

Mainers Give Grads Debt Relief

ANDREW BOSSIE WAS tired of bad ballot referendums. After spending the fall of 2005 with Maine student activists and the League of Young Voters fighting a referendum that would have gutted an anti-discrimination bill written to protect Maine's gay population, he decided to go on the offensive and use the same process to address the needs of Maine's students.

"People were dropping out of school because they couldn't afford it, people were leaving the state after graduation instead of contributing back and growing the economy," he says. "It was a huge problem."

So the former University of Southern Maine student body president and his newly created political action committee, Opportunity Maine, developed a proposal that would ease some of the financial burden of going to college. Then, Bossie and 500 volunteers logged more than 12,000 hours canvassing on street corners in the brutal Maine winter to gather the 73,000 signatures needed to put their proposal on the ballot in the November 2007 election.

But a funny thing happened on the way to election day. Legislators grew so enamored with the bill that they pre-emptively passed it—only the sixth time in a century that Maine lawmakers enacted a citizen's initiative without sending it to statewide referendum. So as of June 22, help is on the way for Maine students in the form of Opportunity Maine, an innovative local answer to the student debt crisis.

Opportunity Maine authorizes tax credits to refund educational loan payments for any Mainer who earns an associate's or bachelor's degree in Maine and then proceeds to live, work and pay taxes in the Pine Tree State after graduation. While the amount available for the credit would be capped at the cost of tuition and fees for the University of Maine system or the Maine Community College system, students at costlier private colleges can also apply for the break. As it stands, a graduate with a bachelor's degree can be reimbursed up to \$2,100 per year for four years. And, in a coup for the business community, employers can agree to make the loan payment on behalf of hired students and then claim the tax credit themselves.

This particular bill is good for Mainers because the state's economy is at a crossroads. The decline in quality manufacturing and natural resource-based jobs has caused average income to drop 30 percent below the New England average. Meanwhile, Maine has one of the highest high school graduation rates in the country, but only 57 percent of students pursue higher education, mainly because of financial constraints. And those who do graduate college leave school with an average debt of more than \$21,000 (the seventh highest in the nation), a main reason why 53 percent of students leave Maine for higher compensation in places like Massachusetts.

While the state's economy is on the ropes, all is not lost. According to "Charting Maine's Future," an October 2006 report by the Brookings Institution, the building blocks for a diverse and vibrant economy remain. For one, in the past seven years the state has witnessed a substantial population boom, jumping from 46th to 26th in the country in annualized growth rate. Maine also outperformed the nation in job creation during the last economic cycle and has seen growth (albeit humble) in high-tech industries like boat-building, advanced materials and biotechnology. But, the report warns, "Maine's aging population includes too few young workers and too few highly skilled or educated people."

"There's been a growing awareness of how important it is to have a highly educated population if you want to stimulate an economy and be competitive," says Anya Kamenetz, author of *Generation Debt*. "And Maine is very aware that they have catching up to do."

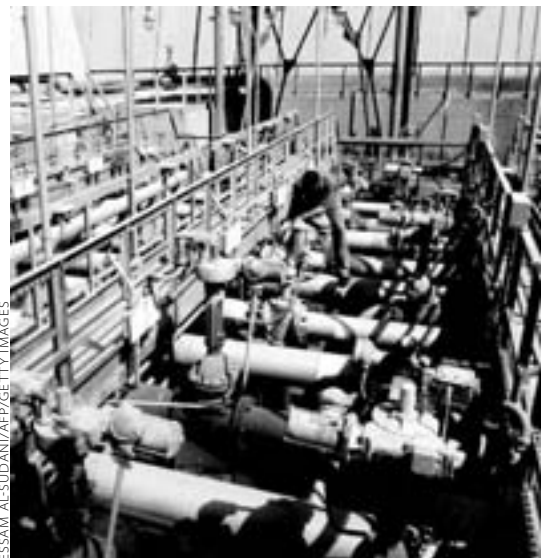
The bill's major strength is its attractiveness to multiple constituents. It eases the increasing burden of college payment for students and their families. Businesses will grow more competitive with an influx of talented applicants. The state will benefit with an injection of new tax dollars and consumption. And proponents claim that financially, the proposal will break even or better by 2015, as the state generates more income as a result of higher income taxes and a stronger economy. "I think the essence of it appeals to a lot of people because it's a really good idea and one that's really needed," says Brian Hiatt, communications director for the League of Young Voters.

Some critics contend that the law should also include Maine residents who attend out-of-state colleges but still want

to move back home. Others question its focus on Maine at the expense of the national economy. But such dissenters are few and far between. Kamenetz says creating incentives for educational attainment could strike a chord with students' rights' activists nationwide.

"While it's a really isolated local effort, it does go farther than most of these national actions because you're actually paying off people's loans, you're not just lowering the payment," says Kamenetz. "If it does have an economic benefit for Maine, it has a chance to be a model for others."

—Adam Doster



An Iraqi worker shuts down a pumping tube at the Iraqi Pipelines Company in Basra on June 5. Employees there recently went on strike, shutting down two pipelines carrying oil and gas products inside Iraq.

Iraqi Unions Fight the New Oil Law

IRAQ'S PROPOSED OIL law, which would open up control of the country's oilfields to multinational corporations, is one of the Bush administration's top political priorities. On July 3, Bush called Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to encourage him and other leaders to move "aggressively forward" on it, and as *In These Times* went to press, its latest draft appeared headed to the Iraqi Parliament for debate. Even if it passes, however, enacting it won't be easy, as it faces strong opposition from Iraqi oil workers.

"It doesn't serve the interests of the

Iraqi people,” says Faleh Abood Umara, general secretary of the Basra-based Southern Oil Company Union and the Iraqi Federation of Oil Workers’ Unions. Umara recently toured the United States, advocating both national control of Iraqi oil assets and immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

Umara says that the law—“written in the United States”—would permit joint ownership of many Iraqi oil fields by foreign companies, which could export much of the oil and profits from these fields for up to 35 years under what are called “production sharing agreements.”

“We want the national Iraqi oil company to make service contracts with the companies, not partnerships,” Umara said in an interview, shortly after dedicating a plaque that extolled international labor solidarity at the Chicago monument to the Haymarket workers, whose protests in 1886 led to the declaration of May Day as the international workers’ holiday.

“We want new technology for the production of oil but to have foreign companies work with Iraqi workers and professionals for a limited time,” he says. “We are not opposed to being developed

with advanced and imported technology, but we would like to be sole owner of our wealth and use it to develop our country and cities.”

The proposed oil law partly would govern distribution of revenue, which Umara says the oil workers’ unions want directed to a national redevelopment fund. But the Bush administration has long wanted to give foreign oil companies as much control as possible over Iraqi oil fields. Under the law, the Iraqi national company would have to compete with foreign companies for production rights, Umara says. Antonia Juhasz, an analyst for the watchdog group Oil Change International, says that the law gives foreign oil companies great flexibility, with no requirement to hire or invest profits locally, and opens the door to the long-term production-sharing agreements that other Middle East oil-producing nations have rejected as exploitative.

The oil workers’ opposition to the law could prove a serious obstacle to the already much-delayed legislation. In June, oil pipeline workers struck for a week “for the rights of workers and against the proposed law,” including demands on compa-

nies to live up to promises for profit-sharing, affordable housing construction and other benefits, Umara says. Although the government had frozen union assets, issued warrants for union leaders’ arrests and even worsened the old labor law from Saddam’s era—preserved by the Provisional Coalition Authority—Umara says the 23,000-member union, representing 36,000 workers, is growing stronger. In 2003, the union forced Halliburton out of the oil fields, which inspired port workers to oust the Danish shipping company Maersk from the docks.

The oil workers’ union also wants U.S. troops to start withdrawing immediately. “I’d rather they withdraw yesterday than today,” Umara says. “I assure you, chaos will not happen, and even if it happened, I’m very sure we can solve our own problems.”

Different religious and ethnic groups cooperate now in a Basra controlled by the Iraqi security forces, he says. While the average oil worker still worries about security, their main concern is the future of Iraq’s oil.

“Most important,” says Umara, “is not to let that new oil law pass.”

—David Moberg

appall-o-meter

3.1 Islamist Mouse Jumps Shark

“Farfur,” the lovable Mickey Mouse lookalike who stole Palestinian kiddies’ hearts, is dead. He was bludgeoned to death, on his TV show’s final episode, by an Israeli agent who had only moments before tried to buy Farfur’s land. Saraa, the host of the program, helpfully explained that Farfur was done in “by the killers of children.”

Yes, the folks at Hamas do television differently.

The program was a staple of the political movement’s al-Aqsa channel. According to the BBC, Israeli and Palestinian authorities alike were none too thrilled with the furry critter’s message to tots. Farfur’s message tended to be a little heavy for young ears.

“You and I are laying the foundation for a world led by Islamists,” he once told viewers. “We will return the Islamic community to its former greatness, and liberate Jerusalem, God willing, liberate Iraq, God willing, and liberate all the countries of the Muslims invaded by the murderers.”

Hamas maintains that they yanked the

show, “Young Pioneers,” to make room for new programming. Can’t wait to see that.

1.0 Slackabomber Nabbed

Riverside, Calif., layabout Audley Yung has been charged with six felony counts, including possession of a destructive device, arson and making criminal threats, all because he was afraid of breaking a little bad news to his mom.

According to police, Yung made a bomb out of a wine bottle and some gasoline and left it next to a tree on the University of California-Riverside campus, which he had doused with gas and set alight. He also sent bomb threats in the mail and over the Internet to university officials.

The incidents managed to delay some commencement ceremonies at Riverside, according to the Associated Press, which was precisely Yung’s objective. His mother was under the impression that Yung was due to graduate, and was planning to drive down from northern California to attend the cer-



emony. Yung claims he just didn’t have the heart to tell her that he’d dropped out.

3.3 Alas, Poor Yorick, I Ashed In His Cranium

It seems only fair that we cut gravediggers a little slack, if for no other reason than the elevated ass temperatures they have to deal with every 4th of July. But

Keith Chartrand of Fitchburg, Mass., has pushed our indulgence to the limit. Chartrand, 30, was discovered to be in possession of a skull and a thighbone he most likely pilfered from St. Bernard’s Cemetery. He had apparently fashioned the skull into an ashtray and the thighbone into a pipe.

Police discovered the trophies after Chartrand’s wife called them to report that the gravedigger had just killed her dog. In a court appearance, according to AP, Chartrand told the judge the charges of grave tampering and cruelty to animals were “bogus.”

—Dave Mulcahey