the attacks upon working families in America and the millions of jobs lost during the Bush administration and with the complicity of Congress. The working class has not suffered such hardships since the Great Depression.

Please contact:

MILLION WORKER MARCH COMMITTEE
ILWU, Local 10 (415) 441-0610
400 North Point, San Francisco, CA 94133



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