



Maine's Clown Prince of Buncombe: Back in the Center Ring...

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By Michael Uhl

Maine's Tea Party Governor Paul Lepage, drawing from his tasteless repertoire of political slap stick and buffoonery, has once again showcased his penchant for self-ridicule before a national audience courtesy of the major media. [We Maine progressives are grateful to see him back on prime time and consider Paul Lepage one of our secret weapons].

Lepage, at his barnyard best, first rose to national infamy when he disdained a ceremonial appearance before the state branch of the NAACP this past Martin Luther King's Day by telling Maine's small African American community to, "Kiss my butt." Many laughs have since followed, too numerous to cite here. For his latest, as was widely reported, Lepage has ordered the removal of a seemingly innocuous mural celebrating Maine's Labor History from a waiting room in the offices of the state's Department of Labor.



The 11-panel mural of laborers by artist Judy Taylor in the Department Of Labor building

Stripped of its absurdity, Lepage's mischief reveals just one of the clocks the former discount retailer of Waterville, Maine – where I am told many of his fellow Franco-Americans cringe at the very mention of his name – would turn back to help ram the

Tea Party agenda down the throats of those of us residing in the erstwhile placid environs of Vacationland.

This particular clock is being calibrated to the union status and budget related disputes we see elsewhere. Lepage certainly takes as rabid a stance on such matters as his Republican colleagues in other parts of the land. So, yes, with the mural debacle Lepage has trained his sights on unions and spews right-to-work and anti-collective bargaining rhetoric with the worst of them. But, even in this thuggish crowd, Lepage is a vulgarian of a higher order. As he prepares the attack on Maine workers and their unions with his legislature, he must first degrade them by besmirching Labor's dignity, its honorable, hard fought struggles, and its very legitimacy.

The mural, created by Judy Taylor with a grant facilitated by the Maine Arts Commission, was installed in 2007. It is 36 feet wide, and contains 11 panels depicting scenes from the old Maine factory trades, logging operations and picket lines, a couple of labor actions – known as strikes – and so on in a similar vein. Whereas Diego Rivera had inserted a worker with the face of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, incurring the wrath of *his* mural's Rockefeller patrons, Taylor portrays Rosie the Riveter – modeled on a real life female worker at Maine's Bath Iron Works during World War Two – but who is apparently as distasteful to Paul Lepage as the leader of the October Revolution was to the heirs of Standard Oil. Here is scattergun polemic so broad and reckless that Lepage's discharge flies far beyond the Temples of Labor and strikes indiscriminately at virtually all from the Greatest Generation who served during wartime in industry or uniform.



Rosie The Riveter and her subversive comrades in a WWII defense plant

Jon Stewart, the comedian whose “news show” is a satire of news shows, mocked the latest Lepageian boner by blandly observing, “It’s a Department of Labor with a mural celebrating Labor.” Enough said. Howls of laughter. Stewart’s audience gets it. Paul Lepage does not. It’s not the Department of Business. Business has no standing in Labor’s House, as Lepage insists. It’s always an invited guest. Through a century of humiliation and batted heads the American Labor Movement, however in decline today, won its right to meet on equal ground and bargain in good faith with management, facing and confronting obstacles along a bloody trail this mural doesn’t begin to depict.

His epiphany that the image of a freestanding entity called Labor might affront the likes of Koch Industries, from whence the oracular instructions of the Tea Party belch forth, Lepage attributes to a complaint that reached his ears from a like-minded philistine who found himself among said panels while awaiting an appointment. One gathers from the testimony that the offended Plesianthropus had spent some time in North Korea, because, according to Lepage, the man said the murals reminded him of communist brain washing there. Although it was not clear if he himself had actually been so laundered in that unhappy worker’s paradise guided by the redoubtable Kim Jung Il.

Under normal circumstances, even when more sensible Republicans previously reigned in the Augusta state house, the disgruntled partisan – though the most generous of contributors to the party war chest - might have been ushered gently to the exit and advised to dispose of his copy of *The Manchurian Candidate*. But I prefer the other explanation for Lepage's sudden interest in the Department of Labor's interior decor, which I overheard on a visit to a union hall, that he would have assaulted the department earlier but was only recently informed that it had nothing to do with Obstetrics.

Lepage's thrust at Labor has not gone unchallenged here. Within hours of his decision to have the mural removed, a call went out to rally opposition at the premises of the Maine Department of Labor. It was a Friday at noon, a working day in late and blustery March, when, if the mercury tops 32° here, we call it Spring. So the turnout was encouraging. A crowd of three hundred, representing various constituencies from union members to outraged artists, along with the usual suspects lining Maine's progressive political spectrum, crammed themselves into a narrow corridor flanking the tiny quarters – roughly 15' x 25' – where the mural yet hung undisturbed.

We heard speeches and exhortations to “defend the mural with our bodies, if necessary.” And then all 146 names of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory dead were read aloud, this day by coincidence also commemorating the hundredth anniversary of that particular act of savagery inflicted upon sweatshop workers, women and the foreign born in 1911.

In the face of such opposition, compounded by his latest PR disaster, Lepage has offered to move the exhibit to an art school in Portland, Maine, as if somehow this “compromise” would redeem his insults and pacify his more vociferous critics on the home front. Thus, whether the mural will stay or go remains at this writing unresolved. But it is Labor that has absorbed the most material blow in this fracas, not Art. Where does Maine Labor stand, I was anxious to learn?

A fireplug of a gent sporting an IBEW sweatshirt had been patrolling the corridor attempting to keep a center passage free at the insistence of the building's fire marshal. Since this was my grandfather's union, I was primed all the more by sentiment to ask the man to comment on how Maine unions were responding to the rumpus. By chance, the brother I accosted, Don Berry, also heads the state branch of the AFL/CIO, which a week before had, he said, organized the “largest labor lobby in the history of Maine Labor.” As for the mural incident, it had, Berry told me, “energized the rank and file.” This was the best news I heard all day.