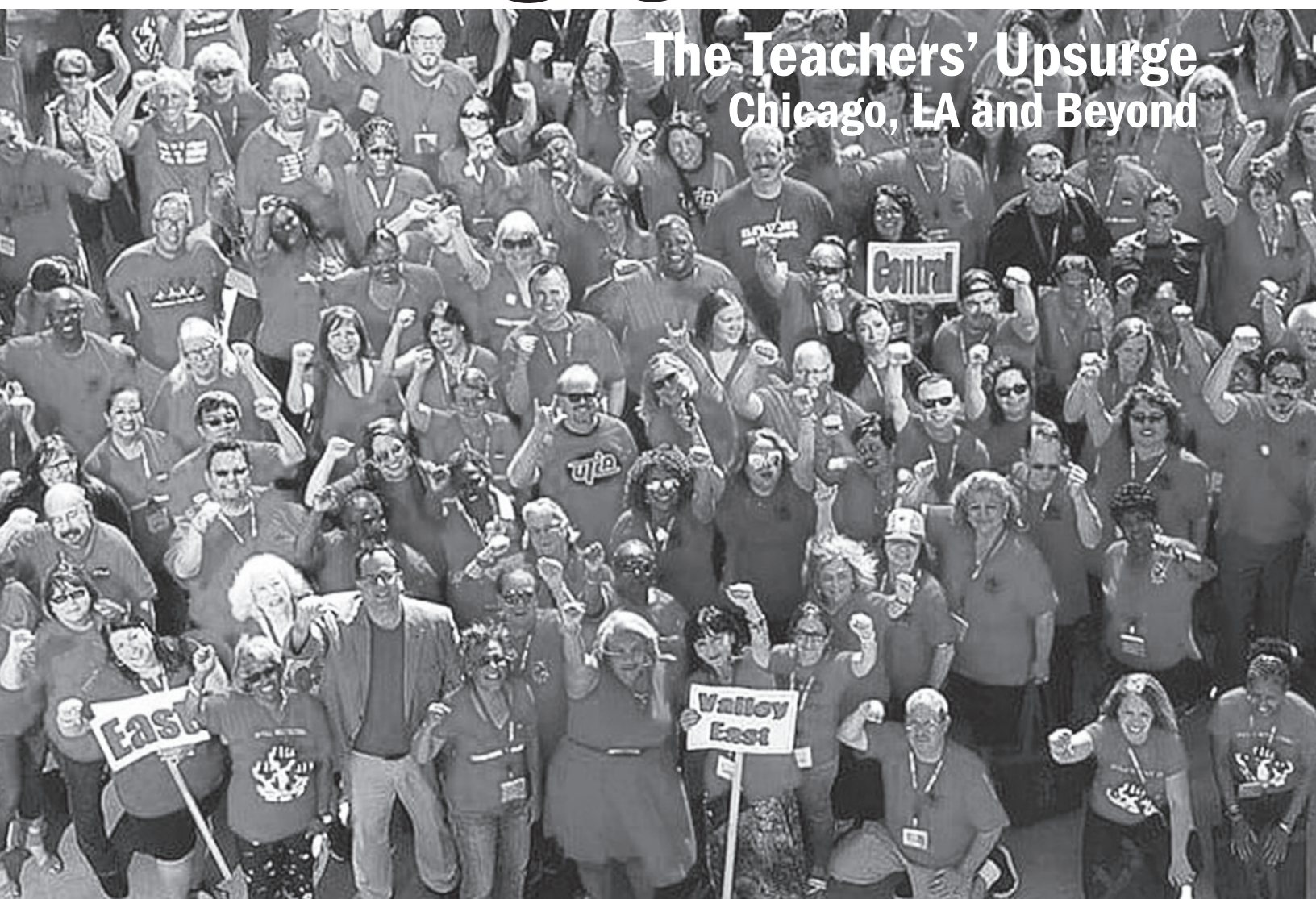


Turkey in 2019 ♦ The Second Amendment from Slavery to Today

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# AGAINST THE **CURRENT**

A SOCIALIST JOURNAL



**The Teachers' Upsurge**  
Chicago, LA and Beyond

## **What and How the LA Teachers Won**

PETER OLSON; ROBERT BARTLETT

## **Women's Oppression and Liberation**

SOMA MARIK ♦ JOHANNA BRENNER ♦ ALICE RAGLAND

ANGELA E. HUBLER ♦ SANDRA LINDBERG



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## A Letter from the Editors:

# Whose “Security” — and for What?

“SECURITY” BECOMES THE catchword of the moment. Donald Trump’s “big, beautiful wall” will, or won’t, enhance border protections from drugs, trafficking, and all manner of brown people with or without prayer rugs. The threat of repeated government shutdowns might end when the two houses of Congress figured out a deal for “securing the border” that Rush Limbaugh would give Trump permission to sign. Or not.

Meanwhile, there are millions of people without security, whose lives are made worse and more insecure by Trump’s antics — and by the cynical manipulations of imperialism, in this hemisphere and globally. Where is “security” for the people of Venezuela, or Honduras, or Yemen, or in African and Asian countries already devastated by effects of climate change?

Start at home. By the time the shutdown of government agencies lurched into its second month, security had taken on a different meaning for 800,000 federal workers furloughed, or performing “essential” work going unpaid. Mostly not high-income earners, they were worrying about the security of their mortgages, their credit ratings (on which, for those with security clearances, their employment may depend), their access to prescription medicines and health care, even the ability to feed their families. Low-paid contract workers, who will probably never be paid for their lost time, faced outright destitution.

The December-January shutdown ended when it became clear by Friday, January 25th that going into another week would cause the airline transport system to collapse. With increased stress, absenteeism among TSA airport workers and air traffic controllers had already reached as high as ten percent, portending a real threat to public security — to say nothing of airplane and food safety inspections going undone, government monitoring of violent weather not happening, and funds for low-income subsidized housing and SNAP (food stamp) programs running low.

The head of the flight attendants’ union, Sara Nelson, and even a mainstream analyst on NBC Nightly News, had gone so far as to suggest that TSA workers’ strike action might be needed to end the shutdown. Airline industry executives must have been warning the White House that the health of a significant sector of U.S. capital was at serious risk. That’s why a second shutdown was ultimately unthinkable — if only because the air transport system would be going down within days, not weeks.

Trading one debacle for another, Trump of course issued his February 15 presidential “national emergency” declaration in defiance of Congress, Constitutional process and common sense to extract money for his wall. The legal and political catfight over that is just beginning as *ATC* goes to press. We’ll be finding out whether the institutions of U.S. capitalist political “stability” can defend themselves.

There’s a lot at stake — more than a garden-variety abuse of power; this is a first-rate impeachable offense and an astonishing precedent if allowed to stand. If a president can conjure up a national emergency at the border from his own imagination, what’s to stop one from ordering mass roundups of “illegal” immigrants, or restoring torture prisons for actual or alleged terrorists (as Trump has advocated), or abolishing birthright citizenship (as some of his advisors suggest)?

Meanwhile the FBI — after decades of murderous abuse of civil rights, now the darling of the liberal wing of the political establishment! — warned that its capacity for criminal investigations was seriously compromised. That

could have affected its capacity to monitor far-right white racist hate groups — if only that were happening in the first place. (We are unable to report whether the FBI was forced to cut back on monitoring and harassing Black Lives Matter, pro-immigrant sanctuary, and antiwar activist groups.)

## Insecurity at Home and Abroad

It’s important at this critical moment to get beneath the surface of the “border security” discourse. Trump’s vanity wall is absurd, of course, even in terms of his own definitions of national security. The United States is not confronted with an “invasion” of “illegal aliens” storming the border; drugs in large quantities are arriving through ports of entry, not hauled on people’s backs through the desert; sex trafficking and exploitation are not facilitated by the “ease” of entering the United States, but precisely by the difficulty of doing so.

Turn the lens to the south: Mexico faces a real and murderous crisis of guns imported from the United States, which get into the hands of wealthy drug gangs and criminal syndicates. Would a “big, beautiful wall” stop this ghastly commerce? Of course not: weapons aren’t smuggled a few at a time by foot traffic — they come in wholesale, through myriad ways and means at the cartels’ disposal.

In fact, *both parts of the hideous two-way drug and weapons traffic, killing people by the thousands in Mexico and the United States, result from the monstrous crime of the failed U.S. “war on drugs.”* That’s the poisonous root of this insecurity. Every serious analyst and medical expert knows this, but practically no Republican or Democratic politicians will say so (with the exception of a maverick like Rand Paul).

Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer emphasize the inability of Trump’s wall to stop the influx of drugs. That narrow focus, however, is itself part of the problem. More border agents and space-age technology, the Democrats’ more “sensible” proposal, could put a dent in the drug flow, but probably only temporarily — and do nothing to prevent the weapons traffic that’s destroying so many lives in Mexico and Central America, the biggest cause of people fleeing northward. The accepted “security” discourse serves to obscure the structural and systemic crisis.

Insecurity stalks the lives of millions of U.S. citizens — not from terrorist threats both real and imagined, but by economic and financial desperation. The plight of federal employees after one deferred paycheck, let alone two, is a window on structural inequality. These are fulltime workers, not the highest but certainly not the lowest-paid sector of the U.S. labor force, with scarce financial reserves — thrown into crisis, even though their eventual back pay was guaranteed.

continued on the back cover



## Editors

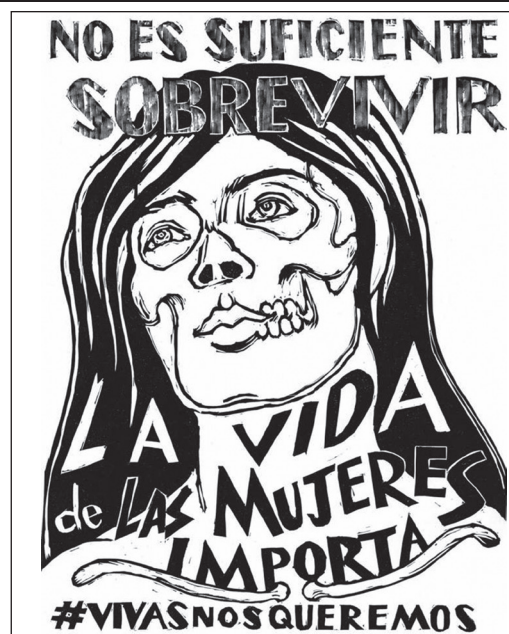
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*AGAINST THE CURRENT* is published in order to promote dialogue among the activists, organizers and serious scholars of the left. We promote the vision of socialism from below, of a revolutionary, working-class, multinational and multiracial, feminist and antibureaucratic socialist movement. *ATC* is sponsored by Solidarity, a socialist organization founded in 1986, together with a group of advisory editors who believe that this magazine can contribute to building an effective U.S. socialist left.

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## Martin Luther King in Memphis: The 1968 Sanitation Workers' Strike

By Malik Miah

*Something is happening in our world. (Yeah.) The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee, the cry is always the same: "We want to be free." (Applause.)*

*—"I've been to the mountaintop," address delivered at Bishop Charles Mason Temple, Memphis, Tennessee, by Martin Luther King, Jr., April 3, 1968)*

THE ABOVE PASSAGE comes from Martin Luther King's famous speech given the evening before his assassination on April 4. King was expressing his own mortality — and why the struggle for justice in Memphis and around the world couldn't be stopped, whether he lived or died.

While King's life is officially celebrated on his birthday in January — the first and only national holiday to honor an African American — it could be argued that his assassination, where and when it occurred and why King was there, shows more profoundly what King's legacy symbolizes to Black and other working people.

King strongly supported working-class solidarity with striking workers, community organizing to support super-exploited Black workers and their families, and the central need to organize nonviolent protests and demands on the ruling powers that be to win fundamental change.

King also applied this radical democratic vision to international upsurges and antiwar struggles, like the one over the Vietnam War.

### Mass Action Behind Legal Victories

King led the masses of Black people to historic victories. Mass direct action protests scared the white ruling class into changing laws in order to end legal segregation — at least on paper — the most significant being the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Those fundamental legal victories opened the door to voting across the country, especially in the Jim Crow South where white supremacists had for decades successfully



invoked "states rights" to overturn the civil and voting rights won by freed slaves, even though the language in the new constitutional amendments guaranteed those rights (13th, 14th and 15th).

The Southern white establishment believed the new federal stance on segregation could be rolled back. They fought back and kept their segregation in place. To answer them required more than a legal response. King and more radical civil rights factions understood that mass action would continue to be a key tactic to pressure the federal and state governments — of both major parties — to act.

### Sanitation Workers Strike

The strike of Black sanitation workers in Memphis reflected that determined vision. King's nonviolent direct action strategy was never only about winning legal equality. His central goal was achieving full economic justice.

A longtime friend and leader of the civil rights movement, Reverend James Lawson, asked him to come to Memphis. King and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), agreed.

Memphis had a sizable Black population. Yet, as in all former slave states, it was a city run by whites for whites. African Americans were second-class citizens.

The city sanitation department had Black and white employees. But Black workers could not shower after work in the department's facility. Black sanitation workers could not take shelter in rain storms and had to hide inside their own trucks.

On February 1, 1968, two workers were crushed to death. The city's inaction led to the unauthorized strike.

As summarized in the report by "The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute" at Stanford University:

On 1 February 1968, two Memphis garbage collectors, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed to death by a malfunctioning truck. Eleven days later, frustrated by the city's response to the latest event in a long pattern of neglect and abuse of its black employees, 1,300 black men from the Memphis Department of Public Works went on strike. Sanitation workers, led by garbage-collector-turned-union-organizer T. O. Jones, and supported by the president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Jerry Wurf, demanded recognition of their union, better safety standards, and a decent wage.

The union, which had been granted a charter by AFSCME in 1964, had attempted a strike in 1966, but failed in large part because workers were unable to arouse the support of Memphis' religious community or middle class. Conditions for black sanitation workers worsened when Henry Loeb became mayor in January 1968. Loeb refused to take dilapidated trucks out of service or pay overtime when men were forced to work late-night shifts. Sanitation workers earned wages so low that many were on welfare and hundreds relied on food stamps to feed their families.

On 11 February, more than 700 men attended a union meeting and unanimously decided to strike.

Soon supported by the local NAACP branch, the strike could have been resolved on February 22, when the city council voted to recognize the union and recommended a wage increase. Mayor Loeb rejected the city council vote, and after police the next day used mace and teargas against nonviolent demonstrators, 150 local ministers formed Community on the Move for Equality (COME), under James Lawson's leadership.

"By the beginning of March," the Stanford Institute report notes, "local high school and college students, nearly a quarter of them white, were participating alongside garbage workers in daily marches; and over 100 people, including several ministers, had been arrested."

"The strikers were supported by the local steelworkers union that allowed them to use their hall for meetings. Heavily redacted files released in 2012 showed that

*continued on page 4*

Malik Miah is a member of the ATC editorial board.



# California Burning, PG&E Bankrupt

By Barri Boone

PACIFIC GAS & ELECTRIC filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy at the end of January 2019. PG&E stock plunged 64% after the 2018 Camp Fire destroyed the entire city of Paradise in northern California, killing 86 people.

California is now known for being on fire — and having the deadliest wildfire in the United States in a century. In southern California there were also those at Woolsey and Hill fires. Altogether the fires destroyed more than 20,000 structures, double the 2017 totals.

More than 28,000 insurance claims are at \$9 billion and expected to increase. To clear the debris will take \$3 billion more, according to state and federal authorities.

In 2017 there were \$10 billion in losses in the northern California wine country. The state insurance commissioner has said that California should rethink the practice of rebuilding in fire-prone areas, but most people want to rebuild their communities.

PG&E's negligence in maintenance of pipelines and electrical wires has been a cause of multiple tragedies. Regulators accused PG&E, one of the nation's largest utility companies, of "falsifying safety documents" for natural gas pipelines for years following its criminal conviction and multimillion-dollar fine for a September 2010 pipeline explosion that killed eight people in San Bruno, near San Francisco.

The oversight agency, California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC), found after an investigation that PG&E lacked enough employees to find and mark natural gas pipelines. This led the staff to falsify data from 2012 to 2017 — and PG&E supervisors were aware of the falsified data, which is a serious violation of the law.

In the San Bruno case, PG&E was fined \$3 million by a U.S. Judge when it was convicted of six felony charges for failing to maintain that pipeline. Regulators added \$1.6 billion in fines for the eight fatalities, other



injuries and property damage.

CPUC's investigative report said it expected "that after such a tragedy, caused by multiple proven violations of law, PG&E would have sought to vigorously enhance and increase its effectiveness in all aspects of its gas safety."

PG&E is also being investigated regarding its equipment's role in igniting wildfires. Cal Fire (California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection) determined that PG&E equipment ignited 17 fires in 2017. There are 11 cases considered for possible criminal prosecution, and PG&E admitted that its power equipment malfunctioned in two instances.

## Corporate Criminality, Public Cost

PG&E Corporation is a Fortune 500 energy-based holding company, with headquarters in San Francisco. It's the parent company of PG&E, which serves 16 million Californians over 70,000 square miles in northern and central California.

PG&E's CEO Geisha Williams "stepped down" recently on January 13. She served as the "public face of the utility." The first woman CEO of PG&E and the first Latina CEO of a Fortune 500 company, she left with a multimillion Golden handshake! She departed when the company said it would file for bankruptcy due to the financial toll after two seasons of devastating wildfires. Williams had seemed intent to stay

longer, said Tom Dalzell, Business Manager of IBEW Local 1245 which represents 12,000 workers at PG&E, State Senator Jerry Hill (D-San Mateo), a longtime critic of PG&E commented, "The real issue is that it has taken them so long to realize that the problem is at the top and that a change is necessary."

The costs for PG&E could be \$30 billion, far more than the \$11.4 billion that its insurance covers. Newly elected Governor Gavin Newsom stated that it is unacceptable that PG&E misleads the public and he is setting up a liaison between

the state and PG&E. He stated that "every-one's immediate focus is, rightfully, on assuring Californians have continuous, reliable and safe electric and gas service."

PG&E sees bankruptcy protection as "the only option." It previously went bankrupt in 2001, which after three years cost each customer from \$1300 to \$1700 in above-market prices. Others could be affected: wildfire victims, PG&E retirees and renewable energy producers.

Bankruptcy can allow companies to modify labor agreements, including altering pensions. Steeper interest rates could cause manufacturing companies to move out of service areas or out of state. More could be financed with bonds that customers pay off over time.

After lobbying, state investor-owned utilities won a legislative shield from bearing the cost of the 2017 fires — another bailout!

With bankruptcy, service would continue and employees continue to work and be paid. Bondholders and shareholders would lose, as would the wildfire victims. IBEW 1245 would fight to preserve retirement plans as they protected benefits in 2001.

## Demanding Change

Senator Bill Dodd (D-Napa) calls for "systemic change" in PG&E's leadership, and pointed out that the shakeup shouldn't stop with Williams' departure. *San Francisco*

*Barri Boone is a 50-year union activist around health and safety issues in many communities. See page 44 for updates to this article.*

*Chronicle* editors called for the breakup of PG&E, noting that Senator Jerry Hill had called for legislation to break up the state's investor-owned utilities.

A breakup could allow PG&E to sell off gas assets and start a fund to help pay for wildfire costs. Regulators are considering whether PG&E should be broken up into smaller regional entities and whether it should be publicly owned. Otherwise investments in clean technologies could be curtailed, such as building a network of electric-car charging stations.

Mark Cooper, a senior research analyst at the Institute for Energy and Environment at Vermont Law School asked whether utilities "should even be allowed to recover all the cost, if they were guilty of imprudent behavior?"

Another issue concerns the Nuclear Power Plant at Diablo Canyon in San Luis Obispo County. The operating licenses expire in 2025 and there are no plans to close or sell it early. PG&E would need \$1.6 billion to decommission Diablo Canyon, meaning a 2% increase in customers' bills.

The total cost would be \$4.8 billion which would include dismantling buildings, transporting leftover materials, removing radioactive materials that meet federal standards, dismantling the site's breakwater and marina and retaining the current employees.

Some organizations like The Action Network are campaigning for "*No PG&E bailout!*" "The state hasn't provided respirator masks, shelter, or relief for thousands of homeless and vulnerable folks but now wants to bail out a bloated investor-owned utility that has spent millions to defeat efforts that would usher in safer, renewable energy."

They call for "decentralizing and democratizing our power, leveraging the progress that has been made by the I9 Community Choice energy programs throughout the state and creating a public distribution utility that works closely with these programs to advance California's climate goals."

The Action Network's demands:

- Hold PG&E and other utilities accountable for their failure to properly maintain equipment, which has cost lives, livelihoods and ecosystems.

- Make PG&E and other utility companies found liable for starting fires pay in full for their impact.

- Let PG&E and/or other liable private utilities go bankrupt. The state can then buy it for pennies on the dollar and transition the infrastructure to decentralized and democratized public power and community choice aggregation programs. (This is possible, all while ensuring that unionized utilities workers retain jobs at the same pay

benefits rates at the new public agency or agencies.)

- No bailout of negligent investor-owned corporations, rescind the ability for them to shift costs to customers (enabled by Senate Bill 901), and refuse to add "cleanup legislation" to extend SB 901 bailout tactics to 2018 or any future fires.

- Support legislative efforts to break up the energy monopolies and replace them with decentralized, locally controlled public utilities, followed with plans to hasten the transition to cleaner energy.

The California Public Utilities Commission has been complicit in PG&E's destruction by backing bailouts and stalling on moves to efficiently bring in cleaner, safer, public utilities. We need local commissioners invested in local, safe, clean energy systems. CPUC President Michael Picker has signaled that the commission is likely going to recommend a bailout, which is against public interest, health, and consent.

Another group, "Popular Resistance" demands: "Don't just stop by breaking up PG&E. The public should take it over."

Tim Wu, who just wrote a book called *The Curse of Bigness*, calls for us to break the monopolies' capacity to control the future by influencing policies that lead to authoritarianism and fascism.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE!!! ■

## The 1968 Sanitation Workers' Strike — *continued from page 2*

the FBI actively monitored the strike."

Twelve days after King was assassinated, the strike successfully ended with a settlement that included union recognition and wage increases, although additional strikes had to be threatened to force the city to honor its agreements.

### Lessons for Today

The reality then was that the white ruling class of Tennessee still opposed the rights of African Americans and did not easily end its segregation laws and practices in the public and private sectors.

It took some time for the civil rights laws to impact Memphis and the state. The first African-American mayor of Memphis was elected in 1991.

At the same time, as elsewhere after King's assassination, his proteges mostly gave lip-service to two key planks of King's legacy: The Poor People's Campaign for economic justice, and his opposition to the Vietnam War as a central concern of Black people.

Most of his leading followers sought public office and economic opportunities, while the traditional civil rights groups continued the legal fight.

The left wing of the movement (Black

Power advocates, Black Nationalists, Pan Africanists and socialists) turned toward more radical anti-capitalist solutions, arguing that full equality was not possible in the capitalist system. These groups were targeted by the FBI and its covert operations that had already been directed against Black leaders such as Malcolm X (assassinated in 1965) and Martin Luther King, Jr.

The debates in the 1960s between the established leaders and more militant youth were about the class issues within the Black community. Seen by the left as a moderate, King was critical of capitalism while continuing to believe that the system could be reformed.

The demands he advanced for economic justice — to win full equality through programs like school desegregation and affirmative action, and support to the economic fight of Black workers — remain just as relevant today as they were in 1968.

He understood that legal equality was only the first step toward ending 400 years of being treated as less than fully human by white people and ruling institutions. That's also why Reverend William Barber of North Carolina is seeking to revive a new Poor People's campaign.

In one of King's most profound speeches

linking racial issues and war was delivered exactly a year before his murder. He linked the War on Poverty with the U.S. war on the Vietnamese people. His own comrades in the SCLC and other civil rights groups, white liberals, and the editors of *The New York Times* criticized him for doing so.

That speech, and his leadership, are still fitting as the U.S. government continues to occupy military bases in dozens of countries, bombs numerous Middle Eastern countries and pushes for new wars in Latin America:

*It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor — both black and white — through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.*

—"Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence," delivered at Riverside Church in New York City, April 4, 1967





## A Post-Strike Reflection:

# What Los Angeles Teachers Won

By Peter Olson

*¡Los maestros unidos jamás serán vencidos!  
¡Los estudiantes unidos jamás serán vencidos!  
¡Los padres unidos jamás serán vencidos!  
¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*

*The teachers united will never be defeated!  
The students united will never be defeated!  
The parents united will never be defeated!  
The people united will never be defeated!*

IT'S 1:30 PM in Los Angeles and our crew of teachers, students and parents has gathered for some much-needed rest before our afternoon picket. We're back in Boyle Heights, one of the oldest barrios in LA, after marching, chanting, drumming and whistling our way through a rally of over

*Peter Olson is a high school teacher, parent of two LAUSD students and member of the LA CoIL collective. Thanks to Janice Chow and other CoIL teachers for their input and feedback on this article.*

50,000 people downtown.

Our band teacher has been sharing her talents with the crowds as part of the Red for Ed Marching Band and the director of our acclaimed *Mariachi Jaguares* group has been hitting the streets with other skilled musicians in our union.

Although we are energized, Angelenos aren't used to weather and we're definitely not used to being outside in the rain for eight hours straight. We're running low on ponchos and have done our best to assemble outfits that we hope might be water resistant. At this moment, it feels good to peel off our outer layers and step into the warmth of Señora Perez's living room.

Sra. Perez has become something of a collective mother to us all during the strike and lives directly across the street. She has two sons who recently graduated from our

school, a daughter who is now a teacher there and having lived through the civil war in El Salvador, knows more than most about the struggle. Today she is feeding us chicken and beans from giant pots simmering on her stove.

We take our plates back to a long table set with stacks of warm corn tortillas and homemade salsas. There we sit and eat and talk about the movement we are building together with many thousands of others across our city.

### A Community Strike

When the 34,000 members of United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) went on strike January 14, we knew we couldn't do it alone and we knew that it had to be about way more than a contract. We knew it couldn't just be a teacher's strike — it had to be a community strike.

That's why, at our school, we started our daily morning picket line meetings by passing the megaphone to the students and parents who had joined us to speak about their own reasons for participating.

Since the strike ended on January 22, much has been written about what happened in Los Angeles and its significance. There were also a number of pieces written before the strike that capture the issues quite well. Valuable coverage and analyses include Sarah Jaffe's work in *The Nation*, Eric Blanc and Lois Weiner's articles and bargaining team lead Arlene Inouye's interview in *Jacobin*, Alia Wong's coverage in *The Atlantic*, fellow Eastside teacher Gillian Russom's reporting in *Socialist Worker* and interview in *The Progressive* and Barry Eidlin's piece in the *Washington Post*.

These commentaries converge around one central insight — that the strike was a decisive victory in an ongoing nationwide movement for the future of public education — a movement that must continue if its promise is to be fulfilled.

*Whose schools?*

*Our schools!*

*Whose schools?*

*Our Schools!*

*What kind of schools?*

*Public Schools!*

*What kind of schools?*

*Public schools!*

Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest public school district in the nation, has around 600,000 K-12 students plus another 100,000 in early and adult education. Our schools are home to 90% students of color; 82% of whom are low income as measured by the criteria for free and reduced-price lunch.<sup>1</sup>

Hence, the question of what kind of education LAUSD students receive is indisputably a matter of racial and economic justice. Inspired by the slogan of the Chicago Teachers Union and its movement allies, the LA strike comes out of years of preparation under the banner of "The Schools LA Students Deserve."

Our current elected leadership, which ran as the Union Power slate, emerged from at least two decades of rank-and-file organizing within UTLA. In contrast to previous leadership teams, Union Power has pursued a strategy of visioning and alliance building with parents and community through direct school-based organizing and also through the Reclaim Our Schools Los Angeles (ROSLA) coalition.<sup>2</sup>

UTLA has also connected with the grassroots, student-led group Students Deserve, which has been organizing alongside Black Lives Matter Los Angeles on several high school campuses against LAUSD's racist policy of daily searches of students and other issues. During the strike, student members

marched on district headquarters, demanding to meet with school board members to present their demands only to be met by police officers denying them entry.

Describing the need for a broad-based, visionary education justice movement, Students Deserve writes:

*Youth, families, educators and community members are coming together to build a new vision of education and society. We are working together because we know our communities have the power to transform our schools and our society. Our voices matter and they need to be heard. We want students in LA to attain skills, literacy in all subjects and become self-motivated, critical thinkers and participants in their schools and communities. Students need to be able to build skills in a nourishing environment and be prepared for their lives when they leave school.*

*Unfortunately, we see that schools have historically not done this and that the current trends in education are still moving our schools in the wrong direction. We need an immediate end to "reforms" that focus on testing, school closures, reconstitutions, pushing out more students, corporate charter companies running more schools, and cuts to vitals areas like arts, music, ethnic studies, libraries, counseling services, adult education, and early childhood education.*

*We need to change the culture and practices of our schools so that they truly support every young person. We need to end racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. We don't want to see the branding some students as "good kids" and others as "bad kids." We don't want students to be pushed out of schools because they are low on credits, are gang-affiliated, have Special Education needs, and/or have recently immigrated.<sup>3</sup>*

By unambiguously aligning itself with students, parents and community, UTLA entered contract negotiations with LAUSD with a broad orientation to "bargain for the common good" rather than a narrow set of teacher-focused demands.

Our bargaining team continuously pushed up against the boundaries of what was considered bargainable, even bringing representatives from community organizations with them into bargaining sessions, much to the chagrin of the district. After more than a year of LAUSD stall tactics, UTLA members In August 2018 voted 98% to authorize a strike.<sup>4</sup>

As the months progressed, it became clear to the public and to our own members that this would not be a strike primarily about teacher pay, but rather one focused on school funding and the conditions of teaching and learning.

In fact, salary was one of the very few areas in which LAUSD had moved significantly in many months of negotiations. In contrast, the district was openly hostile to

the union's repeated insistence on bargaining non-salary issues, especially class size.

## The Class Size and Staffing Crisis

Class size is one of the clearest indicators of whether adequate funding is in place to meet student needs. One does not need a doctorate degree in education policy to figure out that students receive more individualized support and attention in a class of 25 than they do in a class of 45.

Anyone who has spent time in a classroom at any grade level knows that class size has a dramatic impact on students' relationships with their teachers, classmates and schools as a whole.

Although our previous contract contained class size caps (albeit shockingly high ones), they were unenforceable. A nasty piece of contract language allowed LAUSD to override contractual class size caps in any given school year when they declared that it was a financial necessity — which, of course, they did every year.

Getting rid of this regressive section of our contract was one of the central demands and ultimately one of the most tangible victories of this strike. It was also the demand that LAUSD fought most vociferously against.

District management's resistance reflected not only the fact that class size reduction carries a much larger price tag than other items (such as salary increases), but also their strong desire to retain unilateral power and total control in this area — which they did not relinquish until the final day of the strike, after being hammered by six days of mass rallies and pickets with deep community support.

Another core demand highlighted the critical role that out-of-classroom staff such as nurses and librarians play in the overall well-being of school communities. The status quo in LAUSD has been that over 80% of schools do not have a fulltime nurse, leading to lots of jokes along the lines of "If you have to get sick or injured, just make sure it's on a Tuesday or Thursday."

While the strike did secure funding to ensure a nurse at every school and a librarian at every secondary school, the political importance of the demand goes far beyond these measurable outcomes. The call for fully-staffed support services at schools is a step in the direction of the community schools model, which includes "wrap-around" services, among other elements, outlined by the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS), an "alliance of parent, youth, community and labor organizations."<sup>5</sup>

A nurse in every school does not equate to the level of services being described here, but it is a baseline from which to fight for more. AROS outlines the following elements of a community school:



- *Curriculum that is engaging, culturally relevant and challenging.* It includes a broad selection of classes and after-school programs in the arts, languages, and ethnic studies, as well as AP and honors courses, services for English Language Learners, special education, GED preparation and job training.

- *High quality teaching, not high stakes testing, is emphasized.* Appropriate assessments are used to help teachers meet the needs of students and educators have a real voice in professional development.

- *Wrap-around supports such as healthcare, eye care and social and emotional services are offered to assist learning.* They are available before, during and after school and are provided year-round to the full community. Providers are accountable and culturally competent.

- *Positive discipline practices such as restorative justice and social and emotional learning supports are stressed* so students grow and contribute to the school community and beyond. Suspensions and harsh punishments are eliminated or greatly reduced.

- *Transformational parent and community engagement is promoted* so the full community actively participates in planning and decision-making. This process recognizes the link between the success of the school and the development of the community as a whole.

AROS argues that “Sustainable Community Schools are the solution to the opportunity gaps in our schools and will help reverse the growing inequality in our society. The corporate model of school reform promotes closing schools rather than improving them. Instead of expanding supports for students in neighborhood schools, it diverts resources to charter schools without holding them accountable. It is increasing, not fixing, the inequities in our schools.”

This vision of fully resourced, fully public community schools is a proactive rather than defensive response to the privatization threat that currently has momentum with massive financial and political backing in school districts throughout the country, including Los Angeles, where one in five students now attends an unregulated, unaccountable charter school.

## The Privatizing Plague

*Privatizers, take a hike!  
Education is a right!*

Efforts to privatize public education are not new — they’re a core aspect of the neoliberal agenda. And they are certainly not limited to the United States.

Some of the most inspiring fightbacks against school privatization can be found in Latin America — from recent resistance to “disaster capitalism” in Puerto Rico, to the Chilean student uprising of 2011-2013 or the many decades of teacher organizing against

neoliberal policies in Mexico.

In the United States, the privatization campaign has been a bipartisan affair. While Trump’s Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has been a particularly brazen attacker of public schools, in terms of policy there is significant continuity with the pro-charter orientation of Arne Duncan and the Obama administration.

In this sense, it is significant that after the 2018 teacher-led “red state revolt” in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky and Arizona, the strike wave has landed in California, a Democratic Party stronghold.

LAUSD’s current superintendent, Austin Beutner, is a billionaire investment banker with no background in education. Like Eli Broad and other billionaires intent on shaping education policy in Los Angeles, Beutner has close ties with the Democratic Party establishment. By taking the privatization agenda head-on in Los Angeles, UTLA is putting intense pressure on state Democrats from the mayor up to the governor to intervene on the side of increased resourcing of public education.

When adjusted for inflation, California ranks 43rd out of 50 in per pupil funding, and the already underfunded LAUSD loses an additional \$600 million a year to the growing sector of unregulated, unaccountable charter schools, some of which have “co-located” on LAUSD campuses alongside traditional public schools.<sup>6</sup>

Beutner’s proposal to break LAUSD into 32 “networks” is in line with the so-called portfolio model, the latest in the ever-evolving effort to brand corporate ed reform for public consumption. As Clare Lemlich explains in *Socialist Worker*:

*On Wall Street, having a “portfolio” of holdings allows investors to profit off the share prices of different stocks, rather than investing in a single company and being tied to its ups and downs.... investors can then buy stocks in companies they think will make the most money and get rid of the ones they think will fail.*

*Transferred to the education system, the portfolio model means school boards would treat each school as if it were a stock. Rather than invest in a central public education system, the portfolio is “diversified” to include more options — meaning more charters and private schools, all competing against each other for resources....*

*The portfolio model is the latest corporate school “reform” proposal for applying the logic of capitalist markets to the public education system.... (S)chools are businesses, school districts are marketplaces, students and parents are consumers, and knowledge is a product to be bought and sold.*

*The school district ceases to be a central, public planning authority overseeing school policy — and instead becomes the ax-wielder for underperforming schools.*

In this moment of fake reform, a key task for teachers’ unions is to offer our own vision for educational change. Simply defending the status quo of underfunded, beleaguered public schools is a losing strategy and violates the reasons we became educators in the first place. An emphasis on the community schools model, the vision of fully resourced, fully public schools responsive and democratically accountable to the communities they serve, is a powerful and transformative way for our unions to frame a wide range of demands.

## Victory and the Future

*¡El maestro luchando, también está enseñando!*

After six days on strike, UTLA and LAUSD reached agreement that included the ability to begin to enforce class size caps for the first time ever; a six percent salary increase which will help our members cope with the soaring cost of living in Los Angeles; a nurse in every school and a librarian at every high school; an improved cap on student-to-counselor ratios; and increased teacher voice in the charter co-location process.

Beyond the contract itself, the strike won commitments from the district to expand green space, eliminate traumatic and racist “random” searches for 25,000 students across 28 schools, launch a pilot cohort of 30 community schools, move towards a 50% reduction in district-mandated standardized testing, set up an immigrant defense center with a dedicated attorney and even force the Superintendent and pro-charter School Board majority to call for a state moratorium on new charter schools in Los Angeles.

But the more far-reaching gains of the strike cannot be found in the written agreement. This strike is part of a seismic shift in the national narrative about teachers, public schools and privatization. The conversation today looks and sounds radically different than it did five years ago, one year ago or even a month ago.

The massive public backing that was mobilized in support of demands that directly benefit our students is a wakeup call to privatizers that it will not be as easy as they thought to dismantle the public sector and teachers’ unions in particular.

In 2019, teachers are the largest unionized workforce in the country and we are a force to be reckoned with. Despite attacks such as the recent *Janus* decision in the Supreme Court, we are not going anywhere anytime soon.<sup>7</sup>

On the last day of the strike, members received copies of the Tentative Agreement around noon, and by 6 PM that same day 81% had voted to approve it. While UTLA had planned to organize a longer and more participatory process for discussing and voting on the agreement, part of the deal

brokered by Mayor Eric Garcetti that morning included a pledge to return to work the following day.

As a result, many members understandably felt rushed to vote without having a full understanding of what had been gained. Some teachers, having experienced the transformative power of mass collective action, felt that we could win more by extending the strike.

In a press conference on the evening of the vote, UTLA president Alex Caputo-Pearl had this to say in response to a reporter who asked about the vigorous discussion on social media about whether the agreement was the best we could do:

*Our members' expectations were fundamentally raised by this struggle. Teachers in Los Angeles, and every other urban district in the United States, have been beat down for years. With class sizes in the 40s, nobody giving them pencils and pens, having to buy this, that, and the other thing out of their own pocket, having to be at schools where they've got rain coming through the roof — teachers have been beat down. And one of the things that we're most proud of is that this campaign for the Schools LA Students Deserve, that ultimately culminated in a strike and a victory, raised our members' expectations, actually had our members saying, 'I deserve better.' I actually deserve to have supplies in my classroom. I actually deserve to have a class that's small enough that I can walk down the middle of the classroom without having to plow over kids in their desks. And sometimes when expectations get raised, and then you make an agreement, sometimes people feel a little bit raw about it because they want to keep on pushing. And I don't begrudge that of any of our members. In fact, I'm happy that our members have their expectations raised — because the next struggle is right around the corner.<sup>8</sup>*

And so it is. From here, each successive round of contract negotiations must include demands to lower class size caps further and further until we have the conditions that we know our students need to thrive.

We must put our efforts into electing a school board, seat by seat, that is not funded by the privatization lobby and that truly represents interests of public schools.

We must organize a statewide campaign to pass the Schools and Communities First ballot initiative in 2020, which would close California's commercial property tax loophole and bring \$11 billion back to schools, community colleges and other critical neighborhood services.<sup>9</sup>

We must continue to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline and work alongside the Reform L.A. Jails coalition which argues that "instead of investing \$3.5 billion into building more jails, we should be investing in youth programs, quality public education, and affordable housing to keep people

out of jail."<sup>10</sup>

Most importantly, throughout these efforts we must build on the grassroots power that this strike unleashed in LA streets, in our workplaces and in our communities.

As I write, teachers in Oakland, Denver and other cities are gearing up for their own strikes and we stand with them. Los Angeles just saw the first charter school teacher strike in California history and the second (after Chicago) in the nation — raising the confidence of charter school educators to bravely organize in what are often hostile,

## Chicago Charter Teachers' Fight — continued from page 12

special ed teacher at Quest left for a job that paid over \$8,000 more; the school has been unable to fill that position leading to non-compliance with state mandates on meeting the needs of students with IEPs.

After nine days on the picket lines, CICS teachers won another victory for teachers in the charter industry by reaching an agreement that will bring salaries up to or even surpass CPS over four years. This includes both teachers and paraprofessionals.

Depending on funding increases over those years, the base wage is guaranteed to rise by 31.1%, but may go as high as 38.7%.

Eliminating the disparity between the charter and public sectors of education was one of the main goals of the CTU. Now for Acero and CICS unionized teachers this has been largely closed. This is a huge victory and should provide an impetus to organize the remaining 11 non-union CICS campuses as well as the other 70% of non-unionized charter schools in Chicago.

Along with the wage increases, a firm class size limit was written into the contract. Most classes should be no larger than 28 students with a limit of 30. In grades K-2 grades every teacher will have a classroom aide. CICS had proposed paying for both class size limits and pay raises by cutting student support services like counselors and nurses, but had to back down. They had to guarantee maintaining student supports as well as sufficient special teachers.

Another sticking point that management had to concede was parental leave for staff — something that management gave itself. This was a particularly sore point for the mostly female workforce.

A larger share of health care cost will be picked up by management, the school day and year will be shortened with no loss of instructional time for students — all of these are blows against the exploitative conditions that charter teachers work under.

CICS will be forced to pay for these concessions by taking money that they have siphoned from public funds to their umbrella organization. They moaned in the press that

anti-union conditions.

Let's keep building on this momentum — there is much work left ahead of us. ■

### Notes

1. <https://achieve.lausd.net/facts>
2. <http://reclaimourschoolsla.org/>
3. <https://www.schoolslastudentsdeserve.com/vision.html>
4. <https://www.utla.net/news/utla-members-vote-overwhelmingly-authorize-strike>
5. <http://www.reclaimourschools.org/>
6. <http://thecostofcharterschools.org>
7. To read more about the labor movement in the post-Janus era, check out <https://www.labornotes.org/openshop>.
8. <https://www.facebook.com/UTLANow/>
9. <https://schoolsandcommunitiesfirst.org/>
10. <https://reformlajails.com/>

they would be forced to reduce the number of "instructional coaches" and assistant principals to shift the money toward the classroom. For the first time sanctuary school language was included in the contract, an issue every school needs to address.

### Creative Disruption

For strike preparation and during the strike there was both creativity and resolve to force CICS to cave over the demands. The CTU's research spotlighted CICS's byzantine management structure, revealing corporate ties of some CICS board members. Strikers then used that research to carry out direct actions.

A notable example was at the headquarters of Price Waterhouse and Cooper, an accounting firm which employs the current president and treasurer of CICS, Laura Thonn. One hundred and fifty teachers jammed into their Loop high-rise headquarters, blocking the lobby doors, and moving on to block the elevators. Out of the 200 striking CICS teachers and staff, 40 volunteered that day to be arrested.

This dedication on the part of the strikers was key in garnering the support of candidates for mayor in Chicago, a U.S. Senator and members of the city council's Latino Caucus.

With these victories in two of the largest charter chains in Chicago, the bar has been raised for all charter teachers in the city. These examples can lead to unity between all educators, charter and public, in the fight to provide both good learning and working conditions.

Another 13 unionized campuses still have to settle their contracts this year. With these victories, however, a standard is being set that all charter operators will need to meet or answer to their teachers who will wonder why they work under much more difficult conditions. Public school teachers and charter school teachers have developed a good working relationship that is deepening as the battles unfold, and as they fight for the rights of their students together. ■



## From Chicago to Los Angeles: The UTLA Victory in Context

By Robert Bartlett

THE UNITED TEACHERS of Los Angeles (UTLA) have won a big, although limited victory, as detailed in Peter Olson's on-the-ground account in this issue of *Against the Current*. The strike is part of a nationwide teachers' upsurge that began with, and was largely made possible by, the 2012 strike of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

Before that pivotal strike, teachers and their unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), had become stuck in a spiral of concessions, as corporate privatizers — supported by both Democrats like Barack Obama and Republicans — expanded the growth of charter schools in major cities across the country.

Cities have the following percentages of students in charter schools: post-Katrina New Orleans 92%, Detroit 53%, the District of Columbia 43%, Philadelphia 32% and Los Angeles has 20%. As the number of charter school students increased, resources devoted to public schools declined and loss of students led to loss of programs — and in the worst case a closure of public schools like the 48 schools closed in Chicago a year after the 2012 strike.

In the two years between the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) winning control of the CTU and going on strike in 2012, the union worked relentlessly to change the CTU's culture from a service model union into an organizing model under the slogan "The Schools Chicago Students Deserve." This led to the stunning CTU strike victory, much to the surprise of Mayor Rahm Emanuel and union leaders like Randi Weingarten of the AFT.

Teachers throughout the country then realized it was possible to fight the privatizers and gain public support. The St. Paul Federation of Teachers published their own version of "The Schools St. Paul Students Deserve." Caucuses in major cities, like Los Angeles, won control of their union and began the preparation to unite their

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members and build ties with the community needed to win a struggle against formidable foes.

### Fruits of Organizing

As one of a dozen or so members of the "UTLA Solidarity Squad," organized by *Labor Notes* and the United Caucuses of Rank-and-File Educators (UCORE), I was able to compare the level of organization in Los Angeles compared to that of the 2012 Chicago strike.

While in both cities the union members were united and energized by the strike, the level of internal organizing appeared better in LA. Despite its geographical sprawl, there was the eye-popping 80% level of support of LA teachers compared to "only" 67% during the Chicago strike. UTLA clearly did their homework!

UCLA education professor John Rogers commented to the *Los Angeles Times* that what surprised him was not just how strongly the union message came across, but how ineffective the school district management was in trying to persuade the public that it just didn't have the money to fix the schools. He noted that "It's breathtaking how different this conversation is than a decade ago during the recession, when

the conversations were so focused on bad teachers."

The Union Power leadership of UTLA is the result of a decade-long effort of rank and file UTLA members. In 2006 the Progressive Educators for Action (PEAC), a social justice caucus originally founded in the 1990s, formed an alliance with A. J. Duffy; the unified slate won office. But as a leadership it wasn't unified and four years later it was defeated by a slate focused on "bread and butter" issues.

Led by Warren Fletcher, that slate hired a "professional" bargainer and organized a single-focused "Rally for a Raise." Meanwhile PEAC organized a contingent calling for programs that would facilitate a system of quality schools.

The current Union Power leadership, which comes out of the PEAC current, won office in 2014. Its president, Alex Caputo-Pearl, has worked to develop a team committed to internal organizing and linking it to a social justice orientation with strong parent and community alliances.

This, in turn, has transformed the union from bottom to top. The caucus built a union infrastructure in each of 900 schools — even when some schools were quite small. The goal was to establish Contract

Action Teams at every school with a ratio of one CAT leader per 10 teachers at each job site.

This very ambitious goal was probably achieved in many, but not all schools. It was the basis on which to establish intermediary leadership structures that could sustain a working coalition, Reclaim Our Schools LA, which over 250 community organizations signed onto.

After almost three years of organizing, 98% of UTLA members voted to strike. A public opinion poll carried out by Loyola Marymount during the strike that showed 81% supported the UTLA. The infrastructure was solid.

### Strike Power

The strike was initially called for January 10th but was delayed four days due to the union's decision to postpone it in order to forestall the legal roadblocks.

Mornings there was picketing at every school site. For three days during the week all teachers were urged to join a massive downtown rally, after which teachers would return to schools for afternoon picketing.

This schedule enabled teachers, parents and students to be in the neighborhood but also come together for massive rallies. These rallies grew during the six-day strike from 45,000 to 60,000.

Logistical problems didn't deter people from attending, nor did four days of rain in a normally drought-stricken city. Given that there are only about 33,000 LA teachers, a considerable portion of the crowds were made up of parents and students.

Based in the West Valley, I found the most interesting of the six days were when local actions took place in eight of the city's regions. On Wednesday we were to hold a rally at a regional school board headquarters. I arrived an hour early to find the police had blocked off the main street where we were planning on stretching out with a half-a-mile "billboard" of teachers with their signs. Hundreds had already arrived, clogging up the area.

The crowd of 3000 — with more constantly arriving — spontaneously marched toward each end of the street, waving signs, banging on drums and chanting. Having established a major presence on a major thoroughfare, we eventually pulled everyone back to a central point prior to going back to afternoon picketing.

On Thursday there was both a community meeting and another rally at an intersection. This time, with about 500 assembled, about 100-150 would assemble on each corner. Half waited to get for the light and then march to the other side. They continued in a clockwise pattern that allowed traffic on one street while being visible with picket signs, and loudly drumming and chanting.

People danced at each corner to improvised sound systems. The spirit and spontaneity was inspiring and completely self-generated. Throughout motorists honked their support, and so the action continued for a couple of hours.

The day the settlement was announced, the final rally in downtown LA became a victory celebration. Police estimated that 60,000 attended. It was a memorable event soon followed by a rushed ratification process forced on UTLA by LA mayor Eric Garcetti, who wanted students back in class the next day. The agreement was ratified by 81% voting in favor.

### What Was Won, What Remains

Although the settlement was a victory, and despite the unprecedented unity of teachers and the support of the community, many of the 19% voting against the agreement probably felt that they should have gotten more.

Over the course of the contract, class size would drop by one during the first two years, and by two for the final year. This is movement in the right direction, but not sufficient. A number of teachers, especially in the K-3rd grade levels were bitter that "they didn't win anything." (Their class size wouldn't be reduced, but the elimination of the hated "1.5 Clause" protects them from egregious crowding.)

A magnificent struggle that so fully involved both teachers and parents now comes up against the issue of whence the funding comes. LAUSD had been hoarding a growing pot of money that amounted to almost \$2 billion this year. It is unclear how much they will have to dip into that to fund this agreement, but parts of the agreement are delayed for a year or two because of the cost.

Despite the power that UTLA mobilized, it was unable to force a redistribution of wealth towards public education. That is a struggle that no single union or strike can win. The *Los Angeles Times* estimates that the district will have to spend \$400 million over the course of the contract, but that might be a low-ball estimate.

Since most funding comes from the state, changes to the way schools are funded mean challenging Prop 13, which gave property tax relief not only to individuals, but to commercial and industrial properties.

Without another source of revenue, schools in LA and across the state will continue to be underfunded. The issue of funding is a fight that teachers face all across the country.

But If we take a slightly longer view — starting with the CTU strike in 2012 and then considering the 2018 strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona — we can see similar strengths and limitations.

All those strikes — whether carried out by a militant union leadership or by rank and file teachers organized outside the traditional and weak union structures in right-to-work states — ran up against the intransigence of corporate power.

Regardless of how internally organized they were, or how much support they received from the public, only those that had leadership with a radical vision as in Chicago and Los Angeles were able to push beyond winning more than wage increases for extremely underpaid and exploited teachers and staff.

Both the Chicago and LA examples — where the leadership used its resources, where rank-and-file teachers set policy and mobilized themselves, where parents, students and the community joined — provide models of how the struggle can be sustained.

Chicago had a magnificent strike, yet within the year the mayor closed 48 public schools and continued to expand charters. The support that Chicago teachers won by championing the schools that students deserve is still there, but it is a continual struggle to keep the teachers united to be able to fight the next battle — and there will be another one.

If teachers are unable to remain united and outward looking, they will be vulnerable to the pressure of the corporate powers. All movements are subject to a continual pressure that tries to deflate the movements by making partial concessions with a view to taking them back in the future.

What's different today is the growing number of teachers and union locals willing to buck the conservative approach that has dominated the labor movement since concessionary attacks on unions increased over 30 years ago. That includes teacher unions aggressively organizing charter school teachers and defusing the threat charter schools pose to public education.

The transformative struggles within the established AFT and NEA local unions to become versions of "the unions our teachers deserve" are ongoing and difficult. But now there are enough examples with Chicago, LA, St Paul, West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and hopefully places like Oakland and Denver, to provide a template of what is needed: a union committed to social justice for its students and community, a leadership (and better still a caucus) that embodies those principles and organizes within the union, and a union that strives to involve its members in community struggles that build lasting alliances.

We need to trust the creativity of our members and build on translating our growing strength into one that will be capable of taking on the inequality of our society. ■



## Continuing the “Red for Ed” Momentum: **Chicago Charter Teachers Strike, Win** By Robert Bartlett

LAST DECEMBER 4th educators at the Acero charter chain in Chicago became the first charter teachers in the country to go on strike. This was both stunning to the charter industry, which was created in part to avoid the inconvenience of unionized educators, and revelatory to educators across the country.

After picketing four days, the unity and enthusiasm of the charter teachers, along with widespread sympathy and solidarity among parents, forced the Acero leadership to capitulate. This led to a major step in closing the gap between charter and Chicago public school teachers on compensation, hours and working conditions.

The demands that charter teachers raised included issues that the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) are not even legally able to raise in bargaining with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). In 1995, Bill 4.5 amended the Illinois School Code to limit mandated bargaining to wages and benefits. Issues including class size and working conditions are only “permitted” if the school board agrees. (This law was designed to affect only Chicago teachers.)

Since charter schools are privately run, charter teachers were able to bargain these issues. The Acero striking teachers won a reduction in class size from 32 to 30 (still too large), established a salary scale for paraprofessionals who often receive short shrift during negotiations, reduced the pay gap between teachers at Acero and CTU and reduced the outrageously long school year without reducing the classroom time.

They also forced the incorporation of sanctuary language, an important issue given that 90% of the student body is LatinX.

These key gains improved the education for students, and will also tend to improve the retention rate of charter school teachers. At the Robert Clemente campus, teachers told me that out of a staff of 32 teachers last year, eight did not return.

Since Clemente opened in 2012 only three original teachers remain. This churn is typical in an industry which prides itself on overworking and underpaying their staff.

Acero became embroiled in a conflict of interest scandal. The politically connected leadership of the United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) gave construction

contracts to relatives of UNO board members. This was radioactive for the UNO leadership, whose chairperson Juan Rangel was one of the co-chairs of Rahm Emanuel’s election committee.

The combination of internal corruption and political cronyism paved the way for UNO to become the largest unionized network in Chicago! In fact it proved so damaging that the charter had to change their name to Acero.

### **How the Acero Strike Won...**

The strike was won with the overwhelming support of the Acero teachers, who voted 98% in favor of the strike. Picket lines were solid with over 90% of the unionized staff picketing every day. They engaged in exuberant line dancing, going from school to school during the below freezing weather.

Each afternoon teachers from the 15 campuses converged in downtown Chicago to picket the Board of Education, the headquarters of the Illinois Network of Charter Schools (INCS), the Acero headquarters, to attend a rally at CTU headquarters or visit elected officials to explain the deficiencies in their schools and how it hurt their students.

One liberating aspect of the strike was the ability of teachers in the same building to talk to each other on the picket line — something that the demands of the job seem designed to prevent.

Over the course of the four days, teachers told aldermen who visited their picket lines of the struggles they have. A new teacher told Alderman Gilbert Villegas about being hired as a special education teacher, only to report to school and being forced to replace the kindergarten teacher who just quit.

Another special education teacher explained how she was unable to spend the state-mandated hour-and-a-half individual time per week on a student’s individual education plan but only 30 minutes.

Such compelling stories led the Latino caucus in the Chicago City Council to draft a letter, signed by all their members, stating that “We demand that you agree to a contract and settle the strike as soon as possible; it is truly shameful that Acero Network has come to this point!”

Acero’s leader Richard Rodriguez’s sal-

ary of \$260,000 a year is roughly equal to that of Chicago Public Schools head Janice Jackson. Yet he is responsible for 15 schools while she runs about 520.

### **... And What It Means**

The stunning victory left the anti-CTU *Chicago Tribune* fuming in a December 23rd editorial “Is the final bell ringing for charter schools in Illinois?” The answer is twofold.

Charter proliferation occurred with a series of structural changes that began to undermine public education. Since Illinois passed legislation in 1996 allowing the establishment of charter schools, the number has increased rapidly.

Today there are 141 separate campuses; 126 are in Chicago, comprising 57,000 students. Ninety-four percent are students of color; most schools are located in poor neighborhoods. Linked to the proliferation of charters is the erosion of neighborhood schools that were forced to “compete” with nearby charters.

The Board of Education, appointed by the mayor, promoted charters through the Renaissance 2010 plan (<https://bit.ly/2Ek-8jlQ>) that led to the closing of 140 schools between 2001 and 2013. As the charters opened, neighborhood schools were destabilized and ultimately closed.

When the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) was elected to leadership of the CTU in 2010, they saw unionizing charter school teachers as part of their mission. So long as these teachers were an unorganized work force, charter operators would use them to build their infrastructure and undercut public education.

Although the project began before CORE won office, the new leadership understood that it needed to organize charter school teachers to fight for the schools students deserve just as CTU members were motivated (<https://bit.ly/2DUtgSP>).

### **Merging Teachers**

The result of this organizing was the creation of a union of charter school teachers across a dozen different networks, the Chicago Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (ChiACTS). After a process of discussion within both the CTU and ChiACTS, both unions agreed to merge in early 2018.



*Striking Acero teachers do the limbo to lowering class size at the Chicago Public School offices.*

Some CTU members expressed resentment toward their charter colleagues, wrongly equating them with the charter operators and political forces in Chicago who closed schools and put public school teachers out of jobs. It is clear these forces will use charter school teachers as a battering ram against public school teachers to undercut the wages and working conditions of both. So it makes sense to unite.

From the point of view of the charter school teacher who has just recently joined the union, he/she/they may be worried that the larger organization will overlook one's specific needs. In order to facilitate a healthy merger, each union held discussions and separate ratification votes. CTU teachers voted 77% in favor and ChiACTS voted by 84%

While these are large margins, a sizeable opposition shows some of the bitterness in the wake of public school closings and the disproportionate dismissal of Black teachers remains. One strong factor in the merger is that both CTU and ChiACTS teachers were on record against further charter expansion. A second factor is that charter teachers were facing the expiration of 11 separate contracts and were preparing to strike.

During the Acero strike, the CTU's organizational experience was put to good use in framing the negotiations around the needs of both the students and teachers. The CTU was able to provide the infrastructure to support Acero teachers in having both a delegate as well as a strike captain at every school.

It also applied the very successful tactics

of 2012 to both pickets at each campus and rallies in central locations. This allowed the 500 Acero members to feel and demonstrate their collective power.

Picketing was strong at every school as well as participation in the centralized rallies. CTU members who worked in nearby public schools stopped by the picket lines every morning to bring coffee and donuts, and march with Acero teachers.

### **Underfunding and Corruption**

On the picket line I talked to a teacher who took a job at Acero after having taught in the unionized Waukegan (north of Chicago) school system. I asked if it was hard taking a pay cut to work at a charter school, and was stunned to hear that she received a \$13,000 a year raise!

This pointed out to me the particular underfunding of rural schools — as the “Red State” teacher strikes have highlighted.

Underfunding schools is a universal problem, and teachers and parents need to demand a quality education for all children. This requires the wealthy to pay a much larger share of the taxes so that there won't be a vast gulf in resources. It means unionization that can unite teachers across boundaries to fight for the education of their students.

This includes smaller class size, wrap-around services, innovative methods of education, music and art as an integral part of the curriculum and an end to punitive discipline practices.

The Acero strike revealed that charter teachers are just as committed as pub-

lic school teachers to securing a better education for their students. They can be organized into unions capable of blunting the egregious features of the privatizers and their corporate sponsors. This, in turn, takes away much of the incentive to further expand charter schools.

### **CICS Strike**

On February 5th teachers struck four of the 15 Chicago International Charter Schools (CICS). CICS operates under a self-described “portfolio” model where five different School Management Organizations (SMOs) run subsets of the schools. This portfolio model is eerily familiar to a recent proposal of the Los Angeles United School Board to create a breakup of the district into different portfolios.

CICS is divided into five SMOs, with one to four schools and headed by an executive officer. These layers of duplicated management mean there are 14 executives making more than \$100,000 a year; the overall CEO makes \$231,000. Starting teachers, on the other hand, earn \$8,000 a year less than their counterparts in CPS.

The Lloyd Bond campus of the Chicago Rise SMO lists 11 administrators and 19 teachers. Along with a top-heavy administration, CICS has a high overhead. Roughly 30% of the public funding they receive goes to its parent organization, which holds \$36 million in reserves. Nineteen million in bonds is controlled by a firm owned by Craig Henderson, a founder of CICS and former president and treasurer.

Several of the founders of the SMOs started as Teach For America (TFA) alums; teaching appears to have been a step out of the classroom into the boardroom.

Eight CICS directors come from the corporate world. There are several partners from law firms including Laner, Munchin, Dombrow, Becker, Levin and Tomlinberg, which concentrates “exclusively in the representation of employers in labor relations, employment litigation, employee benefits and business immigration.” Others are from the investment world.

The CEO, Elizabeth Shaw, is a TFA veteran who was part of New Orleans’ “recovery school district.” Another member of the board is a founder of the Illinois Network of Charter Schools, the public face of the charter industry in Illinois. This is a complicated web of individual entrepreneurs, privatization advocates, and opportunists looking to make a buck out of the charter industry.

A similarity between the Civitas-run CICS network and the Acero schools is the high turnover rate of teachers and unfilled positions in classrooms. At the Quest campus 5 out of 14 teachers left last year, and students ask teachers if they are going to leave them also. It is understandable as a

*continued on page 8*



## Turkey in 2019: An Assessment By Yaşar Boran

IN A SNAP election on June 24, 2018, Turkish President Tayyip Recep Erdoğan received more than 52% of the vote for president. The rightwing “People’s Alliance” that brought together Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) obtained over 53% of the vote, giving the coalition a solid majority in parliament.

In Erdoğan’s view, the election was an endorsement of his decade-plus rule (he was prime minister between 2003 and 2014); and the ushering in of a new executive system greatly enhancing his powers as president. After the election he triumphantly declared Turkish democracy was “an example for the world.”

Although Erdoğan and his party had overwhelming, and highly undemocratic, advantages during the campaign, a sense of optimism in the leadup to the election had grown in some opposition circles. Many believed there would be a second round in the presidential election (which would have been profoundly damaging to Erdoğan’s legitimacy), while the AKP’s majority in government seemed to be in jeopardy.

A new term for Erdoğan, together with a parliamentary majority and vastly expanded executive powers (approved by a disputed referendum in 2017 during a state of emergency), is a disappointing — and frightening — reality in today’s Turkey.

Some writers have pointed out, however, that despite his party’s advantages over the political opposition in money and media exposure, to say nothing of the atmosphere of intimidation and fear in which the election was conducted, Erdoğan was unable to substantially increase his percentage of the vote over previous elections.

The AKP, moreover, lost seven percentage points from the last election, falling from 49.5% to 42.5% (although to everyone’s surprise the ultranationalist MHP increased its share of the vote to over 11%, more than making up for AKP losses). The inability of Erdoğan and his regime to extend their dominance thus suggests the persistence of opposition and resistance in the face of severe repression.

Prior to the election, some analysts went

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*Yaşar Boran is a writer and historian.*

so far as to suggest there is a new left in the making in Turkey. In particular, the Kurdish movement and the relative success of the pro-Kurdish and leftist People’s Democracy Party (HDP) since its creation in 2012 has been a cause for optimism for some on the Turkish and international left.

The HDP’s passing of the 10% threshold to enter parliament in the June election in a deeply oppressive environment, and the party’s presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş’s garnering of more than eight percent of the vote despite being imprisoned — and therefore silenced in the media and unable to campaign — further suggests there exists a base for radical social change in Turkey.<sup>1</sup>

Such a base could conceivably expand with worsening economic conditions, which reached crisis levels in the months after the election. The Turkish lira, whose value has steadily declined since 2015, plunged to new lows after the Trump administration’s imposition of steel and aluminum tariffs two months after the election.<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of 2018 the lira lost a staggering 66% of its value. With no end to serious and deep-rooted economic problems in sight, it might be expected that popular support for the government could, and should, decline along with people’s economic prospects.

### Repression and Electoral Politics

Thus, there are two ways in which to view Turkish society from a socialist perspective in 2019. On the one hand, the election results of 2018 appear to further entrench the authoritarian AKP regime government while providing it with a veneer of democratic legitimacy, as Erdoğan and his rightist coalition continue to suppress dissent and supporters rally around the populist-conservative appeal of the Great Leader.

On the other, the inability of the conservative alliance to make deeper electoral inroads demonstrates the failure of the AKP’s hegemonic project, and portends instead a possible progressive future. Which of these of these interpretations is more persuasive?

Perhaps more importantly, what does an accurate analysis of Turkish society today portend for the future of social justice and

the left in the country?

The regime strategy was transparent. With unemployment and inflation rising, and the value of the Turkish lira daily reaching new lows, President Erdoğan moved elections scheduled for November of 2019 up to June 24, 2018 — a year and a half earlier than scheduled.

Although it justified the early election by claiming the country needed stability in a chaotic geopolitical context (mainly a reference to the civil war in Syria), the government was clearly scared and knew the situation not going to improve anytime soon.

Although the violent elimination of the nationwide Gezi Park protest movement in the summer of 2013 already revealed the AKP government’s willingness to suppress opposition with brute force, a failed military coup in July of 2016 provided the pretext for the wholesale eradication of perceived enemies of the Turkish regime.

During a state of emergency lasting more than two years, approximately 107,000 public sector workers were sacked by emergency decree. The centrist opposition People’s Republican Party (CHP) has claimed that at least 5,000 academics and more than 33,000 teachers have lost their jobs.<sup>3</sup>

The government’s position is that this massive number of people have links to “terrorist organizations” — that they are either followers of Fetullah Gülen, a U.S.-based cleric and alleged mastermind of the coup; or they are members of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK); or even more implausibly, that they belong to both.

The mass firing of academics and the closure or state takeover of numerous media outlets added to the atmosphere of fear while substantially limiting the range of available views. Turkey led the world in the imprisonment of reporters in 2016 and 2017; it will in all likelihood have the same distinction for the foreseeable future.<sup>4</sup>

The sale of the popular mainstream newspaper *Hürriyet* to pro-Erdoğan Demiroren Holding in 2018 further cemented mass media support for the government. Although opposition newspapers like *Cumhuriyet* and *Birgün* continue to exist, they remain on the margins of public life while fear of government prosecution and closure is unceasing.



*The massive 2013 protest against the destruction of Gezi Park revealed the government's willingness to use brute force to suppress an opposition.*

Television coverage prior to the election suggests the extent of pro-government bias in the mainstream media. According to the official broadcasting watchdog RTÜK, between May 14 and May 30 Turkish state television provided Erdoğan and the AKP with over 67 hours of coverage; the Kemalist CHP and its candidate Muharrem İnce received 12 hours. The new nationalist İyi Parti (the "Good Party," a splinter group from the MHP) got 12 minutes while the HDP and Demirtaş received no airtime.

Privately-owned stations were no better. In the first three weeks of May, news channels CNN Türk and NTV between them gave 70 hours to Erdoğan, 22 hours to the CHP and İnce, and 17 minutes to the İyi Parti.<sup>5</sup>

The silencing of the HDP was not confined to a media blackout. Since the party's electoral breakthrough in the summer of 2015 approximately 10,000 party members, including mayors and city officials, have been arrested. Between the coup attempt in July 2016 and November of the same year 6,000 HDP members were detained and 2,000 were imprisoned.

Party co-leaders Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ were arrested with eight other party members for "making terrorist propaganda" or "being a member of a terrorist organization." Yüksekdağ received a 10-month prison sentence and was stripped of her party membership in 2017; in September of 2018 Demirtaş was sentenced to four years in prison.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the election was conducted during a state of emergency — historically a frequent occurrence in Kurdish areas that went national after the coup attempt. Since the summer of 2015 curfews were declared

at least 332 times in 11 provinces in at least 50 districts, affecting close to two million people and creating a permanent state of exception in much of the southeast.<sup>7</sup>

Although officially ended after the election in July, the new system implemented during the state of emergency allows presidential decrees and executive control over the judiciary. According to Amnesty International, there remains a "suffocating climate of fear" in Turkey despite a supposed return to normalcy.<sup>8</sup>

With all these advantages, the fact that the AKP was compelled to make an alliance with the MHP (members of whom were formerly highly critical of many AKP policies — particularly those recognizing the existence of Kurdish people) prior to the June election suggests the extent of the regime's fear of election losses.

The rightwing electoral alliance was made possible, in large part, by the breakdown of a peace process with the PKK in 2015, thus allowing the government to appeal to the ultranationalist MHP. That large numbers of former AKP supporters voted for the MHP while still voting for Erdoğan indicates that many Turkish conservatives, though unhappy with the economy and ruling party, were unwilling to abandon the Great Leader or vote for a secular-centrist CHP or liberal-leftist HDP.

Piety and nationalism run deep in Turkish culture, and as elsewhere ethno-nationalist groups in Turkey have fanned hostility to minorities, immigrants, and refugees. Appropriately symbolic of the times was that the first head of state to congratulate Erdoğan on his victory was Victor Orbán, the nationalist rightwing prime minister of

Hungary.

### **A New Left?**

Though worsening economic conditions and a spirited campaign by opposition parties failed to dent Erdoğan's electoral popularity, proponents of a new left in Turkey emphasize the bitter hostility of half the population to Erdoğan and his vision of a pious, obedient population. Crucial in this vision is the Kurdish movement and its supporters, particularly as manifested in the HDP.

Pro-Kurdish parties were first formed in Turkey after a 1980 military coup decimated the Turkish left. New social movements around Kurdish and women's rights developed in the 1980s and 1990s, while the Marxist-Leninist PKK attempted to achieve an independent Kurdish state in the region through guerilla warfare.

The government's war against the PKK destroyed thousands of villages and created an estimated two million refugees. The *New Internationalist* accused Turkey's prime minister, Tansu Çiller, of war crimes in 1994 for profiting from land dispossession and ties to the mafia.<sup>9</sup>

The Turkish state has portrayed all pro-Kurdish parties and groups as extensions of the PKK. Since 1990 the People's Labor Party (HEP), the Freedom and Democracy Party (ÖZDEP), the People's Democracy Party (HADEP), the Democratic People's Party (DEHAP), and the Democratic Society Party (DTP) were all closed by Turkey's Constitutional Court.

With the possibility of a political solution to the conflict in the south and east foreclosed, the continued existence of the PKK serves to fan Turkish ethno-nationalism



while militarizing a large segment of society.

After its formation in the early 2000s, the AKP appealed ideologically to conservative Kurds while establishing clientelist relationships with Kurdish economic elites and Islamist groups. The superficiality of the party's ostensible commitment to democratic norms were revealed in 2009, when the DTP was closed.

A ceasefire and peace process between the state and PKK launched in 2012 broke down in 2015; shortly afterward the government began its crackdown on the HDP.

Founded in 2012 as the political wing of the Peoples' Democratic Congress, a coalition of leftwing groups, the HDP is an associate member of the Party of European Socialists and consultative member of the Socialist International.

Between 2013 and 2015 its supporters often likened the HDP to other parties of "radical democracy," specifically Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

In contrast to liberal-left populism (espoused by the political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe), however, HDP ideology is primarily indebted to the American libertarian-socialist Murray Bookchin's ideas on municipalism and social ecology (and, to a lesser extent, the works of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt).

The HDP describes itself as representing the forces of peace and democracy in Turkey, and is comprised of "representatives of labor, ecology and women's rights associations, artists, writers, intellectuals, independent individuals, workers, representatives of different ethnic and religious groups, the unemployed, the retired, farmers, the handicapped, scientists and those whose cities are being destroyed." Important also is the party's stated emphasis on grassroots organizing in streets, neighborhoods, and cities throughout the country.

While there is nothing objectionable in the HDP's progressive agenda, there are a number of problems in the party that might impede hope for radical change in Turkey. The fact that the party was established on the suggestion of imprisoned PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan is enough to forever damn it in the view of a substantial portion of the Turkish population, who see Öcalan and all who support him as advocates of terrorism.

As Cengiz Güneş has noted, electoral support for the HDP has come overwhelmingly from Kurds — only nine percent of the party's supporters identified as ethnically Turkish in 2015.<sup>10</sup> For large numbers of Turks influenced by anti-Kurdish Kemalist ideology as well as pro-government media, the HDP is, like previous pro-Kurdish parties, nothing more than the political arm of a terrorist organization.

The party's commitment to "democratic

autonomy," or "democratic confederalism," is inspired by the writings of Öcalan whose main theoretical influence is now Bookchin. When he abandoned Marxist-Leninism after his arrest in Italy in 1998, Öcalan also abandoned his vision of an independent Kurdish state, adopting over time a position calling for equal democratic rights for Kurds and political decentralization within Turkey.

But in a highly centralized country — where memories of nationalist movements attempting to undermine the integrity of the state predate the Turkish Republic (dating to the Ottoman Empire in the early 19th century) — any suggestion of federalism or local autonomy reeks of separatism.

Critics on the left have also pointed to the reformist nature of Öcalan's ideological turn; some believe Öcalan's ideas have conveniently shifted with the political winds.<sup>11</sup> While advocates of a new Turkish left like Güneş see the HDP's links to European parties as boding well for international solidarity, the desire to appeal to mainstream Western public opinion greatly restricts the party's ability to formulate a radical agenda.

Appeals to the European Court of Human Rights (of which Turkey is a signatory) may be an understandable legal tactic, but it is difficult to see how international solidarity can compensate for an absence of domestic mass support in the long term.

The state's efforts to simply destroy the party is yet another — and probably the most important — reason for caution. It is entirely possible that, as it has in the past, the Turkish state will simply shutter the party and justify its closure with an avalanche of anti-terror propaganda.

While the HDP, in contrast to other Kurdish parties, has made electoral inroads in northern and western parts of the country (especially in the large cities of Istanbul and Izmir), it seems unlikely that the party can expand its electoral base beyond 10-15% of the vote. The best-case scenario for the party in the foreseeable future, it seems, is for it to become a vocal oppositional voice within the government — if it can survive.

### Challenges and Possibilities

A number of writers have noted how the AKP in the early 2000s sought to incorporate those previously excluded from the traditional Kemalist elite into its "hegemonic project." Importantly, the party copied traditional tactics of the Turkish left in neighborhood organizing strategies, while deploying a liberal rhetoric to demand women's freedom to wear headscarves and allowing religious expression in public life. Erdoğan's appeal as a "man of the people" solidified the party's power in the early 2000s.<sup>12</sup>

Yet during AKP rule violence against women has skyrocketed, union density has plummeted, and strikes have been repeated-

ly suppressed by the government.

The murder of women has increased 14-fold since 2002, while reports of domestic violence and archaic patriarchal practices like child brides and so-called honor killings (of gay men as well as women) have also grown dramatically.

As of 2016, Turkey ranked 130 out of 145 countries in terms of gender equality according to the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report; it was 69 in the Gender Inequality Index Rank.<sup>13</sup>

The state of workers and the labor movement are particularly illustrative of the challenges as well as the possibilities for a resurgent left in Turkey. In addition to limiting press and individual freedoms, a post-coup constitution in 1982 banned strikes if deemed "prejudicial to public health or national security." While the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the important emergence of new Kurdish and women's rights organizations, the labor movement atrophied in a "capitalist free-for-all" environment.<sup>14</sup>

Since coming to power in 2002 the AKP government has repeatedly invoked the anti-strike law to disallow labor actions while accelerating privatizations and relaxing labor laws. In 2017 union density stood at 8.6%, down from close to 30% in 2001. Turkey now vies with Hungary for lowest union membership in the OECD, with the United States a close third.<sup>15</sup>

Worker accidents and deaths — most shockingly the killing of more than 300 coal miners from a mine explosion in 2014 — have increased dramatically, especially in the construction, agricultural, and mining industries.<sup>16</sup>

Yet evidence of labor militancy in recent years is abundant. In May, 2015 workers in the auto industry engaged in a series of wildcat strikes across the country. Workers defied management-friendly unions and occupied factories; negotiations were led by worker-run strike committees and union representatives were absent.<sup>17</sup> Their demands included higher wages, job security, and — significantly — recognition of worker representatives and the elimination of company unions in bargaining.<sup>18</sup>

Strike actions spread to 30,000 workers, forcing European auto companies to agree to workers' demands. Yet struggles in the industry continue, and the state has unsurprisingly sided with capital.

In early 2018 the Erdoğan government banned a sector-wide strike scheduled for February 2. Although an agreement reached shortly after was hailed by union representatives as a victory, wage increases lag far behind inflation and some sections of metalworkers rejected the agreement.

While strikes and labor protests continue in a number of industries, the state's

willingness to resort to blunt force to stop worker protests also persists. In September of 2018, workers at a massive new airport in Istanbul stopped work in protest over miserable working conditions and occupational fatalities.

Gendarmerie teams attacked strikers with pepper spray and over 400 workers were taken into custody. Arrested on a number of bogus charges, a message from those apprehended appearing on the website of İnşaat-İş (Construction Workers Union) stated the “real culprits are the bosses at the IGA,” and “Construction workers are not slaves!”<sup>19</sup>

## The Need for Unity

While class conflict is clearly not absent, a cultural and political movement vehicle with the capability of uniting disparate organizations and groups does not exist at present. In Turkey as elsewhere, rightwing demagoguery is currently more potent than leftwing formations.

A distinguishing feature of Turkey is, of course, a level of state repression that makes resistance extremely dangerous. Erdoğan and MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli

have, for example, both warned of the “heavy price” Turkish activists who find inspiration in the French Yellow Vest movement would pay.

The fact that Erdoğan and Bahçeli feel compelled to preempt anti-government demonstrations is itself suggestive of their fears of popular opposition. However, while the roots of resistance exist, discussions of a “new left” are premature.

The joining of labor militancy with mass demands for an end to violence against women and for Kurdish rights may seem today like a utopian dream. It is, however, more realistic than a hope that elections or street demonstrations can in themselves radically alter the balance of power. ■

## Notes

1. Though published before the most recent election, see Cengiz Güneş, “Turkey’s New Left,” *New Left Review* 107 (September/October 2017): 9-30; and Justus Links, “Religion, class, and Turkey’s new left,” *openDemocracy*, July 13, 2015.
2. Trump’s tariffs were mainly an attempt to appeal to Republicans’ evangelical base, which at the time was closely following Turkey’s imprisonment of a pastor, Andrew Brunson, who was suspected of involvement in the 2016 coup attempt.
3. Chris Morris, “Reality Check: The numbers behind the crackdown in Turkey,” BBC, June 18, 2018.
4. Committee to Protect Journalists, <https://cpj.org/europe/turkey/>.

5. “Q & A: Turkey’s Elections,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 7, 2018.
6. “Turkey: 6000 HDP members detained, 2000 arrested since July,” *Green Left Weekly*, November 11, 2016.
7. “Curfew declared 332 times in 3 years,” *Bianet*, October 3, 2018.
8. Kareem Shaheen, “‘Suffocating climate of fear’ in Turkey despite end of state of emergency,” *Guardian*, July 19, 2018.
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11. Alex de Jong, “A Commune in Rojava?” *New Politics*, vol. xv-4, 60 (Winter 2016).
12. Cihan Tuğal, *Passive Revolution: Absorbing the Islamic Challenge to Capitalism* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2009); İsmet Akça, Ahmed Bekman, Barış Alp Özden, eds., *Turkey Reframed: Constituting Neoliberal Hegemony* (London: Pluto Press, 2014).
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14. Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 3rd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 286.
15. OECD.Stat, <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TUD>.
16. Daniel Johnson, “Workers in the New Turkey,” *Jacobin*, April 2015.
17. “Wildcat strikes spread across auto industry in Turkey,” *Free Speech Radio News*, May 26, 2015.
18. “İnşaatİİLL backs metalworkers’ struggle in Turkey,” May 28, 2015.
19. “Arrested Airport Workers: Real Culprits are Bosses Condemning Us to Inhumane Conditions,” *Bianet*, September 24, 2018.

## Betraying the Kurds

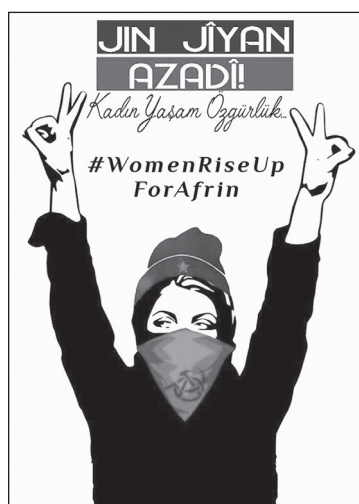
MILITARIST HAWKS AND liberal pundits alike are up in arms (figuratively, of course) over Donald Trump’s “victory” proclamation and announcement of U.S. troops’ withdrawal from Syria. What does it actually mean for the cascading disasters in the Middle East?

It’s certainly true that a couple thousand U.S. troops can’t resolve the Syrian civil war and destruction of that country, and that U.S. imperialism has no legitimate business intervening there or anywhere else.

This doesn’t mean that Trump’s plan to withdraw this force has any progressive significance, or anything to do with peace. It’s a move on a regional chess board — and for imperialism, allies are pawns.

Syrian Kurdish forces have been the most effective fighters against the brutal “Islamic State.” They saved the Yazidi population from ISIS genocide on Sinjar mountain, liberated hundreds of Yazidi women from sexual enslavement, and defended the town of Kobane against the ISIS siege. Trump’s announcement might be a gesture to Turkey’s presidentialist-dictator Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and it’s a cynical betrayal of the Kurdish fighters.

Erdoğan’s number one priority is crushing Kurdish national aspirations, along with



all democratic opposition to his rule. The presence of U.S. troops in northeastern Syria restrains Turkey from launching a murderous assault on the Kurds there.

The imperial knife in the back of the Kurds and their desire for autonomy or independence is a recurring story. At the same time, Saudi Arabia’s murderous U.S.-

coddled royal house is driving Yemen to genocidal famine. Israeli and U.S. threats against Iran are provoking Tehran’s buildup of its own asymmetric deterrent — the supply of sophisticated guidance missiles to Hezbollah near the Lebanon-Israel border.

The main point to understand is that *imperialism creates problems that it cannot solve*. That’s been disastrously evident ever since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

It’s criminal that Democratic politicians, including some supposed liberals, are trying to outflank Donald Trump by striking a more militaristic posture. But it’s a big mistake for well-intentioned folks in the peace movement to say they support or even applaud Trump’s withdrawal announcement. The

question isn’t whether this or that tactical move — or verbal posture — by this imperialist administration is a good or bad thing, in isolation from its overall military-political interventionist project.

Trump now says he wants to move the U.S. troops from Syria into Iraq, in order to “keep an eye on Iran.” It’s not clear exactly what that even means, but it’s undoubtedly part of the ominous and growing U.S. threats against Iran, which can only make matters worse. And Iraq’s political leadership has responded angrily against being drawn into Washington’s anti-Iran crusade, to say nothing of being treated like Donald Trump’s bathmat.

In the region’s horrifying descent into sectarianism, civil war and mass destruction, the Kurdish freedom movement, especially in Syria, is the only remaining force that both represents democratic aspirations and has some military capacity. Despite its limits and contradictions, this is the movement that should command the solidarity of international left and antiwar forces.

The United States has had a great deal to do with creating the disasters afflicting people from Afghanistan to Palestine. The political uproar over whether a suddenly announced troop withdrawal from a corner of Syria is or is not “in our fundamental strategic interests” doesn’t even touch the reality that it’s precisely those “interests” that are the problem.

— David Finkel



## The Strange Career of the Second Amendment U.S. “Gun Rights,” Part II

By Jennifer Jopp

[The first part of this essay, in our previous issue (ATC 198, <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/198/second-amendment/>), explored the 18th and early 19th century origins of the conflict between “the importance of a militia to a free state” and the individual right to own and carry guns.]

AS STATES MOVED to ban concealed weapons and eventually to criminalize the possession of certain kinds of weapons, courts struggled to articulate which view of the right to bear arms — civic or individual — held sway. Court decisions articulating the view that the right encompassed an individual right were often met with consternation, and in general the public expressed the view that “the people’s right to be free from the threat of violence took precedence over the individual’s right to arm himself.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet the articulation of an individual rights conception had been voiced and would gain adherents over time. Arguments in favor of an individual rights interpretation came from two opposing — yet interrelated — quarters: a growing critique of slavery and its endemic violence and the growing grip of cotton production on the slaveowning southern states.

The abolitionist movement grew out of a heady mixture of the revolutionary era’s language against slavery, the impact of the second religious Great Awakening’s powerful impetus to purify society and in response to the growing power of slavery in the American economy and society. As abolitionist thinking developed, it came to articulate a radical critique of American society and law.

Many abolitionists, such as John Brown, came to believe that the violence of slavery could only be met with violence on the part of abolitionists. The conflict in Kansas and the murder of abolitionist activists as well as the violence of the slave system itself, led many in the movement to assert that arming Blacks — slave and free — was the only way to end slavery.<sup>2</sup>

In these decades, militias in the South functioned largely as slave patrols or provided the personnel for slave patrols. Cadets from state-funded military academies like Virginia Military Institute and The Citadel — founded to provide the military discipline and command structure necessary to police slavery — also filled the ranks of the patrols.

Slave codes made the white male population responsible for policing the Black population, both slave and free. Patrols were



Slave patrol capture, *Anti-Slavery Almanac*, 1839.

given extensive legal authority to ask any Black person for a pass, to enter any dwelling or to mete out any punishment. State and local laws targeted Blacks for disarmament.

Other groups in American society were also targeted for disarmament. The Indian Intercourse Act of 1834 forbade selling weapons of

any kind to indigenous peoples. In these decades, free Blacks, Catholics, and those born outside the United States were all at various times forbidden from carrying guns.

Disarmament, it is worth remembering, came within the context of resistance to the contemporaneous and interrelated processes of dispossession of indigenous lands (accelerated by the Indian Removal Act of 1830) and the expansion of the plantation economy. Throughout the South, the building of arsenals, the creation of military academies, the expansion of the state militias, as well as increasingly draconian slave codes, came in the aftermath of a series of slave revolts.

At the same time, the rights of white men to own guns expanded. Of the 20 states joining the Union between 1790 and 1860, 14 included provisions for the right to bear arms. This development paralleled others of the time period; it was also during these decades that the rise of universal white manhood suffrage meant the demise of voting rights for women and free Blacks.

New technological developments meant smaller weapons and — in an increasingly anonymous society — posed a particular sense of danger and spurred a series of state regulations on carrying weapons. As states sought to regulate guns, arguments advancing an individual right to arms appeared.

This emphasis reflects an emerging set of ideas in the early national period that mirrors other developments in the law. A growing emphasis on the desirability of competition and the demise of an emphasis on the rights of the community appeared in many aspects of the law.<sup>3</sup> Nineteenth century society was rife with violence: street brawls, riots, and fisticuffs were commonplace.<sup>4</sup>

As did the Revolutionary War, subsequent wars raised questions about the nation’s military preparedness and prowess. The War of 1812 brought new concerns about the weaknesses of the militia system and new support for a stronger Navy and Army.<sup>5</sup>

Questions about the efficacy of militias were also raised in response to periodic revolts. The hostility to centralized

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authority that earlier rebellions had articulated never disappeared (and never has disappeared) from American life. The 1842 Dorr Rebellion, as one example, raised the question of the right of revolution inherent in a republican form of government and the rebels formed their own militia units and sought to seize weapons from a public arsenal. The state militia quickly put down the rebellion.

Among the transformative aspects of the Civil War was the arming — as government policy — of Black men as soldiers in service to the republic. One of the central challenges of Radical Reconstruction in the years after the Civil War was the demand of newly freed Black men for the rights of citizenship. As Martha Jones aptly illustrates, the demands that shaped post-bellum debates had been nurtured in the decades before the war as free Blacks developed an argument for birth-right citizenship, the right to serve on juries and the right to carry weapons.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, Jones suggests that the denial of citizenship rights to Blacks, and the ways in which they are spelled out in the earlier Dred Scott decision, was formulated in response to demands by free Blacks in the era between the Revolution and the 1856 decision.<sup>7</sup> The decision noted that conceding that Blacks were citizens would include the “right to keep and carry arms wherever they went.”<sup>8</sup>

There is thus a long history of efforts to keep weapons out of the hands of Black men. The regulations designed to do so often came in the aftermath of slave revolts or uprisings. After the Haitian Revolution, which reverberated throughout the Atlantic slave world, the first U.S. official to take control of the new American possession of Louisiana ceded to the planters’ demands to disarm existing Black militias.

In many states, laws were passed in the aftermath of slave revolts to remove access to guns by free Black men. For example, free Blacks in Baltimore, though subject to licensing rules, had had access to gun ownership.<sup>9</sup> Attempts to restrict that access was understood, by both the whites who sought the restrictions and the Blacks who fought for access, as a question of citizenship and rights.

That connection was further complicated by the double purpose for which guns could be put: self-protection and hunting. Hunting offered food, items for trade and a measure of independence.<sup>10</sup> This quest for autonomy was understood by slave owners who sought to restrict Black men — slave and free — from having guns. Naturally, too, armed Blacks could fight back and defend themselves.

John Brown was one abolitionist who clearly understood this connection and devoted many of his efforts to the arming and training of Black men. One aspect of the fundamental terror that he struck in the hearts of slaveholders was certainly the prospect of armed Blacks who could defend themselves and could aid slaves in running away or preventing recapture by slave patrols.

Black men trained in military tactics could also potentially recruit and train others, no small fear in the uneasy bor-

derlands of Florida and Texas. In the wake of Nat Turner’s rebellion, as one example, the state of Virginia prohibited free Blacks “to keep or carry any firelock of any kind, any military weapon, or any powder or lead.”

Tennessee altered its state constitution in 1834 to specify that the “white freemen of this State have a right to keep and bear arms for their common defense,” while an earlier provision had not specified race. Likewise, the demise of post-Civil War Reconstruction brought the Black Codes and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, which both shared the goal of allowing the white populace to terrorize and police the Black population, including the goal of disarming Blacks.

The enactment of Black Codes throughout the South, limiting the civil rights of the new freedmen, including the right to own firearms, helped to spur passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. Many of its framers hoped that the amendment would require Southern states to extend the protections of the Bill of Rights — including the Second Amendment — to Blacks.

This issue was of particular import in the violence-ridden post-war South. It is also worth noting that at the end of the war, soldiers — including those of the defeated Confederacy — were allowed to return home with their weapons. There was a particular antipathy to the Republican plan to allow newly-freed Blacks to join state militias.

Subsequent decisions by the Supreme Court, most notably in the *Slaughterhouse* cases and in *Cruikshank*, severely limited the radical promise of the post-bellum amendments to the Constitution. Although there is substantial evidence that the Privileges and Immunities Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment was meant to protect the right of individuals to keep and bear arms from infringement by the states, the Supreme Court rejected this interpretation in *United States v. Cruikshank* (1876).<sup>11</sup>

Thus, throughout the 19th century the Supreme Court ruled that the Second Amendment does not bar state regulation of firearms. In *Presser v. Illinois*, the Court reiterated in 1886 that the Second Amendment is “only a limitation upon the power of Congress and the National government, and not upon that of the States.”<sup>12</sup>

Following the Civil War, Union veterans William Conant Church and George Wood Wingate created the National Rifle Association. They had observed that the absence of a powerful military culture in the North meant that Union soldiers were far less effective marksmen than their Confederate counterparts.

This concern was echoed in the 1901 creation of the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice and in the 1903 Civilian Marksmanship Program. This latter program, part of a War Department appropriations bill, reflected a desire to improve military marksmanship and national defense preparedness. Participants in this federally funded program practiced marksmanship using surplus military weapons.

Likewise, concerns about the viability of the militia in the modern period led to the Dick Act of 1903 and the National





Defense Act of 1913. These two acts nationalized the militia and brought it under federal control by creating the National Guard.

As noted above, gun regulations were often used to target “suspect” groups. The 1911 Sullivan law in New York required a license for any weapon small enough to be hidden. Evidence suggests that this law targeted Italian immigrants in New York City.

World War I and the military service of millions of young men brought yet another surge of racial violence in the aftermath of the war. Race riots that broke out in this era are some of the most violent in U.S. history.

Young Black men who had served in the armed forces and experienced unsegregated societies abroad returned home with a determination to live new lives. In reaction, white veterans “led second-era Klan efforts to violently ensure ‘all-American’ racial, religious, and nationalist power.”<sup>13</sup> Black men in uniform provoked particular animus.

Another aspect of the post-WWI culture of the United States was the rise of other forms of reactions against the cultural and social changes wrought by urbanization and the growth of an industrial society. These reactions found expression in the growth of Christian fundamentalism and their networks of radio stations, schools and other institutions, particularly in the aftermath of the 1924 Scopes Trial.<sup>14</sup>

The National Origins Act of 1924, severely restricting Asian and southern and eastern European immigration, was also another manifestation of the fear that white, rural Americans experienced in the face of the sweeping changes taking place in the country.

The 1930s, in response to an increase in organized crime, saw the passage of both the National Firearms Act of 1934, which required taxation on and registration of automatic weapons, and the Federal Firearms Act of 1938.

In the 1939 Supreme Court Case of *United States v. Miller*, a challenge to the National Firearms Act of 1934, the Court ruled that the Second Amendment protected only the citizen’s right to own those firearms that were ordinary militia weapons. This decision held the Act constitutional, and in its reading of the Second Amendment (in conjunction with the Militia Clause of Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution), asserted that “[i]n the absence of any evidence to show that possession and use of a [sawed off] shot gun...has some reasonable relationship to the preservation or efficiency of a well regulated militia, we cannot say that the Second Amendment guarantees the right to keep and bear such an instrument.”<sup>15</sup>

**W**orld War II raised many of the same issues as had WWI: Black men and women, Native Americans, Japanese Americans and many others who fought for the United States fought in segregated units and faced hostility and discrimination.

The end of the war brought often violent confrontations between men in uniform and those desiring to maintain a racial status quo. “Third-era Klansmen,” men who had served in World War II and Korea, “played key roles in the violent opposition to civil rights.”<sup>16</sup>

Today’s paens to Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King that focus on the language of his “I Have a Dream” speech, rather than his work with striking Memphis sanitation workers, elide the violence and brutality of the opposition to

real racial equality in this country — then and now. Watching footage of white policemen standing by as protesters were beaten in Charlottesville last year was eerily reminiscent of so many episodes in the struggle for racial justice in this country.

When it came, once again, to the question of disarming Black men, the calculus is different. The NRA supported the Gun Control Act of 1968, which was certainly designed to remove weapons from the Black Panthers, who had openly displayed firearms.

It was in the 1970s, as noted above, when the NRA turned toward the view that it has increasingly embraced: *any* regulation on guns is an infringement of a constitutional right to the possession of guns. The subsequent Firearm Owners Protection Act of 1986 weakened provisions of the previous act and — responding to the NRA and other efforts — forbade the maintenance of a federal registry of gun ownership.

In 1980, the NRA for the first time endorsed a presidential candidate in Ronald Reagan. He appointed Antonin Scalia, who cast the deciding vote in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, the most important Supreme Court case dealing with the Second Amendment in decades.

There were certainly other forces at work in these years desirous of a change in both the public understanding of the Second Amendment and the law. John Ashcroft, Attorney General under George W. Bush, “took office with an agenda that included changing the Department of Justice’s position on the Second Amendment.”<sup>17</sup>

In *Heller*, the Supreme Court found that the Second Amendment protects an individual right to possess and carry firearms. It also ruled that two District of Columbia provisions, one that banned handguns and a second that required lawful firearms in the home to be disassembled or trigger locked, violate this right.

In arriving at its decision — using an “originalist” approach — the Court engaged in some interesting historical interpretation, citing language from circumstances that did not reflect the broad spectrum of opinion at the time. To cite an example, the Court cited the 1846 case of *Nunn v. State*, an 1846 Georgia case written by Joseph Henry Lumpkin.

Lumpkin, a staunch defender of slavery, struck down a gun law on the basis of the Second Amendment. In citing this case, while failing to explore contemporaneous gun regulations in many northern states, *Heller* moved a view of weapons use forged in the slave culture of the south as the legal norm of the country at the time.

In that period in the South, it was regarded as a question of honor to openly carry weapons and “this enthusiasm for public carry influenced its legal culture.”<sup>18</sup> No doubt, openly carrying weapons also increased the ability of slave patrols to exercise terror on the slave population. Thus, although this conception of the Second Amendment — as we have seen — has a racist history as old as the republic, it was now articulated by the highest court and had thereby given the NRA’s understanding of that history its imprimatur.<sup>19</sup>

This view of the Second Amendment was fertile ground for a growing strain of thinking in American culture. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, a shattering military loss with which the country has yet to come to terms, a “lost cause” narrative had particular appeal to the white power movement. Many veterans “carried the war home” through engagement

in paramilitary activity. In a twist on earlier versions of such movements, the state itself became the enemy.<sup>20</sup>

In many ways, this view of the state found an echo in much of the anti-statist rhetoric at all levels of American society. As the Republican Party began to openly deride the institutions of the republic and Reagan asserted that “the government is the problem,” large sectors of the population grew disaffected from the traditional organs of state: Congress, the presidency, the press, and the military.

For growing numbers of heavily armed white power groups, the events at Ruby Ridge (1992) and in Waco (1993) confirmed the narrative that the federal government was an oppressive occupying power. A fixation on outward enemies has meant that white nationalist and other hate groups in the United States have continued to grow, and the threat that they pose to the country has been generally ignored by the federal government, intelligence agencies, and law enforcement organizations.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, the rise of white power groups is only one part of a larger story about the omnipresence of guns in our society. So pervasive are they, and so potent their connection to ideas about masculinity and power, that it is often difficult for politicians to formulate an effective argument against their possession.

Many people “feel they’ve been the victims of sustained economic violence at the hands of tyrannical governments” of both parties. For many in rural America, on the losing side of globalization and its attendant deindustrialization, “protecting and expanding Second Amendment rights is the only policy that they’ve been able to get politicians to move on. For that reason alone, it’s totemic.”<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately both sides misstate the issues. The Second Amendment was not seen at the time as exclusively guaranteeing an individual right to bear arms as a right distinct from military service. It certainly had little to say about other forms of “gun control,” as it was common at the time for regulations on everything from where one could store gunpowder to who could possess a gun.

Thus, the phrasing is certainly not meant to mean that the right is unrestricted as it is understood in the modern sense. Yet liberals, too, misstate their case when they assert that the Amendment speaks only to a collective right to gun ownership. It was commonly understood at the time that English common law gave one the right to self-defense, and subsequent developments — especially in the 19th century — sharpened this strain of thinking in American culture.

True, for much of American history, the Second Amendment was understood to address a collective right to gun ownership. The NRA’s original motto was “Firearms Safety Education, Marksmanship Training, Shooting for Recreation.” Yet a strain of thinking articulating the idea of gun possession as an individual right, and as a means of protection of the home, has always existed alongside the collective understanding.

Today, the headquarters of the NRA contains this truncated inscription of the Second Amendment: “The Right of the



*War doesn't prepare soldiers for life after war.*

People to Keep and Bear Arms Shall Not be Infringed.” The larger militarization of our culture as well makes gun possession difficult to discuss and an intractable problem to solve.

We live in a country awash with weapons. Surplus military weapons that can no longer be sold to our allies (and enemies) abroad wind up in the hands of gun enthusiasts and local police forces. The post 9-11 arming of the police with military grade weapons is a continuation of a long tradition of surplus

weapons in the hands of civilian forces.

The United States is the most heavily armed society in the world, with 112 guns for every 100 citizens.<sup>23</sup> Almost a hundred people die every day in the United States by gunshot. We do not have access to complete information about the full impact of guns in our culture. The 1996 Dudley Amendment limits academic research into gun violence by controlling funding administered by the Centers for Disease Control: none of the funding can be invested in research that “may be used to advocate gun control.”

In our current political climate then, one might say that the oldest idea of all — that of an individual right to possess a weapon which cannot be taken away from you by the government — has gained new currency. In its newest incarnation, this idea has taken a new turn in its adherents’ insistence that the government has no right to regulate guns at all.

Such a belief signals the loss of a sense of the legitimacy of the government to rule and to regulate the lives of its citizens. Here we see once again the fault line of race in our history. For it was after the election of Barak Obama that this idea and the fear that the government would disarm the populace gained new currency. For adherents of white power ideas, the election of the nation’s first Black president spelled a world turned upside down.

The debate over the meaning of the Second Amendment — as do so many other contemporary debates — functions on multiple levels. On one level, it is a debate, however flawed, about reducing violence in our society. Proponents of forms of gun control who call for more regulation in the aftermath of every mass shooting do, indeed, want to reduce the incidence of gun violence in our society.

On another level, it is of course a debate about who we are as people, who we are as a society, about what our history says about us, and about how we understand public space in American society. The sites of much of the gun violence in our society — public schools and public lands — speak to our inability to come to terms with the human costs of our militarized culture.

The armed takeover of Malheur Wildlife Refuge in Oregon by white men claiming ownership of land, land now deemed to be “public” although once in the hands of indigenous peoples, speaks to the ways in which the government has lost its legitimacy in the eyes of part of the populace. The failure of the federal government to call these actions treasonous speaks as well to the erosion of the government’s own sense of a loss of power.

The contrast of the public treatment of armed white men



on public lands with the treatment of peaceful protesters at the Dakota Access Pipeline site also speaks to the ways in which this debate is — and always has been — racialized. The “right” to “keep and bear arms” for many is the right of white men of all classes to exercise their power and masculinity against all others in society.

We might better call a reckoning with our current history of guns “bringing the war(s) home,” as from the beginning of the republic we have never come to terms with war and its costs. Such a lack of acknowledgment might seem a strange fate for an imperialist power that, first with continental settler colonialism, then with imperial expansion in the Caribbean and Central America and the Philippines, and later as a global force has extended its military might and its destructive tools all over the world.

Yet from the earliest fear of the corrosive impact of paid mercenary soldiers, to Reagan’s assertion that we would help “no country that came to power by the barrel of a gun,” to our current attempt to keep men destroyed by the costs of war from public view, we fail to reckon with the costs of war.

From colonial conflict with Native Americans to the unspeakable violence of slavery to the Revolution, the conflict with the Barbary states, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Civil War, the Spanish American War, World War I, World War II, the Cold War, the Korean War, wars in Central America, the Iraq War, the war in Afghanistan, the war in Serbia, the Second Gulf War, the war in Yemen, the war in Libya, and the war in Syria, we must not imagine that we can live in a world steeped in death and destruction and not pay its costs.

From the outset, these wars have required men to kill, leading to difficulty in their returning to civilian life. In the aftermath of every one of these wars, we have veterans — many of them armed and trained in weapons’ use — who do not take easily to rule by others. We have always feared these men, feared their return to us, but not enough to give up war.

In the 20th century and continuing today, this tendency took on new urgency as we moved to a permanent military footing and a permanent military economy. Weapons production shapes our economy, our society, and our foreign policy. Trump’s boasted sale of \$110 billion of weapons to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is only the latest example of the ways in which military imperatives overtake all other concerns, democratic or humanitarian.

We do not know what to do with all of the weapons that we produce, and thus we are awash in surplus weaponry. These weapons find their way into the hands of all kinds of people. Gun shows and shooting ranges offer one avenue of access. Vast stores of weapons are also the target of large-scale theft; we do not have an effective system for tracking all of the weapons that exist in this country.<sup>24</sup>

We live in a society steeped in a violence that is elided from much of our history. We believe ourselves to be, we want to be, a country that is guided by the “better angels of our nature.” Yet we are, as we have always been, a country unable to free itself from the clutches of our past as a society founded on a particularly potent mix of settler colonialism, slavery, and a messianic sense of purpose.

It is also a violence that is disproportionately borne by the poor and people of color in our society, yet for which we all pay a price. Our increasingly militarized police forces, our

militarized carceral state, militarized borders, and vast military-industrial and financial complex threatens us with ever intensifying carnage.

We end where we began at the outset of this essay: Until the United States can come to terms with our violent history, until we disentangle the ownership of weapons from what it means to be a citizen in this country, we have little hope of solving the contentious debate on the Second Amendment. ■

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## Notes

1. Cornell, *A Well-Regulated Militia*, 149.
2. Reynolds, John Brown: *The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York, 2005); James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York, 1996).
3. See Morton Horowitz, *The Transformation of American Law* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1977).
4. Joanne Freeman, *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2018).
5. Steven Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820* (Baltimore, Maryland, 1987).
6. Martha Jones, *Birthright Citizens: A History of Race and Rights in Antebellum America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 19 How. (60 U.S.) 393 (1857).
9. Jones, *Birthright Citizens*, 102.
10. Jones, 104.
11. *United States v. Cruikshank*, 92 U.S. 542, 553 (1875).
12. *Presser v. Illinois*, 116 U.S. 252, 265 (1886).
13. Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2018), 20.
14. In a recent article on Truthdig, Paul Street, citing Jason Stanley’s *How Fascism Works*, listed some characteristics of our current political culture; many of these— including a loathing of cities and anti-intellectualism— were also hallmarks of particular strains in American culture in the 1920s. See “Signs of Creeping Fascism all Around Us” on Truthdig, November 14, 2018. See Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods* (Basic Books, 2006).
15. *United States v. Miller*, 307 U.S. 174 (1939).
16. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 20.
17. Mark Tushnet, *Out of Range: Why the Constitution Can’t End the Battle over Guns* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.
18. Saul Cornell and Eric Ruben, “The Slave-State Origins of Modern Gun Rights,” *The Atlantic*, September 30, 2015.
19. A more recent Supreme Court case addresses the long-standing reluctance of the Court to extend Second Amendment rights to the states through the Fourteenth Amendment; see *McDonald v. City of Chicago*, 561 U.S. 742 (2010).
20. Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 24.
21. Janet Reitman, “State of Denial,” *The New York Times Magazine*, Sunday November 11, 2018: 38-49; 66-68.
22. Quoted in Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2018), 104.
23. Small Arms Survey.
24. See Belew, *Bring the War Home*.



Durbar Mahila Samanway Committee (Sex Workers' Union) marching in May Day 2018 demonstration.

(Re)turn to Marx@200:

## Women's Oppression and Liberation By Soma Marik

DOES KARL MARX have any relevance for today's struggles for women's liberation? Do his theories of society and revolutionary transformation present us with tools that in any way continue to be useful?

These and related questions come up repeatedly — as I will argue — for two very different reasons. I will exclude here the arguments, if they can be called that, of the extreme right, which are opposed to human liberation in any form, from class exploitation, from racial, gender and sexual oppression and discrimination. Rather, my focus is on forces and ideas within what we can call the center and the left.

With the worldwide collapse of older, organized, often large Marxist (or socialist) working class parties, a left-liberal segment became more influential even within the old left. We think of the left's orientation to the Democratic Party in the USA (where no mass workers' party has existed for some 80 years now) — or the example of India where the left, in order to halt the fascist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) [extreme Hindu nationalist — ed.], sees no option but to rely on the rightwing liberal Indian National Congress.

One consequence has been the acceptance of intellectual currents that reject Marxism's contributions to the principles of emancipation. Another consequence of the collapse

of class politics is the rise of an ideology that conceives of the struggle for liberation as separate for each gender, race or other "identity"-based segments of the population. These separate oppressions at best forge moral alliances, rather than an objectively rooted unity.

A secondary but not unimportant reason lies in the creation of an opposite ideological claim that Marxism indeed promotes women's liberation, *Dalit* [lower caste — ed.] and other oppressed people's emancipation, but must be hostile to feminism, *Dalit* (or *Ambedkarite*) politics, etc. as all being variants of "bourgeois/petty-bourgeois politics."

In India in particular, in the name of putting the working class first, this second current is widely present within both the old mainstream left and considerable parts of the far left. We can call this a sort of Marxist Antifeminism. It has both indigenous and international influences.

### Marxist Antifeminism in India

Kanak Mukherjee, one of the first woman members of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in Bengal and a leader of the Communist-led mass women's movement from the end of the 1930s. She later became a key figure in the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPIM) and its women's front, the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), needs to be cited in this connection.

Mukherjee, belonging to an older generation of activists, dismissed feminist ideas and movements for autonomy in

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many of her writings. Her focus was on fighting the Congress as well as the CPI (after the party split in 1964 and she went to join the CPIM), defending the Left Front government in West Bengal from 1977. However, a few remarks scattered through her political essays show Marxist Antifeminism at work. She saw feminism as a homogeneous category, and a movement that set women against men rather than class against class. In *Women's Emancipation Movement in India* (1989), she wrote:

*Now the imperialists are also throwing a challenge to the healthy democratic women's movement. They are propagating the misleading Western "feminist" ideology to misdirect and confuse women of the villages and cities....As against Marxist ideology and its analysis of the women's emancipation movement as an integral part of the people's revolutionary movement and the class struggles of the proletariat, these agencies advocate "party-less" or "above party" "feminist" theories to confuse and disrupt the democratic women's movement. (103)*

In the next paragraph, she sets forth the theoretical positions of the feminist movement as she sees it.

*These feminists, though of various views, pose the woman's question as opposed to men's and hold the patriarchal system of society responsible for the exploitation of women. Thus, they try to divert the class struggle into a struggle between men and women. This breeds hatred in the family, conjugal life and social life, and leads to the isolation of the women's movement from the mainstream of the people's movements.... Some of the leaders of these action groups pose as leftists and criticise the teachings of Marx-Engels-Lenin on women's questions." (Ibid).*

Younger activists, who had to build their organizations while in regular dialogue with the left wing of the feminists, such as Brinda Karat, for many years General Secretary of the AIDWA and now a member of the CPI(M) Politbureau, took a somewhat more nuanced position, but explained the persistence of patriarchal families as a hangover from the ruling class, with no material roots within the toiling people. (Karat, *Survival and Emancipation*, 36-39)

One of the major influences from abroad has been "classist" (class reductionist) forces in the West, especially their material available in English. Here, I do not propose to look at all dimensions, but to mention the example of Tony Cliff's book *Class Struggle and Women's Liberation*. Cliff took the most conservative trends in feminism as representing the norm, then debunked all feminists as some kind of homogeneous force, and went back to Marx, Zetkin, Lenin and others as evidence that he stood with the Marxist tradition.

Cliff's argument against the feminists, taken up in the mid-to late 1980s by some activists in India having connection with the British Socialist Workers Party, included the stance that feminists are wrong in differentiating between men and women even when looking at women's oppression:

"This is not to deny, however, that men behave in certain ways which are oppressive to women.... But the blame should be placed squarely on class society, not on its individual agents. Women's oppression damages the interests of both working women and men." (Cliff, 229)

Elsewhere, Cliff lumps theoretical disputes around violence against women as minor, or issues that divide women from men.

*Many women in the women's liberation movement have consistently focussed on the areas where men and women are at odds — rape, battered women, wages for housework — while ignoring or playing down the areas of struggle where women are more likely to win the support of men — such as opposition to the cuts in hospitals and*

*schools, the right to abortion, and battles at work for equal pay or the right to join a trade union....(T)he women's liberation movement has come to concentrate on where women are weakest. (177-8)*

This implies that fighting too seriously for an end to rape and violence against women should take a very low priority in the agenda of a Marxist party or a Marxist-led women's movement — *an especially appalling position in the context of violence against women in India!* (My own response to Cliff's harnessing of Zetkin to his narrow position appears in my essay "German Socialism and Women's Liberation," 2003.)

## Marxist Antifeminism vs. the Real Tradition

To make sense of Kanak Mukherjee's attacks, it is worth looking at one of her earlier essays, published in a Bengali collection of her writings, Nari Andolonor Nana Katha, titled "*Patitar Paap*." Originally published in 1958 in the women's association journal *Ghare Baire*, it deals with prostitution.

The title sums up her attitude, for *Patita* means "the fallen woman," and *paap* is "sin." Apparently, back in the 1950s there was already some agitation among prostitutes for organizing, to demand better conditions. The essay looks at Engels, at Lenin's dialogue with Zetkin, and at real or supposed achievements in the USSR and China, and discusses existing laws to eradicate prostitution in India.

About the prostitutes themselves and their demands there is a brief statement: "What the fallen women themselves are saying or doing is not important. ... The first demand of the fallen woman is the demand for freedom from her fallen life. What they want is unimportant, the real issue is what we want for them and what we are doing about it."

Rather than a long polemic over this, I want to move to Marx, at a very young age, provides with a different approach. In *The Holy Family*, there is a considerable discussion of gender in the context of Marx's critique of Szeliga's analysis of the French socialist Eugene Sue's novel *The Mysteries of Paris*.

For Sue, the emphasis is on a questionable altruism shown by the German Prince Rudolph. In Marx's discussion, we find an examination of Fleur de Marie, a Paris prostitute, and Louise Morel, a sexually exploited servant of a bourgeois man. Marx's description of Fleur de Marie rejects the specious philanthropy of Sue, which later affects the attitude of Mukherjee.

*We meet Marie surrounded by criminals, as a prostitute in bondage to the proprietress of the criminals' tavern. In this debasement she preserves a human nobleness of soul, a human unaffectedness and a human beauty that impresses those around her, raise her to the level of a poetical flower of the criminal world and win for her the name of Fleur de Marie. (The Holy Family, in Marx and Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 4, 168)*

It is not an abstract moralism by which Marx judges Fleur de Marie, but by how her actions affect herself and others. Pointing to the hardships of working class women and girls, Marx rejects the priest's description of Fleur de Marie as sinful. "The priest had made up his mind concerning Marie's penance; in his own mind he has already condemned her." (172)

As members of the proletariat have no way to survive but to sell their labour power, when there is not enough other work the women are forced to sell their bodies to survive. Marx sees her entering the nunnery as an illusory consolation which focuses on the mind at the expense of the body. Christian values forced her to focus on supposed crimes that

she had committed, ignoring her reality.

Marx's sharp remark is: "Convent life does not suit Marie's individuality — she dies. Christianity consoles her only in imagination, or rather her Christian consolation is precisely the annihilation of her real life and essence — her death." (176)

It could be argued that Kanak Mukherjee did not ask that all prostitutes be made to enter convents, whether by persuasion à la Rudolph or by the force of law. However, this is precisely the point — that her condemnation of the prostitutes as "fallen women" willy nilly pushes her in the same direction as Sue and Szeliga.

It is the moral degradation of the prostitute, not the society that has produced her, that Mukherjee's article ends up stressing. Marx's view of what she had done is put in other terms:

*The memory of the catastrophe of her life — her selling herself to the proprietress of the criminals' tavern — puts her in a melancholy mood. It is the first time since her childhood that she has recalled these events.... Finally, contrary to Christian repentance, she pronounces on the past the human sentence, at once Stoic and Epicurean, of a free and strong nature: "Enfin ce qui est fait, est fait." ["In the end, what is done is done." — ed.] (MECW v. 4, 169)*

Coming from Marx, the identification Epicurean needs to be understood as "materialist." And selling herself is caused by her need to survive. So she "considers her situation not as one she has freely created, not as the expression of her own personality, but as a fate she has not deserved." (169)

The voice of Fleur de Marie should be given due attention: instead of a sweeping assertion that what she wants does not matter, what matters is what "we" (the liberators from above) want to do to her. It is ironic that a fictional Prince Rudolph is to appear in a Marxist garb over a century after Marx wrote.

Marx's attitude to the issue is clear. He is not glorifying the initial condition of Fleur de Marie, when she certainly did not voluntarily choose to become a prostitute. But the alternative life she was given was far worse, as Marx saw it, for she was made to atone for something for which she was not responsible. To treat the prostitute as a fallen woman is to put the spotlight on her, and not on the social system that repressed her.

## Marx and Engels on the Family

It is also worth looking at both *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto*, for the way Marx and Engels look at the family. Rejecting the possibility of looking at the family as a unit through the ages, they stressed (this was of course a joint work) that one has to look at the historical context, particularly the social relations involved in production.

*One cannot speak of the family "as such." Historically, the bourgeois gives the family the character of the bourgeois family, in which boredom and money are the binding link, and which also includes the bourgeois dissolution of the family, which does not prevent the family itself from always continuing to exist. ... Where the family is actually abolished, as with the proletariat...the concept of the family does not exist at all, but here and there family affection based on extremely real relations is certainly to be found. In the eighteenth century the concept of the family was abolished by the philosophers, because the actual family was already in process of dissolution at the highest pinnacles of civilisation. The internal family bond, the separate components constituting the concept of the family were dissolved, for example obedience, piety, fidelity in marriage, etc; but the real body of the family, the prop-*

*erty relation, the exclusive attitude in relation to other families, forced cohabitation ... (MECW v. 5, 180-81)*

The argument is repeated, with more rhetorical sweep, in *The Communist Manifesto*: "On what foundation is the present family, the bourgeois family, based? On capital, on private gain. In its completely developed form this family exists only among the bourgeoisie. But this state of things finds its complement in the practical absence of the family among the proletarians, and in public prostitution."

As with much of the *Manifesto*, there is a compression involved. What they seem to be arguing is that the family in bourgeois society needs to be viewed distinctly from pre-capitalist families. This family, in its ideal form, existed among the bourgeoisie, while the absence of ownership of the means of production meant that in practice such a family tended to be absent in the working class.

In the later writings of Marx we can certainly see that he recognized the existence of families among workers in practice. But there is no idealization of the family. There is no need to argue that Marx had arrived at positions developed by feminists. There is certainly no elaboration of the concept of patriarchy. What I am getting at is that Marx is simply pointing out that there is no universal form of family across time.

*The German Ideology* also provides some evidence of a much more complex attitude to women's supposed inferiority. The discussion on the gender division of labour points out that the natural division that exists due to women's different biology turns into something social, with wife and child being described as the first slaves of the husband.

Since this original "natural" division is seen in societies that have underdeveloped productive forces, social and productive development would render the division no longer necessary. At the same time, since women are "enslaved" (whether this was based on Marx's class analysis and/or whether it was a linguistic turn of phrase), this suggests that technological improvement alone would not lead to women's improvement. Rather, a suggestion exists that they would have to fight for their emancipation.

In an essay of 1846, to which Michael Löwy draws attention in his *The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx*, Marx looks at family-based and other "private" oppressions. Löwy argues that the essay "amounts to a passionate protest against patriarchy, the enslavement of women, including bourgeois women, and the oppressive nature of the bourgeois family." Löwy adds that there are few things like this in Marx's later writings.

Talking about the French Revolution and its aftermath, Marx wrote:

*The revolution has not overthrown all tyrannies; the evils of which the arbitrary authorities were accused persist in the family, where they cause crises analogous to those of revolutions. (MECW v.4: 604)*

## Marx and Feminism

This is not to argue that Marx had prefigured every progressive step made by feminism. However, it suggests that Marx's ideas very often put him closer to many feminist arguments and in opposition to Marxist Antifeminism. The argument that a political and economic revolution might not automatically mean the overthrow of all other oppressions, including particularly gender oppression, is one that would be made by socialist-feminists and Marxist-feminists about the Russian and other revolutions.





Tea women workers in Munnar, India. They bypassed the bureaucratic and male-dominated union and went out on strike in 2015.

Kanak Mukherjee's book *Women's Emancipation Movement in India* ends with a quotation from Lenin. It is in fact a good argument that Lenin makes, since he talks about the communist women's movement as a mass movement, not only of the proletariat, but of all the exploited and oppressed. (Mukherjee, 107-8)

What Mukherjee does not say, and what Karat would hesitantly admit in her book, is that the overthrow of capitalism did not mean gender equality. "With the general erosion of the commitment to socialist theory by ruling communist parties in many of these countries over a period of time, the conscious ideological and cultural struggle against patriarchal attitudes, which were the hallmark of the early years of the Bolshevik revolution, all but disappeared." (Karat, 44).

The problem, however, was not simply the absence of "ideological and cultural struggles," but the failure to understand the material roots of sexism. This is where in recent times Marxist-feminists have taken important strides forward, but basing themselves firmly on Marx.

## Identity, Intersectionality and Class Struggle

Anti-Marxist arguments sometime come from those who claim identity politics, regarding each kind of oppression in itself as a distinct entity. My argument is that each of these oppressions are real. But they cannot be solved (a) within capitalist society, or (b) each on its own as if there were no connections. Thus, *Dalit* caste and gender are both real classifications. As the #MeToo campaign in India has thrown up, sexual harassment of *Dalit* women is rarely acknowledged.

Ruth Manorama, speaking at a meeting in late October, stressed the need to speak about the sexual harassment of *Dalit* women, which has been ignored for hundreds of years. Cynthia Stephen, writing about NGOs in *Tamil Nadu*, points out that when she protested against an abuser (who had abused another person, not herself) she was thrown out. She

notes:

*Information was shared by others, not by me, to the funders of the organisation where I worked about the various wrongdoings of the executive director and the board members. But as far as I know, they did nothing to intervene at the time or maybe they chose to believe his lies and nobody asked me for my side of the story. Was it because I was seen as a Dalit woman and therefore one whose opinion did not matter"? (<https://bit.ly/2TgIUgn>)*

One way of dealing with these problems is to create a hierarchy, deciding that certain oppressions take priority. This is what Antifeminist Marxism does in a way, arguing about class first, others later. Reversing the signs, this is what is sometimes done by anti-Marxist critics.

Marxist-feminists have been in the forefront of a new analysis. From Lise Vogel and a small number of others to Tithi Bhattacharya in recent times, a line of argument has been developed, stressing that Marx's analytical tools and his own discussions in *Capital* and elsewhere can be extended.

Workers are sustained their paid and unpaid labor, which includes the care of workers, themselves as well as the care of the non-working members of the working-class family (the elderly, the children, the sick). Their survival ensures the replacement of their generation of workers by the next. This has been called social reproduction theory.

In the essay "How Not to Skip Class," Tithi Bhattacharya writes: "Instead of the complex understanding of class historically proposed by Marxist theory, which discloses a vision of insurgent working class power capable of transcending sectional categories, today's critics rely on a highly narrow vision of a 'working class' in which a worker is simply a person who has a specific kind of job."

Bhattacharya follows closely Marx's analysis of capitalism, and stresses, not that he had made all the connections, but that within his analysis there is scope for its expansion to a full-fledged social reproduction theory. Bhattacharya points

out that workplace struggles are not the sole form in which class struggles are fought out.

Workplace struggles thus have two irreplaceable advantages: one, they have clear goals and targets; two, workers are concentrated at those points in capital's own circuit of reproduction and have the collective power to shut down certain parts of the operation. . . . But let us rethink the theoretical import of extra-workplace struggles, such as those for cleaner air, for better schools, against water privatization, against climate change, or for fairer housing policies. These reflect, I submit, those social needs of the working class that are essential for its social reproduction. They also are an effort by the class to demand its "share of civilization." In this, they are also class struggles. (Viewpointmag.com, October 31, 2015.)

Bhattacharya, as well as David McNally in "Intersections and Dialectics: Critical Reconstructions in Social Reproduction Theory," his essay in a volume *Social Reproduction Theory* (2017) edited by Bhattacharya, both argue that intersectionality theory leaves unexplained the potential for a unified theory of oppression and exploitation.

Nonetheless, whether we look at the context of intersectionality theory in the USA where Black Feminism arose as a response to exclusions, or to its current applications in India where both *Dalit* women and Queer activists have been talking about it as a response to their exclusions from the "mainstream," I would argue that we cannot treat intersectionality as a failed framework.

Patricia Hill Collins had argued that oppressions should be seen as a single, historically created system. There do indeed exist multiple layers of oppression, and unless the specially oppressed and their conditions are understood and they have their own voice, one can collapse into the Cliff-type position where those points where men are "willing" to help must be foregrounded, while uncomfortable issues like rape and assault should be pushed to the rear.

Intersectional politics of oppressed social groups is not necessarily revolutionary. But neither is it reactionary. What is called "identity politics" involves struggles of different social groups. Intersectional identity politics is a step to recognising that it is possible to be oppressed in one context and privileged/oppressor in another.

*Dalit* women in recent times have challenged the #MeToo campaign in India, not because they are misogynists but because they feel it is focussing excessively, or even solely, on upper caste, comfortably placed women, ignoring much more systematic sexual harassment and sexual violence perpetrated on *Dalit* women.

When recently one queer activist made a Facebook post expressing happiness that the #MeToo campaign was showing that heterosexual women could also be facing trouble, most other queer activists took strong exception.

Intersectionality is therefore an awareness that there is not one homogeneous, simplified exploiter beating in the same way upon all the downtrodden. And it is an attempt to raise the awareness that unless the struggle for social



January 2019 Calcutta (Kolkata) protest of passage of the Transgender Bill, an attempt to discipline and regulate transgender people. Militant sections of the movement are protesting the 2018 bill.

progress consciously incorporates all the oppressions, they can never be overcome in some automatic manner. The struggle for empowerment and representation of one oppressed group can even further the oppression of another oppressed group if it does not act self-critically with regard to its own tactics and rhetoric.

Intersectionality may not lead to revolutionary directions. But the concept of the proletariat as a "universal class" in Marx suggests how Marx also provides a possible link between class struggle and intersectionality. If the emancipation of the proletariat is not possible without the emancipation

of all the oppressed, this needs to be understood, not as an automatic function of an ideal proletarian revolution, but as the process where multiple oppressions are seen, addressed, and given proper representation.

For example, it might mean the need for building mass working class organizations where women, *Dalits*, *Dalit* women, queers, are represented in the program, in the organization, and in the leadership in increasingly growing numbers.

So we need to see that Marx's method provides us with the tools to integrate different oppressions and shows how capitalism binds them together. Intersectionality shows us that these distinct oppressions do have autonomous dimensions. Today we find that a (re)turn to Marx has a lot to do with the pressure of concrete struggles.

If we did not acknowledge this, we might again turn to a wooden Marxism that would reduce class to abstract, casteless, raceless, genderless humans who simply sell their labor power at the marketplace. Marxist theory and practice must move forward, not back. ■

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Marx for Today:

## A Socialist-Feminist Reading By Johanna Brenner



Mujeres Grabando Resistencia

CONSIDERING HIS WORK as a whole, Marx had little to say directly about women's oppression or the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism.<sup>1</sup> And some of what he had to say was, well, misguided. Yet Marxist feminists have drawn on his thought to create a distinctive approach to understanding these issues.<sup>2</sup>

Marxist feminists begin, where Marx does, with collective labor. Human beings must organize labor socially in order to produce what we need to survive; how socially necessary labor is organized, in turn, shapes the organization of all of social life. In *The German Ideology*, Marx articulated this foundational starting point:

*The fact is, therefore, that definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations. Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production. The social structure and the State are continually evolving out of the life-process*

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*of definite individuals, but of individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people's imagination, but as they actually are; i.e. as they act, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will. (MECW 5:37)*

When Marx refers to individuals who are productively active in a definite way, he is thinking primarily about the production of material goods. Marxist feminists expand the notion of socially necessary labor to include that part of collective labor that meets individual needs for sustenance and daily renewal as well as birthing and rearing the next generation.

The term "social reproduction" has been developed to refer to this labor.<sup>3</sup> By social reproduction is meant the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life on a daily basis and inter-generationally.

Social reproduction involves various kinds of socially necessary work — mental, physical and emotional — aimed at meeting historically and socially, as well as biologically, defined needs and, through meeting these needs, maintaining and reproducing the population.

Among other things, social reproduction includes how food, clothing and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, how the maintenance and socialization of children is accomplished, how care of the elderly and infirm is provided, how adults receive social and emotional support, and how sexuality is experienced. From this starting point, we can see how gender and gender relations — such as a gender division of labor — are social, historical constructs, embedded in structures of social reproduction.

Actually existing capitalist societies each have their own histories and trajectories of change, and gender relations are structured across a diverse terrain. While recognizing this complexity, socialist-feminists have drawn on Marx's work to analyze how patriarchal relations work in capitalist societies. By going back to Marx's texts, I want to highlight some aspects of this socialist-feminist theoretical framework.

### Social Reproduction and Gendered Division of Labor

That we speak of production on the one hand and social reproduction on the other is, in part, an artifact of both the (masculinist) development of Marxist thought and the nature of the capitalist mode of production. In capitalism, the work done in households, although crucial to the reproduction of human beings, is separated off from the production and circulation of commodities. In comparison, with the exception of slavery, in pre-capitalist class societies, households organized

through marriage and kinship were the basic unit for organizing the production of material goods as well as human care.

As Marx pointed out, in capitalist production commodities (including commodified services) are both use values and exchange values. (MECW 35:45-46) That is, they meet a need (otherwise there would be no point in making them); but they are not produced in order to meet needs. Rather, they are produced to generate surplus value — or profit.

From the point of view of the production of use values, waged and unwaged labor form a unified process which has, as its end result, the reproduction of human beings. The separation of what is, from the point of view of production of use values, an integrated process into two different types of labor (commodified and uncommodified) is a result of capitalist class relations of production, not a universal fact of human social life.

This separation parallels the emergence of divisions between the public and private spheres, between family and work, between the state and the economy. These are also a hallmark of capitalist societies. These double separations — economy/household and economy/state — have shaped the history of gender relations and women's struggles to change them within capitalist societies.

Until now, all known systems of social reproduction have been based on a gendered division of labor (albeit sometimes quite rigid, at other times more flexible). Although this pattern appears to be mandated biologically — by the physical requirements of procreation and the needs of infants — the distribution of the work of social reproduction among families, communities, markets, states and between women and men has varied historically. This variation can be analyzed, at least in part, as the outcome of struggles around class and gender, struggles that are often about sexuality and emotional relations as well as political power and economic resources.

In societies that preceded capitalism, property rights were vested in male household heads and formed the basis of patriarchal authority — literally the rule of the fathers. For capitalist class relations to emerge, this system of property rights had to be overthrown. The forcible legal and extra-legal processes through which men were deprived of their property and turned into wage laborers threatened to undermine this patriarchal system — at least for the working class. Observing the extreme exploitation of women and children in the 19th century factories, Marx argued in *Capital*, Vol. I:

*However terrible and disgusting the dissolution, under the capitalist system, of the old family ties may appear, nevertheless, modern industry, by assigning as it does an important part in the process of production, outside the domestic sphere, to women, to young persons and to children of both sexes, creates a new economic foundation for a higher form of the family and of the relations between the sexes... Moreover, it is obvious that the fact of the collective working group being composed of individuals of both sexes and all ages, must necessarily, under suitable conditions, become a source of humane development; although in its spontaneously developed, brutal, capitalistic form, where the labourer exists for the process of production, and not the process of production for the labourer, that fact is a pestiferous source of corruption and slavery. (MECW vol. 35:492-493)*

Although Marx was vague about how this higher form of family and relations between the sexes would be constituted, he was quite clear in his critique of the bourgeois family where male property owners continued to hold sway over

their wives and children.

*But you communists would introduce community of women, screams the whole bourgeoisie in chorus. The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women. He has not even a suspicion that the real point aimed at is to do away with the status of women as mere instruments of production. (MECW 6: 502)*

Marx insisted that there was no “natural” or “transhistorical” family form. Thus, he argued, in *Capital* Vol. I, “It is, of course, just as absurd to hold the Teutonic-Christian form of the family to be absolute and final as it would be to apply that character to the ancient Roman, the ancient Greek, or the Eastern forms which, moreover, taken together form a series in historical development.” (MECW 35:492).

While Marx never developed his analysis of this historical evolution, his notes on the family in pre-capitalist societies point to a more dialectical approach than that taken by Engels, for whom the introduction of private property determines the “world historical defeat of the female sex.” For example, Marx points to the simultaneous emergence of hierarchical rank and men's collective control over women (as captives/slaves) in clan societies prior to the development of private property. (Brown 2013)

Marx was in one sense right about the long-run possibilities for challenging patriarchal family relations that inhere in women's access to wage labor. However, his critique of exploitative employment, while exposing the destruction of women's and children's health and well-being, also drew on ideals of feminine virtue that were central to the “separate spheres” gender ideology of his age — thus the reference to the “corrupting” influence of factory work under capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

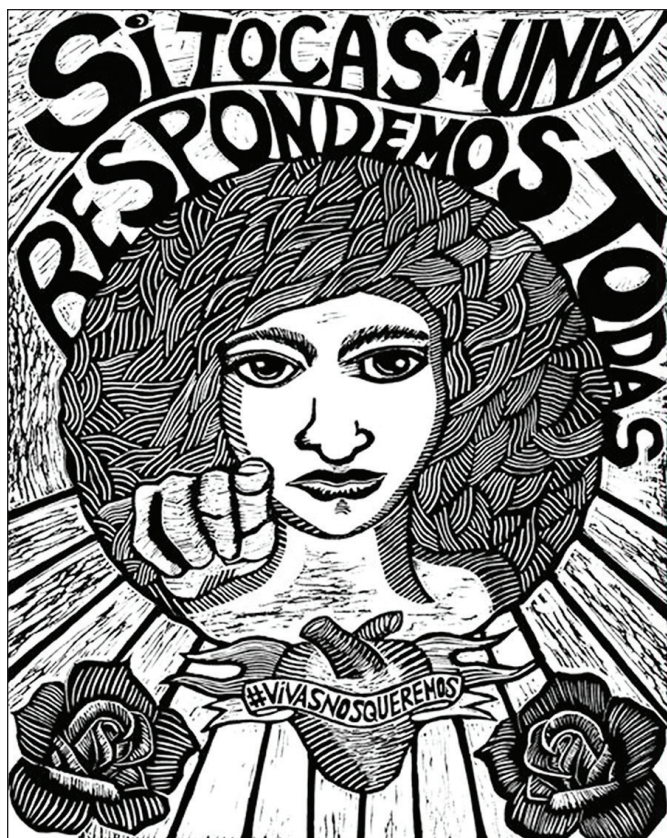
Marx tended to conflate physical and moral health in his scathing critiques of 19th century working conditions, and reserved special condemnation for instances where gender differences were undermined, as in his selection of this quote from a commission report in *Capital* Vol. I:

*The greatest evil of the system that employs young girls on this sort of work consists in this... They become rough, foul-mouthed boys, before Nature has taught them that they are women... they learn to treat all feelings of decency and of shame with contempt... Their heavy day's work at length completed, they put on better clothes and accompany the men to the public houses. (MECW 35: 467)*

An even more important problem with Marx's analysis is that he does not fully incorporate the sheer amount of caring labor required for human survival, and insofar as he does pay attention tends to assume that it is naturally women's work. Marx occasionally indicates the importance of women's domestic work, as, for example, in *Capital*, Vol. I describing the disastrous consequences for the family (and the increased profit for the employer) in the employment of women and children alongside men:

*Compulsory work for the capitalist usurped the place, not only of the children's play, but also of free labour at home within moderate limits for the support of the family. The value of labour-power was determined, not only by the labour time necessary to maintain the individual adult labourer but also by that necessary to maintain his family. Machinery, by throwing every member of that family on to the labour-market, spreads the value of the man's labour-power over his*





A graphic by Mujeres Grabando Resistencia for a campaign to defend women against femicide: "If you touch one, we will all respond."

whole family. (MECW 35:398-399)

Marx goes on to argue that because the family must rely more on purchasing commodities rather than domestic work, "[t]he cost of keeping the family increases, and balances the greater income." Increasing the number of wage earners does not raise but lowers the family's standard of living, because "economy and judgment in the consumption and preparation of the means of subsistence becomes impossible." In other words, the value inherent in women's domestic skills is lost.

During the U.S. Civil War, which disrupted the cotton trade, textile workers in England suffered massive layoffs. Here, Marx argues, the women operatives "had time to cook. Unfortunately the acquisition of the art occurred at a time when they had nothing to cook. But from this we see how capital, for the purposes of its self-expansion, has usurped the labour necessary in the home of the family." (MECW 35:399).

Marx thus identified a central contradiction of capitalism — that although capital depends on the reproduction of labor power, the demand for profit threatens to undermine the reproduction of laborers themselves. Marx captured this conundrum in his famous ironic comment in *Capital*/Vol. I: "The maintenance and reproduction of the working-class is, and must ever be, a necessary condition to the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave its fulfillment to the labourer's instincts of self-preservation and of propagation." (MECW 35:572).

Labor power differs in a fundamental way from other factors of production. The capitalist who invests in machinery can be reasonably sure to get the fruits of his investment. Indeed, as a rule, capitalists must invest to raise productivity in order to cut costs and compete. In contrast, the capitalist has

no hold over the children of his current employees and so is reluctant to pay a wage that can support them. There is thus a tendency toward pushing wages below the bare minimum:

*In the chapters on the production of surplus-value it was constantly pre-supposed that wages are at least equal to the value of labour-power. Forcible reduction of wages below this value plays, however, in practice too important a part, for us not to pause upon it for a moment. It, in fact, transforms, within certain limits, the labourer's necessary consumption-fund into a fund for the accumulation of capital ... If labourers could live on air they could not be bought at any price. The zero of their cost is therefore a limit in a mathematical sense, always beyond reach, although we can always approximate more and more nearly to it. The constant tendency of capital is to force the cost of labour back towards zero. (Capital Vol. I, MECW 35:595-596)*

From this perspective, the capacity of the working class to reproduce itself depends on the working class itself — on the level and extent of class struggle. Through struggle over the length of the working day, over wages, over the conditions of work, over the extent of the welfare state and other public services, working-class people have wrenched from capitalist employers the means to care for themselves and their children.

At the same time, the forms these struggles took — how working-class men and women defined their goals, organized their forces, developed their strategies — were shaped by institutionalized relations of power and privilege formed around race, gender, sexuality and nationality. In particular, working-class women's responsibilities for caregiving, and the conditions under which they do this work, have often disadvantaged them in relation to men within both informal and formal arenas of political contestation and decision-making.

On the other hand, women find a ground for respect, authority and power in their care responsibilities. And where women cooperate across households in order to accomplish their work in social reproduction, they create the social basis for collective action. Women's location in the labor of social reproduction, then, is a resource for resistance as well as a source of disempowerment.

By undermining older forms of individual patriarchal control over women's labor within family households, capitalist expansion has opened up possibilities for women's political self-organization — but the organization of social reproduction in a capitalist economy where millions are, from the point of view of capitalist employers, nothing more than a "surplus population," constitutes the basis for new forms of women's oppression.

Some feminists have named this a shift from private to public patriarchy, because it is based in the first instance on men's collective access to public power rather than on their direct control over household members through property ownership. The question remains, however, why are men able to sustain greater access to public power, given that bourgeois democracy at first in principle and, through decades of feminist struggle eventually in fact, confers equal citizen rights on men and women?

Compelling answers to this question have been developed by feminists who start from the observation that discourses of gender difference are central to the constitution and legitimation of political power.<sup>5</sup> Although discourses of gender difference certainly have an effect, from a Marxist feminist standpoint, we would add that ideas do not sustain themselves

without some grounding in everyday experience.

This was of course one of Marx's great insights when describing the "fetishism of commodities." That relationships between people come to be seen as relationships between things is a reflection of the wage relation in commodity production. This is not a "false consciousness" in the sense of ideas imposed by cultural and social forces; rather, it is a worldview that expresses, or is consonant with, actual experience under the relations imposed by the commodity form.

In the same way, to understand how male domination sustains itself in any given moment, we have to look for the underlying social relations that confer a logic on, make sensible and even productive, discourses of gender difference.

The resistance of capitalist employers to investing in the reproduction of labor power, competition among workers, the individualizing pressures of the wage form itself, all push in the direction of privatizing rather than socializing caregiving work. But so long as caregiving remains a private responsibility of households whose members must engage in substantial hours of both waged and unwaged labor, the gender division of labor will retain a compelling logic.

Of course, individual and family survival strategies based in a gender division of labor are not simply the outcome of rational responses by men and women to material difficulties. They also reflect women's and men's interests and desires which are shaped socially and culturally as well as economically.<sup>6</sup>

## Class Relations and Social Reproduction

Three other features of the capitalist system that Marx identified are helpful to us in thinking about how social reproduction — and the gender division of labor within it — have come to be organized and changed over time.

First is the drive toward commodification that arises from capitalist competition and the search for new arenas for profit-making. Here again, we see the two-sided nature of capitalist expansion — in enabling challenges to patriarchal forms, and at the same time limiting what those challenges can accomplish.

As capitalism penetrates all areas of human activity, use values are turned into commodities — things to be bought and sold rather than given, bartered or produced for one's own use. The conversion of use values into exchange values (commodities) ties people more firmly to the capitalist economy, because in order to consume one has to earn.

On the other hand, ever-expanding possibilities for consumption allow and encourage new forms of individual identification and self-expression. As Rosemary Hennessy points out, in the early 20th century:

*(S)tructural changes in capitalist production that involved technological developments, the mechanization and consequent deskilling of work, the production boom brought on by technological efficiency, the opening of new consumer markets, and the eventual development of a widespread consumer culture...displaced unmet needs into new desires and offered the promise of compensatory pleasure, or at least the promise of pleasure in the form of commodity consumption...This process took place on multiple fronts and involved the formation of newly desiring subjects, forms of agency, intensities of sensation, and economies of pleasure that were consistent with the requirements of a more mobile workforce and a growing consumer culture. (Hennessy 2000: 99)*



We Want to be Alive: "Has raping me made you more of a man?"

Mujeres Grabando Resistencia

The spread of consumerism, wage labor, urbanization, the decline of small businesses and the related rise of new professions whose practitioners were a driving force toward state regulation of bodies (e.g. medicine, public health, social work, psychology) all laid the basis for a reorganization of sexuality and family life, particularly in the middle class. Older patriarchal norms of motherhood, marriage and sexuality were overturned, but replaced by a heteronormative regime that re-inscribed the gender division of labor.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of the 20th century, intensified commodification, as Alan Sears argues, had not only generated the spaces of open lesbian and gay existence, but also consolidated gay visibility around a class and race specific identity that relies predominantly on the capacity to consume. (Sears 2005: 92-112)

The more life becomes organized around the production and consumption of commodities, the more people are encouraged/allowed to regard every aspect of their humanity as a potential for making money. The logic of possessive individualism and the commodification of labor power that is its foundation creates a powerful drive toward regarding affection, sexuality, and even biological reproductive capacities as commodities that can be bought and sold.

As Marx and Engels wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, describing the spread of capitalist social relations: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify." (MECW 6: 487)



The infinitely repeated counterposition of modernity and tradition, culture and nature, sacred and profane in contemporary political discourses revolves around the dualism between exchange value and use value — between that which can or should be sold and that which cannot or should not be.

There is no way out of this dualism, and therefore out of the debate, so long as the conditions under which people possess their bodily capacities are governed by the scarcity and insecurity of life under capitalism. In a context of coercion, which is always present so long as people are separated from their means of survival, it is difficult to distinguish labor that is meaningful and freely chosen from that which is not.

The commodification of procreation (not all of which requires new reproductive technologies) offers new fields for profit-making, while also expanding access to biological parenthood for new groups: gay men (e.g. egg “donation”/surrogacy), lesbians (e.g. sperm banks) and infertile heterosexual couples (e.g. surrogacy, *in vitro* fertilization). Commodification of procreation undermines ideals of motherhood as a naturally mandated identity and challenges religious and biologically based legitimations of patriarchal family relations, replacing them with contractual norms of choice and consent.

At the same time, commodification of procreation also opens up new possibilities for generating profit through the exploitation of women’s reproductive capacities (e.g. in surrogate pregnancy and egg donation), while defining women’s access to these new forms of earning income to be their right as “free” wage earners.<sup>8</sup>

A second feature of capitalist production relations that shapes the organization of social reproduction and the gender division of labor is capitalist control over the work process. As Marx points out, insofar as workers control important aspects of the production process they have a basis for resistance; therefore, capitalist employers seek to minimize workers’ control through deskilling and through supervision.

In *Capital* Vol. I, Marx distinguishes between the coordination required for a complex cooperative labor process and the very different work of control necessitated by the capitalist character of that process, which creates an “unavoidable antagonism between the exploiter and the living and labouring raw material he exploits.” (MECW 35: 336).

He goes on to say, “If then the control of the capitalist is in substance two-fold by reason of the two-fold nature of the process of production itself — which on the one hand is a social process for producing use values, on the other a process for creating surplus value — in form that control is despotic.” (MECW 35: 337)

Managerial strategies for controlling labor create, incorporate and reproduce relations of power and privilege organized by race, gender, nationality and sexuality (Burawoy 1979; Munoz 2008). Processes of gendering, racializing, and sexualizing bodies and identities, embedded in capitalist management, take up and reinforce hegemonic constructions of gender dualism that are central to the gendered division of labor in social reproduction. At the same time, strategies of working class resistance to managerial power at the workplace and in the broader society also reflect relations of power and privilege organized by race, gender, sexuality, etc. and may constrain management in ways that benefit some workers

at the expense of others. For example, local labor markets, and therefore the wages of different groups of workers, are shaped by political processes and not only economic ones.

The consequence of workers’ loss of control over the ways in which labor is coordinated — and the capitalist drive to extract as much surplus labor as possible — is that the full range of human needs cannot be incorporated into decisions about how production is organized.

In no capitalist society is production organized to take into account, to actively support, and to provide for, the socially necessary labor of care. This work is extensive, highly skilled and labor intensive, even though it is often thought of as unskilled and inherent to feminine nature. Even the most “family friendly” welfare state regimes, such as Sweden, do not intrude substantially on private firms’ employment policies.

A third feature of capitalism is that exploitation takes place through the free exchange of the wage contract, and therefore requires the separation of political and economic power. One of the most important shifts in the organization of social reproduction in capitalist societies over the past century has been the emergence of the welfare state — the expansion of public (government) responsibility for education, healthcare, and childrearing, as well as increased (and often oppressive) state regulation of families, especially those in the vulnerable parts of the working class (e.g. immigrants, oppressed racial/ethnic groups, the poor, single mothers).

Although it is tempting to understand these developments as state managers acting in the longterm interests of the capitalist class — stepping in to guarantee the reproduction of the labor force when the capitalist employers will not — we might instead follow Marx’s lead in focusing our attention on the self-organization of the working class.

In *Capital* Vol. I, describing the victory that enforceable legal limits on the working day represented, Marx sarcastically describes the “conversion” of factory owners and their ideologues to the ideal of regulation following their defeat at the hands of the working class:

*The masters from whom the legal limitation and regulation had been wrung step by step after a civil war of half a century, themselves referred ostentatiously to the contrast with the branches of exploitation still “free” [of regulation]. The Pharisees of “political economy” now proclaimed the discernment of the necessity of a legally fixed working-day as a characteristic new discovery of their “science.” (MECW 35: 300)*

The extent and form of government expansion into social reproduction is the outcome of reform struggles in which middle-class and working-class men and women, not only capitalist employers and state managers, played important roles. As products of struggle, state policies reflect the level and purposes of women’s political self-organization but also the different resources and power available to women and men in different classes and racial/ethnic groups.

Moreover, the terrain on which these groups have engaged is hardly neutral. Developments in the capitalist economy provided political openings and political resources — for example, by drawing women into wage labor — but capitalist class interests also placed constraints on what could be won.

These constraints have been exercised mainly in two ways. First, especially in the liberal market economies, capitalist employers have consistently — and for the most part

successfully — resisted government intrusions on their business practices and significant taxation of their profits. More fundamentally, state managers and legislators are ultimately dependent on economic growth and prosperity, which in turn is controlled by capitalist investors.<sup>9</sup>

By acknowledging these constraints, we can better understand how and why state welfare policies have institutionalized rather than challenged the gender division of labor. For example, in the early 20th century United States, the first government programs to support solo mothers emerged out of a period of intense working-class mobilization and politicization; a broad women's movement that engaged organized women workers and Black clubwomen, but whose activists and leaders were predominately white and middle class/upper class women; and the interventions of new professional groups who offered their expertise to manage, uplift, and assimilate the unruly classes.

In the context of powerful opposition from the employing class and reflecting its constellation of race/class forces, the movement's predominant discourses sought to legitimize government provision by asserting that paid work was detrimental to good mothering. (Mink 1995; Brenner 2000)

## Conclusion

Many contemporary feminist activists and thinkers recognize that gender relations cannot be abstracted from other social relations — of class, race, sexuality, nationality, and so forth. Marx hardly resolved the question of how we might theorize this totality of social relations.<sup>10</sup> Still, his analysis of capitalism as a mode of production provides a fruitful starting point for a feminist theory and practice that might not only understand this totality but also engage in movements that can finally transform it. ■

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## Notes

1. I am very grateful to Nancy Holmstrom, Barbara Laslett, and Marcello Musto for their comments on earlier drafts of this essay and Heather Brown for her critical excavation and examination of Marx's writing on gender and the family.
2. As with any political/intellectual endeavor, Marxist feminism contains a range of approaches. Beyond writers who locate themselves explicitly in Marxist theory, a broader group of socialist feminists draw on Marxist ideas. See, e.g., Nancy Holmstrom (2002); Hennessy (2000); Vogel and Gimenez (2005); Hennessy and Ingraham (1997); Federici (2004); Ferguson (1989); Arruzza (2014).
3. C.f. Brenner (2000); Armstrong and Armstrong (1983); Ferguson (1999); Vogel (2000); Gimenez (2005); Bhattacharya (2017).
4. As Terrell Carver points out, given Marx's antagonism to Victorian social values, he might also be read here as in line with some strains of Victorian feminism (Carver 1998: 229-230).
5. Cf. Scott (1986); drawing on Marx, Teresa Ebert (2005) offers a critique of the "post-modern turn" in feminism.
6. Debates about the origin and reproduction of the household gender division of labor in capitalism have figured largely in Marxist and socialist feminist theorization of women's oppression. For a range of approaches, see Delphy (1984); Mies (1986); Costa and James (1975); Barrett (1980); Federici (2004).
7. In addition to Hennessy, see Laslett and Brenner (1989).
8. Like other industries facing government regulation, high wages (or both), the surrogate pregnancy business is going global (Gentleman 2008).
9. For a classic statement of this argument, see Fred Block's (1980) "Beyond Relative Autonomy: State Managers as Historical Subjects."
10. For a feminist reading of Marx and theorization of the ensemble of social relations see Himani Bannerji (2005) "Building from Marx: Reflections on Race and Class," and see also Cinzia Arruzza, (2014) "Remarks on Gender."

## Who Is Responsible?

A POLITICAL CRISIS has been unfolding in Guatemala since president Jimmy Morales announced last summer he would not renew the mandate of the UN-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala. On September 20, 2018 tens of thousands of Guatemalans participated in a national strike, demanding Morales' resignation.

Guatemala's courts have "formally recognized that the state enacted genocide against the Ixil people" in the 1980s. The late dictator Efraín Ríos Montt (a favorite of the U.S. religious right), was convicted in 2013. But while last September's trial of Ríos Montt's Head of Military Intelligence, José Mauricio Rodríguez Sánchez, reaffirmed the finding of genocide against indigenous people — massacres, sexual violence and forced disappearances — the high court found Rodriguez Sanchez personally "not guilty" in a bitterly divided 2-1 ruling over the fierce dissent of Judge Sara Yoc.

"Why is no one responsible?" demanded Jill Cortez from Rabinal, one of 22 indigenous communities that brought the case to court. Unfortunately Elliot Abrams, John Negroponte, Oliver North and other U.S. architects of the 1980s slaughters in Central America are unavailable for trial. For updates, see [www.nisgua.org](http://www.nisgua.org). ■



## Angela Davis on Women, Culture, and Politics As Relevant as Ever After Thirty Years

By Alice Ragland

ANGELA DAVIS DESERVES a shoutout this Women's History Month, and every month. Active and influential in international freedom struggles for nearly six decades, her speeches and writings have valuable lessons to teach us about the major injustices that we face in this era of heightened racism, xenophobia, and reactionary violence.

*Women, Culture, and Politics*, a compilation of speeches shedding light on struggles that Black women face in a white supremacist, capitalist, imperialist world, was published (NY: Random House) in 1989. Yet Davis's words remain as relevant today as they were back then. They should be revisited by anyone interested in engaging in and learning more about global struggles for justice.

In light of Women's History Month, I recommend three key takeaways from the book that are as necessary today as they were 30 years ago.

1. *The women's movement still needs to take seriously the concerns of poor and working class women of color.*

We are living in an era of #MeToo, #TimesUp, #MuteRKelly, and other movements to bring to light the abuse that women face daily. Pussy hats and women's marches occur against a backdrop of the continued violence and devaluation that women face. Yet even within these movements, race and class biases mute the voices of women of color, including and especially Black women.

Angela Davis warned in 1989 that the women's movement was not as effective as it could be, because white middle-class women failed to focus on the needs of poor Black and Latinx women. And this is largely still the case. Issues that disproportionately have a negative impact on poor women of color, frequently marginalized in discourse on women's equality.

Davis's call to action in *Women, Culture, and Politics* needs to be central to the current women's movement:

"We must begin to create a revolutionary, multiracial women's movement that seriously addresses the main issues affecting

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poor and working-class women. In order to tap the potential for such a movement, we must further develop those sectors of the movement that are seriously addressing issues affecting poor and working-class women, such as jobs, pay equity, paid maternity leave, federally subsidized childcare. . . Women of all racial and class backgrounds will greatly benefit from such an approach."

It's not enough, she argues, for predominantly white middle class women's organizations to simply recruit more women of color, but rather "the particular concerns of women of color must be included in the agenda." (7)

Voices and struggles of women of color need to be central, not peripheral. A higher minimum wage, affordable housing, free healthcare, and ending mass incarceration, environmental racism and police violence are all issues that need to be taken seriously by women in the movement.

2. *The United States is still taking away money from social programs while increasing its*

*budget for organized violence.*

*Women, Culture, and Politics* was published toward the beginning of what we now know as the neoliberal era, which entails the slashing of social welfare programs, privatization of public institutions, outsourcing of jobs, and accelerated, unregulated destruction of the environment in a concerted effort to consolidate and maximize the wealth of the wealthiest individuals on the planet.

Even in 1989, Davis already sees the detrimental impacts of the decimation of social programs and jobs traditionally held by African Americans on their communities — increased poverty and joblessness, food insecurity, lack of healthcare, and extreme health disparities. The increase of the defense budget at the expense of social programs has hurt poor and working class communities across the nation, with African Americans hit particularly hard.

On this topic, Davis warns: "The increasing militarization of the economy is perhaps the most prominent feature of the structur-

al crisis of capitalism.” (86)

“In cities like Chicago, Black youngsters suffer from diseases of malnutrition that

afflict children in the famine areas of Africa, yet school breakfast and lunch programs have been abolished to provide the weapons developers and manufacturers with an unending supply of money.”

(71)

“Instead of providing poor people with adequate food stamps, the corporations that make up the military-industrial complex are awarded giant defense contracts.” (62)

Davis further highlights the ways that unending U.S. military interventions oppress people of color all over the world while domestically, poor and working-class people enlist in the military as a way to make a living or attend college for free, since many of the jobs that those populations traditionally held are now gone.

War-related violence is inflicted on people of color from the Middle East to the global South for the purpose of bolstering U.S. economic domination. Military surplus weapons go back into U.S. ghettos for police forces to inflict additional violence on poor communities of color.

As Davis contends, “we should be...

exposing the connections between the threat to world peace posed by the Pentagon and the escalating domestic attacks on the lives of our people.” (70) A message as real as ever today!

*3. Violence against women is still an issue that needs to be examined as a byproduct of violent social structures.*

The Brett Kavanaugh confirmation and memory of the Clarence Thomas hearings, Harvey Weinstein’s and Bill Cosby’s convictions, the release of #SurvivingR.Kelly, and the calling out of various other high-profile men for sexual attacks have taken place alongside increased discussions about consent on college campuses and #MeToo marches.

As working-class women and women of color are still not receiving the attention as are more affluent white women on this problem, the movement against sexual violence could benefit from Davis’ assessment of the issue as the byproduct of a violent system that needs to be radically transformed. She points to the connections between racism, capitalism, imperialism, and the perpetuation of sexual violence against women.

Davis urges us to think about rape not as a result of an individual personality flaw or a natural characteristic of maleness, but as the consequence of a system based on violent domination. To this point, Davis ques-

tions: “Do men rape because they are men, or are they socialized by their own economic, social, and political oppression — as well as by the overall level of social violence in the country in which they live — to inflict sexual violence on women?” (46)

She also points out the often overlooked reality that imperialism and war are interrelated with rape and violence against women — and the same violent social structures that embolden sexual assault in the United States lead to rampant sexual assault, both inside the military and toward civilian women in occupied areas abroad.

In situations of war and occupation, women’s bodies are used as targets or collateral damage. To further illuminate the connection between rape, fascism, racism and imperialism, Davis says that “Indeed, rape is frequently a component of the torture inflicted on women political prisoners by fascist governments and counterrevolutionary forces. In the history of our own country, the Ku Klux Klan and other racist groups have used rape as a weapon of political terror.” (46)

We live in the aftermath of a genocidal and slaveholding society that produced the rampant rape of Black enslaved women, and its post-slavery continuation when the majority of Black women were only allowed to be employed as domestic workers. The structure of an overtly racist and slaveholding society made this possible, and the current structures of an unequal and violent system continue to enable unfathomable levels of sexual violence against women.

Davis warns that relying on the carceral state will not fix the underlying problems that lead to rape, arguing that “sexual violence can never be completely eradicated until we have successfully effected a whole range of radical social transformations in our country.” (49) ■

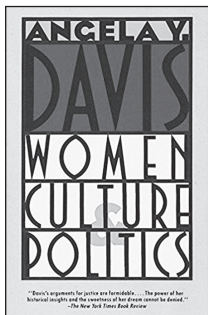
## White Power — cont. page 36

survival of the white race.

But the bodies of women have not been just symbolically powerful: women’s grassroots activism has also been central to the function of both the segregationist and white power movements. *Thus, to treat all women as a political group with shared values and goals is deeply problematic.*

This is not a new insight of course, and although women of color activists and theorists have been arguing this point for a very long time, the multiple divisions that fracture women as a group continue to trouble activism, as demonstrated by the conflicts surrounding the Women’s March.

McRae and Belew’s scholarship offers no easy answers to this problem or others they address, only information that we must consider as we continue to work toward solutions. ■



## The Activism of Angela Davis

FIVE DECADES AGO, a brilliant young African-American professor of philosophy and Communist, Angela Davis was the United States’ most prominent political prisoner, on trial for her life in a notorious frameup murder trial as a supporter of the Black Panther Party. She won that case with brilliant legal defense, and the help of a mass outcry of international and Black community support.

Times change. When the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (BCRI) was intimidated into cancelling the 2019 Fred Shuttlesworth award it had announced for her, the charges hurled at Angela Davis weren’t that “she’s a lifelong revolutionary and a communist,” or “she supported the Panthers,” or “she wants prison abolition!” — all of which are true — but that “she’s antisemitic,” which is absolutely 100% false.

Angela Davis, especially in recent years, is outspoken in support of Palestinian rights and freedom. That’s why she, like many other supporters of the Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions (BDS) campaign opposing Israel’s system of discriminatory laws and daily atrocities in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, are smeared with the “antisemitic” label. Congressional

representatives Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, the first two Muslim women elected to the U.S. Congress, are of course also recent targets of this assault.

The BCRI cancelled Davis’ award when it received a letter of “concern and disappointment” from the local Holocaust Education Center. But another sign of changing times is that the cowardice of BCRI’s leadership blew up in their face.

The Birmingham mayor and city council came to her defense, as did a huge outpouring from civil rights, Palestinian and Jewish voices and organizations, including more than 350 scholars and Civil Rights veterans who issued an Open Letter in support of Angela Davis and Palestinian rights. After a quick turnaround the award was reoffered.

Once upon a time, the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and pro-Palestinian advocacy were supposed to remain separate, and the liberal wing of the “pro-Israel” lobby worked overtime to keep it that way. No longer. Struggles for freedom, self-determination and human rights can’t win in separation from each other. Great respect to Angela Davis for helping spread that message!

— David Finkel



# REVIEW

A Not Distant History:

## White Women and White Power

By Angela E. Hubler

### Mothers of Massive Resistance:

White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy

By Elizabeth Gillespie McRae

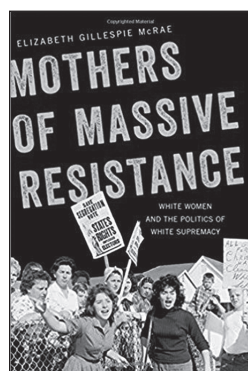
New York: Oxford University Press, 240 pages, \$34.95, hardback.

### Bring the War Home:

The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America

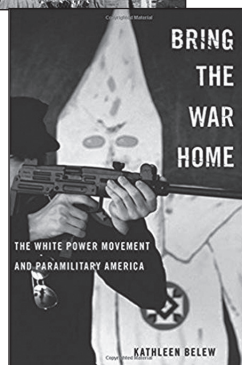
By Kathleen Belew

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 239 pages, \$29.95, hardback.



by civil rights, feminist, LGBTQ and labor activists.

Recent histories of racism in the 20th century by Elizabeth McRae and Kathleen Belew deepen our understanding of this violence. While they focus on different periods and distinct (though connected and overlapping) movements, both stress that the strategies and ideologies employed by



the white supremacist and white power organizations have moved from southern segregationists and the radical right into the mainstream.

Both histories, then, are invaluable to understanding our current political moment. McRae focuses on the

1920s to 1970s, documenting the role of white women in “grassroots resistance to racial equality.” (4)

While the role of Black and white women in the civil rights movement has been documented, scant attention has been accorded to white Southern women’s role in preserving segregation. This omission has obscured, McRae argues, their connections to white conservative women’s political activism nationwide and their role in the development of supposedly “color-blind conservatism,” which stresses “property rights, law and order, good motherhood, and constitutional intent.”

This new language supplied the “wolf” of old-fashioned, explicitly racist politics with sheep’s clothing, and thus “disguised policies supporting racial inequality.” (10)

### White Supremacist Maternalism

White segregationist women asserted a “white supremacist maternalism,” demanding segregation as a parental right based on the claim that because integration “eroded their ability to secure the benefits of white supremacy for their children it compromised their ability to be good mothers.” (14)

McRae persuasively argues that while the explicitly racist language of the early 20th century gave way in the anti-busing movement in Boston and elsewhere (to which she devotes a chapter), to demands for parental choice and control over children’s education, property rights and hostility to governmental intrusion, the goal of the movement was unchanged: *to maintain racial segregation*.

McRae organizes her historical analysis in terms of “real or perceived threats to racial segregation.” (10) In the interwar period, she says, the threat was understood to be “apathy,” a failure to grasp the constant labor needed to maintain it. This apathy should, according to segregationists, be confronted by local and state activism. (11)

The gender-specific duties of women authorized groups like the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) early in the 20th century to censor textbooks that “were not loyal to the South” and promote those representing segregation as natural. (50) A primer on the KKK by UDC member Laura Rose was adopted as a text in Mississippi, while Black people, Black history and slavery were eliminated from textbooks.

The organization also sponsored essay contests, scholarships, and teacher training that encouraged “the celebration of Confederate heroes, reinforced the doctrine of states’ rights and minimized the role of slavery in the Civil War.” (51)

In the post-World War II era, the withdrawal of federal support for segregation provoked reactionary political activism — within and against the Democratic Party, opposition to the Supreme Court, the United Nations, and Black southern political mobilization.

First, southern Democrats broke with their party in response to the party’s domestic civil rights platform and Truman’s desegregation of the military in 1948. Truman’s justification for civil rights referred to the United Nations charter, a threat, segregationists argued, to national sovereignty.

The United Nations became a target for a number of the women that McRae focuses on: Florence Ogden, opposing the UN’s Genocide Treaty argued that it would threaten “private property, Christianity” and whites, as a minority of the world’s population. She asserted:

DECADES AGO, IN my capacity as director of Women’s Studies at Kansas State University, I received an anonymous, xeroxed letter in which our program was accused of encouraging “Negro men” to dance with “white women.” Sickened, my academic proclivity to document and preserve was overcome by revulsion, and I threw the letter in the garbage.

At the time, I naively thought the letter seemed anachronistic, a throwback to an era about which my grandmother told me, when a 1920s Nebraska church service she was attending was interrupted by white-robed Ku Klux Klansmen sweeping in to contribute to a building fund.

Soon after I received that letter, however, about 30 minutes from the university and close to Ft. Riley, where they had been stationed before their deployment in the First Gulf War, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols assembled the bomb that killed 168 people when it exploded in 1995 at the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

This event, the largest act of domestic terrorism in the United States, connects to the Klan members about which my grandmother told me, the letter I received, and the recent upsurge in racist violence in the United States. These events represent efforts to maintain white, heterosexual, male power in the face of hard-won victories

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*A Negro, a Chinese, or a member of any racial minority, could insult you, or your daughter. Your husband might shoot him, knock him down, or cuss him out. If so he could be tried in an international court. It would also make it a crime to prevent racial intermarriage and intermarriage would destroy the white race which has brought Christianity to the world. (148)*

Disgusted with the Democratic Party's support of labor rights and racial equality (she claimed the party had acted like "a heathen mother who throws her child to the crocodile"), Ogden campaigned for Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952, explaining in her newspaper column "Dis an' Dat" that the failure of Democratic men to fulfill their patriarchal role in protecting white supremacy forced white Southern women to do so. (124)

Ogden's opposition to the UN was shared by national conservative organizations, including the Daughters of the American Revolution, exemplifying McRae's overall argument that southern segregationist women worked to link their concerns "to constitutional, patriotic, anti-communist, and anti-international crusades." (161)

McRae notes that civil rights activism was often said to be linked, especially in the Cold War context, to communism and to the Soviet Union. For segregationist women, anti-communism was gendered: they considered themselves responsible for their children's protection and education and sought to prevent interference from an overbearing state.

in 1960, in her award-winning essay in a contest for high school students sponsored by the Association of Citizens' Councils of Mississippi, smiling, attractive Mary Rosalind Healy wrote, "I know that the social exposure of one race to another brings about a laxity of principles and a complacency toward differences which has but one inevitable result — racial death. Thus I must believe in the social separation of the races of mankind because I am a Christian. . . . It is up to ME as a product of the struggle of my forefathers, as a student of today, and as a parent of tomorrow to preserve my racial integrity and keep it pure." (194, 192)

### White Power As Social Movement

Kathleen Belew takes up her story roughly where McRae leaves off. She distinguishes the white power movement that is her subject from white supremacists on which McRae focuses. White power refers to "the social movement that brought together members of the Klan, militias, radical tax resisters, white separatists, neo-Nazis, and proponents of white theologies, such as Christian Identity, Odinism, and Dualism between 1975 and 1995." (ix)

The origin of this movement, she argues,

is the Vietnam War, based on a narrative of "soldiers' betrayal by military and political leaders and the trivialization of their sacrifice." (3) Disaffected veterans like Louis Beam, a central figure in the white power movement, created a paramilitary culture, affording them the opportunity to share military "expertise, training, and culture" in camps they established in Texas, Missouri, West Virginia, Indiana, Colorado, Alabama and numerous other states. (52)

While the Vietnam War and its cultural impact explains the most recent history of the white power movement, Belew situates the effect of the Vietnam War within a broader context, citing veterans' key roles in founding the Klan after the Civil War, post-World War I violence and civil rights era attacks after WWII and the Korean War, including the 1963 bombing of the Birmingham church.

"Ku Klux Klan membership surges have aligned more neatly with the aftermath of war than with poverty, anti-immigration sentiment, or populism." The Vietnam War in particular, says Belew, "intensified fear of Communism," and this anti-communism unified previously distinct white power organizations, a new, post-1975 development. (20, 22)

While WWII veterans in the Klan who had fought Nazis in Europe objected to working with neo-Nazis, the Vietnam war reframed their shared interests. In 1979, members of the Federated Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party joined together to show *Birth of a Nation* in China Grove, North Carolina.

Members of the Workers Viewpoint Organization (soon renamed the Communist Workers Party) staged a rally and protest, and "stormed the community center armed with clubs." After this confrontation, a Klansman commented, "I see a war, actual combat, eventually between the left-wing element and the right wing." (57, 60)

### The Complexity of Violence

Several months later, members of the newly united racist group shot and killed five protestors ("four white men and one black woman") at a "Death to the Klan" rally organized by the CWP in Greensboro, NC. (55)

There is much to learn from this critically important event in the history of the white power movement, not least, the possible ramifications of a leftist activism — like that suggested by those who urge anti-racists to "Punch Nazis" — that embraces violence. Students in my social movements classes have been very engaged in considering this complex question.

Historicizing the issue with reference to this event is enormously helpful, although there are no clear answers. One need not

be a pacifist to question the advocacy of violence when that violence ratifies the right's sense that they are under attack, justifying yet further violence.

Of course, the debate about the use of violence is one of many factors that fragmented the left (cf. the division in the civil right movement represented by the opposition between the pacifist Martin Luther King and the militant Malcolm X), at the same moment that, as Belew observes, the right was unifying.

Belew devotes a chapter to "spectacular" state violence that intensified fears within the white power movement. This militarized violence was manifested in assaults on the white separatist Weaver family on Ruby Ridge, Idaho in 1992, killing Vicki Weaver and her 14-year-old son; and the 1993 siege and assault by the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms on the Branch Davidians' paramilitary commune in Waco, Texas, ending in a fiery apocalypse and the death of 76 members of the commune, including 21 children, and several federal agents.

These events were seen as exemplifying a violent "New World Order" that resulted in a surge in paramilitary white power organizations like the 12,000 member Michigan Militia with which Timothy McVeigh was associated.

McVeigh's April 19, 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building is a terrifying example of a defining characteristic of the white power movement: while earlier white supremacist violence "often worked to reinforce state power" the violence embraced by white power seeks to overthrow it.(x)

In 1983, says Belew, the movement had declared war on the state, at the same time that they adopted a strategy of leaderless resistance. This strategy, Belew argues, has obscured an accurate understanding of the movement and underlies mischaracterizations by the press of perpetrators of right wing violence as "lone wol[ves]," isolated "madmen" acting alone. (127)

### Roots of the Alt-Right

A shift in the late 1990s to "online spaces" has further hidden the white power movement from public view, now seen, says Belew, in the "explosion" of alt-right views into the mainstream during the Trump campaign. McRae and Belew afford us a much deeper understanding of the roots of this phenomenon.

In particular, the detailed understanding of the role that white women have played in the history given us by McRae and Belew must instruct feminist practice.

Both forcefully demonstrate the way in which the sexually vulnerable figure of the white woman, threatened by Black and immigrant men, is central to the rhetoric of

*continued on page 34*



# REVIEW

## Lots of Scurrying — But No Revolution in Sight

By Sandra Lindberg

### Why Women Will Save the Planet, 2nd Edition

By Friends of the Earth and C40 Cities  
London: Zed Books, 2018, \$14.95 paperback.

FRIENDS OF THE Earth, an environmental activist organization claiming two million supporters and five thousand member groups, offers its second edition of *Why Women Will Save the Planet*.

This edition, focused on cities, includes contributions by C40 Cities, a network of 96 cities working to address climate change. C40 Cities self-reports that it represents “650+ million people and one-quarter of the global economy.”

The two organizations have jointly produced a book with statements from “pioneering” female elected representatives, activists and academics. Learn here, the editors proclaim, that “women’s empowerment and gender equality are as important to saving the world as the widespread use of solar panels or electric bikes/cars and other green technologies.”

You would think with all this women power that the messages in the book would reflect huge shifts in business as usual. Unfortunately, with a handful of exceptions, the essays in the book are a bit like a nest of well-dressed mice nibbling around the edges of a world map.

The collection of essays begins with promise. From page one, lead editor and mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo insists that “(t)he severity of climate impacts is inextricably linked to economics, public health, inequality and gender.” In every essay that follows similar opinions are expressed.

Yet each time the connection among an oppressive economic system, women’s subjugation and looming planetary catastrophe appear, the next step — outright criticism of capitalism — fails to manifest, with only three exceptions.

Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies and Cellia Aldridge seem to have crept into this anthology almost against the prevailing mindset of the remaining writers. These three are not afraid to describe in detail how capitalism tears at the planet and sub-

jugates women’s lives.

Environmental activist and scientist Vandana Shiva’s “Hand in Hand: Women’s Empowerment and Sustainability” hits hard from the first page. Describing her work in the Punjab, she writes, “I saw that women had disappeared from the farms of Punjab; they had been replaced by chemicals and tractors. In a society where women are made disposable in the economy, they are then made disposable in their lives.” (130)

Activist and philosopher Maria Mies goes further, describing a matrifocal culture from 30,000-10,000 BC replaced by a patriarchal warrior culture, “[T]he main target of ‘Father War’ is not just human enemies but ‘Mother Nature’ herself... and his latest son or avatar is capitalism... [which acts like it] can overcome the limits of space, time and the limits of our planet Earth... The only way to save life on Earth is to stop the war on nature and create a totally new civilization.” (159-160)

Mies has written since the 1960s about the devastating connections between capitalism and patriarchy. She is a German scholar and the author of *The Lacemakers of Narsapur* and *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labor*.

Cellia Aldridge, activist with World March of Women, announces her revolutionary viewpoint in her essay’s title, “How the Defense of the Commons and Territories Has Become a Core Part of Feminist, Anti-capitalist Struggles.” She insists: “Urban and rural women in all countries — especially working-class women, women of colour and indigenous women, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual women and women living with disabilities — experience the exploitative impacts of transnational and national corporate control.” (152)

### Falling Short of Anticapitalism

These three are not afraid to demand system change and an end to capitalism. The remaining authors, whether politicians, activists or scholars, still operate based on the assumption, or hope, that capitalism will grant women an equal share of its spoils. They remain supplicants at capitalism’s table, hoping for crumbs of cheese.

Such inexplicably narrow views fill pages and pages. Anne Hidalgo, Mayor of Paris and Chair of C40 Cities, attempts to prove

the effectiveness of her work by describing her successes with the latest Paris Climate Change Agreement, though countless scientists recognize that the document will not be enough to stave off climate disasters even if nations voluntarily abide by it.

Alexandra Palt, Chief Corporate Responsibility Officer at L’Oreal, when asked about efforts to stamp out abusive forms of labor in supply chains, admits: “A big weakness in the Modern Slavery Act of 2015 is that there’s no official body to monitor implementation of [the part of the act focused on labor abuse].” (50)

Caroline Lucas, Member of Parliament for the Green Party in the UK, while extolling the importance of hope, also acknowledges:

“But the culture, vested interests and workaday rules of Westminster, are rigged against women — against anyone, in fact, trying to do things a bit differently.

“Politically independent community leaders are disadvantaged because we don’t have a proportional voting system... Westminster has always dragged its feet. We need to keep fighting for reform, challenge the establishment and make the system fairer, more balanced.” (115)

In spite of these women’s admissions about the inequality of the systems in which they do their work, all continue to believe that capitalism can somehow be transformed.

The book contains 27 essays and descriptions of the contributors’ efforts and organizations. The global scope of the contributions that come from the UK, Europe, Africa, Asia, the United States and Canada suggests that the viewpoints should be diverse and stimulating.

Instead, the willingness of all but three writers to avoid use of the term capitalism, let alone socialism, suggests these authors may have been very carefully selected.

One wonders if more critical sisters were avoided in an effort to present a book focused on a can-do, work within the system attitude. While many women in this book work very hard to improve the lives of women around the globe, the underlying problem that stymies them all — capitalism — remains unexpressed in most of their visions of how to improve women’s situations or the fate of the planet. ■

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# REVIEW

## A Call to Action By Patrick M. Quinn

### We Can Do Better:

Ideas for Changing Society

By David Camfield

Halifax and Winnipeg, Canada; Fernwood Publishing, 2017, 168 pages, \$25 paperback.

DAVID CAMFIELD's *We Can Do Better* represents a significant contribution to the literature of the Left. A Canadian academic and activist, Camfield has written an eminently readable and accessible book aimed at a broad readership.

While relatively short, its 132 pages of text are packed with historical, sociological, psychological, economic, political and cultural analysis. What Camfield sets out to do in this book is a tall order indeed, but he accomplishes it well.

The author provides an overview of contemporary society, primarily Canada, the United States and Britain, an analysis of the evolution of human society over the course of millennia, and a projection of what needs to be done to challenge and positively transform the prevailing capitalist social, political and economic order.

Camfield takes up the central question of "what is to be done" to positively transform society, situating this critical discussion in the context of his analysis of how human society has changed over centuries.

Camfield calls the method that he uses to analyze what happened in the past as well as contemporary society "reconstructed historical materialism."

I find this a rather curious terminology — far better had he called his analytical method "updated and expanded historical materialism" since the method that he employs is neither new nor "reconstructed."

The method of historical materialism was developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the mid-19th Century and extended by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, among others, during the last decades of the 19th and early decades of the 20th centuries.

Marx and Engels drew upon the work of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel in formulating their theory of historical materialism. Engels used the analytical method of historical materialism in writing his 1844 book, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* and in *The Origin of the Family, Private*

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*Property and the State*.

Karl Marx used historical materialism in all his historical and political writing. It was the method employed by Lenin in his *State and Revolution* and *What Is To Be Done?* and by Leon Trotsky in his superb *History of the Russian Revolution*.

Camfield has updated and expanded the theory of his-

torical materialism, as the publisher's website puts it to "fuse critical Marxism with insights from anti-racist queer feminism" — concepts rarely addressed by the classic Marxist thinkers.

### Rebuilding the Left

*We Can Do Better* contributes to the current discussion on the left about what needs to be done in order to rebuild socialism in the 21st century.

The global left during the period 1917 to 1990 was largely conditioned by the Russian Revolution of 1917. That period, for better or worse, came to a close in 1989-1990 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the decline of the Soviet Union.

Largely because of the events of 1989-1990, the global left has been in a precipitous decline since then. Today it is weaker than it has been since before Marx and Engels put pen to paper to write *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, amidst the momentous but ultimately defeated European revolutions of that year.

The best way to approach Camfield's book might be to first read its introduction "About This Book," its conclusion (Chapter 15), its glossary which follows the main text, its notes, his suggestions for further reading, his references and the book's table of contents.

The table of contents reflects the book's structure and how Camfield uses each chapter to build upon previous ones. The book is divided into four parts: Part I, titled "Popular but Defective: Three Schools of Theory;" Part II, "An Alternative: Reconstructed Historical Materialism;" Part III, "Answering Some of Today's Questions;" and Part IV, "The Point Is To Change It."

In Part I, Camfield recounts three theories advanced by defenders of the prevailing organization of contemporary society — Idealism, Evolutionary Psychology, and Neo-

liberalism — and effectively refutes them.

Part II explains historical materialism, and uses it to analyze past societies and how societies change and evolve over time. In Chapter 7, perhaps the book's most important chapter, Camfield dissects the prevailing capitalist mode of production, assesses its strengths and weaknesses, illustrates how patriarchy and racism are integral components of contemporary capitalism, and analyzes its present neoliberal form.

In Part III, he poses and answers a number of critical questions: whether today's capitalism is making life better for most working people; why so little is being done about the dangers of climate change; why women are still oppressed by sexism; why racism is an integral component of contemporary capitalism; and perhaps most importantly, why there is so little "fight back" against the ravages of contemporary capitalism.

In Part IV, Camfield asks whether change for the better is possible and whether there is a better organization of society than capitalism. Answering both questions in the affirmative, he then proposes a rudimentary strategy for change, predicated upon involving larger and larger numbers of people in struggle against the capitalist system that oppresses them.

### What's Orthodox?

One might wish that Camfield had chosen a title that more adequately conveys what he is writing about. And one might wish that he had drawn upon the work of others who have preceded him, particularly the contributions of the Belgian Marxist and social and economic theorist, Ernest Mandel.

While Camfield criticizes "orthodox Marxism," he does not elaborate what he means by it. And while he briefly discusses the rightward drift in the United States accelerated by President Donald Trump, his book would have benefited from a greater consideration of the role that racism plays in consolidating the white base of Trump's supporters.

Perhaps a minor quibble: I do not agree with his characterization of the system prevalent in the former Soviet Union and its eastern European satellites as "state capitalism" — for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that such a characterization in effect downplays the perniciousness of "real" capitalism in which today an elite 1%  
*continued on page 44*



# REVIEW

## Strong Man, Authoritarian Ideology By Victor Nehéz

### Orbán — Hungary's Strongman

By Paul Lendvai

Oxford University Press, 2017, 224 pages,  
\$28.45 hardcover.

PAUL LENDVAI'S STUDY *Orbán — Hungary's Strongman* won the prestigious European Book Prize for 2018, earning him €10,000. His book was originally published in Hungarian and, because Viktor Orbán is a really extraordinary personality in European politics, is now available in English. At the moment Orbán is serving his third consecutive term as prime minister (2010, 2014, 2018). Assuming his government lasts its full term, he will become the longest-serving Hungarian prime minister in history.

The author is a Hungarian-born Austrian journalist who fled to Vienna after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution ended with the Soviet invasion. He was the Vienna-based correspondent for the *Financial Times* for 22 years and a columnist for the major Austrian daily newspaper, *Der Standard*.

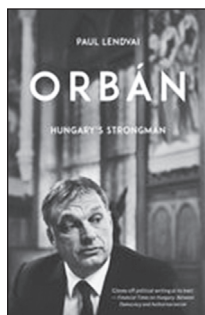
The book begins by quoting philosophers who draw varying conclusions about the dynamic relationship between the individual and history. This leads into the author's discussion of the most popular and successful East European politician of the 20th century, the Communist János Kádár, who served a 32-year term. Lendvai calls him "a dictator without personal dictatorial tendencies."

After Kádár together with Soviet troops repressed the revolution and arrested, tried, found guilty and executed 229 people — jailing thousands more — it was clear who was in charge. But this was followed by a raise in the living standards and the gradual introduction of small freedoms such as the possibility of going abroad (first to Soviet bloc countries, later to capitalist countries as well.)

The Kádár regime offered both security and a chance for individual prosperity. All the regimes afterward — including Orbán's — could not offer that. Today a child born into poverty has little chance to alter this condition. Most will die in the same circumstances in which they were born.

The Hungarian regime with its one-party system, and under the thumb of the USSR, had stigmatized the 1956 uprising as a counter-revolution. The day of historical reckoning with the taboos of the Soviet era came

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known 26-year-old, Viktor Orbán. He openly demanded that Soviet troops withdraw.

### Orbán's Beginnings

The original Hungarian title of the book, *New Conquest*, refers not only to how someone from a simple rural background was able to step forward but also — as we can read in the first three chapters — how he utilized his 15-20 former university friends to gain and maintain his status. They first came together through their political activities in the students' union at István Bibó Special College for law students. (Bibó was a opposition political philosopher who founded the college in 1983.)

According to Lendvai, Orbán's political career should be examined together with his colleagues because of their incredible group history. Together with some oligarchs from the new national capitalist class, this grouping built a powerful political party, *Fidesz* (Alliance of Young Democrats).

In spite of a few splits and changes, this handful of former students have remained at the helm of their party for 30 years. They have protected their group identity and seized total power over a whole country.

### Preparing for Power

Early in Orbán's political career Lendvai interviewed him frequently. His book traces Orbán's parliamentary rise after the regime change in 1990 and details how he moved *Fidesz* from being a liberal student organization to a center-right party. He also reveals Orbán analyzing the mistakes of the first freely elected prime minister, the conservative József Antall.

Orbán was critical of Antall for failing to build up a media campaign and an economic base capable of sustaining a rightwing government. Thus, Orbán was already thinking about techniques to build and sustain his own political machine.

on June 16, 1989 in Budapest's Heroes Square during the reburial of Imre Nagy and other martyrs of the 1956 revolution. At this rally only six people spoke. The speech most remembered for its clarity and conciseness was that by an un-

Thanks to the neoliberal decisions and widespread corruption of the so-called Socialist-Free Democrats' government (1994-98), Viktor Orbán and his party won the 1998 election; he became the second youngest prime minister of Hungary. (The author incorrectly identifies him the youngest one; actually the youngest was a Stalinist politician, András Hegedüs.)

Lendvai doesn't mention it, but Orbán used his office to support the consolidating power of the Hungarian upper class. However Orbán's extremely aggressive tone toward the opposition and his nationalist attitude cost him the election four years later.

Yet his defeat did not teach Orbán that gratuitously antagonistic confrontation was unhelpful. Lendvai comments, "On the contrary, he maintained he had not been sufficiently adept and nowhere near tough enough in his managing of the government." Over the ensuing eight years he prepared himself for his second chance.

The author paints a fairly positive assessment of the Socialist-Free Democrats' coalition government first led by a technocrat banker, Péter Medgyessy. Yet the author does criticize Medgyessy for his "distribution of electoral goodies," which increased the budget deficit.

Lendvai can't deny his own mainstream (neo)liberal values, and consequently is not ready to examine the first welfare program of the post-Communist era from the viewpoint of the unprivileged. Instead he allows neoliberal pundits to express his opinion.

Nor does the author realize how this neoliberal point of view frustrated ordinary people. Orbán, however, proved skilled at appealing to these frustrated citizens and offering a dream that captures the loyalty of majority.

Lendvai details how the world economic crisis hit Hungary and how rampant corruption and the divisive personality of the following prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány (who thought himself a Hungarian Tony Blair), led to Orbán's comeback victory in 2010.

From the moment he took his oath of office as prime minister, he saw the opportunity the constitutional majority provided. As Lendvai explains, Orbán immediately moved to "turn this into an impregnable fortress of power."

This is true not only in legislation passed, but in developing political symbols for the regime. At the early stage, Orbán called it a System of National Cooperation. The pompous text, a “Manifesto of National Cooperation,” was hung in a 20 X 27 inch glass frame in all public offices.

In conjunction with accepting the New Constitution as the New Fundamental Law of Hungary, each local mayor established a table of this New Fundamental Law in the office so that citizens could study this granite-stiff document — as he used to call the paper. Since 2011 the document has been modified seven times.

### The “Mafia State”

To analyze the nature of the regime Lendvai uses a popular expression, Mafia State, coined by a liberal minister, Bálint Magyar. As Lendvai says, “the Mafia State is a privatized form of a parasite state, an economic undertaking run by the family of the Godfather, exploiting the political and public instruments of power.”

He notes that some analysts emphasize the “systematic demolition of the fundamental institutions of democracy,” while others call it “a hybrid regime in which the features of the authoritarian system are stronger than those of democracy.” Orbán for his part likes to call it “illiberal democracy.”

Lendvai provides a detailed explanation of the major steps by which Orbán liquidated the government’s system of checks and balances. He cites with delight Orbán’s egregious ambition and well-formulated plan by quoting him: “I make no secret of the fact that in this respect I would like to tie the hands of the next government. And not only the next one, but the next ten governments.”

Now serving his third consecutive term, Orbán’s motto is: “We have only to win once, but then properly.”

In power Orbán was no longer willing to be interviewed, even by Paul Lendvai. While once they seemed to have a genial relationship, since Orbán and his party formed the government in 2010 neither Lendvai, nor the decreasing numbers of the opposition media, have that possibility.

Orbán’s handlers will do anything to prevent a journalist from interviewing the prime minister. It was only when Orbán was in Brussels that, adapting to the local policy, he was forced to speak with journalists.

The author demonstrates how Orbán dominated the media in 2015 when the migrant crisis unfolded as they merely sought passage through Hungary. He unleashed a giant hatred campaign, building on fear and anxiety among the Hungarian people.

He stated: “We do not want to be diverse and ... we do not want our own colour,

traditions and national culture to be mixed with those of others.” He encouraged people to develop an obsessive fear of those who wanted to walk through the country to the West. He wanted them to avoid looking at the refugees’ sorrowful condition and offering to help.

In Lendvai’s opinion the only threat to Orbán’s hold on the country can come from civil organizations. That’s why Orbán strives to depict them as the paid agents of the Hungarian-born George Soros.

Soros has all the necessary qualities to be perceived as the perfect enemy: a multibillionaire who lives in the West, who is Jewish, seen as an outsider, and someone who supports migrants. For Orbán, Soros, Brussels, the West and migrants are all enemies.

Lendvai concludes that the success of the Orbán regime comes from the weakness of the opposition, which he sees as untalented, in the government’s pocket or inept. While there is some truth in that analysis, it is a superficial explanation. It doesn’t explain Orbán’s skillful dealings.

Stabilizing the economy is central to Orbán’s rule. And it is true that the opposition parties are associated with the earlier, more chaotic economy.

### How German Capital Aids Orbán

In fact Orbán’s success is not only because of a deeply divided opposition but the fact that after the great recession he was able to stabilize the economy using the resources of the European Union. His economic decisions flawlessly satisfied the interests of Western capital, first and foremost those of the German auto industry.

If the leaders of the German conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian twin party the Christian Social Union (CSU) would slap Orbán’s hand, Orbán and his party would walk out of the European People’s Party in the European Parliament.

Orbán would then fall back into his real place. But the chance for this is tiny, because leaders of the German automotive industry love doing business with him.

With Orbán in charge, parliament operates as a huge factory, passing new bills at a rapid pace. There are new bills on elections, on the media, and on all institutions that could be possible checks and balances.

Although the author properly presents how Orbán cleverly makes sure all posts are filled with his commissars, he fails to notice how changing the Labor Code has strengthened the interests of capital.

Strike action is restricted. The introduction of a flat 15% income tax lets the rich off the hook, while the corporate tax rate of 9% transforms Hungary into a tax-haven.

Orbán does much to veil the fact that he eats from the hands of German establishment, and claims his government is independent. And because he has seen to it that there aren’t strong unions, he makes Hungary cosy for capital.

Thanks to weak labor regulation and the ridiculously low level of taxation, Western companies operating in Hungary make extra profits. Combining this strategy along with his partnering of local oligarchs, Orbán has state money to create jobs and presumably keep citizens happy so they don’t worry about the withering of democratic institutions.

We can see the same utilitarian logic — not mentioned by Lendvai — in relation to the Paks nuclear power plant. Initially the European Commission raised objection to its extension by Rosatom, the Russian state nuclear power holding company, because there had been no transparent bidding process. But when it turned out that the most expensive part of the new power plant will be delivered by Alstom, a French company, and the U.S. General Electric corporation, the criticism disappeared.

We can see that the interests of the West coincide with the authoritarian capitalism of the Orbán regime. This enlarges the picture of Orbánism. Its political-economical interest finds favor with local and international big business alike. This reality, in turn, relays an alarming and disturbing message to ordinary people who might be allies in helping to defend us and overcome the precarious world order.

What a pity that Paul Lendvai’s book doesn’t provide that larger story. ■

### A Note of Thanks

**YOU’RE THE BEST!** Our readers’ contributions to *Against the Current’s* fund appeal came to a total of \$5511 — a terrific boost to the magazine’s financing and morale.

We look forward to an exhilarating as well as turbulent year ahead for the social justice and socialist movements. Watch for our coming May-June issue, which will be our 200th!

The editors extend a special thanks to our volunteer proofreaders around the country, who help us to avoid all manner of typographical errors and assorted glitches, and also to make some often convoluted text more readable: Karin Baker, Mara Dodge, Joshua Freeze, and Linda Kerth who’s the latest addition to the team.

All remaining errors, of course, are due to hacking by foreign agents and in no way our fault. ■



# REVIEW

## Assessing the Bolshevik Record: A Sympathetic Critical Study

By Peter Solenberger

### Before Stalinism:

The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy

By Samuel Farber

Verso, 1990 and 2018, 221 pages + notes, bibliography and index, \$24.95 paperback.

VERSO, A NEW LEFT Books imprint, has republished Samuel Farber's *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy*, originally published in 1990. In the Introduction to the book, Farber describes his aim in writing it:

*[T]his study should be seen as an attempt at synthesis focusing on the theme of revolutionary democracy and its fate in the early years after the October Revolution... In other words, this book is an attempt at a political reflection on history, an inquiry into what alternatives existed and might have worked at the time, as well as what can we learn for today, particularly in light of recent developments in the Communist and Western capitalist worlds. (13)*

The book is valuable on four levels: 1) as an account of the rise and fall of Soviet democracy in the revolutionary period 1917 through 1923; 2) as a critique of Bolshevik thinking and policy on workers' democracy, whether one agrees with the critique or not; 3) as a posing of alternatives for the time, whether one agrees with them or not; and 4) as a drawing of lessons for future revolutions.

*Before Stalinism* acknowledges that the Russian Revolution faced a very difficult situation: economic backwardness; a relatively small working class in an overwhelmingly peasant country; the devastation of World War I; the further devastation of the civil war launched by the counterrevolution, imperialist blockade and military intervention; and the failure of the revolution to spread west to Germany and other European countries.

The book argues that making a virtue out of necessity in the face of these difficulties, Lenin and the Bolsheviks inadequately appreciated the critical importance of workers' democracy in the transition to socialism. As a result, they pursued top-down policies which aggravated the difficult

situation, further undermined soviet democracy, and ultimately contributed to the rise of Stalinism.

It develops this theme with respect to the soviets, factory committees, trade unions, the press, political parties, repression, and socialist legality. It explores the alterna-

tives proposed at the time by right and left oppositions in the Bolshevik Party and by Lenin himself. It proposes a possible alternative scenario following the Bolsheviks' victory in the brutal Civil War (1918-21) centered on the need to preserve soviet democracy.

Whatever one thinks of the book's argument about 1917-23, *Before*

*Stalinism* provides invaluable information and poses essential questions. Future working-class revolutions will face the problems Farber takes up. Revolutionary socialists need to understand what went wrong in 1917-23 to help lead the working class to a better future outcome.

### A Possible Alternative Scenario?

Farber's argument is controversial among revolutionaries of the Trotskyist tradition and other non-Stalinist revolutionary socialists. Knowing this, and also responding to the August 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, *Against the Current* hosted a symposium on *Before Stalinism* beginning with its January-February 1992 issue (ATC 36).

ATC 36 carried articles by Susan Weissman, Boris Kagarlitsky and Tim Wohlforth; 37 ones by David Mandel and Ernest Haberkern; 38 by Tim Wohlforth and Bernard Rosen; ATC 41 included a response to critics by Farber.

I particularly agree with the contributions of Susan Weissman and David Mandel, which argue that *Before Stalinism* raises key questions for revolutionary socialists to consider but inadequately takes into account the constraints the Bolsheviks faced, the limitations of the objective situation.

In her "The Onus of Historical Impossibility" Weissman writes: "What Farber does successfully is to point to political errors that facilitated the counterrev-

olution represented by Stalinism. What he cannot do is suggest remedies to problems that were insoluble."

In his comment "The Rise & Fall of Soviet Democracy" Mandel writes: "To the degree that the book sensitizes socialists to the central issue of democracy and provokes a concrete discussion about the institutional arrangements required for its real functioning and safeguarding, the book serves an important purpose.

"As a study of what went wrong with soviet democracy, however, it suffers from some serious methodological weaknesses. One of the main ones is its perfunctory treatment of the 'objective situation.'"

To take the clearest example of *Before Stalinism's* inadequately taking into account the objective situation, toward the end of the book Farber elaborates a possible post-Civil War scenario:

*In 1921 and 1922, such negotiations might have led to a power-sharing arrangement with these other Soviet parties [Mensheviks, Left Socialist Revolutionaries], or even, in the most extreme outcome, to the Bolsheviks leaving the government altogether. In the event of such an extreme and unprecedented situation developing, certain minimum conditions could have been agreed through the above-mentioned negotiations. First, a programmatic iron-clad guarantee preserving the major gains of the October Revolution, e.g., that there would be no attempt to return the major industries to private capitalists, and that the growth of private capitalism in the countryside would remain subject to strict controls. The Communist Party could have insisted on these conditions on the high moral and political grounds that, just as bourgeois democratic countries could not allow the "democratic" restoration of slavery, neither could a popular soviet democracy allow the wholesale restoration of wage slavery. Second, the Communist Party would have retained full freedom of agitation and propaganda, including the right to support revolutionary movements abroad, although obviously it could only have done so as an independent party, and not in its capacity as a partner in a coalition government. Lastly, the Communist Party would have publicly announced that it possessed the determination and material ability to resort to armed struggle if the stipulated agreements or the physical integrity of the Communist party membership were violated by the new government. (207)*

Peter Solenberger is a Solidarity member and activist in southeast Michigan.



Petrograd Soviet, 1917 — the flowering of the hope for working-class democracy and power.

David Mandel's response to this is:

In my view, the restoration of soviet democracy after the Civil War, that is, the enfranchising of the workers and peasants (excluding or not the wealthy peasants), would almost certainly have quickly led to a full capitalist, or a capitalist-landlord, restoration in a very authoritarian form. The author's suggestion that the Bolsheviks, in negotiations with the other socialist parties, could have insisted on "iron-clad guarantees" smacks of the same naiveté that he attributes to Lenin's own proposals to control the bureaucracy by merely appointing more workers to the party's Central Committee and Central Control Commission, the latter to be merged with the Commissariat of Worker-Peasant Inspection.

If Mandel is correct, and I think he is, the only way out was to spread the revolution to the west. The defeat of the German revolution in 1923 put this possibility out of reach.

### Voluntarism

Farber faults Lenin and the Bolsheviks for top-down policies and also for what he sees as the root of those policies — "voluntarism," the view that will can prevail over material reality. In "Lenin's NEP as an Alternative (1921-1923)," the last chapter before the Epilogue, he writes:

Therefore, in a very real sense, Lenin's original views on the party and society were closer to Jacobinism than to Stalinism. His sometimes uncritical endorsement of the Jacobins is very suggestive in this regard. One of the principal

features of what I would call Lenin's "quasi-Jacobinism" was his frequent emphasis on what the revolutionary dedication and consciousness of a few individuals and groups such as parties could accomplish. This emphasis was usually accompanied by an insistence that these groups have organizational roots in the working class and that individual leaders have an appropriate working-class (or peasant) background. This, as distinct from an approach that, while recognizing the indispensability of political leadership, still places the central emphasis on the development of class democratic institutions such as factory committees, unions, and soviets. (213)

This criticism is unfair, in my opinion. Lenin and the Bolsheviks believed in leadership, but they also believed in structures of working-class democracy — soviets, factory committees, trade unions and other mass organizations. Their problem was that these structures failed under the conditions of Russia's backwardness, isolation, war, the decimation of the working class and the absorption of the most politically conscious and active workers into the government. The Bolshevik Party became the main structure of workers' democracy, and under the conditions this wasn't enough.

In the first chapter, "The Rise and Fall of Democratic Soviets," Farber approaches the problem in a more balanced way. He writes:

But what about the possible objection that War Communism, "excesses" and all, was a desperate gamble to fight counterrevolution and help bring about international revolution that would break the vicious cycle of underde-

velopment and allow Russia the opportunity to construct socialism? The answer to that is that there are very different kinds of gambling. The October Revolution was itself a gamble of course, but it was a gamble based on a revolutionary but still objectively plausible program for economically backward Russia: namely, a quick end to the war, denunciation of all imperialist treaties and annexationist claims, self-determination for the victims of the Tsarist "prison-house of nations," radical redistribution of the land, and, last but not least, workers' control of large-scale industry. This was a worker-led majoritarian program that could expect to and did win the support of the broad masses of the exploited and oppressed. Furthermore, this program could and did become a beacon and call for the radical wing of the international workers' movement to make an even more advanced revolution in their own countries. Had this revolution succeeded in the more developed countries, then and not before, the material possibilities might have been developed for truly, socialist institutions in Soviet Russia. What is politically not acceptable from a revolutionary democratic point of view is the kind of gambling that involves highly voluntaristic social and economic policies. Given the economic backwardness of Russian society, such policies could not possibly have been carried out without the systematic mass coercion and oppression of at least a major part of the exploited and oppressed classes (e.g., the peasantry). Again, the notion that democratic working-class rule could survive in such a situation is surely utopian. (61)

This distinction between the "accept-



able” gamble of the October Revolution and the “not acceptable” gamble of “highly voluntaristic social and economic policies” is not as clear as Farber suggests. With the failure of the revolution to spread to the west, the “acceptable” gamble became the “not acceptable” gamble. But the gamble was, I think, still worthwhile.

## Twenty-eight Years On

Twenty-eight years after the publication of *Before Stalinism* and 26 years after the ATC symposium, I have a somewhat different take on the book than I’d have had at the time, if I’d read it, which regrettably I did not. The book’s exaggerated criticism of Lenin and

the Bolsheviks seems less important now, and its advocacy of soviet democracy more important than ever.

Partly this is a consequence of events. In December 1989, when Farber finished writing *Before Stalinism*, a part of the Soviet bureaucracy led by Mikhail Gorbachev was still pursuing perestroika (“restructuring”) and glasnost (“openness”), borrowing from the capitalist market and bourgeois democracy to try to reform the system. Stalinism was collapsing in Eastern Europe, and the Berlin Wall had just fallen. The Tiananmen Square protests and their repression were six months in the past. The Stalinist world was in flux.

Trotsky wrote in the “The USSR and Problems of the Transitional Epoch” section of the 1938 Transitional Program:

“The political prognosis has an alternative character: either the bureaucracy, becoming ever more the organ of the world bourgeoisie in the workers’ state, will overthrow the new forms of property and plunge the country back to capitalism; or the working class will crush the bureaucracy and open the way to socialism.” (<https://bit.ly/2HHcRX8>)

With that moment then upon us, I for one was not very receptive to what I’d have viewed as unfair criticism of Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the revolutionary trajectory.

Today we know the outcome. Capitalism was restored in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, China and Indochina, with corrupt, authoritarian regimes across the vast expanse from Hungary and Poland to Russia and the former Central Asian republics of the USSR to China and Vietnam.

The workers didn’t rise. Instead, capitalism and imperialism consolidated, with Russia and China joining the imperialist ranks. All the governments coming out of the national-liberation struggles, apart from Cuba, became neoliberal, most of them also authoritarian.

In the wake of all that, whether *Before Stalinism* was fair to Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1917-23 seems secondary. Revolutionary socialists can learn much from the book to prepare us to do better next time.

## Another Look

There are many points on which Farber is simply right. The military measures and “war communism” of the 1918-20 civil war period promoted a habit of command in the government and party bureaucracy, *komchvanstvo* (“communist conceit”) and a tendency to try to solve problems by administrative, rather than political or economic, means.

Repression by the Cheka (the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combatting Counterrevolution and Sabotage) went too far and helped create an atmosphere of fear and submissiveness. Mass deprivation led to disaffection, and the incompetence and corruption of officials bred cynicism.

One-party rule developed because, as Viktor Serge tartly observed, “In 1921, everybody who aspires to socialism is inside the party; what remains outside isn’t worth much for the social transformation.” (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/serge/1939/02/letter.htm>). But Bolshevik leaders, including Lenin and Trotsky, made a virtue of this necessity, not seeing its dangers.

When the Soviet government introduced the New Economic Policy in 1921,

## Further Reading

In addition to *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy*, Samuel Farber has written four books on Cuba taking up the theme of socialist democracy there: *Revolution and Reaction in Cuba, 1933-1960* (Wesleyan University Press, 1976), *The Origins of the Cuban Revolution Reconsidered* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006), *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959: A Critical Assessment* (Haymarket Books, 2011), and *The Politics of Che Guevara: Theory and Practice* (Haymarket Books, 2016). See my review of *The Politics of Che Guevara* in ATC 185.

E.H. Carr’s three-volume *The Bolshevik Revolution* (Norton, 1985) is a sympathetic history of the period covered in *Before Stalinism*. Its main limitation is that in recounting what happened it can seem to argue that what happened must have happened. Readers must add their own critique.

Isaac Deutscher’s three-volume biography of Leon Trotsky is an excellent, sympathetic account of the history through which Trotsky lived, including the 1917-23 period. Its volumes are *The Prophet Armed*, *The Prophet Unarmed* and *The Prophet Outcast* (Verso, 2004).

Stephen Cohen’s *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888-1938* (Oxford University Press, 1980) is another excellent biography covering the period. Cohen is sympathetic to the viewpoint of Nikolai Bukharin and the right wing of the Bolshevik Party in the 1920s. His *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History since 1917* (Oxford University Press, 1986), published four years before Farber’s book, rejects the totalitarianism school of Sovietology and traces the reform policies of Mikhail Gorbachev, with which he is sympathetic, back to Bukharin’s thinking.

Roy Medvedev’s *Let History Judge: The Origin and Consequences of Stalinism* (Knopf, 1972, and Columbia University

Press, 1989) and Marcel Liebman’s *Leninism under Lenin* (Merlin Press, 1975, and Haymarket Books, 2017) “expounded on the libertarian side of Lenin,” as Farber put it in *Before Stalinism* (210).

*October 1917: Workers in Power* (Resistance Books, IIRE and Merlin Press, 2016), edited by Fred Leplat and Alex de Jong, is “a fine tribute to the Revolution, with articles by Paul Le Blanc, François Vercammen, Ernest Mandel, David Mandel (unrelated), Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky,” as I put it in my ATC 189 review.

Paul Le Blanc’s *October Song: Bolshevik Triumph, Communist Tragedy* (Haymarket Books, 2017) covers the history and issues raised in *Before Stalinism* but from a standpoint more sympathetic to the Bolsheviks. Bill Smaldone reviewed the book in ATC 197.

David Mandel’s lengthy study of the Petrograd working class in the revolution is forthcoming in paperback from Haymarket, and will be reviewed in a future issue of ATC.

Alexander Rabinowitch’s study, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Indiana University Press, 2007) draws on archival documents that became available in the 1990s. His previous books are *Prelude to Revolution: The Petrograd Bolsheviks and the July 1917 Uprising* and *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd*. Rabinowitch is not a Marxist or a proponent of socialist revolution, but his research provides essential information whatever your political viewpoint.

Secondary sources are not enough to really understand the period, especially since the writings of the protagonists are so readily available in print and on the Internet. See particularly the writings of Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and Serge at <https://www.marxists.org/>. ■

the Bolsheviks knew that its expansion of markets would stimulate capitalism and strengthen internal forces favoring full capitalist restoration. To counter this they tightened discipline in the Bolshevik Party, the last bastion of workers' democracy in the Soviet federation, with a faction ban. Not seeing that the political counterrevolution would come from inside the party and state bureaucracy, they made exactly the wrong move.

Farber doesn't take this up, but a further problem was that the Bolsheviks allowed the Communist International to be shaped in "too Russian" a fashion, as Lenin put it at the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922. This contributed to the 1923 defeat of the German revolution, which pretty much sealed the fate of the Soviet Union.

Then, claiming that the root of the defeat in Germany was the lack of "Bolshevik discipline" in the German party, Zinoviev, with the support of Stalin and Bukharin, launched a campaign to "Bolshevize" the Communist parties. Charlie Post describes this history well in an ATC 150 review of Pierre Broue's *The German Revolution, 1917-1923*.

#### For Future Revolutions

The value of *Before Stalinism* goes deeper than these points of agreement. In his Introduction Farber explains his reasons for writing the book, beyond contemporary events and concerns. I quote at length because Farber clearly explains his positive views, no commentary necessary:

*Indeed, I would like to think of this book not as just one more reexamination of the Russian Revolution, but as an effort to begin the construction of a theory of the politics of the post-revolutionary transition to socialism in the light of that experience. Socialists, and Marxists in particular, have been prone to the development of numerous analyses of the economics of the transition to socialism. Yet, in the absence of a theory of revolutionary democracy, these analyses tend to deal with the question of democracy as if it was in some way derivative from the economics, if not altogether irrelevant.*

*When I write about democracy, I have in mind a society where institutions based on majority rule control the principal sources of economic, social, and political power at the local and national levels. I am also thinking in terms of an authentic participatory democracy based on the self-mobilization and organization of the people.*

*However, majority rule would need to be complemented by ample minority rights, and civil liberties. There can be no real socialist democracy, or for that matter full and genuine innovation and progress, with dissident individuals and minorities terrorized into silence and conformity ....*

*The key question then becomes if, and to what degree and for how long, objective obsta-*

*cles and crises confronting a successful revolutionary movement can justifiably be claimed as reasons to abridge democratic freedoms. In such a context, the politics and ideologies prevalent among the revolutionary leadership and rank-and-file are critical ...*

*In addition, it is also important to examine how various responses to danger are compatible with the original short- and long-term goals of the revolution, and the way in which these responses are publicly justified. (3-4)*

***We've now seen the movie of the rise and fall of Soviet democracy — and the rise and fall of the Soviet Union — from beginning to end. That gives us an immense advantage over Lenin and the Bolsheviks.... Diagnosis doesn't solve the problem, it isn't a cure, but it's a necessary first step.***

From this perspective, the chapters of *Before Stalinism* read like a checklist of what should have happened in 1917-23 — whether or not it could have happened then — with regard to soviets, workers' control, trade unions, media, political parties, repression (particularly what Farber calls "surplus repression" beyond what's necessary to defeat counterrevolution) and socialist legality, and as a checklist of what should happen in a future socialist revolution.

For reasons of length, I won't try to summarize the contents of those chapters beyond Farber's generalizations above. I encourage readers to get the book and read them for themselves.

We've now seen the movie of the rise and fall of Soviet democracy — and the

#### **A Call — continued from page 38**

of the population appropriates the surplus value created by the labor of the subordinate 99% and completely dominates society.

These caveats aside, *We Can Do Better* is a highly relevant contribution which will hopefully prompt further discussion and help build broad struggles against the capitalist system — struggles that will eventually grow into an offensive with the potential to replace it with a democratic, egalitarian system to the benefit of all humanity. ■

rise and fall of the Soviet Union — from beginning to end. That gives us an immense advantage over Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

We know that if we, meaning our political descendants, see the symptoms Farber points out and do nothing to remedy them, the result will be degeneration of the revolutionary project and counterrevolution by bureaucratic usurpation. Diagnosis doesn't solve the problem, it isn't a cure, but it's a necessary first step.

Revolution seems far off today, but in human history a century since the 1917 Revolution isn't such a long time. The capitalist system has massive excess capacity worldwide. To maintain profits it jacks up the rate of exploitation. As a result, inequality is increasing rapidly. Reactionary nationalism, racism and xenophobia are growing. Inter-imperialist rivalry is intensifying. The climate is warming. The seas are rising.

For revolutionary socialists, thinking about what went wrong the last time the working class tried to emancipate itself is only prudent. ■

#### **PG&E Bankruptcy Update**

AS PACIFIC GAS & Electric (PG&E) goes into bankruptcy court, TURN (The Utility Reform Network) is demanding a voice for customers. It is joined by AARP, Public Advocates, the Farm Bureau Federation, Sierra Club and Greenlining Institute, who are campaigning for stricter oversight and for "policymakers to prioritize protecting Californians from this criminal company."

Otherwise the court, which has sole jurisdiction, might put the "rights" of PG&E creditors over those of ratepayers. This would enable creditors to sell off PG&E assets and ignore the public needs. Creditors include megabanks with ties to Wall Street.

California's inundation with huge storms — causing devastating floods, mudslides, and trees being uprooted and falling across highways as well as in rural areas and beaches — has already caused hundreds of accidents and for thousands to be without power.

All this is compounded by PG&E's still unresolved history of neglect. PG&E's latest projection is that it will take more than 10 years just to clear vegetation which is causing further danger!

Governor Newsom should give a tour of all the devastation to climate deniers from Trump to Congress to evangelicals. PG&E is definitely a poster-child for corporations under capitalism, putting profits before lives of people and the earth. — **Barri Boone**



There are more desperate insecurities for recipients of DACA and Temporary Protected Status, which Trump revoked and then had offered to “extend” as part of the Republicans’ pre-shutdown border-wall package. The brave intransigence of the “Dreamers,” refusing to trade away the lives of their undocumented families and communities in exchange for their own status, put a measure of backbone into the Democratic leadership on this issue. And that’s before we even discuss the mass detention and separation of families who are legally seeking asylum.

Far from easing the crisis driving people out of their homelands, the Trump gang has turned to openly *promoting a civil war in Venezuela*. The administration — even during the U.S. government’s own shutdown — encouraged the leader of the Venezuelan National Assembly to declare himself interim president, then called on the Venezuelan armed forces to intervene on the side of the “new government” that’s been elected by no one, and rallied a consortium of rightist Latin American governments and some of its Western allies to its side.

The political-economic implosion situation in Venezuela was already so dreadful that it was difficult to imagine how it could be made worse — but true to form, U.S. imperialism has found a way. Far from a peaceful political resolution that Venezuela desperately needs, the prospect of a fragmented Venezuelan military — with the involvement of the new ultra-reactionary Brazilian regime and Colombia’s rightwing government — could mean horrific violence.

While the governments of Mexico and Uruguay attempt to resolve the Venezuelan crisis, the U.S. neoconservatives work to sabotage the effort. Nothing in the Trump-Bolton-Pompeo scenario for Venezuela points toward any kind of democracy, or toward ending its economic and social collapse.

The United States already endorsed the straight-up stolen and unconstitutional reelection of Juan Orlando Hernandez in Honduras, accompanied by brutal repression that accelerated the flight of refugees from that country. Washington’s project in Latin America clearly goes beyond Venezuela, to the restoration of the era of total U.S. imperial dominance.

The appointment of Elliot Abrams — architect of the Reagan administration’s 1980s genocidal crimes in Central America, convicted for lying to Congress and pardoned by George H.W. Bush, a man who should be serving consecutive life prison terms for crimes against humanity, now dredged up as a “special envoy” to Venezuela — shows what Trump, Bolton and Pompeo intend.

The revival of rightwing rule in the strategic countries of Argentina, Colombia and especially Brazil have given the discredited neoconservative militarists a new opportunity to rule the continent — with the approval of half if not more of the Congressional Democrats. In Brazil, the election of the near-fascist Jair Bolsonaro followed the coup-like impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff — one of the very few top-level Brazilian politicians *not* accused of corrupt personal enrichment — and the highly dubious conviction and imprisonment of former president Lula da Silva, the likely winner if he’d been allowed to run.

Democratic processes in Honduras and especially Brazil could have offered the region and Venezuela a ray of hope.

Now only a popular and international outcry against the imperialist scenario may halt the slide toward the worst possible outcome.

## **Why a World of Insecurity?**

There are urgent and powerful lessons to learn here. “Security” for the peoples of the United States and the world does not grow from border walls, or from expeditionary military interventions, or from sponsoring coups, fake elections and civil wars in countries considered to be “vital to America’s strategic interests.” Those interests themselves are at the heart of the problem.

The internal war erupting between Trump and the U.S. intelligence and security services illustrates how a system generates disasters it can’t solve. Trump, who unilaterally withdrew from the nuclear agreement with Iran, insists that the Iranian regime has violated the deal. The intelligence and nuclear weapons control experts point out that it hasn’t. They do, however, state that North Korea has no intention of relinquishing its nuclear weapons. No, says Trump, that threat ended when he and Kim Jong-un “fell in love.”

There was “NO COLLUSION,” bellows the president, between Russia and Trump’s 2016 election campaign, as mountains of evidence to the contrary pile up. ISIS “has been defeated” in Syria, claims the White House, while U.S. military intelligence estimates that twenty or thirty thousand jihadist fighters remain on the ground.

After 40 years of externally manipulated war in Afghanistan and 17 years of the United States’ invasion, the U.S. military cannot stay there, nor can it leave without generating yet another security “vacuum” and chaos.

The most ominous present development, coming at the same time as Trump’s imaginary “national emergency,” is a very real global emergency — the United States’ rapidly escalating drive toward war with Iran. At the Warsaw meeting where John Bolton and Mike Pompeo attempted unsuccessfully to whip European nations into line behind U.S. policy, Israel’s prime minister Netanyahu let the snarling cat out of the bag when he “told Israeli media that Arab states and Israel are coming together ‘in order to advance the common interest of war with Iran.’” (Trita Parsi, MiddleEastEye.org, February 15, 2019)

Netanyahu posted this “war” message in Hebrew, evidently thinking the rest of the world wouldn’t notice. He later changed the wording on his Twitter account. While Washington’s demands that U.S. allies withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal fell flat, every sign indicates that the United States will engage in continual provocations to create a pretext to attack.

While many previous threats have been more rhetoric than real menace, the present moment has the feel of the 2003 buildup to the U.S. invasion of Iraq — aggravated by the subjective factor of a U.S. president who’s besieged at home and unhinged from reality.

From Venezuela and Central America to Palestine, Yemen and Afghanistan, and from mass refugee detention camps at the U.S.-Mexican border to the disaster facing furloughed federal workers — and contractors who will never get their lost pay — people pay the price for ruling elites’ criminal mischief. Capitalism and imperialism create a world of insecurity, at home and abroad, for people and for the planet. ■

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