

supporting gay marriage (28 percent), opposing gay marriage but supporting civil unions (30 percent) and opposing both (32 percent). The poll had a 4 percentage-point margin of error.

According to Taylor, the lack of any clear majority is another reason that a victory in Iowa could hearten advocates in other states where same-sex marriage laws are currently being weighed, including California, New Hampshire and Vermont.

“This is a very important case,” she says, “because it would make Iowa the first state in the nation’s heartland to find that equality in marriage is guaranteed in the state’s Constitution. If the court rules in our favor, and I think that could have a transformative effect on the nation as a whole.”

And, according to Varnum, should the ruling come down in their favor, she and Trish will be first in line.

“We’ve always said if it would become legal in Iowa, we would pursue that,” she says. “Iowa is our home and we want to be married in our home state. This is where we live. We don’t live in Massachusetts; we don’t live in Canada. Our day-to-day lives is here in Iowa, and being able to be treated fairly is so important.”

—Jessica Pupovac

Czech Against U.S. Military Power

ON MARCH 17, the Czech government withdrew its proposal to ratify an agreement with the Pentagon to install a U.S. military radar base in the Czech Republic.

Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek halted the ratification process when it appeared that the Chamber of Deputies—the lower house of the Czech Parliament—was likely to vote to reject the agreement.

“The retreat was very significant, because our government had promoted the radar as one of its key accomplishments,” says Jana Glivická, a leader of the grassroots No Bases Initiative, which has opposed the radar for more than two years.

Indeed, one week after the government withdrew the radar proposal, Topolánek’s governing coalition collapsed. Its position in favor of the radar was one of the

reasons why the government failed to win a vote of confidence in parliament.

Two-thirds of Czechs have opposed the radar since it was first proposed in 2006. Calls from activists with the No Bases Initiative and the Nonviolence Movement for a popular referendum on the issue have repeatedly been rebuffed.

In September 2008, the Czech government put the final touches on an agreement with the United States to install the radar, and the Czech Senate approved the accord. However, the agreement could not be implemented until the Czech Chamber of Deputies ratified it.

“Thanks to the hard work of anti-radar groups in the country, popular opinion remained strongly mobilized against the radar,” says Glivická. “This public opposition culminated in the likely ‘no’ vote in the Chamber.”

The anti-radar movement has drawn support from people around the world alarmed by the military escalation of the proposed European missile defense program of the Czech radar and its companion Interceptor missiles in Poland. An ad hoc coalition of U.S.-based peace groups, including the Campaign for Peace and Democracy, the Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space, and the Humanist Movement, participated in the U.S. campaign to support the Czech peace activists by issuing public statements, visiting the Czech Mission to the United Nations, and organizing hunger strikes, among other actions. (Full disclosure: I co-direct the Campaign for Peace and Democracy.)

On March 16, this coalition sent an open letter to the Czech Chamber of Deputies that was signed by more than 550 people, including professor Noam Chomsky, columnist Katha Pollitt and author Adam Hochschild.

Topolánek said that the government has not abandoned its plan for the radar.

“This does not mean we would give up on the ratification process,” Topolánek said in a March 17 television address. “We will return to this issue after talks with the U.S. administration and after the NATO summit in Strasbourg and Kehl,” referring to the talks scheduled for early April.

Anti-radar activists in the Czech Re-



On Feb. 18, Czech activists demonstrate in front of the European Parliament in Brussels against the deployment of a U.S. radar base on Czech soil.

public and their international supporters say they will continue their campaign until the proposal to install the radar is permanently withdrawn.

Jan Tamas of the Czech Nonviolence Movement, said “[W]e continue our fight, but we can say that we won one important battle. Now in the Czech Republic, a new chapter of our struggle begins.”

—Joanne Landy

Students Won't Sweat It

THE CLOSING OF a textile factory in Honduras has led to a battle between garment manufacturer Russell Athletic and U.S. student activists—and the students appear to be winning.

In October 2008, the company closed its Jerzees de Honduras factory in the city of Choloma—its only unionized plant in the country. In the wake of the decision, thousands of students on 25 U.S. campuses successfully pressured college administrators to cancel contracts with Russell through petitions, meetings and protests.

Reports from the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), an international labor monitor, ruled that the closing was the culmination of Russell’s long-time efforts to break the factory’s union, of which 750 of 1,800 employees were members.

In November 2008, the WRC issued a report alleging a two-year campaign by management to eliminate the union,

snapshot



SOUTH AFRICA—On March 23, South African patients of the tuberculosis (TB) center in Khayelitsha, on the southwestern coast, wait to see doctors on the eve of World TB day. The TB incidence rate in Khayelitsha is at least 1,500 per 100,000 people each year, one of the highest rates of TB in the world. (Photo by Alexander Joe/AFP/Getty Images)

which it labeled the “scorched earth option.” It also said Russell’s alleged union-busting activities were “among the most brazen and systematic the WRC has ever encountered.”

In October, workers at Jerzees de Honduras declared an impasse during contract negotiations, which, under Honduran labor law, requires a government mediator and is the first step toward a legal strike. Five days later, the company announced the factory’s closure.

Russell insists the move was purely a business decision, noting their seven other factory closures in Honduras last year. But Scott Nova, executive director of the WRC, cites a history of anti-union firings and 70 documented threats from management—some by top corporate officials—that union activity would lead to the plant’s shuttering.

“The fact that an economic motive may also have been present does not in any way exonerate Russell,” says Nova. “This is a company that, by its own admission, has engaged in systematic abuse of workers’ associational rights. Given that admit-

ted history of violation, it’s very difficult to take seriously their present denials.”

In response to the closure, activists with United Students Against Sweatshops, a national network of student groups, have toured the country with the workers’ union, Sitrajerzeesh, pressuring administrators to cut or not renew contracts until Jerzees de Honduras is reopened. The Universities of Michigan, Minnesota, Penn State, Purdue and Wisconsin have already cut contracts.

Rod Palmquist, USAS international campaigns coordinator for, estimates the cuts have cost Russell millions of dollars.

“Even if we don’t cut all the contracts, big retailers like Dick’s Sporting Goods who want to sell a Penn State shirt through Russell but can’t because they’ve lost the licensing agreement will just drop Russell altogether,” Palmquist says. “We’re going to drive them out of the collegiate apparel industry by the time we’re done with them.”

A spokeswoman from Russell says

many universities still support the company. “These false allegations are damaging to our business and our reputation,” says Catherine Gammon, senior director of sponsorships, advertising and publishing at Russell. “But it’s the reason that we’re so aggressively putting the facts out there.”

Gammon says Russell is planning a fact-finding delegation with university administrators to Honduras. “When the administrators go down and have a chance to speak with our employees,” she says, “they’ll find workers who now make enough to afford homes and educate their children.” Administrators will not, however, be meeting with union members.

The company’s website claims it offers Honduran workers wages that are 26 percent higher than the legal minimum, and good benefits, including healthcare and paid vacations.

But in a statement sent to university administrators, the WRC said that “there is nothing exemplary” about Russell workers’ compensation, which it called “the norm in Honduras.” It also noted that the plant gave no vacations or medical care beyond the law’s minimum requirements, and it did not provide legally mandated childcare.

Russell Athletic is owned by Fruit of the Loom, which in turn is a subsidiary of Berkshire Hathaway, the massive conglomerate owned by billionaire investor Warren Buffet. The company has not stepped in, but the WRC’s Nova thinks it should.

“There needs to be some adult supervision here, because Russell and Fruit of the Loom clearly do not know how to handle this in a responsible manner,” says Nova. “Not even morally responsible, but responsible for their own brand, because what they’re doing is ultimately damaging to their own brand.”

Meanwhile, universities continue to drop Russell. Palmquist expects the cuts won’t end until the factory is reopened.

“Russell is such a serial abuser of workers’ rights that it’s not even controversial for schools all around the country to take serious action against them,” he says. “And more schools around the country are going to follow suit until they reopen Jerzees de Honduras.”

—Micah Williams