

A SOCIALIST JOURNAL

# AGAINST THE CURRENT

## NO TROOPS! NO TRUMP!



### Black Lives Then and Now

ANTHONY BOGUES ♦ MALIK MIAH ♦ DICK J. REAVIS

### Opening Up Schools in the Pandemic?

♦ ROBERT BARTLETT

### Toward Class Struggle Electoral Politics

♦ BARRY EIDLIN interviews MEAGAN DAY & MICAH UETRICH



## A Letter from the Editors:

# The Pandemic and the Vote

BY ALL POLITICAL leading indicators, Donald Trump is taking down the Republican Party to its most shattering electoral debacle in decades. “Presiding,” if that’s a word for anything Trump does, over the entirely preventable health and economic COVID-19 calamity, he’s proving himself willing to sacrifice anything for his own interests.

As Dr. Anthony Fauci warned of 100,000 new daily coronavirus infections by November, Trump’s dispatching federal marshals and border patrol thugs to face off against Black Lives Matter marches, was deliberately calculated to inflame chaos in American cities on the pretext of “restoring law and order.” When that didn’t work he turned to another chaos-inducing ploy, announcing that the November election is “rigged” by mail-in voting. In anything like normal political times, a poll-slumping president’s call to “postpone” a looming election would be an occasion for his party to save itself from oblivion by dumping him.

That same day, we learned that the Census Bureau was ordered to cut short household visits in order to deliberately undercount communities of color. This happened immediately after the White House instructed hospitals to report COVID statistics to Health and Human Services instead of the Centers for Disease Control — where the HHS bureaucracy can bury and falsify them. Mercifully, after Trump’s super-spreader campaign rallies from Tulsa, to Phoenix, to the Black Hills of South Dakota left more virus outbreaks in their wake, the GOP convention in Jacksonville, the Florida epicenter of the pandemic, finally had to be cancelled.

This administration — tragicomic in its incompetence, vicious and sadistic in its treatment of immigrants and asylum seekers, grasping dangerously although ineptly for authoritarian presidentialist rule — presents the most repellent picture to an increasingly desperate domestic population and a disbelieving world.

At present, the likely margin of Trump’s defeat looks to be too great to allow the election to be stolen either by rightwing voter suppression or, as several widely circulated articles have warned, post-election manipulation by Republican-controlled state legislatures. *In the present climate, however, no outcome can be taken as certain.* Polls have been wrong before; voter intimidation and suppression are escalating; dirty tricks close to the election are inevitable; and we know too well that the anachronistic Electoral College can produce fluky and disastrous results.

At the outer improbable extreme, a Trump/GOP Grand Theft Election could create not just a contested outcome but *an existential crisis for the constitutional system* that has served U.S. ruling elites so well through more than two centuries. That’s another whole scenario. But here’s what we know for sure: Following the November vote, the United States will remain a country bitterly polarized — between insurgent anti-racist and social justice movements, and vicious reaction spearheaded by white nationalism.

The United States will still face a coronavirus calamity and severe economic shocks, neither of which are ending soon — with tens of millions of people facing eviction, long-term unemployment, loss of health care, the destruction of public education and whole communities, with the prospect of mass misery on a scale not seen since the 1930s Great Depression.

The unfolding climate catastrophe, and a global pandemic with huge loss of life in the global South, are layered on top of numerous looming international conflicts, particularly the U.S.-China confrontation. The cancer of rising authoritarian regimes is spreading. And we know that win or lose, some

40%+ of the U.S. electorate will cast its votes for the candidate, and what has become the Trump party, of open white supremacy.

Is this really new? No, and yes. Certainly we’ve seen blatant racial presidential campaign appeals before — Richard Nixon’s 1968 Southern strategy, Ronald Reagan’s 1980 “welfare queens,” George H.W. Bush’s 1988 Willie Horton ad, and plenty other repulsive spectacles. Yet not in living memory has a sitting president actively embraced the Confederate flag, the symbol of human slavery in America — not since Woodrow Wilson proudly screened “Birth of a Nation” in the White House.

The Trump reelection campaign is reduced to its essentials: open promotion of white racism, pandering to corporate greed, and Trump’s incomprehensible denial of the scale of the COVID-19 nightmare that exposes even his own support base to the risk of mass death. With the economy cratering, he has nothing else left to run on.

### What’s New, and Not

There is indeed something new here — both in the magnificent rise of the Black-led, multiracial insurgency against murderous police brutality and the systemic racism and obscene social inequality at the roots of this society, and in the virulence of the entrenched opposition. The tectonic conflict of these forces will define the coming decade.

If the gulf on social issues between the two U.S. capitalist parties has grown to historic levels, what’s *not* new in any fundamental sense is the Democratic Party. Much attention focuses on the growth of a “progressive” and sometimes oppositional wing of the party, which has energized the voting base. But the levers of policy-making and power remain firmly in the hands of the Pelosi-Schumer leadership, which answers to the party’s corporate donors.

The Democratic candidate Joe Biden offers a hardly inspiring option — continuation of the stagnant neoliberalism of the Clinton, and with some variations the Obama, administrations. Despite its verbal gestures toward the progressive wing and (much more) toward the movements in the streets, the Biden campaign is a consistent message of No: No to Medicare for All, No to the Green New Deal, No to defunding and demilitarizing police. Yes to platitudes, no to meaningful concrete change.

Some of Biden’s announcements, on the environment for example, look half-decent on paper, and so does the Democratic platform — that meaningless document, influenced as usual by the liberal and progressive wing. What counts aren’t words, but what a president and potential

continued on the inside back cover

# AGAINST THE CURRENT

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## 2 “Good Trouble, Necessary Trouble”

Malik Miah

## 4 Black Lives Matter and the Now Moment

Anthony Bogues

## 7 Why Send Troops to Portland?

Scott McLemee

## 8 Court Ruling on LGBT Rights

Donna Cartwright

## 9 Your Postal Service in Crisis

David Yao

## 10 Solidarity’s Election Poll

## 11 Why Green? Why Now?

Angela Walker

## 12 Opening Up the Schools?

Robert Bartlett

## 16 Toward a Real Culture of Care

Kathleen Brown

## 17 Toward Class Struggle Politics

Barry Eidlin interviews Meagan Day and Micah Uetricht

## 33 Behind Lebanon’s Catastrophe

Suzi Weissman interviews Gilbert Achcar

## 36 C.T. Vivian, Organizer & Teacher

Malik Miah

## Review Essays

### 21 Provocative Presence of a Difficult Past

Alan Wald

### 30 Nonviolence & Black Self-Defense

Dick J. Reavis

## Reviews

### 35 Studying for a New World

Joe Stapleton

### 37 Experiments in Free Public Transit

Joshua DeVries

### 39 The Fight for Indigenous Liberation

Brian Ward

### 41 At Home in the World

Dan Georgakas

## In Memoriam

### 43 The Larry Kramer Paradox

Peter Drucker

*Front Cover:* Demonstration against federal troops coming into Detroit.  
Jim West: [www.jimwestphoto.com](http://www.jimwestphoto.com)

*Above:* Detroit memorial for murdered African Americans.  
Jim West: [www.jimwestphoto.com](http://www.jimwestphoto.com)

*Back Cover:* Selma, Alabama: Bloody Sunday, March 7, 1965  
[www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com)

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## John Lewis's Message to Today's Activists: "Good Trouble, Necessary Trouble" By Malik Miah

*"Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."*

— A tweet from June 2019

JOHN ROBERT LEWIS died July 17 in Atlanta, Georgia, at the age of 80. He was born on February 21, 1940, in the segregated town of Troy, Alabama. His parents were sharecroppers. He was the last living member of the civil rights leadership known as the "Big Six."

In 1960, as a seminary student in Nashville, Lewis participated in the sit-ins to desegregate lunch counters. The following year he was one of 13 who joined the "Freedom Rides" to desegregate public transportation across the South.

Lewis was arrested 45 times in his life — some 40 times when battling Jim Crow segregation. He was beaten bloody by cops, state troopers and white supremacists.

### Living Continuity of Movements

Today's Black Lives uprising leaders stand on the shoulders of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Lewis' life reflects the power of that revolutionary leadership and its inspiration to today's new leaders.

Although Lewis became a part of the Democratic Party establishment as an elected member of Congress beginning in 1986, he lived for over 20 years as a community leader in the Jim Crow South — where whites saw African Americans as less than human.

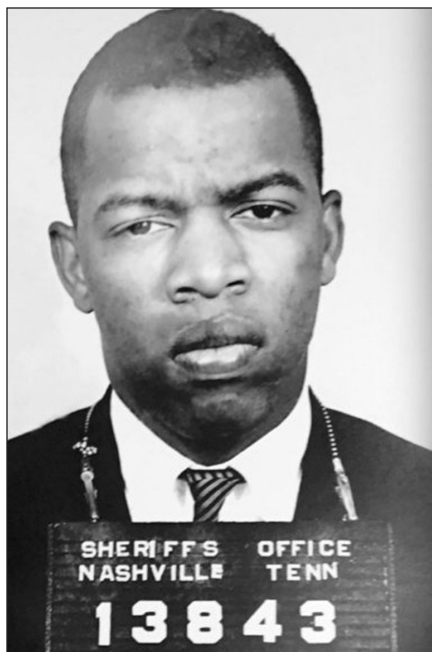
In 1968 Lewis married Lillian Miles, a former Peace Corps volunteer to Nigeria and librarian. Until her death in 2012 she was his closest political advisor. In 1976 they adopted a son, John Miles-Lewis.

Lewis lived an extraordinary life. He fought legal segregation in the South in his youth and joined the Black Lives protests this year in the Capital. A living continuity of the two popular struggles, he knew racism when he saw it.

John Lewis refused to attend the inaugu-

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*John Lewis was arrested 45 times during his life.*

ration of Donald Trump and criticized Trump as a racist president and white nationalist.

### Nonviolent Teaching and Practice

While in seminary school, Lewis took James Lawson's weekly workshops in the nonviolent teachings of the Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi.

On Saturdays they practiced by going into the segregated areas of the downtown department stores, then coming back to class to evaluate their action. Lewis was one of the most disciplined Gandhians.

As the sit-ins spread, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was born. From its beginning in 1960, SNCC was seen by the leaders of the movement as the "shock troops of the revolution."

Although the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) seeded the meeting that spawned SNCC, it remained independent, partially on the advice of Ella Baker, SCLC's executive director.

Lewis responded to an ad placed in SNCC's *The Student Voice* for volunteers for "Freedom Ride, 1961," to desegregate public transportation across the South. The freedom riders were assaulted by vigilantes;

one of their buses burned and they endured an all-night siege, only leaving under a heavy martial escort.

Lewis joined the SNCC staff the following year and became its chair in 1963, the same year he spoke at the March on Washington. At 23 he was the youngest on the platform. He gave a militant speech demanding the government act now for freedom, yet it was weakened by the leadership's desire to appease President Kennedy.

### The Unedited 1963 Speech

The night before the march, the speech was mistakenly leaked to the press, and as word of its contents began to spread, Lewis was summoned to a meeting with the march's leaders and urged to tone down certain elements.

Lewis edited his harsh criticism of the Kennedy administration's civil rights bill, which he'd originally called "too little and too late," and changed his call for a march "through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did" to a march "with the spirit of love and with the spirit of dignity that we have shown here today."

In his unedited speech, he said:

*"I want to know, which side is the federal government on?"*

*"The revolution is at hand, and we must free ourselves of the chains of political and economic slavery. The nonviolent revolution is saying, 'We will not wait for the courts to act, for we have been waiting for hundreds of years. We will not wait for the President, the Justice Department, nor Congress, but we will take matters into our own hands and create a source of power, outside of any national structure, that could and would assure us a victory.'*

*"To those who have said, 'Be patient and wait,' we must say that 'patience' is a dirty and nasty word. We cannot be patient; we do not want to be free gradually. We want our freedom, and we want it now. We cannot depend on any political party, for both the Democrats and the Republicans have betrayed the basic principles of the Declaration of Independence."*

He continued:

*"All of us must get in the revolution. Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village and every hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes, until the revolution is complete."*

*"In the Delta of Mississippi, in southwest*

Georgia, in Alabama, Harlem, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and all over this nation, the black masses are on the march!

"We won't stop now. All of the forces of Eastland, Barnett, Wallace and Thurmond [segregationist officials in the South] won't stop this revolution.

"The time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. We will march through the South, through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did. We shall pursue our own scorched earth policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground — nonviolently.

"We shall fragment the South into a thousand pieces and put them back together in the image of democracy. We will make the action of the past few months look petty. And I say to you, WAKE UP AMERICA!"

The young revolutionary Lewis believed that Freedom Now could not wait for those who said take it slow.

### Voting Rights Act

The Democratic Party at the time was an alliance of Northern liberals and Southern white supremacist racists in the Jim Crow South. That unholy alliance gave John F. Kennedy the 1960 presidential election. The Southern Democrats were okay so long as the Democratic Party did not demand it allow Blacks the right to vote and other freedoms.

Student youth rejected that alliance. The traditional leaders, however, were conscious of support from white liberals.

SNCC leaders, including Lewis, represented the militant uncompromising wing of the movement and did not back down in its criticism of the Kennedy administration. Yet SNCC leaders so deeply resented the Black establishment's restrictive rules and prescribed picket signs that they underestimated the impact of the march.

The same ambivalence occurred when Martin Luther King announced a voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama in 1965. SNCC workers anticipated that this leadership-centered approach would undermine their attempt to develop local Black leadership.

Officially SNCC was uncommitted to the infamous March 7, 1965 "Bloody Sunday" march when some 600 demonstrators peacefully walked across Edmund Pettus Bridge, named after a Confederate general and former head of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan. SNCC workers, however, were free to participate as individuals and in fact John Lewis was one of the three march leaders.

As marchers were ordered back, the troops mounted a brutal assault. Lewis was knocked down, beaten and ended up in the hospital with a fractured skull. "I gave a little blood on that bridge," he said years later. "I thought I was going to die. I thought I saw death."

In response to the broad public outrage, the Democrats in Washington decided they had to act. Within weeks President Johnson pushed through the Voting Rights Act.

The Act's significance was revolutionary. It restored rights that Blacks had gained after the ratification of the 13th Amendment that ended slavery (1865), the 14th Amendment that guaranteed civil rights (1868) and the 15th Amendment that outlawed the suppression of citizens' right to vote on the basis of race, color or previous condition of servitude (1870).\*

Those rights lasted 12 years, until the Union army left the South and white nationalists organized a counterrevolution. They used extralegal terror and the legal institutions to deny Blacks the positive steps they had made during the period of Radical Reconstruction.

In 1966 Lewis lost his chairmanship of SNCC to Stokely Carmichael, representing the left-wing of the organization, who demanded "Black Power." Soon afterwards, Lewis resigned from the organization but remained on SCLC's board.

Groups like the Black Panther Party later connected the fight for equality to the struggle of Black workers against their superexploitation by the employing class.

### Legal Equality, but Not Enough

Interestingly enough, Lewis met the great revolutionary nationalist Malcolm X — the day before the 1963 march, and again in a trip to Africa in 1964 — and concluded that more than any other individual Malcolm had been able "to articulate the aspirations, bitterness, and frustrations of the Negro people."

In another interview Lewis pointed out that while Blacks in the South were focused on the battle to overturn legal segregation and win basic rights, northern Blacks suffered from a different racism — *de facto* discrimination.

It took the civil rights revolution to win the main *legal* demands of the movement. Three historic laws — 1964 Civil Rights Act, 1965 Voting Rights Act and 1968 Housing Act — opened society to a new reality where African Americans could finally live anywhere in the country and even vote.

Those three laws ended the bond between southern Dixiecrats and the Democratic Party. President Nixon and the Republican Party embraced the white segregationists in the 1970s.

Overnight a majority of southern whites switched their allegiance from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. The party of Lincoln that crushed the Confederacy became the party of racism.

Lewis and others who fought for legal

\*Indigenous people were excluded from the 14th amendment and women from the 15th.

equality in a nonviolent revolution shifted their focus to joining the institutions like the two-party system from which Blacks had been excluded.

King, on the other hand, decided to keep the movement for change in the streets arguing that formal legality meant little without economic power. He began organizing a Poor People's Campaign and, against the advice of allies, began opposing the U.S. war in Vietnam.

While supporting a strike of sanitation workers in Memphis, King was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

### Unfinished Revolution

Afterwards the divisions between the more moderate wing of the movement and militant nationalists hardened. Eventually the civil rights establishment shifted from the streets to winning hundreds of elected positions to city, state and even nationally.

It is not unusual that leading activists in a democratic revolutionary struggle become more moderate when the main legal demands are won, even though fundamental change to the economic system has not occurred.

The Black Nationalist and Black Power wing rejected the objective of integration into the capitalist system. They had been influenced by the ideas of Malcolm X and African independence leaders, and Cuban revolutionaries, particularly Fidel Castro and Che Guevara.

The BLM movement today, led by Blacks but multiracial in composition, is at the head of the democratic struggle to end policing and systemic racism. There is more understanding that to end policing (abolish, defund and redirect the money for social programs) requires mass struggle. It cannot wait for a new president in November.

Too often progress is made, then derailed, reversed, or overwhelmed by powerful reactionary forces. "Bloody Sunday" in Selma led directly to the passage of the Voting Rights Act — *yet suppressing the Black vote is a pillar of today's Republican Party strategy.*

The election of the first African American President was followed by a bigot running for election, and now reelection, on a platform of racism and resentment.

John Lewis understood that gains won in the past had been eroded and could only be defended by more agitation and popular struggle. That is why democratic revolutionaries of today can salute his life, and his vision that being a good troublemaker and breaking immoral laws is the first step toward full equality.

Many also see that much more is needed to end systemic racism. This will require an anti-capitalist revolution. ■

## Confronting the Legacy of Racial Capitalism: Black Lives Matter & the Now Moment By Anthony Bogues

WE LIVE IN an extraordinary moment. One in which many cross currents tussle for sustained dominance. A moment when armed white supremacy groups attempt break-ins to legislative offices in states like Michigan. One in which the science of contagion is in battle with a myopic individualism, wherein the wearing of a mask for medical protection becomes a signifier for a political symbolic battle around hegemony.

All this occurs in a moment when there is a historic pandemic, which should make us as a human species reflect on our contemporary ways of life. A pandemic that exposes the structures of the American health system, where race and class determines those who will survive and live and those who disproportionately die.

In the midst of this crisis in which lockdowns and shelter-in-place are everyday practices, we witnessed one of the most significant global protests that the world has seen for some time. The protests upended many commentators, shattered many conventional wisdoms about politics, and at least for a time punctured the everyday normal to which many of us had become accustomed.

So what was at the root of this upsurge? What are its significances? And, therefore, how might we understand it?

In the epigraph to the first chapter of *Black Reconstruction* (1935), W.E.B. Du Bois writes about “How black men, coming to America ... became a central thread to the history of the United States, at once a challenge to its democracy and always an important part of its economic history and social development.” That challenge has historically been the touchstone for both American democracy and its civilization.

*Racial slavery was a cornerstone of capitalism.* It is not that racial slavery laid the foundation for capitalism; rather racial slavery, the plantation slave economy, the African slave trade were themselves practices

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of capitalism. At the core of the inauguration of capitalism was not the factory system with its wage labor but the slave plantation, unfree labor and a network of credit and debt arrangements.

In *Debt: The First 5000 years* (2011), David Graeber points out how the Atlantic slave trade depended upon a system of debts and credits. Within this system emerged various institutions we now associate with capitalism from bond markets to brokerage houses.

There was also the emergence of major companies whose chief functions were linked to slave trade, financing plantations and other aspects of the European colonial project. Here one can refer amongst others to the Dutch West India Company, the French Société de Guinée, and of course, the Royal African Company of England.

At the core of what historian Catherine Hall calls this “slavery business” was the African captive who became an enslaved person. The late African American theorist Cedric Robinson called this historical process “racial capitalism.”

### The Enslaved Black Body

The enslaved body as the Caribbean historian Elsa Goveia said was “property in person.” It was a body that produced commodities, while itself commodified. The black female enslaved body reproduced this process three times over: as a body-producing commodity, while itself a commodity, and then through sexual violence being a reproductive body of enslaved labor.

The plantation was a site of generative violence of commodification. Capitalism was inaugurated through the various violences enacted upon the enslaved black body.

Exploitation was established upon the foundation of unfree labor. That is the history of capitalism: not a stages theory of transition of societies from one mode of production to another, but rather a historical process of generative violence upon the bodies of the African enslaved.

In such a history the body is not secondary, it is the source of the methods, the several ways, of practices which turn the human into an enslaved dehumanized thing. For creating such a historical process colo-

nial and planter power needed to construct forms of life, ways of thinking, construct modes of being human that would at least for a time guarantee the full reproduction of a society.

To put this another way: *exploitation requires forms of domination*, and the latter requires ideas and practices which the dominant elite and others accept. This is about the manufacturing of what Gramsci calls “commonsense,” a kind of naturalized underpinning of a society, an ideational glue which holds society together.

In slave and colonial societies violence was regularized as a technique of rule because in such societies might was right. And while this was so these orders also ruled by means of a set of ideas and practices about who was human and who was not.

### Racialized “Common Sense”

All nations as we know are an “imagined community” and as such we search for what glue bind the nation together. In America, the glue that has bounded the society together is not the fiction of America as an idea, the exception of the “City on the Hill,” rather it has been anti-black racism.

What Du Bois calls the “wages of whiteness” became the naturalized common sense which structured the everyday practices of living. Anti-black racism has a long history, founded within the matrices of the generative violence of the African slave trade and elaborated in plantation slavery through a complex system of customs and legal codes.

It was codified in human systems of classification promulgated by European natural historians in the 17th century, mapped by Christian doctrine, whereby some human beings had souls and some not; and then, in the 19th century, became re-codified through the so-called scientific studies of skulls.

Phrenology was a pseudo-science of the study of the mind, in which it was said that Africans were inferior because of the size of their skulls: since the brain was then thought to be located in the skull. Ultimately, when science made it clear that there was no scientific basis for anti-Black racism, then culture became a terrain to explain the sup-



This Black Lives Matter demonstration in Detroit was organized as an action of and for the disabled community. Many demonstrations were organized by specific constituencies in the aftermath of George Floyd's death.

Jim West www.jimwestphoto.com

posed inferiority of blackness.

So blackness as visual marker produces within the dominant common sense the death of the Black person. Black life becomes disposable, is a lack, has no interiority, is locked upon itself. As a visual marker, the black body has no escape. Its public presence is an affront, it must be tamed, put back in its place. It must be not allowed to breathe, because breath is life and for the black body to breathe means it has life.

This is not primarily an American phenomenon. The history of racial slavery in America, the inauguration of Jim Crow and formal segregation, given the imperial power of America on the world stage created the illusion that there was a special American race problem.

All societies of course have their own historical specificities, but anti-Black racism was not an American feature alone. What Du Bois called the "color line" was embedded in the world because racial slavery and colonialism were parts of a global system ruling much of the world from the 15th century Columbian voyages onwards.

The anti-Black racism of European colonial powers drew from racial theories created in America, the Caribbean, the historical encounters between Europe and Africa. South African apartheid drew some of its resources from the structures and practices of American Jim Crow.

In all this the black body was the disposable surplus; not the other but the irremediable non-other; that which could not be fully included into the body politic of the given nation. Such an irremediable body, always on the outside, challenges the very meaning of democracy itself. It is why struggles around anti-Black racism shake the society, indeed call Western civilization into question.

### Challenging the Foundations

If we agree historically that the foundation of the capitalist West was racial slavery and colonialism and the accompanying genocide and attempted genocide of the Indigenous populations, then what we are witnessing today are the challenges to this foundation.

Capitalism is not just an abstract economic system as Marx made clear long ago when he noted that economic relationships are always between people. To rule, to be able to reproduce itself, any social system creates ways of living, modes of being human as it is then understood. Historically and in the present, anti-Black racism and the creation of whiteness and of white supremacy was both a way of life and a signifier of being human.

It is not just an ideological belief but rather a naturalized common sense that in many ways functions like a fantasy, one which has material life and consequences. Common sense as well in part is constructed by the historical understandings of a society about itself.

We are, as humans, historical beings that make sense of ourselves through memories of the past. We take from that past to make the self. In societies where the past has been a *historical catastrophe*, where regularized violence operated as "power in the flesh" making the "human superfluous," that past becomes a critical way to establish the grounds for inhumane ways of life.

America's unwillingness to confront the fact that it was a slave society since its founding as a British colony; that practices of settler colonialism wreaked havoc on the indigenous population, along with Europe's unwillingness to confront its own history as multiple colonial powers; these now provide

a dominant common sense which structures the present.

Yet as the poet and thinker Aime Cesaire noted in 1955: "Between the colonizer and the colonized there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops ... no human contact, but relations of domination and submission."

This history is elided by European countries. It is a history made visible through the various pacification campaigns, the genocide of the Herero people in Namibia, and under Belgian King Leopold the regular cutting off of the hands of the Congolese people.

It is a history codified through forms of rule which created the African subject into a "native" and turned various African social and political formations into tribes. History, however, lives in the present and becomes memorialized into the public landscapes of monuments, an encoded system of public signs which enact meanings in the public domain.

So when the Black Lives Matter Movement and those activated by it demand the removal of monuments, they are engaged in a move of symbolic insurgency to get rid of the public landscapes of the everyday violent historical monumentalization in the present. This happens in America, in South Africa, the UK. And continental Europe cannot escape the fire this time.

### After the Murder of George Floyd

So here we are. For over a month there have been in America the single largest protests in America's history, ignited by the public lynching of George Floyd who cried out "I can't breathe" before being murdered, and then died with the words "Mama" on his lips. In that modern lynching scene, for nearly nine minutes we witnessed the meaning of anti-black racism.

Yes, it was the policeman who knelt down on his back and neck. Yes, the American police force were operating like modern day slave catchers. But there was something else, and that something else was the casual nonchalance, the non-recognition that Floyd was human. It was the nonchalance that Floyd was just another disposable black body.

The daily confrontation between Black men and increasingly Black women with the police is the nodal point where anti-black racism is most visible. In this nodal point there is no pretense. State authority expresses itself that might makes right, that Black life does not matter. This is so in Brazil, in parts of Europe, the Caribbean, the United States of America or indeed in parts of Africa. Here ordinary Black life does not matter.

After the death of Trayvon Martin in 2013 a group of Black feminists, Patrisse

Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi, formed the organization which became known as “Black Lives Matter.” Today the name of the organization has become a political banner igniting the political imagination of both Black and white around the world.

There is a rich historical current in which Black revolts/uprisings have catalyzed various struggles around the world. In the 19th century the dual Haitian revolution inspired Greek anti-colonial figures fighting against the Ottoman Empire when some of them wrote to the Haitian government requesting arms and political support.

We recall how what was then called “Negro Revolt,” the Black uprisings in the 1960s, influenced feminist and antiwar movements around the world. In all this the African American spiritual “We Shall Overcome” became a clarion political message of many movements. So why, might we ask, does Black Lives Matter at this moment become transformed into a catalytic political banner, one which has engaged the political imagination of thousands?

I return to Du Bois: Racial slavery was the foundation of America and, I would argue, of the making of the modern world. As a form of domination its very core was the double and triple commodification process I addressed earlier. It was about making non-human another human being.

As a generative historical process, it lasted for centuries. That is a special form of domination which not only required violence but creating another kind of human being, one who would be surplus and disposable. It also created the conditions for Black struggle to be catalytic, a point the Caribbean historian and radical thinker C.L.R. James made in 1948. When living underground in the USA he noted in a seminal essay, “The Revolutionary Answer to the Negro Problem in the United States” that “this independent Negro Movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation.”

Black Lives Matter became a political banner because it challenges continued racial domination, its deep rooted legacies and consequences. It says we are human. As such it demands that the society should be transformed to create new ways of living. It not only therefore exposes police brutality but calls to order the entire historical foundation on which Western civilization rests, which is why getting rid of the historical monuments which venerate the West has become so crucial.

### Why a New Historical Moment

While part of a historic Black Liberation tradition, BLM political organizational methods have also developed critiques about Black masculinity. Given all this, Black Lives

Matter as a political banner is world-historic. And here the reader might pause and wonder why?

Let us return to the making of the modern world; to the ways in which anti-Black racism continues in the after-lives of racial slavery to dominate black life as it has done so for centuries. So when there are sustained protests against the institutional and everyday forms of anti-Black racism and this happens on the global stage, is this not world-historic?

The current global protests are world-historic because they confront the entire panoply and edifice that built the modern world. They are also world-historic because they posit different methods of political organizing which breaks from previous forms of radical Black movements.

When the movement demands that monuments, which invoke the past and undergird the present, must fall, it draws from the earlier struggles of South African students and the Rhodes Must Fall Movement (bringing down statues of Cecil Rhodes, a colonial founder of white supremacy in southern Africa — ed.).

It demands *abolition*, making that word capacious, creating a new political language not just about abolishing prisons but demanding the opening of a new space, invoking the radical imagination to think of new ways of life. If many social and political radical movements have paid attention only to the state and the economy as structures of the present, Black Lives Matter is attentive to the history of the structures and their underlying assumptions and common sense.

We are indeed in a new moment. Some say this moment feels different in part because the worldwide protests have been multiracial, as the image of a lone white woman sitting on the sidewalk in a rural American town with a sign which reads “Black Lives Matter” illuminates.

But perhaps what is most different about this moment is that for the first time in a world governed by neoliberalism, where as Stuart Hall and Alan O’ Shea put it there is a neoliberal common sense, we are witnessing an uprising that challenges a foundational element of that common sense, in which anti-Black racism has been a glue for the American body politic.

This is an uprising of the radical imagination which demands abolishing the reproductive structures of the making of the modern world. As Stuart Hall makes clear in his work, common sense is a contested terrain. In every major uprising where elements of the dominant order have been challenged, power when it cannot defeat immediately or ignore the uprising attempts to coopt signs and symbols of the upsurge, thereby gutting them.

So the response of many American corporations has been to proclaim support for Black Lives Matter, not for the movement but to appropriate the banner turning it into a slogan. So when Amazon proclaimed on its website at the height of the protests that Black Lives Matter, it was responding to a popular upsurge it could not ignore.

Amazon’s practice was one of appropriation. One of the remarkable features of American power is its ability to quickly gobble up what begins outside of the body politic and rework it into a hegemony without fundamental changes occurring. This is one aspect of the present moment.

But there is another somewhat troubling aspect to the moment. It is this. The current Trump regime is one which can be called authoritarian populist. One core of its ideology draws extensively from the political traditions of American white settler nationalism, a nationalism in which there is not only anti-Black racism but hostility to the figure of the so-called “foreigner.”

In the current moment this is represented by the deep anti-immigration policies and statements of the ruling regime. What the Black Lives Matter movement has done is to challenge this authoritarian populist ideology. The response of the regime is to, in Trump’s phrase, *Dominat*e. In other words, to shut down the movement in whatever way in an attempt to silence it and to retake the ideology field of battle.

That the regime to date has not been able to successfully shut down the movement speaks to its power; but it does not mean that the battle is over.

We end where we began, with Du Bois and *Black Reconstruction*, where in 1935, he identified a form of politics he called “abolition democracy.” It was, he argued, the necessary radical political framework — if the transformation of America was going to occur after the Civil War. For Du Bois, “abolition democracy” in his words “pushed towards the dictatorship of Labor.”

By then Du Bois was in the most radical phase of his intellectual and activist life. Eighty-five years later the Black radical imagination has reworked abolition into a demand for new ways of life, dismantling the structures which inaugurated the modern world.

Fundamental change may not come and at the time of writing this piece, things can be said to be flux and for sure a revolution is not around the corner.

But historically, fundamental change requires the work of the radical imagination, the thinking that a new form of human life is possible. The global Black Lives Matter protests have opened that space. That is its remarkable significance for the current moment. ■



# Why Send Troops to Portland?

By Scott McLemee

SOMEDAY HISTORIANS WILL look back on the cascade of events in 2020 and probably conclude that developments in the United States took a sinister turn on or about July 15.

That day, troubling reports started coming out of Portland, Oregon, where, as in countless other parts of the country, mass protests against racism and police brutality were underway. The word among activists on social media was that protesters were being grabbed up by people in military fatigues bearing patches that identified them only as “police” who were cruising the streets in unmarked cars and vans.

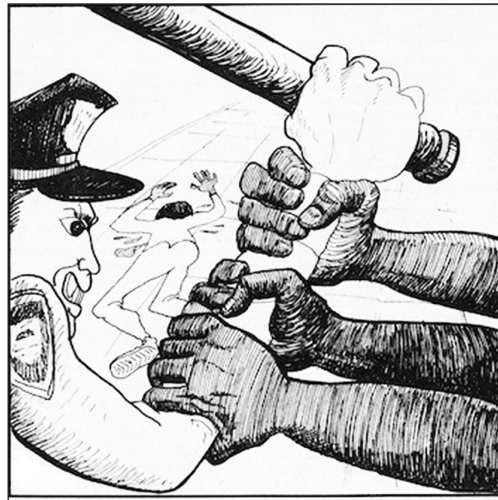
Cellphone video recordings soon proved that this was no wild rumor. One individual, shown being carried off to a van, later reported that he was held at a federal courthouse, where he was given the Miranda warning (“You have the right to remain silent...”) but was never told the grounds for arrest or what agency was holding him.

Following media inquiries, U.S. Customs and Border Protection released a statement that it acted on “information indicating the person in the video was suspected of assaults against federal agents or destruction of federal property.” CBP also claimed that its agents had identified themselves and were wearing CBP insignia.

“I have a pretty strong philosophical conviction that I will not engage in any violent activity,” the detained protester told *The Washington Post*. After refusing to waive his rights, he was released from custody but given no record of the arrest.

The number of people detained in this manner is probably known only to the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees CBP. More than a hundred DHS agents (including some from Immigration and Customs Enforcement) were in Portland in July as part of Operation Diligent Valor — despite clear indications by the city’s mayor and Oregon’s governor that they were neither welcome nor needed.

*Scott McLemee is a Solidarity member living in Washington, DC. Links to his reviews, essays, and other work can be found at the website [www.clippings.me/mclmeme](http://www.clippings.me/mclmeme).*



Tom Keough

## Expanding Deployments

By early August, DHS was circulating “open access security reports” on two reporters covering Portland for the national news media to law enforcement agencies. They consisted largely of material culled from the journalists’ Twitter accounts.

In addition, the department circulated information on arrested protesters presented in “baseball card” format. The intention to provoke or prolong harassment was clear in each case.

In the meantime, Department of Justice sent 200 federal agents to Kansas City on the pretext of fighting violent crime. While slightly less grandiose sounding than DHS’s Diligent Valor, the DOJ’s Operation Legend (also called Operation LeGenD) was no less an effort to derail social protest.

The mean streets of Kansas City seem far less credible as a concern of the Trump administration than protesters’ demands that local law-enforcement funds be redirected to meeting residents’ health, education, and housing needs.

Other cities targeted for LeGenD deployments are Albuquerque, Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit, Memphis, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and St. Louis, Missouri.

## Who Is Being Targeted — and Why?

Far less worrying to federal authorities throughout this period have been the right-wing protesters who, besides denouncing efforts to limit the spread of the coronavirus, are prone to issue death

threats and march around with weapons to back them up. (Some also bear swastikas and Confederate flags, suggesting that the inalienable right not to wear a mask is, at most, a secondary issue.)

During rallies against stay-at-home orders in Michigan this spring, gun-bearing protesters threatened the governor with lynching. In his testimony before Congress in late July, Attorney General Bill Barr pretended not to have heard about it. Nor did he bother to make the faintest of half-hearted gestures of concern.

The viciousness of reactionaries tends to grow in direct proportion to the urgency of the social demands being made, and the course of 2020 has been no exception.

With deaths from the pandemic in the United States in the six figures while the unemployment rate remains double-digit, teachers around the country prepare to go on strike if necessary rather than let their schools reopen as centers for the spread of disease. People whose right to a living wage has been denied find themselves classified as essential workers — without whom nothing else functions, even badly.

The potential for rent strikes and militant resistance to eviction grows, as does recognition that universal healthcare and a basic income are reasonable demands.

At the same time, everyone paying attention realizes that for the white-nationalist Republican party to remain a factor in American politics, it has to suppress the vote among the communities hardest hit by the pandemic. And those throwing protesters in vans aren’t just curiously neglecting to notice the paramilitary right but hanging out with them on social media.

As we go to press in August 2020, one year has passed since the investigative site Pro Publica revealed the existence of a virulently racist and xenophobic Facebook group with 9,500 followers drawn from past and present agents of the Customs and Border Protection. Following a remarkably under-publicized investigation, CBT fired four agents, suspended 38 without pay, and warned a few more to knock it off.

The impact on the other 9,400 or so has not been reported. But one thing seems clear: Whatever else it may have been, Portland in July was just practice. ■

# Supreme Court Ruling on LGBT Rights A Victory, an Unfinished Agenda

By Donna Cartwright

THE SUPREME COURT's decision on June 15 upholding three employment discrimination cases brought by LGBT people marks a huge step forward toward full equality for queer people. The court ruled that job discrimination based on employees' sexual orientation or gender identity necessarily violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which forbids discrimination based on sex.

The employment discrimination decision came five years after the Court's ruling that denial of the right to marry to LGBT people was unconstitutional. Many queer people and their allies saw the 2020 decision as long overdue, since state and lower federal courts had made similar decisions decades ago.

In fact, the battle for LGBT inclusion was won through protracted struggle on the ground over the last several decades. The strength and courage of queer people in winning mainstream public support for our rights lit the way for the courts to follow. The self-organization and militance of previously marginalized people made all the difference.

When David Cole of the ACLU was asked during oral arguments by Justice Gorsuch whether prohibiting employment discrimination against queer people would lead to a "massive social upheaval," he pointed out that in effect, that social upheaval had already occurred. It happened because oppressed people organized and fought for their rights.

## What's Next on the Agenda?

As important as the court's action was, much remains to be done before we see anything like a truly equal playing field for queer people. The June decision was limited to Title VII, which covers employment discrimination; it does not cover education, jury service, health care and housing, although cases relating to those areas may soon follow.

And in view of the relatively weak social support [the "social wage"] provided by the U.S. federal, state and local governments, much more is needed for traditionally dis-

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*Aimee Stephens worked as a funeral director but was fired when she transitioned. While she won her case, Stephens died before the decision was handed down.*

advantaged and excluded segments of the population, such as people of color, women, people with disabilities, etc.

The social disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic is a case in point, for both LGBT people and others. Marginalized people are often the worst hit by social disasters, and this year's outbreak is no exception.

People who are unemployed or only sporadically employed have less access to health insurance, and therefore, to health care. The pathological system of employer-based health insurance that predominates in the United States ensures that the most vulnerable will be the most poorly served.

And insurance isn't the only obstacle. According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, 23% of trans people who needed a medical provider didn't seek one because of concern about discrimination or disrespect. Another 33% decided to forgo treatment because they couldn't afford it.

Just a week before the Supreme Court decision on LGBT employment rights, the Trump administration finalized a regulation that removed protection for transgender people against sex discrimination in health care. While this action seems to fly in the

face of the Supreme Court's reasoning, it will still have to be undone.

Meanwhile, reproductive health care and trans health care are often being deemed "nonessential."

Marginalized people, both LGBT and straight, are being pushed into the underground economy. Sex workers, both trans and non-trans, face grave danger from contagion, and those who are incarcerated are often put in shared cells that don't respect their gender identity. Precarious living arrangements increase the danger of domestic violence, from families as well as partners.

Meanwhile, right-wing anti-LGBT politicians, who tried over the last few years to pass state laws preventing trans people from using public restrooms, only to see their most prominent efforts fail, have shifted their focus to preventing young trans people from obtaining life-affirming and sustaining treatment that could give them a much better start in life. At least nine such bills have been introduced or are planned this year.

LGBT people and their allies need to remain vigilant and mobilized to resist and overcome both anti-trans prejudice and the more pervasive inequality that dominates our society. ■

## Your Postal Service in Crisis — Why? By David Yao

THE U.S. POSTAL Service, a publicly owned institution with a large (630,000) unionized workforce and a history dating to 1775, is facing a financial crisis that could present a real opportunity for the Trump administration to enact its program of privatization as well as weakening its employee unions.

As payments and correspondence have shifted in the last decade from the mail to digital platforms, postal revenues have not matched expenses, despite parcel delivery expanding with the increase in online commerce.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the weakening of postal finances. As businesses and institutions shut down, advertising and business mail plummeted correspondingly. At one point, internal estimates forecast cash reserves running out in summer or fall of 2020, although revised forecasts have pushed the cash crunch to sometime in 2021.

When the first pandemic stimulus bills were being debated, the Postal Board of Governors (comprised of Trump appointees!) requested \$75 billion. By comparison, annual postal revenue is around \$70 billion. The final legislative package initially earmarked \$25 billion, but it was jettisoned due solely to opposition from the White House and in its place a \$10 billion loan was authorized.

The animus of the current President to the Postal Service has been ascribed to his fear of voting by mail, which draws larger participation and thus runs counter to the voter suppression espoused by the Republican Party.

Another commonly cited motivation, bizarrely constructed, has Trump's dislike of the *Washington Post*, owned by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, resulting in a demand

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*David Yao is a longtime postal worker who participated in the 2012 Hunger Strike to Save the Postal Service organized by Communities and Postal Workers United.*

for the Postal Service to drastically raise its rates on parcels it delivers under contract

for Amazon. (Raising rates would merely shift work to Amazon's own rapidly growing delivery network, or subcontracting to Fedex or UPS instead).

But prior to the pandemic, the Trump White House had issued recommendations, no doubt produced by the many Heritage

Foundation alumni working there, that the Postal Service be examined for its potential privatization, at least in part.

Several countries, Great Britain for example, have wholly privatized their postal systems, resulting predictably in higher prices, worse service, degraded wages and working conditions, but greater profits to shareholders.

The potential for damage to the Postal Service has been heightened by the presidential appointment of a new Postmaster General, Louis Dejoy, a major donor to the Trump re-election campaign. Alex Greene, a postal worker in Tennessee, comments:

*"Even many Trump-supporting postal workers are questioning why the administration is so dead set against mail-in voting and apparently the Postal Service itself. The new Postmaster General's policies, which value minor savings over quality service, are widely unpopular among both the public and the postal work force."*

Dejoy was CEO of New Breed Logistics, which was under contract with the Postal Service for over 25 years, meaning he should know well which portions of the USPS would be attractive for privatization. The official announcement of his appointment notes his role on the Board of Trustees of the Fund for American Studies, whose self-described vision is "To win over each new generation to the ideas of liberty, limited government and free markets."

As to the prospect of a Republican Party mega-donor in charge of the system that

delivers mail ballots — well, draw your own conclusions.

### The Historical Background

Few people know that the modern version of the Postal Service came about as the product of a worker revolt. In 1970 the Post Office was just another federal agency whose employee unions lacked collective bargaining rights. Instead, they relied on "collective begging" — lobbying Congress for wage increases.

After six years without a raise, postal employees were given a much smaller increase than Congress voted itself. The result was the largest wildcat strike in American history, as workers in many cities walked out, followed by their union leaders.

The pre-Internet reliance of American business on the mail brought the country to a standstill. Troops sent in by President Nixon as strikebreakers could not adequately move the mail.

As a result, Congress passed the 1970 Postal Reorganization Act, making the U.S. Postal Service semi-autonomous (with a corporate-style Board of Governors but under congressional oversight).

Importantly, unions were granted collective bargaining rights with binding arbitration to settle any disputes, but conservatives blocked union shop status, meaning membership was voluntary, not obligatory. The Postal Service was required to be self-funding from the payment of postage and fees, separate from the federal budget, unsubsidized by taxpayer dollars and operating on a non-profit, break-even basis.

After decades of decent increases in negotiated postal wages supported by increases in postage rates, the mailing industry found a way to derail this in the 2006 Postal Enhancement and Accountability Act (PAEA). It enacted a price cap on most rates, thus limiting postal revenue. It also enacted a requirement that healthcare premiums for postal retirees be funded decades in advance, in part through yearly payments of over \$5 billion for a 10-year period.

The long recession that began in 2008 from speculative housing financing, combined with the beginnings of a shift from paper to digital payments and correspondence, undermined postal finances to the point that run-

ning out of cash became a concern in the mid-2010s. But increases in parcel delivery and revenue offset that, to the point that some years became profitable ones if you looked only at operational costs.

But the Postal Service announced losses every year, based mostly on the “pre-funding” retiree healthcare obligation from the PAEA, which unions pointed out were unique — *not imposed on any other federal agency or private employer*. At least a dozen years of lobbying finally resulted in the U.S. House passing a 2019 bill to repeal this pre-funding, but it was never considered by the Senate.

### Funding in 2020 and Beyond

Advocates for preserving the Postal Service as an important part of the nation’s infrastructure are pushing for \$25 billion outright in the Heroes Act being considered by Congress in August. But aware of the competing interests and ideologies that are battling to shape that stimulus bill, there are other bills being presented, such as one that would provide \$25 billion for electric postal vehicles, fallback plans as there is a high possibility of postal exclusion again.

The American Postal Workers Union (APWU), the more militant of the four craft unions, working with MoveOn.org and other progressive groups, encouraged a series of local actions on June 23 in support of a car caravan in Washington D.C. to present two million signatures in support of postal stimulus money. On July 23 it organized a national call-in day to put pressure on senators of both parties.

If hopes fade for stimulus in the current Congress, undoubtedly the unions’ strategy will be to get Biden elected as well as Democratic Party control of Congress. Previous corporate Democratic presidents and their ilk — Obama and the Clintons — have been notably unresponsive to postal unions’ concerns, so a vigorous public pressure in any event will be required.

The upcoming debates, regardless of who holds political office, will revolve around competing visions for the future of the institution. One vision, in line with centuries of tradition, holds that the USPS is a public service with a mission to provide equal and affordable service to all — rich and poor, urban and rural.

The pandemic has highlighted the need for a strong and affordable postal service to efficiently deliver basic goods as well as important items like medicines, face masks and mail ballots. Furthermore, the reach of its services could be expanded in socially positive ways.

Postal banking, which existed here from the 1930s until the bank lobby succeeded in eliminating in the 1960s, could raise as much as \$9 billion per year, according to

an internal study. It could help underserved communities while serving as an affordable alternative to the predatory lending industry.

Converting the postal delivery fleet to electric vehicles and providing publicly available charging stations at post offices — socially valuable moves worthy of public subsidy — could give momentum to the lagging changes needed to fight climate change.

There is social value in 630,000 decent-paying jobs spread throughout the country. Fair hiring procedures have resulted in a workforce with a high percentage of people of color — 21% of postal workers are Black, compared to 14% of the national workforce.

The other vision for the future is a too familiar one in the public sector — cost-cutting, reduction in services, increased prices, favored treatment to more powerful customers and attacks on the unions.

The new Postmaster General has announced plans, with details just emerging, to reduce retail hours and change delivery practices in ways that seem likely to delay mail and create customer complaints. As postal worker Alex Greene puts it:

*“Dejoy, or ‘Delay’ as some are sarcastically*

*calling him, has moved quickly to implement what he calls a ‘pivot’ that amounts to intentionally delaying the mail and reducing quality of service. Ostensibly this is to reduce overtime and save money, but in reality it will save little and the greater effect will be to throw the Postal Service into chaos — and cast doubt on its reliability just before an election where many will rely on the mail in order to safely vote.”*

It’s the old formula of denying resources to a government service, declare it a failure and began to privatize in part or in whole.

Fortunately, the postal workforce still has large unions, although they are not on the whole as effective at mobilizing their memberships to the degree that activists would like. Organizations that support mail balloting have emerged as allies.

The public currently gives very favorable ratings to the Postal Service and the pandemic has increased foot traffic and awareness of its value but that still needs to be converted into political capital on its behalf.

The coming year may prove a crucial test for the survival of the U.S. Postal Service in its current form, in a moment that could prove as pivotal as the 1970 postal wildcat strike. ■

## Solidarity’s Election Poll

SOLIDARITY, THE SOCIALIST organization that sponsors *Against the Current*, is taking no formal position regarding the 2020 U.S. presidential election. In view of the complexity of the issues and the impossibility of in-person meetings during the coronavirus pandemic, the National Committee organized an online poll to test the balance of opinion of the membership. Three options were offered, and members were also encouraged to submit comments.

**OPTION 1:** To support the Green Party campaign of Howie Hawkins and Angela Walker, seeing this as the expression in this election of an independent, anti-capitalist and openly ecosocialist alternative to both the ultra-reactionary Trump Republican presidency and the false promises and neoliberal capitalist politics of the Democratic Party and Joe Biden — the same anti-working class politics that helped elevate Trump to the presidency. Members of Solidarity who are involved in the Green Party have formed a working group to support the Hawkins/Walker campaign as well as Green candidates in local and state races.

**OPTION 2:** To vote Green in those states where the outcome of the presidential vote seems assured, while voting for the Biden/Harris Democratic ticket in closely contested states where the danger of a Trump victory could decide the election. This tactic expresses our advocacy of

the urgent need for independent politics, while also making clear within the movements our understanding of the importance of preventing the catastrophe of a second Trump term.

**OPTION 3:** “Dump Trump, Fight Biden,” meaning a vote for the Democratic ticket to get rid of Trump, while making clear that a Biden presidency, despite its standard-issue progressive campaign postures, doesn’t represent any progressive alternative to the neoliberal policies of the capitalist ruling class, or to pervasive systemic racism, or to U.S. imperialism, nor a fight for anything resembling an adequate response to the environmental catastrophe. It is a recognition that defeating Trump is the immediate overriding imperative but that the struggle for a different politics, rooted in popular struggle, is not postponable.

The results of the poll were: OPTION 1: 47%; OPTION 2: 27%; OPTION 3: 21%. Slightly over 5% expressed no preference, but submitted comments.

In the face of Trump’s ominous threats and anti-democratic maneuvers, it should also be clear that in the event of a stolen election leading to a massive political crisis, everyone on the left should participate in the mass mobilizations to defend the right to vote, for votes to be properly counted, and the results to be respected.

—David Finkel  
for the Solidarity National Committee

## Why Green? Why Now? By Angela Walker

IN THE SPRING of 2020 I received the phone call from Howie Hawkins, who was seeking the Green Party nomination for president and had already received the Socialist Party's nomination. While I was expecting only to be asked to support his candidacy, Howie asked me to be his running mate.

I thought of my grandkids, and I asked myself what kind of world they are inheriting and what can I do to change it. I was shocked by Howie's request, but I knew I could not say no.

"I've known Angela since 2014," said Hawkins, "She speaks with a clarity and conviction that people understand and believe. She was my first choice and I'm so glad she accepted," Hawkins said.

Both the Green and Socialist parties are in a position to amplify the people's power. If not now, when? We can deliver our message to millions of Americans, and I am honored to be running with Howie to bring about necessary change.

### My Experience

I was born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin to a working-class Black family. Early in life, I quickly learned that cooperation, dignity and integrity were more important than financial wealth. Attending Bay View High School in Milwaukee, I and a group of Black students petitioned for and received an African American history class.

I graduated in 1992 and joined the Army Reserve in August. Following the birth of my daughter Epiphany, I began classes at the Milwaukee Area Technical College in 1993. We shortly relocated to Jacksonville, Florida, where I attended the University of North Florida.

In 2000, I was part of the mass mobilization in the demand for the recount of ballots in the recent election. I traveled to Tallahassee, Florida to protest widespread discrepancies with the ballots in the election. This was the beginning of my involvement in protests. I became a believer in the power of people coming together to stand up for their rights.

In need of extra income, I took a job

*Angela Walker is the Green Party candidate for vice-president.*

driving a school bus, and left college in 2001 to drive full time. I loved being a bus driver. I engaged in peaceful actions against the war in Iraq in New York and Washington, DC when I was a driver for Greyhound Lines.

I returned to Milwaukee in 2009 and got a job with the county transit system. Two years later, Wisconsin's new Governor Scott Walker began his assault on unions from the state capitol. As a member of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 998, I joined thousands of union workers and our allies, as we occupied the Capitol in protest.

My actions led to my appointment as Legislative Director for Local 998, a capacity in which I served for two years. I helped organize efforts to inform transit riders about proposed cuts to service and transit access, and assist in securing the necessary funding for the transit system.

I fought for basic funding for the Milwaukee County Transit System and advocated for working families. Whether it was educators, healthcare workers, machinists, postal workers, or the Fight for 15, our union stood in solidarity. Our union was involved in the Occupy Wisconsin and Occupy the Hood movements.

In 2014 I was approached by Rick Kissell, a lifelong socialist and friend, to run as an independent socialist against conservative democrat David Clarke, the incumbent Sheriff of Milwaukee County. Our campaign discussed Milwaukee's root causes of crime: poverty and systemic racism. We got the attention of the Left across the country, after receiving 20% of the vote as a socialist in an election for Sheriff.

I went to work for Wisconsin Jobs Now in 2015, as Community Campaigns Coordinator for the organization. I was part of the resistance to the privatization of public schools in Milwaukee.

In 2016, Emidio "Mimi" Soltysik of the Socialist Party asked me to be his running mate for Vice President of the United States. I accepted, and despite our limited ballot access on the continental United States, we garnered four percent of the vote in Guam's preferential poll.

Needing to regroup and reconsider my relationship in activism and politics, I moved to South Carolina. At first, I worked as a substitute teacher at the secondary education level. However, in the summer of 2017 I returned to my work as a driver, this time driving a dump truck. I continue this job to this day.

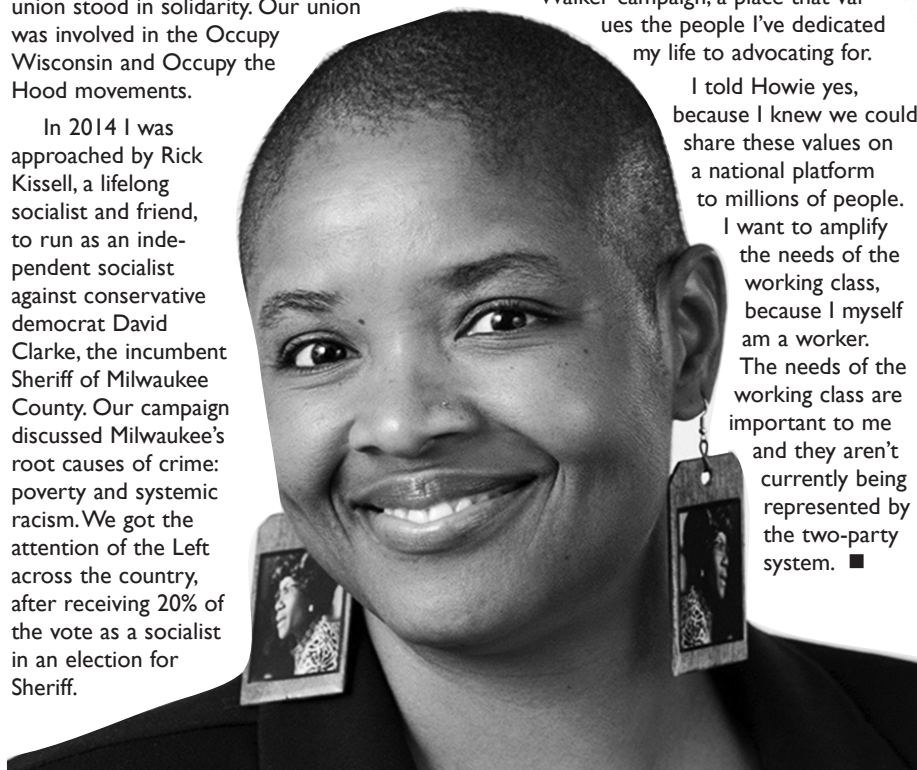
I am a mother of one, and grandmother of five. I am a fierce advocate for the rights of Black, Brown and Indigenous people, the LGBTQIA community, Labor and the Earth itself. I found a home in the Hawkins/

Walker campaign, a place that values the people I've dedicated my life to advocating for.

I told Howie yes, because I knew we could share these values on a national platform to millions of people.

I want to amplify the needs of the working class, because I myself am a worker.

The needs of the working class are important to me and they aren't currently being represented by the two-party system. ■



## Can U.S. Schools Be Reopened Safely? By Robert Bartlett

SIX MONTHS SINCE the worst health crisis in 100 years began, there is no sign that it is under control in most parts of the world. In the United States, it has created mass unemployment, exposed the vast rifts between the rich and poor, and promises to widen them unless the social movements impelled by Black Lives Matter and teacher/community organizing can continue to reframe the political, social and economic landscape.

Until mid-March, when governors and mayors took drastic steps, with orders to shelter in place, closing businesses and schools to slow the spread of the virus, many people continued their lives with a growing sense of fear of what would happen. Most schoolteachers had just a few days of warning before their schools were (rightly) closed.

Let's imagine how a socialist society would confront this crisis.

*First*, it would have already prioritized the infrastructure that people need. Hospitals and neighborhood clinics would have been built on a public health model. That is, it would develop sustainable and preventive measures as opposed to the high tech and expensive approach used in the country today.

Studies would examine how the virus is transmitted and what measures could be taken to interfere with transmission. Until a vaccine is developed, infected people would be isolated to prevent them from spreading it. This means they would be supported with food, lodging, and appropriate care while their immune system dealt with the infection. For those whose immune systems trigger an excessive response, quality medical care would be available.

*Second*, schools would have already been reorganized. All the old weaknesses of public education — crumbling, poorly ventilated buildings, funding inequalities, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient social and emotional supports — would have been replaced by a well-maintained and resource-rich school and its gardens. By significantly reducing class size, small clusters of students (five to

seven students) might be able to continue in-person classes.

*Third*, the work week would have been reduced with paid time off. When people got sick they would not be expected to go to work.

*Fourth*, learning would be viewed as a lifelong process. A variety of teaching and learning styles would be assumed. Control of the curriculum and the ability to change it would no longer be driven by national “common core standards” or local school boards, but by teams of teachers who are the real experts in how to adapt their subject in terms of the needs of their students and the challenges of remote learning.

*Fifth*, industrial food production would be dismantled and the destruction of forests halted. This would minimize the danger of transmitting viruses from animals to humans.

Instead, in today's capitalist economy we are faced with multiple dilemmas that are more political than scientific in nature. Most importantly, the economic closures have produced the greatest mass unemployment since the 1930s Great Depression. And because the economy is based on what is profitable — not what is needed — we now face the pressure to reopen business.

In order to do that, schools need to be opened so parents can get back to work. Yet there are no clear conditions for what measures need to be taken to make schools safe. The fact that this is happening two months before the presidential election adds to the pressure Trump is imposing.

As the number of U.S. positive cases remains over 50,000 a day, the Trump administration piously declares that education is essential. In other words, children, educators and maintenance staff are all expendable.

### What Is Known About SARS-CoV 2?

We now know that up to perhaps 40% of infected people never show outward symptoms, yet are still infectious.<sup>1</sup> To detect these people requires testing on a much larger scale than has been developed six months into the pandemic.

Tests are limited because of the type being used, a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test that requires swabs, pipettes, and chemical reagents to process it, and because it is costly (\$150 or more per test).

Yet capitalism has centralized production to low-cost locations and uses “just-in-time” distribution, insuring that with any crisis, these vital supplies are in short supply.

The tests also depend upon automated, but expensive, machines to process the samples and produce a bottleneck. It may take days or even a week to receive the result. Even were there an adequate number of trained tracers, such a delay makes that too late to do any good. Privatization of health care in general leads to a form of “lean production,” where decisions on staffing, number of beds, and number of hospitals are based upon profit margins.

The rate of deaths among people who contract the virus is estimated worldwide at between 0.5-1.0% and recorded deaths currently are over 750,000, with the United States at 175,000. But even the majority who survive are not ensured a complete recovery.<sup>2</sup>

Prolonged illnesses, evidence of blood clotting leading to strokes, permanent damage to the lungs and neurological abnormalities are among the serious side effects. A few have undergone surgery to have their lungs replaced. Mortality is highest in older people, but people of all ages have died from COVID-19.

Study of the virus has led to some conclusions on transmission contrary to what was initially stressed. This is a respiratory virus, and the main means of transmission is through droplets expelled when those infected (including asymptomatic people) spread viral particles as they talk, breathe, cough or sneeze. The bigger particles quickly fall, while the smaller linger in the air and drift farther away.

Studies have shown that a six-foot separation distance is reasonable for avoiding the larger droplets but the smaller ones are likely to continue spreading. However, as of now there are no conclusive studies on differentiating between these modes of transmission. We do not know what proportion each plays nor what is a safe distance to avoid aerosolized particles.<sup>3</sup>

Cleaning surfaces can't hurt, but wearing masks is far more effective in limiting viral spread. Enclosed spaces are far more dangerous than being outdoors. The cases

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Jim West: www.jimwestphoto.com

*Teachers are used to fighting for the needs of their students, and in demanding that schools be safe before students and staff go back to the classroom they are carrying on in that tradition.*

where numerous people have caught the virus reveal the commonality of being poorly ventilated, with many in proximity to each other over prolonged periods of time.

The Diamond Princess cruise ship, meat-packing plants, prisons, and nursing homes all share those characteristics — along with today's schools.<sup>4</sup>

Disproportionate mortality rates in Black and Brown communities are more a consequence of poverty rather than “poor life choices.” Poor people are more likely to be in “essential” jobs, less likely to be able to work at home, have paid sick leave or health care coverage. They are also more likely to share smaller spaces with extended families and when they become sick — since they have little health coverage or paid sick time — less likely to seek medical care.

What is the relative risk of COVID-19 infections and the transmissibility of infected children? A study of 55,000 people who had the virus reveal that almost 80% of the deaths were those over 65; less than one percent were under the age of 18.<sup>5</sup>

The risk of serious illness is also concentrated among older people. But some children have had the virus and died from it, and all who have the virus can transmit it. A recent study from Korea showed that children under the age of 10 transmitted

the virus at 50% of the efficiency of adults, while those between the ages of 10-18 transmitted at the same rate as adults. A smaller study of children under the age of five found that viral loads in nasal tissues were 10 to 100 times higher than that in adults.<sup>6</sup>

This study shows that children are not immune. Schools are not safe havens from the virus. In fact, they pose a risk of transmission from school to home and vice versa.<sup>7</sup>

### The Public Health Response

Political wishful thinking, outright stupidity and a focus on Wall Street meant that the federal government dilly-dallied for the first couple of months. The testing debacle is due not only to lack of planning and a slow response by agencies like the Centers for Disease Control, but also due to the hollowing out of the U.S. public health system since Reagan was president.

The federal government's refusal to direct production of needed PPEs and testing supplies allowed price gouging and speculation at every level. Each governor was forced to compete with others in order to obtain the needed materials.

By the middle of August, the average number of daily tests averages are about 750,000, but seems to have plateaued. This is still far short of what is needed to accurately track and curb the spread of this virus.

There are rapid antigen tests akin to those used in home pregnancy kits, which can be used to detect the viral particles that induce antibody production. They are not as sensitive as the PCR tests but have the advantage of giving results within 10-15 minutes and are cheaper, possibly \$1 a test when production gets up to scale.

If production of such a test were prioritized, it would be possible to test every person every day by just having them spit into a tube of saline solution and dip a test strip into the saline.

Alternatively, you could test at-risk populations like agricultural workers and those in food processing plants, prisoners as well as schoolchildren and staff. Rapid test results would allow for quarantining immediately and effective contact tracing.<sup>8</sup>

Any scenario that would allow safer reopening of schools would have to ramp up testing and tracing. Otherwise it will be

difficult to reduce the risk of transmission.

### How Effective is Remote Learning?

Even if schools had prepared for a scenario of online learning in case of a public health emergency, no educator would put forward remote learning as equivalent to in-person classes. The reality of online learning has given parents a greater appreciation of how hard teaching is.

True, there are online resources that can be useful in supplementing a curriculum, but the ability to interact with students is almost completely lost. U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos would never enroll her children in an online charter school, and neither should we.

The deficiencies of online learning actually mirror the disparities in society. The lack of school resources in poor neighborhoods or rural areas are replicated by remote learning: lack of laptops, no high-speed access to the internet, little infrastructure to learn new software, a transition to presenting lessons via computer and the effect of large and impersonal classes.

Most important is the lack of empathetic contact between teachers and students, the difficulties that younger students have in focusing, and added burdens students with Individual Educational Plans and English language learners face.

One of the most obvious problems is student engagement. Not a lot of data have been collected, but the Chicago Public Schools released data that showed during the week of May 11th, only 60% of students logged on at least three days a week and 25% did not login at all. These metrics show the challenges educators face.<sup>9</sup>

Punishing students who fail to log in is counterproductive to a learning environment. Yet in Michigan's affluent Oakland county a 15-year-old student with learning problems was sentenced to a juvenile facility during the pandemic. Her crime: failing to complete her online homework. Taken out of court in handcuffs, Grace was in detention from mid-May until August 11. Of course she was African American. Fortunately the Black Lives Matter movement protested and eventually she was released to her mother.<sup>10</sup>

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) released a report on June 21st that called for a safe return to school in the fall. The thrust of the document is that the negative effects on students from being out of school outweigh the risks of being in school. They pointed out that COVID-19 appears to act differently than the flu in children and that the risk of severe effects and rates of transmission may also be lower.

Since the AAP's report, the careful study of Korean children I mentioned earlier showed a differentiation of transmission

between those under and over the age of 10. This contradicts some of the AAP's more hopeful assumptions, as does the July 30 "Children and COVID-19: State Data Report" the AAP and Children's Hospital Association released. It concluded at least 338,000 U.S. children had tested positive, with 97,000 in the previous two weeks.<sup>11</sup>

It was also disappointing to read AAP's suggestion that three-foot distancing of students may be sufficient. The research documenting aerosol spread strongly supports a greater distance. AAP seems to say that the educational needs of students supersede health needs. Why should society be forced to make such a choice?<sup>12</sup>

Staff and the parents of schoolchildren fear school will be a site marked expendable just so the "economy" can resume. No wonder a Chicago Public Schools survey showed about 80% of Black and Latino families said they wouldn't send their children back for in-person instruction.<sup>13</sup>

### Precautions to Make Schools Safe?

We know that prolonged exposure to aerosolized viral particles is a key risk. If the numbers of COVID-19 cases in the community were low, or going down, what measures would need to be in place to prevent schools from being another potential hotspot of infection and spread?

Massive amounts of money would be necessary to retrofit schools and hire more staff. The American Federation of Teachers estimates that schools will need \$116 billion to provide for more staffing (instructional, health, and custodial), PPEs, cleaning supplies, transportation, technology and social and emotional support. The School Superintendents Association estimates the cost at \$200 billion.

Currently no money has been allocated by Congress, and many state budgets may lose money this year and next in what was an already underfunded budget.

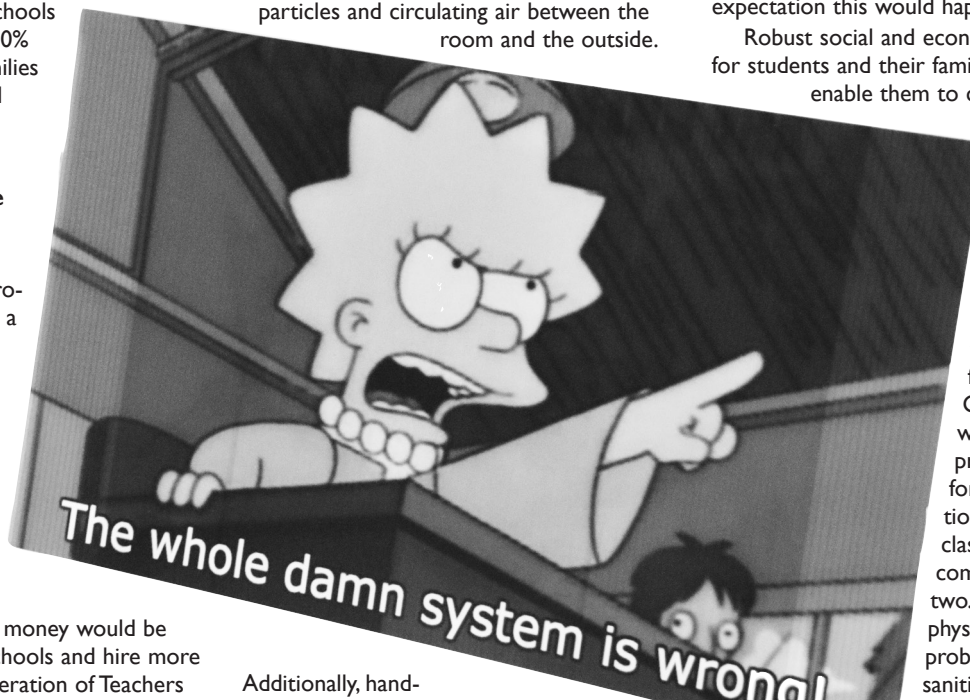
Measures that need to be taken in schools include dramatically cutting class size, with no more than a dozen children in elementary classes, improving the school building's infrastructure, and hiring more teachers, paraprofessionals, nurses and social workers as well as custodians.

Teachers have always fought for a reduction of class size. Education works better when students get more individualized attention. From personal experience I can

say that when the number of students goes above the low 20s in high school, and even lower in the elementary grades, it is no longer possible to check in with individual students. In the middle of a pandemic dramatically lower class size is not only pedagogically better, but the reduction will make it more difficult to transmit viral particles.

Instead, the push to open schools regardless of threats to health is threatening to cause an exodus of older teachers if they are not allowed to work remotely. This comes at a time when more, not less, staffing will be needed amid a teacher shortage.

Most important is improving the ventilation — enabling windows to open and updating the air filtration system with High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) or MERV 13 filters capable of removing viral aerosol particles and circulating air between the room and the outside.



Additionally, hand-washing stations need to be installed in classrooms, and provisions of PPEs like masks hand sanitizer made available at all times.

There has to be attention to working out details such as how to limit interactions in common areas, creating small cohorts or pods of students that are isolated from other cohorts, providing time for individual students to wash their hands, and installing lids on toilets (yes plumes of virus particles can be emitted when toilets flush). This involves planning and is extraordinarily expensive, far beyond the pale costs suggested.

Many schools are notoriously filthy, a result of cutting staff and/or outsourcing cleaning to private companies like Sodexo or Aramark. While viral transmission through touch is not thought to be as significant as aerosol transmission, maintaining a clean building will help, and reinforce the

idea that schools are taking all possible measures to keep people safe. Additionally, many schools have severe structural problems, as the Detroit teachers demonstrated just a few years ago when they struck over rats in the school and crumbling ceilings.

In the ideal return to school, there would be daily or frequent testing of students and staff. That would detect infections earlier and limit transmission, but in absence of mass or targeted testing there will be confirmed cases of infection and protocols need to be in place to deal with that. Smaller class sizes, cohorts, and limited interactions will reduce the number who need to be traced, but anyone who has been in contact with an infected person needs to be retested and perhaps go into 14-day quarantine. Provisions need to be made in expectation this would happen.

Robust social and economic supports for students and their families must exist to enable them to quarantine when

necessary. If ever the need for universal health care was doubted, today it is imperative.

What have schools done to prepare for reopening? Generally, they were asked to prepare three plans: for online instruction, for in-person classes and for a combination of the two. To set up the physical school they probably got more sanitizer, masks and thermometers and installed some handwashing stations.

Perhaps they have done some planning about minimizing contact between classes, like canceling music and art and having children eat their lunch at their desks.

The experience of online learning in the spring should have spurred districts and departments of education to be feverishly working to improve access to the internet and to plan for how the content of classes can be better presented online. For the most part that did not happen as they hoped that the virus would "magically" disappear.

However, Betsy DeVos and several state legislatures are attempting to inflict damage on public school teachers who are highly unionized and willing to fight for quality education and for their rights. DeVos has ruled that public and private schools must split federal funds provided under



the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, regardless of schools' economic needs.

A few legislatures are considering bills that would mandate that districts administer testing at all grade levels. Since this would require a report to appropriations subcommittees, it may be used as a hammer over those districts who "fail."

Such bills show the limitations of a rigid standards-based curriculum where administrators are focused on meeting state learning goals. Actually, students and staff alike are intensely interested in this crisis as it plays out. In biology it would be natural to adapt the curriculum to aspects of viral reproduction, how viruses hijack cellular metabolism, the cellular nature of life, how the virus enters cells, the immune system response and so on. The nature of the scientific process and research would be demonstrated and studied as it plays out in real time.

Mathematics could look at modelling viral growth rates, economic costs to produce vaccines and tests, and how data are analyzed through statistical analysis. History and literature might study the numerous examples of plagues and pandemics including the Black Death, the 1919 influenza epidemic, and the introduction of smallpox to the Americas and its decimation of the Native American population. All subjects can be personalized and made more meaningful.

### Are Schools Ready to Open?

From a safety perspective, no. The lack of testing and public health measures has led to widespread rising COVID-19 cases in most of the country. Counterposing the needs of in-person student education ver-

sus safety is unfair to children, parents and school staff.

Proponents prioritizing the reopening of schools range from those like pediatricians who do understand the educational and social needs of children to politicians like Trump and DeVos, who cynically want to open schools to further their agendas. They have never supported adequately funding public education.

Polling released on July 27 by the Kaiser Family Foundation indicates that by a two-to-one margin, the public believes, for safety reasons, schools should open later rather than earlier. Among parents of color the ratio is three to one. By 71% to 22% people believe that schools need more resources to open safely among parents of color the numbers go to 82% to 17%.

Among parents, high or moderate concern over the possibility of teachers, students or family members becoming infected range from 79% to 69% and parents of color show about 10% higher concern. Parents are also worried about their children falling behind academically and *need* services provided by schools like breakfasts and lunches.<sup>14</sup>

The prudent course is to take the measures necessary to control the virus in the community and provide the resources that will improve remote learning. Meanwhile, the plans should begin to provide the resources for a safe reopening of schools when the viral presence in the community is low and declining.

The less-than-transparent process of how or whether to open schools by local districts and the lack of clear guidelines by agencies like the CDC who suggest social

distancing "if feasible," make these mostly unilateral decisions particularly stressful for parents and school staff. People are rightly distrustful of decisions that are centered neither on science nor safety.

Most importantly, teachers and parents have by and large been left out of school planning. Safety committees containing parents, students, teachers and staff need to be set up and empowered to have public discussions on what measures need to be taken for schools to safely reopen. These need to continue once schools begin again.

Teacher and community pressure have prevented a number of schools from opening, including the large districts of Chicago and Los Angeles. The American Federation of Teachers has taken the unprecedented step of allowing locals to strike if safe conditions are not in place to allow schools to open.<sup>15</sup>

Studying inequities in society that show greater effect in marginalized Black and Brown communities during COVID-19, and the Movement for Black Lives, could empower students to view education as more than subjects they are forced to take without really knowing how they will use them. The relevance of education could be demonstrated. The neglect of both education and public health could be linked to the vast social movement that has grown in response to systemic racism and inequality.

No one can predict when a vaccine will be developed and how effective it will be. Until then, we should continue to demand the conditions that will provide a safe and equal education today and when schools reopen. ■

### Notes

1. (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/planning-scenarios.html>)
2. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01738-2>
3. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7293495/>
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7. [https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/10/20-1315\\_article](https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/26/10/20-1315_article)
8. <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.06.22.20136309v2>, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/opinion/coronavirus-tests.html?searchResultPosition=1>
9. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/education/2020/5/27/21271582/online-remote-learning-cps-students-public-schools-engagement>
10. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/michigan-judge-denies-release-teenage-girl-who-was-jailed-after-n-1234377>
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12. <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>
13. See "Chicago abandons in-person school plan," by Kathleen Foody, Detroit Free Press, 8/6/20
14. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/report/kff-health-tracking-poll-july-2020/>
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MAHMOUD NAWAJAA, A prominent human rights defender and general coordinator of the Palestinian national Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, was dragged away from his family by Israeli occupation forces in a July 30 night raid on his West Bank home. Held on unspecified "security offenses" in Israel's Jalameh interrogation center, denied access to lawyers, following widespread international protests he was released without charge after two weeks.

A July 31 appeal for support from the BDS Movement stated: "Mahmoud's arrest comes in the context of Israel's plans for the *de jure* annexation of much of the occupied Palestinian West



Bank, on top of its decades-long *de facto* annexation and apartheid. His arrest is part of Israel's attempts to clamp down on human rights defenders."

The detention highlights the continuing and growing importance of the global BDS campaign for Palestinian rights. More than 4700 Palestinian prisoners are held in Israeli jails, where the BDS Movement appeal notes: "With the COVID-19 virus spreading, mass detention aggravates health and safety risks to all detainees, adding to the common culture of torture and degrading and inhumane treatment."

For updates, information and action appeals, contact [info@bdsmovement.net](mailto:info@bdsmovement.net). ■

## Speaking Out at the University of Michigan: Toward a Real Culture of Care

By Kathleen Brown

IN JUNE, THE Office of Student Life released the “Wolverine Culture of Care Pledge” as part of the “community’s shared responsibility” to limit the spread of COVID-19. The pledge calls on students to wash their hands, wear face masks, and practice social distancing while on campus.

“Shared responsibility” is invoked again and again in times of crisis, encouraging us all to pitch in. While the University runs because of the effort of workers and students, talk of “shared responsibility” only goes one way. Despite invoking the rhetoric of care, the University’s actions demonstrate that it values its endowment over workers’ livelihood and students’ needs — causing hardship and harm.

The University’s decision to hold a residential semester puts workers in harm’s way as the pandemic rages and no vaccine is available. And it is the University, despite its immense wealth and well-paid administrators, that socializes pain — forcing those of us with the least to give up the most.

The University claims that it has no alternative but to fire workers due to loss of revenue. This leaves workers with no income and no health care in the midst of the most severe economic recession and public health crisis of our lifetime.

Workers who remain on payroll face reduced futures through frozen wages and an end to retirement matching, ensuring this current crisis will extend into the future. *We need to be clear: these are firings and cuts are not necessary.* The University of Michigan has abundant financial resources to protect it from this crisis in the form of \$6.7 billion in unrestricted reserves.

These cuts are unconscionable, but even more so given the University’s administrative bloat of hundreds of highly paid administrators who make six figure incomes while safely ensconced in their homes.

In the University’s talk of shared respon-

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*Kathleen Brown is a PhD student at the University of Michigan and active in the graduate student union, GEO. This article has been expanded from comments she made the Board of Regents’ Meeting of July 16, 2020, discussing the University’s controversial plans for in-person Fall semester reopening. The online version of this article will have a number of links documenting this story.*



*Before the layoffs, Michigan Medicine nurses demonstrated for the PPEs they needed.*

Jim West: [www.jimwestphoto.com](http://www.jimwestphoto.com)

sibility, we must ask why Marschall Runge, CEO of Michigan Medicine [the University’s hospital complex — ed.], still makes \$1.4 million a year when workers have been laid off. We must ask where Michigan Medicine’s \$108 million surplus in 2018 and \$178 million surplus in 2019 have gone. These funds have certainly not been “shared” with workers.

According to the information released at the Regents’ meeting on June 25, Michigan Medicine’s losses due to COVID were much less than anticipated and MM is projecting a surplus for FY20-21 of \$44 million. As the slide presented here demonstrated, this amount was secured by literally taking the money out of workers’ pockets through \$70 million in labor cuts.

### What’s Needed Now

Administrators have laid off 41% of the nearly 300 lecturers at the Flint campus and 738 workers from Michigan Medicine. If the University believed in a real culture of care, it would immediately reverse layoffs of lecturers, custodians, and medical personnel. Indeed, the University should greatly expand employment to counter the effects of the pandemic and to create a safe workplace.

We need *more* lecturers and instructors to expand the number of low-enrollment classes. We need *more* custodians to keep buildings clean and virus-free. We need *more* medical workers to set up a robust testing infrastructure.

We need *more* support staff to assist students struggling with homelessness, hunger, and mental health crises. And as the epidemic of racism limits and steals the lives of Brown and Black people, we need *more* resources to invest in students and workers of color.

Against UM’s manufactured scarcity, there is a real culture of care — from below. I see it when Michigan Medicine emergency room workers crowdsource \$52,000 on GoFundMe for their laid-off co-workers. It is graduate workers fighting to protect international grads against

ICE rulings, but also against UM’s discriminatory international fee.

It is graduate students fighting for our fellow parent members to be able to use the childcare subsidy, or disabled graduate students fighting for the right for all of us to work remotely.

A real culture of care is Black students raising awareness of ongoing racism in order to create a welcoming environment for students of color; it is undergraduate students organizing to disarm and defund campus police, reverse tuition increases, and fund all three Michigan campuses equitably.

If the University believed in a real culture of care, it would recognize how the pandemic has negatively affected graduate students’ research and job prospects, and would engage Graduate Employee Organization and Rackham Student Government’s requests in our open letter, which include extended funding and time-to-degree. Even though 1800 signatories support our demands, the University refuses to meet with us.

The University has the resources to absorb the financial shock of the pandemic. Regular workers do not. Until the University truly shares responsibility — starting by using a higher percentage of the endowment and cutting pay for top-paid administrators to share with low-paid workers — its rhetoric of “care” rings hollow. ■

## A Discussion with Micah Uetracht and Meagan Day: Toward Class Struggle Electoral Politics

LABOR SOCIOLOGIST BARRY Eidlin interviewed Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) activists Micah Uetracht and Meagan Day, authors of *Bigger than Bernie: How We Go from the Sanders Campaign to Democratic Socialism* (Verso Books, 2020) for *Against the Current*. Eidlin is the author of *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and a professor of sociology at McGill University in Montreal.



Meagan Day

**Barry Eidlin:** Obviously the context has changed beyond what anyone could imagine since your book *Bigger than Bernie*. What initially drove you to write it?

**Micah Uetracht:** Clearly, there has been a sea change in U.S. politics since Bernie's first primary run in 2016. Surprisingly, not many books had taken stock of that sea change. We wanted to talk about both the lessons that have been learned from Bernie's two campaigns, but also this newly reborn socialist movement, to break down some of its most important constituent parts.

We highlight DSA's electoral activity with a case studies chapter. We also advance a theory of "class struggle elections" as a general orientation towards how DSA, and socialists in the 21st century, should approach electoral politics.

Then we provide a roadmap for how to organize outside of the electoral realm. As important as electoral wins are, the vast majority of DSA members see socialist politics as going way beyond just running good socialists in elections — things like rebuilding the U.S. labor movement and particularly building fighting, democratic unions.

We wanted to write a book that could speak to both people who are part of that newly reborn socialist movement, as well as Berniecrat types who like the idea of Medicare for All or free college for everybody but haven't had much engagement with socialism beyond that. We wanted to invite them into this newly reborn socialist movement, to encourage them to join DSA as the

next logical step in their political activity.

**Meagan Day:** Writing the book was somewhat difficult because we didn't know how Bernie's 2019-20 campaign was going to turn out. We started writing this last summer, not knowing if his campaign would take flight.

We needed to write a book that would be serviceable if Bernie lost badly. It had to work if Bernie Sanders won the primary but lost the general election, or if he won. And it had to cover the scenario that actually occurred, where Bernie made a strong challenge but was ultimately defeated by the Democratic Party establishment.

This was actually a helpful set of constraints, forcing us to boil down our perspective for how socialists should be engaging in politics to a core set of principles, which would apply in a wide variety of political circumstances. Even though the political situation has changed in ways that we could not possibly have foreseen, the book holds up, because we're really talking about a core set of principles for political engagement.

### Seismic Shifts

**BE:** Since you wrote the book, not only has the Sanders campaign come to an end, but we have had these seismic, social, political and economic shifts: the coronavirus, the accompanying financial crisis, and the massive eruption and revival of Black Lives Matter and anti-police brutality mobilizations. Then, of course, this is all unfolding alongside the ongoing global climate catastrophe. How has that living reality shifted, challenged or confirmed your thinking about the current U.S. political terrain?

**MD:** Now that the Bernie Sanders campaign has come to an end, some on the left say that electoral politics is a dead end: we tried it, and we failed, so we need to turn our energy elsewhere. And of course, there are exciting developments in the streets with Black Lives Matter revived — developments that have opened up all kinds of new politi-

cal possibilities and questions.

But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't continue to contest elections, particularly for class struggle-oriented, socialist candidates. And it certainly doesn't conflict with anything we argue for in the book.

I think *Bigger than Bernie* is useful in this moment in that we're actually laying out a set of criteria for how to engage in elections that isn't simply "electoralist," meaning the reductive notion that socialists can elect our way to transformative social and economic change.

We refute that thoroughly. We're arguing that there's a particular way of engaging in electoral politics that strengthens movements. That is, the purpose of electoral politics for socialists is the symbiotic relationship between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary political activity. It is more important than governing or legislating, although these are obviously critical.

**MU:** Obviously, anybody who examines our political moment and the largest protest movement in American history must be shocked and surprised. Nobody could have predicted that things would pop off in quite the way that it did, and the fact that they have is incredibly encouraging and inspiring.

But there's never been a lack of public political upsurge in the United States. Just over the last couple of decades we've seen anti-globalization movements, the anti-Iraq War movements, the Wisconsin capitol occupation, Occupy Wall Street, the first round of Black Lives Matter in 2014-15 with Michael Brown's murder.

The problem is that each explodes and then the energy dissipates into the air. It never finds an institutional or organizational form that can go from upsurge to an organization or tangible legislative change.

**BE:** You've got the steam but not the piston.

**MU:** Exactly, as a wise man once said. DSA's hope is not that we'd be doing something different or better than the social movement upsurge we see in the George Floyd uprising. The hope is that we can serve as a box to capture some of the steam, and get some people elected who can be champions of the demands emerging from the streets.

We've seen that with this current moment. In Chicago where I live, the six

socialist aldermen are championing the demand to defund the police. They are the loudest and most consistent voices on the city council, which is pushing back against the neoliberal politics of our mayor. (By the way, we profiled them in *Bigger than Bernie*.)

As I mentioned before, some people on the left are saying, “Now we see that engaging in the Bernie campaign was a waste of time.” I don’t think that is an accurate read of the moment. In fact, this moment is perfectly of a piece with the “not me, us” message that Bernie articulated.

**BE:** *Given the stranglehold of the two-party system in U.S. politics, traditionally the debate within the left has been about the role of the Democratic Party. Whether it’s Sanders’ campaigns now or Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow campaign in the 1980s, the question is whether the end result just channels activism into the Democratic Party. Is the Democratic Party the graveyard of social movements? Or is there a possibility of energizing a potential alternative political movement?*

*That debate has now resurfaced. What’s your take on whether the dynamic is to head into the graveyard once again or to energize something beyond that might break out of the Democratic Party trap?*

**MD:** DSA exploded in membership after Bernie Sanders ran in the Democratic primary against Hillary Clinton, even though he’d spent his career as an independent.

I’m one of those who joined DSA during that wave. In the context of DSA, and as a direct result of the Bernie Sanders campaign, I’ve been able along with thousands of other people to develop political independence from the Democratic Party. That’s critical to understand.

Sometimes in these debates, we talk about it in the abstract. What concretely occurred is that Bernie Sanders’ candidacies in the Democratic Party have heightened the contradictions between the party’s leadership and its base.

His run and his platform highlighted the extremely politically reactionary and economically conservative nature of that party; it helped create new political groupings of people who are extraordinarily skeptical, even antagonistic toward that party.

I don’t think it’s necessarily true that because you’re running on the Democratic Party ballot line, you’re strengthening confidence in the Democratic Party. In fact, a lot of people’s confidence in the Democratic Party has been shaken since Bernie Sanders started his first campaign using its ballot line.

**MU:** Being stuck with the Democratic Party and not having a party of our own is a major barrier to the left in the United States, historically and contemporarily.

We make the case that the road beyond the Democratic Party must go through the Democratic Party in the form of the “dirty

break” strategy. What political figures like Bernie and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have done over the last couple of years has successfully heightened the contradictions that Meagan mentioned within the party.

There are millions of people who just got a very intimate education about what happens when you run within the Democratic Party. According to the conventional wisdom, the Democratic Party is the left party, and yet when Bernie Sanders was saying that we could have some really basic social democratic programs — Medicare for All and free college — the party did everything they could to destroy him.

What better political education about the nature of the Democratic Party could you get on national stage than those kinds of attacks? Now it’s up to socialists to make the case to make the next step to say, yes, this party really sucks, and in the long term we need one of our own.

It’s impossible to say that Bernie’s campaigning for the Democratic Party nomination has played into the hands of the Democratic Party. On the contrary, the party establishment is very worried about what Bernie and candidates like him are doing. They’re worried about the power that the Democratic Socialists of America is building in states and cities around the country where we are running socialist candidates on their ballot line.

If we’re ever going to be able to break with the Democratic Party, we are moving in a good direction and are doing some of the things that we need to do in order to engineer that.

### Class Struggle Elections

**BE:** *Can you lay out more explicitly the theory of “class-struggle elections”?*

**MD:** Our theory consists of essentially three criteria for how to distinguish between electoral politics which would help build socialism.

The first criterion is that the campaign — or if the campaign is successful, the time in elected office — needs to be focused on raising the expectations of the working class which have been so curtailed by neoliberalism. One of the hallmarks of neoliberalism is the foreclosure on the imagination of political alternatives, summarized famously by Margaret Thatcher: “there is no alternative.”

With class-struggle elections we want to break the spell of managed expectations and give people a sense that another world is genuinely possible through collective political struggle, that things don’t have to be as they are, that this is not “natural.”

Then we need to select demands that are two steps ahead of where people are, but not 20. There’s a perimeter around what’s considered possible in “normal” political discourse. We need to reach

beyond that perimeter when we’re selecting demands. We can’t overreach or else we’re going to lose credibility.

I think that’s a balancing act that is critical for socialists to consider when we’re engaging in electoral politics. A good example of this is Bernie Sanders’ flagship policy proposal in 2016: Medicare for All.

The second criterion is to engage in a process of both polarization and unity that only socialists are capable of — we can unite the working class while we oppose the capitalist class.

For their part Republicans are masters at division and polarization. They divide up the working class along lines of race, gender, nationality, sexuality, culture, geography. Democrats, on the other hand, call for unity, but a false form of unity. It’s an impossible harmony between interests in society that are diametrically opposed to one another — the capitalist class and the working class.

The Democrats are essentially saying we all need to get along. That includes Blue Cross Blue Shield executives and people whose medical claims are being denied by Blue Cross Blue Shield. We reject that form of unity and instead want class polarization.

You can see how the socialist combination of unity and polarization is very distinct from what’s on offer from both the right and center. It’s necessary for us to keep that in mind in everything that our candidates and elected officials do.

The third criterion is quite simple. It’s the golden rule that socialist electoral campaigns need to leave movements stronger than they found them. This means not merely being in “dialogue” with movements, which I think progressives often are capable of doing. We’re talking about an enhanced relationship to movements.

We want to use the candidacy and the office to build movements that already exist and create new movements or new sources of extra-parliamentary pressure. The theory isn’t that we can elect our way to socialism. We’re going to need to exert pressure from below to force change. Building that pressure is a primary task of socialist politicians.

**BE:** *Recently we’ve seen state primaries where there have been some important victories for socialists broadly defined, running in the Democratic Party primaries. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and four other DSA candidates won their New York state primaries. Also, in New York you’ve just had Jamaal Bowman beating out Eliot Engel, a 16-term incumbent backed by the DP establishment.*

*Rashida Tlaib easily won her Michigan primary and Cori Bush has won a big victory in St. Louis. There were some recent victories in Texas and near misses in Kentucky.*

*Do you see this as an emerging insurgency against the Democratic Party establishment? How far do you think it can go? How far do*

you think the party leadership will go trying to squash it?

**MD:** I see this as an insurgency against the Democratic Party establishment. How far it can go depends on the organizational capacity that we build to support it. We need to make sure that it doesn't go off the rails, that it is tied to social movements.

How far will the Democratic Party establishment go to squash it? I think as far as they possibly can: that's a matter of power. It's not a matter of their interest or intent. The Democratic Party establishment has no interest in relinquishing power to people of our political persuasion.

*It comes down to whether they are capable of undermining and crushing us.* It seems to be true in some cases and not others. The open question is whether the Democratic establishment is an emperor wearing no clothes or a semi-state institution with some of the world's greatest power players and the vast access to resources to crush us. It looks different in different cases.

We're getting mixed messages so it's a bit confusing. For example, the Democratic establishment seemed to be floundering throughout the primary and was not able to consolidate around a candidate. They spent a lot of time kicking and screaming about Bernie Sanders' candidacy but they weren't able to elevate one of their own.

Was it through sheer incompetence that they were going to allow Sanders to squeak through — someone who represented the opposite of the Democratic Party agenda, a neoliberal agenda hammered out over the latter part of the 20th century?

Ultimately they managed to put a stop to the Sanders insurgency, demonstrating that they're still quite strong despite their incompetence. But we see cracks in the facade all over the place. For example, when Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez ousted Joe Crowley, it was clear that Crowley was asleep at the wheel. Powerful Democratic incumbents like him lost interest in grassroots campaigns if they ever had to begin with. They just didn't have the skills to fend off an insurgency like AOC's.

Then there are other races where we thought we would be able to replicate that success. We felt we had learned through watching that we could beat them through the sheer power of organizing, of pounding the pavement. Then they managed to outspend us six to one and kicked our asses.

I think the dynamics are different in every race but they'll try to crush us no matter what. They're not going to give us a

pat on the back and welcome us in the door. The question is whether in each instance we can marshal the capacity to overcome them, whether our power is stronger than theirs.

**MU:** It's not like there was a window accidentally left open and now it's been shut. After AOC won, lots of people including



Micah Uetracht

many on the left said, "Oh, the establishment was caught sleeping but they won't get caught like that again." Two years later, you have Jamaal Bowman winning his congressional seat against another hapless incumbent.

**BE:** Hapless but well-entrenched.

**MU:** The movement against the Democratic Party establishment is obviously

still going; it's still racking up victories. And the movement is much larger than DSA.

Jamaal Bowman is a member of DSA, but he was fundamentally Justice Democrats' candidate. Socialists are playing key roles as part of a broad anti-Democratic Party establishment campaign.

#### Who's Running?

**BE:** While AOC or Jamaal Bowman may personally identify as socialists and have nominal membership in DSA, they are not DSA activists. Then you have someone like NY State Senator Julia Salazar who was.

Regardless, how and to what extent can these candidates be held accountable? How can they advance the socialist agenda? Getting elected is just the first part. Now actually they're incredibly constrained by all the many obstacles that the capitalist state and the parties throw up in their faces. How do we as a socialist movement navigate that terrain?

**MD:** That's an important and huge question. First, I will say that it's important to be running our own people. By our own people, I mean, democratic socialists who cut their teeth in movements. Ideally, the gold standard for DSA is to run people who developed politically in the context of DSA itself and consider DSA their political home.

When someone like that is not forthcoming, we should be turning toward people who cut their teeth in other social movements, other organizations that we consider good, strong working-class organizations that share our political values, instead of DSA existing to rubberstamp whoever the most progressive person is in any given race.

If we don't do that we're going to quickly liquidate our political identity. We'd end up with a bunch of people representing DSA who don't have the political perspective or the personal relationships or the backbone to resist the conservatizing pressures that bear down on them when they're in office.

The ideal situation is to be running as DSA. We have skilled organizers who've gone through years of political development including working on campaigns that allow them to get their hands dirty in politics.

They've been engaged in a multi-tendency democratic organization that allows them to learn political skills such as persuading people to listen to their ideas. They know when to enter a coalition with people who might not necessarily agree with them, and when to push back.

Those who have developed these skills in the context of DSA are the best people to be running for office. Of course, a lot of them have never thought about running for office. That's the best type of person.

If you have to pull teeth to get someone who you know is a fantastic DSA organizer, and a dedicated and committed socialist, to consider running for office, that's much better than having a progressive who wants DSA's field operation.

We need to run candidates who have their own moral and political compass that they're going to be following once elected. That's also one of the main reasons why I think it's essential to run our own people. Ultimately, we need a DSA apparatus to stiffen people's spines once they get in office.

**BE:** Speaking of developing infrastructure and backbone, I think an impressive feature of the Sanders campaign was its ability to develop independent organizations. What will happen now? Will these be a lasting ongoing force, or will they fade away like Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition after the 1988 primary?

**MU:** This is a good question. I think that the answer is that it will not fade away, precisely because many former staffers for the Sanders campaign were already DSA members. Those who were not joined DSA afterwards because they saw it as their political home. That's essential to making sure that the steam does not just dissipate, that these people have a socialist political organization that has become their home.

There's a sizable minority of Bernie's former staff who are DSA members with a distinct set of campaign skills. Another interesting facet of the Sanders' campaign was that it brought in people who came from unions where there was more bottom-up, one-to-one organizing. All these skills take time to develop. Many radicals have never felt there were any opportunities to use them. I think that having these skills as part of DSA's organizing toolbox will be important.

**BE:** *Where is DSA's energy directed now?*

**MU:** With the end of the Sanders campaign, people who got involved and really believed in what Bernie was saying drew the conclusion that the natural thing to do wasn't to try to get somebody else good elected, but rather to go build broader working-class forces, whether in the labor movement, joining DSA or affordable housing struggles.

Those kinds of struggles were exactly what Bernie was talking about being necessary to build the world we want. Here are a bunch of people who see social change happening not solely through elections. I think they're poised to continue to make huge contributions to social change going forward.

**BE:** *Given the current quadruple crises of the pandemic, economic oppression, police brutality and the looming climate catastrophe, will the developing insurgencies having staying power beyond the election season? Even in this moment where traditional electoral politics takes up considerable bandwidth, do you have thoughts about the role DSA can play through November and beyond?*

**MD:** I'm not sure that each particular expression of radical politics is going to survive the month, much less the election. Things are unfolding very quickly. I would also venture to say that it appears to me that while a few stalwart organizers are continuing to press on the demands to defund the police, the current protest momentum is declining, which is completely natural.

I can't predict the future, but the next flashpoint might be around the question of whether or not schools reopen and how. It seems we're gearing up for a big conflict that has the potential to mobilize working-class people. That is, the form of the movement and its demands may change.

I personally have a strong feeling that we're going to continue to see a lot of militancy, particularly among the working class because the pressures bearing down are so strong. As we know, that does not automatically translate into resistance. There have been lots of times when the American working class has been kept under the boot of the capitalist class and unable to organize or resist.

A missing ingredient, of course, is this sense of expanded political possibility. We are in a radical moment. I would say that the turning point was probably the first Black Lives Matter uprising, but concretized by the first Bernie Sanders campaign.

Since then, it has felt like we're living in a moment of ever-increasing radicalism. You even saw in the period between the two Bernie campaigns, with the Red for Ed Movement [teachers' strikes] constituting the largest U.S. strike wave in four decades.

It feels like things are continuing to reach

a fever pitch. I don't see that slowing down. I don't think that this beginning radicalization is a consequence of the Trump presidency, but I think the Trump presidency has exacerbated it.

Therefore I don't think that's going to stop if Joe Biden wins the election; I think it'll continue. It's our job as socialists to try to figure out where we fit in to each of those organic expressions of working-class militancy, and how to enhance and, to the best of our ability, direct them.

### November and Beyond

**BE:** *With the end of the Bernie campaign, we ended up in this situation where socialists are faced with this horrible choice in November of Trump versus Biden. What is the task for socialists between now and November? To the extent that we are engaging in the electoral realm, or thinking about the outcome of the November election, what should we be planning to do in November and beyond?*

**MU:** DSA voted at the 2019 convention in Atlanta not to endorse any other presidential candidate besides Bernie. That was the right thing to do.

I don't think there's anything socialists can do in the realm of presidential politics for the immediate future. DSA's path forward is correct: DSA members are extremely involved in several down-ballot races and hopefully, we will win some.

There are also important projects like the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC). There aren't as many racial justice protests as there were initially but, certainly, that whole moment has not run its course. Socialists should be participating in those movements, as good-faith participants rather than in an attempt to capture them and insert our own agenda.

We argue in the book that DSA so far has managed to do both good class-struggle electoral work and non-electoral organizing at the same time. Those are our principal tasks going forward.

**MD:** If individual DSA members feel that they need to make votes for Biden in the battleground states, then that's understandable and it's up to each person. I think DSA as an organization made the correct choice to withhold our incredible volunteer capacity from the upcoming presidential election. I think it's more important for us to maintain a strong political identity.

There are other issues besides Trump versus Biden in the November election. Aside from important down-ballot races to keep an eye on, there are crucial ballot initiatives. In California there is a big push on a referendum called Schools and Communities First, which is an attempt to tax the rich to fund public education.

I just got off the phone with some people in Portland DSA, who have gathered

enough signatures, in the middle of the pandemic, to get a universal pre-k ballot measure on the ballot. DSA chapters, even in the middle of this pandemic, even when everybody is only organizing over Zoom, are developing campaigns!

This is incredible to see. I've been consistently very impressed by the dedication that socialist organizers continue to have to organizing when it's impossible to do so in person. DSA chapters across the country are doing cross-organization, coalition building, and volunteer organizing — all completely digitally right now. It's a marvel of organizing. I'm very impressed. We're busy.

Since we've decided not to endorse Joe Biden and that we will not be orchestrating phone banks on behalf of the Joe Biden campaign, liberals accuse us of taking our ball and going home.

They accuse us of being sore losers and dropping out of politics. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am astonished at how busy DSA members are in waging all kinds of campaigns right now.

**BE:** *One of the big things that loom throughout Bigger than Bernie is the fact that there is no working-class political representation today in the U.S. political landscape. Most glaringly, we lack a workers' party of some sort. As I've argued in my book Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada, this lack is not an inevitable feature, but rather the result of political struggles in the 1930s and 1940s.*

*If we build on that argument, do you foresee a possibility for this new emerging movement coming out of 2020 to reshape the political landscape and create the conditions for that kind of working-class party, or do you have other ideas about how that would come about?*

**MU:** Rather than trying to make a prediction, I would say that many people within DSA understand that the Democratic Party is not their friend. The Democratic Party is a fundamentally capitalist party that does not represent the interests of the working class in this country. What they do with that, obviously, is a question, both for individuals and DSA. We have some ideas in the book about how to act based on that analysis.

Right now, DSA is building a bench of people to run as candidates, people who understand that it is a problem that we are stuck with this Democratic Party. If we're ever going to get beyond the Democratic Party, this will have to deepen and expand.

Many things would have to change for us to create that mass working-class party that we all know that we need.

Who knows, we might see a 21st-century red scare where we all end up in jail before we can end up creating such a party. Yet I feel extremely optimistic about the general direction in which the newly reborn socialist movement in the United States is moving, toward a party of our own. ■

# Dead Trotskyists Society: Provocative Presence of a Difficult Past

By Alan Wald

## US Trotskyism, 1928-1965

Part I: Emergence. Left Opposition in the United States

Edited by Paul Le Blanc, Bryan Palmer & Thomas Bias

Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2019, 704 pages, \$36 paper.

Part II: Endurance. The Coming American Revolution

Edited by Paul Le Blanc, Bryan Palmer & Thomas Bias

Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2019, 835 pages, \$50 paper.

Part III: Resurgence. Uneven and Combined Development

Edited by Paul Le Blanc & Bryan Palmer

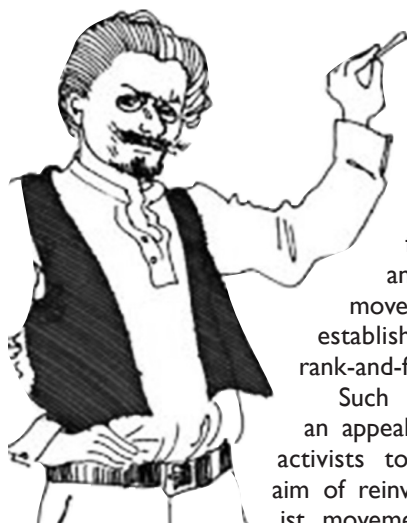
Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2019, 719 pages, \$36 paper.

EVEN THOUGH ALLEN Ginsberg's "America" was not among the ardent verses recited in the 1989 teen drama *Dead Poets Society*, his 1956 anti-capitalist protest poem hurled a celebrated challenge of defiance against the stifling conformity of his native land: "When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?"

Lamentably, so far as our present-day political culture goes, an inspection with a microscope might indicate an oversupply of competing Trotskyist groupuscules, and almost no demand. Viewed through regular glasses, the larger picture suggests that it's mostly all quiet on the Trotskyist front, and has been so for quite a while.

### I. Where Have All the Trotskyists Gone?

In the 1930s, U.S. adherents of exiled Bolshevik Leon Trotsky in the international communist movement led a spec-



tacular teamster strike in Minneapolis and were a dazzling pole of attraction in New York intellectual life. In the 1960s Trotskyists provided expert leadership for the Fair Play for Cuba Committee and the anti-Vietnam War movement, and in the 1970s established vital networks of rank-and-file unionists.

Such a track record augurs an appealing resource for young activists to investigate, with the aim of reinventing a vibrant socialist movement by studying earlier

*THIS ESSAY IS dedicated to the memory of Anne Chester, Froben Lozada, Asher Harer, Kwame Somburu, Nat Weinstein, and Sylvia Weinstein — working-class heroines and heroes.*

applications of Marxism to labor, race, international politics, organization-building, coalitions, elections, and much more.

Yet the memory of undeniable accomplishments is in jeopardy of displacement. The last time I recall the term "Trotskyism" inviting truly national attention was in 2011, on the occasion of the death at age 62 of the well-known "contrarian" journalist Christopher Hitchens. *The New York Times* described Hitchens as "a British Trotskyite who had lost faith in the Socialist movement"<sup>1</sup> and Channel 4 News quoted Scottish politician George Galloway ridiculing him as "a bloated, drink-sodden former Trotskyist lunatic."<sup>2</sup>

Whether the *meshugaas* of Hitchens' political apostasy signified the "twilight" of Trotskyism, or simply transported us momentarily into its "Twilight Zone," is a puzzler that might be debated.

But fear not. This review essay of a three-volume documentary history of U.S. Trotskyism is addressed to committed militants — not cynics or laptop Bolsheviks. The Introduction to Volume III explains why this recovery project matters:

*"The people who were drawn to the Trotskyist banner sought to forge a genuinely revolutionary pathway from the violence and oppression of capitalism to a better future of socialist democracy, the control of the world's economic resources by laboring majorities for the good of humanity — a cause which they believed had been betrayed by the bureaucratic leaderships and badly compromised programs of the mass reformist-Socialist parties and by the global Communist movement led by Joseph Stalin."*<sup>3</sup>

That is, while always marginal as a social movement in the United States, Trotskyism's relatively distinctive ideas and experiences may assist in the present-day recomposition of a new revolutionary socialist agenda to meet the extraordinary times in which we live.

Conversely, some kind of "fight for the soul of Trotskyism" is the opposite of what we need. Accordingly, in what follows, there will be no deluging you with wild and wonky tales of bizarre shenanigans or, alternatively, extolling the delights of engaging in doctrinal hairsplitting ("The Joy of Sects").

We are in a moment of danger for our society and the future of the socialist Left. As I write, deaths from COVID-19 are steadily mounting; a global anti-racist movement contesting the funding of murderous cops is underway; mass actions to eradicate shrines to traitors and bigots are sweeping several countries; agonizing impoverishment and off-the-charts unemployment show every sign of persisting and deepening; and an unhinged president grows more barking every day.

More than merely a year, 2020 could well turn out to be more of a historical juncture — like 1929, 1939, 1956 or

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1968. The road ahead is coming into view as even more forked than usual.

Will there be an advance toward greater working-class solidarity and increased understanding of the roots of racism in political economy, or an upsurge in the hammer-blows of immiseration and repression? Is the course of history about to be transformed, or are we facing a speed-up of alterations already in progress?

The Left, justifiably, is embroiled in contentious debates about the next stage while we all wonder what is to be done. In our search for guidance, this is no time for indulgence in the perusal of archaic texts as an act of necromancy to predict the future. On the other hand, surely there is merit in revisiting an earlier moment of bold creativity when true socialist internationalism was imaginable, and activists gave their all to bring it about.

## II. St. Paul of Trotskyism

A portal back to precisely such a time in radical history landed with a surprisingly heavy thud on my front porch this spring — a box containing 2258 pages of primary sources and commentary under the rubric of “US Trotskyism, 1928-1965.”<sup>4</sup>

Multiple door-stop tomes is what I might have foreseen because the never-ending production of internal discussion bulletins and journal articles was a Trotskyist tell; but who would be willing to furnish the sheer Stakhanovite intensity of labor to pull all this together? More to the point, what would motivate young activists to read it?

The answer to the first question is Paul Le Blanc, the *éminence grise* behind this remarkable trilogy of lost and marginalized voices, and with all due respect to James Brown, the hardest working man in revolutionary historical studies. He is author of close to a dozen monographs, but also a tireless compiler of essay collections of works by V. I. Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Antonio Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburg, C. L. R. James and more.

Customarily a vastly busy one-man band, Le Blanc in this particular documentary series engages the assistance of two associates: Bryan Palmer, the stellar historian whose two-volume *Marxism and Historical Practice* became available in paperback in 2017 from Haymarket Books, and socialist Thomas Bias (1950-2019), a much-admired political activist in the International Typographical Union.

The resulting product is Le Blanc’s most ambitious effort to date, an orchestra of documents rescued from the pages of publications of the main Trotskyist group, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and its predecessors, spanning the years from 1928 to 1965.

As an activist scholar, Le Blanc himself is of an exceedingly rare breed. From a pro-Communist family, and with New Left bona fides as a one-time member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and a Conscious Objector in 1966 during the Vietnam War, Le Blanc labored in the orthodox Trotskyist vineyards of the SWP and Fourth Internationalist Tendency (an expelled group seeking readmission) for decades before veering off to join the more heterodox Solidarity and International Socialist Organization (ISO), and now the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

Such an itinerary may look like a version of Marxist speed-dating, or serial monogamy, but Le Blanc entered each of these commitments with honorable intentions. More note-



Dorothy Eisner painting of Dewey Commission with Leon Trotsky standing and addressing

worthy, he emerged from these involvements with a mature and admirable temperament: as an optimistic peace-maker, far from the heated world of his political ancestors and many of his one-time comrades.

He may well be christened “The St. Paul of Trotskyism,” in this instance appropriate for a comrade supremely devoted to popularizing and giving intellectual weight to the classical tradition. In innumerable debates filling a wide range of publications on the Far Left, he is unfailingly cordial even as he is persistent in defending his arguments, qualities on display in his management of *US Trotskyism*.

## III. A Magisterial Assembly of Archival Materials

In this massive collection, Le Blanc is able to command numerous moving parts so that, while I can’t promise that everyone will find the read a heart-pounding thriller all the way to the end, there are treasures in every volume.

I am especially struck by the multitude of riveting Marxist activist-writers who applied protean talents to understanding capitalism and imperialism in the worst decades of the last century. This encompasses not only the redoubtable leaders whose political writings have been in print for many years, such as James P. Cannon, Max Shachtman, Farrell Dobbs, C. L. R. James, Art Preis, Fred Halstead, George Breitman, George Novack and Evelyn Reed. There are also those who would, for various reasons, eventually quit or be excluded from the movement, but possessed talents revealed soon after in strik-





g commission.

ing ways.

If one wants to see how a Marxist analyzed the Nazi invasion of France at first hand, there is “How Paris Fell” (1941) by Sherry Mangan (writing as “Terence Phelan”), the modernist poet and translator in 1955 of the Juilliard Opera Theater’s landmark production of Mozart’s *Idomeneo, King of Crete*.

For rare particulars about the conditions faced by revolutionaries under the fascist occupation, see “Europe Under the Iron Heel” (1942) by Jean van Heijenoort (writing as Marc Loris), a world-famous historian of mathematical logic and expert on Kurt Gödel. To grasp what ensued in the postwar labor movement, there is “The Great Strike Wave and Its Significance” (1946) by Bert Cochran (writing as E. R. Frank), the author of the masterful *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (1977).

To see the elements of a theory of Stalinism presented as an alternative to Trotsky’s, check out “State Capitalism and World Revolution” (1950), co-authored by C.L.R. James along with Raya Dunayevskaya, founder of Marxist-Humanism and author of books on philosophy and women’s liberation, and Grace Lee Boggs, the

legendary Detroit activist and autobiographer of *Living for Change* (1988).

To understand how a Marxist interpreted the controversial period from the election of Andrew Jackson to the Civil War, see “Three Conceptions of Jacksonianism” (1947) by Harry Braverman (writing as Harry Frankel), the author of the Marxist classic *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism* (1974). An incisive critique of “The Myth of Racial Superiority” (1944) is provided by former psychology professor Dr. Grace Carlson, the subject of Donna T. Haverty-Stacke’s forthcoming *The Fierce Life of Grace Holmes Carlson: Catholic, Socialist, Feminist* (2020).

The bulk of this magisterial assembly of archival materials is drawn from articles appearing in Trotskyist newspapers and journals, internal documents, book reviews, and letters and reports, but substantial space is also devoted to introductions that open each book and precede each section. These amount to 76 pages in Volume I, 57 pages in Volume II, and 51 pages in Volume III, a total of 184 pages. Thus the trilogy contains a collectively-written historical narrative that is a small book on its own.

Le Blanc himself prepared the vast majority of these prefaces and overviews, a total of 15. Palmer contributed four and co-authored one; Bias wrote two and co-authored one; and Andrew Pollack, another political activist, contributed two to the first volume only.

The attention-grabbing titles of each volume tell a kind

of story of “Emergence,” “Endurance,” and “Resurgence.” Admittedly, this amounts to a narrative arc often found in fiction, especially in tales that climax in a happy ending — which turns out not at all to be the case, especially when the trajectory of the Trotskyist movement is viewed from the 21st century. The internal partitions of the material, from my point of view, are well-crafted, although the weight of the selections included in each chapter fluctuates considerably.

Volume I covers the formation of the Trotskyist movement in 1928, with the founding of the Communist League of America, and runs to the beginning of World War II, with the 1941 Smith Act Trial that sent leaders of the SWP leadership and Teamster Union activists to prison for allegedly advocating the violent overthrow of the U.S. government. This unit has eleven chapters, ranging from two to nine items in each.

The most extensive deals with the 1939-40 dispute between supporters of James P. Cannon and Max Shachtman, the equivalent of a Thunderdome. It was a political cage match event that involved disputes over the organizational character of the SWP as well as the actions of the Soviet Union (invading Poland and Finland) at the start of World War II.

The volume also includes exceptionally well-informed chapters, grounded in dense research by Palmer, about the CLA, “Labor Struggles,” and “The Smith Act Trial.” In the introduction to this final segment, Palmer’s gifts are stunning as he creates a lucid and compelling narrative connecting the copious dots among various aspects of the SWP’s Teamster activity, Trotsky’s criticisms of his supporters’ labor policy from Mexico, the threat of fascist groups in Minneapolis, the role of Trotskyists in the nationwide WPA strike, the collaboration of the FBI with the head of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the handling of the trial defense, the dispute with ultraleft critics in the Fourth International, and much more.

The book closes with a small selection of historical and theoretical essays from the era by SWP leaders such as Felix Morrow, Albert Goldman, George Novack (writing as William F. Warde), and C. L. R. James (writing as J. R. Johnson).

**T**he second volume, comprising the postwar and early Cold War years, has five chapters varying from four to 17 items. They take up the “Dawn of the American Century,” “Challenging Racism,” “Dissensions” (disputes with minority groupings led by Morrow and Goldman, and James), “Coping with the Cold War, Global and Domestic,” and “Confrontations Internal and International.”

In this last subdivision, among the longest, Palmer caught me off guard by lapsing into a boilerplate tract against the favorite Dark Side Trotskyist of so many dogmatists — the Egyptian-born Greek Marxist Michel Pablo (a pseudonym for Michalis N. Raptis). What to make of a one-sided polemic capped by a denunciation of the reunification of the Fourth International — 20 years down-the-road! — as “rooted in a common Pabloite orientation to the Cuban Revolution...”?<sup>5</sup>

Without entering into an Olympian debate over the question, let me briefly state that “Pabloism” has become an umbrella term for working up a bloodlust against non-sectarian Trotskyism. It was certainly appropriate for Palmer to indicate his own opinions, but those seeking a more informative view of Pablo’s mixed contribution to revolutionary Marxism would do well to consult the summary found on the Marxist Internet Archive.<sup>6</sup>

Mulling over these uncharacteristic pages in *US Trotskyism*, one wonders whether the invocation of the name “Pablo” is everlastingly destined to have the same effect on the orthodox Trotskyist mind as the full moon used to have on werewolves.

The third volume, covering new radical developments in the mid-1950s and early 1960s, contains six chapters ranging from five to 12 items each, this time closing with an even more extensive selection of history and theory that includes writing by several women — Grace Carlson, Jean Simon (a pseudonym for Jean Tussey), Myra Tanner, and Joyce Cowley.

Broadly conceived as showcasing what Le Blanc nicely calls “A Party of Uneven and Combined Development,” this concept — better known as a political-economic theory — is here applied to illuminate “a left-wing organization, particularly one spread over different geographic areas, with diverse social composition, embracing different generations, and interacting with co-thinkers in various other countries as well as with the complex and evolving society within which it is embedded.”

Le Blanc further adds that such a dialectical contradiction can also be found “within an individual who is a leading member of such an organization.”<sup>7</sup> This lead-in advances to a reflective and creative interrogation of the sectarian as well as non-sectarian aspects of the SWP, followed by a convincing description of its achievements in the 1960s.

Quoting long-time SWP leader George Breitman, much of this success is attributed to “listening to and learning from non-Marxist figures — such as Malcolm X, Rev. Cleage, William Worthy, Jesse Gray, Daniel Watts, James Baldwin, the exiled Robert F. Williams and Julian Mayfield...”<sup>8</sup>

One might accordingly characterize this forward thinking that was extant in the late 1960s as a sort of “vegetarian” phase of SWP development, then regrettably followed by a disastrous “carnivorous” one. For the latter, Le Blanc concludes this Introduction with a brief but pointed summary of the party’s transformation in the 1970s.

For various reasons the once working-class organization was turned over in 1971 by the Old Guard to a new student leadership (mainly a friendship circle from the elite Carleton College) that successfully embraced organizational “authoritarianism” and then, suddenly, a homemade version of “Castroism.” It was a frog-in-boiling-water situation with the hand of one Jack Barnes on the burner, and the meal finally cooked up was a bland and “politically irrelevant sect.”<sup>9</sup>

#### IV. “Normie” Trotskyism?

There is no way to fairly describe the full scope of these volumes, hence some highly selective and hopefully constructive observations will have to suffice.<sup>10</sup> In the interests of putting the bottom line up front, I’ll just come out and state my main point here: Any hope for the redemption of aspects of this tradition will come from candidly posing the problems that are the concerns of the activist Left at the present time. If these are not clearly named, they can’t be addressed.

In contrast, a surefire path to irrelevance is to lecture the activists with certainty about “correct positions” once held by the movement with little consciousness that many of these are replete with policies and practices that have so often led to disaster. *US Trotskyism* embodies both approaches, and is at its best when it tilts toward the former.

I long ago learned how to speak Trotskyism and have personally met and interviewed many of the contributors to this trilogy, but the novice radical who encounters *US Trotskyism* for the first time will be in a different situation.<sup>11</sup>

This means that guideposts and framings play a decisive part in how the raw material of these volumes is processed. Here I find that the Prefaces and Introductions by all the editors are unquestionably beneficial, albeit chiefly in delivering clear and compelling explanations of the origins of the Left Opposition led by Trotsky and the history of the various stages of the SWP.

On the other hand, there are no explanatory footnotes to the primary materials, nor are there chronologies, timelines, glossaries of key terms and biographical identifications, or a bibliographical essay mapping kinds and categories of available scholarly and archival resources.<sup>12</sup>

Readers without some background may have more than a little difficulty in remembering the differences among the American Workers Party, the Workers Party of the United States, and the Workers Party; or the Communist League of Struggle, the Marxist Workers League, the Leninist League, the Workers League, and the Revolutionary Marxist League. Neophytes might find themselves checking out on the particulars in favor of skipping ahead to episodes of melodramatic blood-letting and political purging à la *Game of Thrones*.

When one starts to count up the expulsions from the SWP (almost always described in these volumes euphemistically as splits, divergences, ruptures, and exits), one runs out of fingers and toes very soon. Some of these bitter altercations turn into venomous Forever Wars, especially those in which Cannon is opposed to Max Shachtman, and a dozen years later to Bert Cochran and George Clarke.<sup>13</sup>

In an article by Shachtman, ultra-leftists like Hugo Oehler and B. J. Field are discussed with relatively more leniency, even humorously. In contrast, the aforementioned — all once intimates of Cannon in the SWP leadership — are characterized by the SWP majority as incorrigible revisionists politically and men of bad faith personally.

Decades later, oppositionists would continue to be decried as clones of these renegade Darth Vaders (who was himself formerly a Jedi Knight); and in 2020, like Trump’s obsession with Obama, their names *still* live in the heads of many self-proclaimed “Cannonites” who seem addicted to re-enacting scenarios. I’ve even heard a few muttering, “Will no one rid me of these meddling Shachtmanites?” But I’ve also observed neo-Shachtman supporters fantasizing crypto-Stalinism every time the name Fourth International crops up.



Top left: James P. Cannon, Joseph Hansen, bottom left: Farrell Dobbs, a leading Minneapolis teamster imprisoned during WW II, and Antoinette Konikow, a socialist feminist doctor who taught women about their bodies and performed abortions.

No wonder that present-day activists might conclude that the mentality of sectarian factionalism seems to operate within the larger movement of Trotskyism as if a virus; a snippet of chemical memory that repeats itself numerous times. Do these volumes acquiesce in an acceptance of this, or do any of the contents seek out some means of immunization against the worst forms of the disease or at least achieve a flattening of its curve by preventive measures?

**B**y and large, *US Trotskyism* follows the play-book of the authorized writings of the SWP, especially the narrative found in Cannon's *The Struggle for a Proletarian Party* (1943), *The History of American Trotskyism* (1944), *Speeches to the Party* (1973), *The Struggle for Socialism in the "American Century"* (1975), and *The Socialist Workers Party in World War II* (1977), as well as compilations such as *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism: A Documentary History* (1973), edited by a British anti-Pabloite named Cliff Slaughter.

I don't mean to suggest that the account provided is entirely uncritical. Le Blanc is acute in censuring the SWP's 1930s blind-spot on race (worthy of a hashtag #TrotskyistsSoWhite), while Palmer maintains that Cannon was insufficiently anti-Pablo ("his critique was not a decisive repudiation of the politics of Pabloism") and even guilty of "national chauvinism."<sup>14</sup>

From the outset, however, the perspective is that all the losing oppositions in the SWP were ones that "fundamentally disagreed and broke away."<sup>15</sup> That makes the contents of *US Trotskyism* mostly comfort food to those educated in the SWP traditions. The menu may be less tasty to those who seriously doubt that all the ruptures in the SWP involved issues of fundamental (therefore, split-worthy) principle, and who even might suspect that undemocratic and bureaucratic means may have been at times used by the SWP majority.

Are the editors, following the SWP positions to such a large extent, actually advancing and reproducing a political version of a "Normie Trotskyism" for the present generation? My view is that the trilogy is normie to the degree that it commends this orthodox and unadventurous perspective on the past as an interpretative norm.

While *US Trotskyism*, especially in passing references by Le Blanc, occasionally opens the door to new avenues of discussion and reconsideration, the gap is never very wide and I find that too little passes through. Le Blanc several times emphasizes that the authors of the introductions have "different 'takes'...on both minor and major questions," but it would have been helpful to say explicitly what a few of these are, and even to provide meaningful comparisons.<sup>16</sup>

Likewise, Le Blanc offers encouraging general statements about the need to develop a "superior paradigm" to "replace variants of the old perspectives...in these pages," ones that "may end up synthesizing new conceptualizations with those drawn from the richness of the Trotskyist tradition." Still, his main example is that of the occasional infusion of "'heterodoxy' into the reigning 'orthodoxy,'" which needs a much more detailed elaboration than is provided.<sup>17</sup>

For the most part, despite the strategic presence in the book of routine platitudes about no faction being perfect, and all sides having some valid point, the volumes encourage an

"us versus them" perspective, and the "us" is repeatedly the SWP majority faction.

One suggestion for future consideration is for the serious student of Marxist theory and practice to revisit the debate about the nature of the Soviet Union, to ask whether the bitter rupture among dedicated anti-capitalists was objectively necessary to pursue for so many decades, especially as there was frequently a convergence in opposing Soviet repression (in East Germany 1953, Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968) as well as episodic near-collaborations.

Can one now acknowledge that extended adherence to seeing the world through the prism of one of these singular theories (there were at least five or six) was based on understandably poor information and exaggerations on all sides due to factional rivalries? Maybe there are still reasons to be skeptical of a unification before 1989, but the USSR collapsed 50 years after the original schisms began in a manner that (at least in my view) confirmed no one's pet model.

Moreover, was it so absolutely critical for the SWP to decide on one single analysis of such a highly complicated question as "the" official position when an organization of around 1000 people had absolutely no influence on governmental policy or anywhere else? To his credit, Le Blanc mentions Marcel Van der Linden's highly relevant argument for a *synthesis* of elements of the various Marxist theories of Stalinism, but then he neither develops nor integrates that perspective into his estimation of the SWP legacy.<sup>18</sup>

Another possible dispute to revisit concerns Cannon's expectation of the SWP in the post-World War II era gearing up to lead a transition to the dictatorship of the proletariat at warp speed. This was way off, yet those who had accurately questioned that analysis were treated rather harshly. What about providing an example of how, knowing what we now know, one might have used that clash of predictions in a productive debate that came closer to understanding postwar reality?

I raise such suggestions for consideration not because I favor counter-factual history, but because the Left of today needs to locate authentic grounds for unity. Some Marxist groupuscles act as if "regroupment" means everyone agreeing with *their* program. But only candid explorations of where a once-inspiring political current went wrong (as well as where it was accurate) will creatively address newly-arising situations. These will be ones in which we ourselves must debate about what is common ground and what is overreaching in the conditions of the 21st century, instead of accepting the dividing lines that have come before as a teleological inevitability.

As the French Marxist Daniel Bensaïd observed, "The Past is full of presents that never came to fruition."<sup>19</sup> That's surely why contemporary radicals continue to examine the rise of German fascism and the Spanish Civil War to assess whether different policies might have produced more favorable outcomes.<sup>20</sup>

## V. What Would Cannon Do?

The Marxist movement of 2020 confronts many situations for which much of the material in this trilogy provides not a



C.L.R. James

template, but intriguing examples of earlier efforts to offer perspectives on analogous challenges: combining the struggle against race and class oppression; the problem of revolutions that over-reach and subsequently decline; international solidarity and anti-imperialism; self-defense against repression; the nature of fascism and how to build unity to oppose it; Marxist electoral strategy; and the necessity of revolutionary organization.

This last topic is hardly a sideshow, inasmuch as Cannon saw “party building” as a central concern. Nevertheless, radicalizing young people continue to either fear commitment to a serious organization due to a long history of cult leaderships and purges, or else they naively jump right into groups (not necessarily Trotskyist) that repeat the old mistakes as tragedy and farce.

Even experienced veterans find it painful to dispassionately revisit times past in which they had an emotional investment. Instead of rethinking their own role, they often resort to the by-now predictable rationalization that the organization betrayed its program or became a cult at the moment they were ejected. Furthermore, as one might expect, groups that currently imagine themselves as derived from the Cannon-era SWP act as if they have alleviated these critical matters, despite abundant evidence to the contrary.

In the volumes of *US Trotskyism*, there is little aimed at taking action in a fresh and informed manner to mitigate either of two interrelated perils. One is the paradoxical effect of the long-term charismatic and decisive leader, who accrues great prestige and becomes territorial about organizational control over time.

The other is the conundrum of when splits/expulsions are truly required, or result from political myopia and resistance to power-sharing. Neither is a simple matter, unless one chooses to merely side with the victors, which is the prevalent posture in these volumes.

Nonetheless Cannon, who radiated proletarian authenticity throughout his life, is an intriguing personality and political thinker, not the least because of his capacity to gather so many diverse and colorful individuals around him. The dilemma is that many complicated things happen as a leadership gains authority and becomes institutionalized; delusions of grandeur about one’s own political genius can be promoted by sycophancy.

By the same token, in a faction fight, several ostensibly conflicting claims may be true at once in gauging an unpredictable, complex, and fast-changing world situation. A full-blown pile-on, or treating minorities as untouchables, is guaranteed to cause a loss of faith in the likelihood of future fair treatment.

There is no doubt that, when it came to internal crises, Cannon was effective because he didn’t mess around; he went straight for the jugular as if loosing the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword. Palmer reminds us on several occasions that Trotsky had chastised Cannon as early as 1933 for an “inclination to resolve political issues through organizational methods.”<sup>21</sup>

When one is reading through these volumes, however, one finds that Cannon’s opponents could often throw back charges of misbehavior as good as they got.<sup>22</sup> Focusing on one figure as the factional bogeyman in SWP history is as unwar-

ranted as is continually asking, “What would Cannon do?”

Seventy or 90 years after these internal battles, I don’t see the point of indulging in a high dudgeon of retrospective partisanship when it comes to believing one faction’s truth about which side misbehaved in either a bureaucratic or “disloyal” way — or in excusing undemocratic behavior because the political line was allegedly superior. No one expects a political debate to showcase the graciousness of a *maître d* tending to a displeased customer, and it’s surely nothing more than a pleasant pipedream to fantasize, “What if there was a scheduled faction fight and nobody came?”

Instead of choosing sides retrospectively, it might be more constructive to the development of socialist culture to have a candid discussion that includes the psychological costs of bullying and belittling behavior, often accompanied by rancor and sneering, with the result of cadres being crossed out and embittered in these spirit-breaking purges.



James and Grace Lee Boggs collaborated with C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya.

## VI. The Long View of Trotskyism

Looking back on the SWP experience chronicled in these volumes, one needs to think more circumspectly about the meaning of the legacy in a new millennium. Particularly pressing issues include the drastically changed state of capitalism and imperialism, and their war against the working class of the world, a crisis that still screams out for modernized socialist solutions.

To be sure, for the years just after these volumes conclude, it is hard not to be impressed with the achievement of Cannon in delivering the goods organizationally to a new generation in the 1960s. Despite all the episodic miscalculations and the diminution of its ranks, the SWP’s anti-capitalism and commitment to socialism remained steadfast.

With Cannon, Breitman and a few other “Dope Trotskyists” refurbishing their thinking in relation to shifting realities, it became possible for many of us — inspired by the New Left’s *élan* and dismayed by its structural collapse — to benefit from a still-functioning party that played a mostly positive role in the social movements of the new radicalization.

Then again, these gains turned out to be bewilderingly fragile. The elite student elements who would take over the SWP, and transform it through escalating sectarianism, effortlessly ascended to power only one year into the 1970s.

As non-workers fully in command of an ostensible “workers” party, they completed their political and organizational makeover less than a decade after that.

In other words, if one starts with the 1939-40 schism, the SWP that Cannon built survived not much more than four decades, while Shachtman’s organization (Workers Party/Independent Socialist League) folded after barely two decades, and Cochran’s (American Socialist Union) after one decade.

From a long view of five decades later, the difference doesn’t seem so momentous as some of us once thought. And the membership disparities of groups of between 200 or 400, or an occasional bump to 1,000 or so, seem negligible in comparison to what is required for a major impact. This is a trilogy with a cut-off date of 1965, but it is haunted by a ghost from the future.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the seeds of Trotskyist ideas have spread widely. No one is suggesting that “We are all Trotskyists now,” which would not be desirable; but elements from Trotskyist thought have sometimes percolated through the broader radical culture in ways that renew Marxism. While many SWP luminaries have not gotten the attention they merit, C. L. R. James, Hal Draper, Raya Dunayevskaya, Grace Lee Boggs, Harry Braverman, and Sidney Lens are just a few admired names among the U.S. far left with a Trotskyist past, while Michael Harrington and Irving Howe are icons among liberal social democrats.

From Western Europe, there is considerable admiration for the work of Isaac Deutscher, Tariq Ali, Ernest Mandel, Michael Löwy, Daniel Bensaid, Perry Anderson, and more. And through the work of Palmer, the Minneapolis Teamster Strike is closer than ever to center stage in labor history.

Among the New New Left and millennial socialists (especially the 65,000-strong DSA), one can point to the impact of the “Rank and File” strategy for the labor movement, and statements such as the following by *Jacobin* editor Bhaskar Sunkara in the *Nation*: “...at the dinner tables of my childhood friends...I would meekly call myself a socialist.... ‘Like Sweden?’ I would be asked. ‘No, like the Russian Revolution before its degeneration into Stalinism.’”<sup>23</sup>

Such seeds spread far and can grow in unexpected and unanticipated forms. Political clarity and organizational coalescence have yet to flower, but the virtue of volumes such as *US Trotskyism* is that they might give a hand to the gardening.

Perhaps the facet of Trotskyism’s cultural dimension would have been heightened if the trilogy had included more on literary-artistic issues. While even three volumes can’t include everything, there might have been a dozen pages of creative work by SWP members such as John Wheelwright (his poem dedicated to Trotsky), Sherry Mangan (a “Paris Letter” on surrealism), Sol Babitz, Laura Slobe, George Perle, Duncan Ferguson, Maya Deren, Harry Roskolenko, Trent Hutter (Peter Rafael Bloch), and others, not to mention the debate over the Marxist-modernist journal *Partisan Review* in the Trotskyists’ *Socialist Appeal* (or some of Trotsky’s correspondence with SWP members on the *Partisan Review* editorial board).

Moreover, the narrative history might have made reference to the many cultural figures attracted to Trotskyist youth groups at various times. For instance, while the matter is of no interest to orthodox Trotskyists, the fact that the leading young Trotskyists at UC Berkeley in the 1930s included the gay poet Robert Duncan, the film critic Pauline Kael, and the painter Virginia Holton Admiral (mother of actor Robert De Niro) is indicative of the movement’s on-the-ground appeal to creative radicals.

On the other hand, the same Trotskyist culture contained mindsets more suggestive of religious faith than Marxist science, as can be seen in this 1944 claim by SWP leader Joseph Hansen in the journal *Fourth International*:

“When the history of our country is written by future historians, they will not look for material in the library at Hyde Park where Roosevelt employs a staff to file away minutiae about himself. They will dig painfully into scattered memoirs, accidental bits written in the heat of struggle, items preserved in the files of Trotskyist publications, to find out what the real figures of American history were like.”<sup>24</sup>

Statements of messianic zeal like this are not much present in the pages *US Trotskyism*, but they are part of the historical picture of the movement that existed and need to be addressed. At the same time, I should emphasize that the 1960s brought about a diminish-

ment of such grandiose illusions, as can be seen by the fine selection of writings by Hansen on Deutscher, Breitman on Black Nationalism, and Cannon on C. Wright Mills and socialist democracy in Part III.

## VII. Grand Predictions

Karl Marx famously warned: “The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”<sup>25</sup> If that remains true for the Left, the only way out of the nightmare of flawed models is to identify and dismantle the negative legacies in order to understand what went wrong; then, creatively rethink the model — not simply glue it back together.

A principal political fault in the historical writings represented in *US Trotskyism* flows from a cast-iron certainty about the next phase of history, especially a rapid drive toward social revolution during the late 1930s, and another coming as a surefire result of World War II.

This certainty produced delusions about one faction already possessing the “principled revolutionary program” (a matter of opinion) which only encouraged a rush toward inaccurate understandings of what was happening in the world and among the working class. Next came unrealistic prospects for progress by the SWP as well as the assorted groupings that emerged from it.

Our taking note, in hindsight, of such hyped-up prospects can no doubt provide a context for explaining why some of the faction fights seemed so bitterly urgent to the participants and splits were presented as brave steps forward. Yet the recognition of such causes for zealotry cannot serve as any kind of *justification* for bad behavior. A larger point must be recognized: Such grotesquely disproportionate expectations flowed from the making of catastrophically *ill-informed judgments*.



Pauline Kael,

Repeatedly, one finds even the most sophisticated of contributors to these volumes treating history as a teleological process — marching inexorably toward a crisis that will produce the next stepping-stone toward a classless society. A characteristic claim is Cannon's 1946 prediction, just after the postwar strike wave and on the eve of what we now call "The Golden Age of Capitalism:"

*"Our economic analysis has shown that the present boom of American capitalism is heading directly at a rapid pace toward a crisis; and this will be a profound social crisis which can lead, in its further development, to an objectively revolutionary situation."*<sup>26</sup>

Those SWP members who raised questions about projections that seemed out of touch were quickly labeled as pessimists, bending to alien class pressures, and so forth. Marx, in distinction, was surprisingly ambiguous on the topic of teleology, which is why contemporary socialists appropriately treat this kind of thinking with skepticism. We must also ask how Cannon could be so certain of "our economic analysis"; who were the experts, what resources did they have, and why were they taken so seriously?

History has not been kind to grand predictions, although there is certainly nothing unusual about coming up with erroneous generalizations from a contemporaneous political conjuncture as I suspect that Cannon did in this instance. All of us are familiar with the case of Francis Fukuyama, the eminent political scientist who wrote *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) after the collapse of the USSR.

On this basis Fukuyama declared the triumph of liberal democracy, moments before separatist passion and ethnic cleansing began to tear through the former Yugoslavia, followed by the dramatic escalation of nationalism, populism, and fundamentalism.

The lesson is that the present generation of socialists, seeking effective political program and strategy, must create safeguards against such thinking through the fashioning of new and appropriate forms of revolutionary optimism and abiding less hubris about our powers of prophecy. Instead of Court Astrologers telling us the best time to rev up the class struggle, we require access to a wide range of expertise that will help us converge on a better understanding of reality.

Can there be an organizational culture that can accommodate the theory and practice of non-teleological Marxism? One would have to have superhuman powers of cluelessness to believe that young radicals can simply start a new revolutionary socialist movement with a blank slate, making an end-run past history. At the same time there can be no toleration of the recycling of old pieties about the "real" Trotskyism or Cannonism never having been tried.

The most productive way to settle scores with the past is to candidly determine what took place and why; and that may mean opening the very doors that others prefer to keep closed. In our pursuit of a culture that can increase the possibility of sound socialist politics, perhaps we should investigate matters such as the following:

- Were the issues resulting in schisms in the SWP imperious to a compromise solution, or were some unnecessarily exaggerated by internal power struggles or profound misreadings of history?

- Were decisions by the membership in heated disputes made on the basis of being fully informed about matters such



Leon Trotsky, Frieda Kahlo and Jean van Heijenoort, who arrived in Mexico as Trotsky's secretary and bodyguard, later working with the SWP in New York from 1939-47.

as the U.S., Soviet, Chinese, or Cuban economies, or mainly a result of loyalty to certain charismatic leaders?

- Was a phenomenon like groupthink (the desire for cohesiveness and fear of ostracism at the cost of critical evaluation) a factor in the organizational culture of the SWP?

- Was the leadership selection process (which put in power white males such as Cannon for 25 years, Farrell Dobbs and Tom Kerry for 15 years, and Jack Barnes for nearly 50) flawed in some way that requires a critical review?

- What was the actual scope of the internal educational system in the SWP and its predecessors? Was there an authentic openness to the newest research in philosophy, economics, and social theory? Or did the highly-selective "Trotsky School" at Mountain Spring Camp, New Jersey, operate more like a Hogwarts with "The Three Laws of Dialectics" in place of magic and wizardry?

Moreover, the entire issue of sexual misconduct, not to mention mistreatment of sexual non-conformists, is absent in these volumes. Did such things simply not exist back then; or was sexism so baked into the culture of the movement that the editors can't see it? (There is not even a citation of Christopher Phelps' 2013 prize-winning essay on "The Closet in the Party: The Young Socialist Alliance, the Socialist Workers Party, and Homosexuality, 1962-70," winner of the Audre Lorde Prize and appearing in a journal well-known to the editors.)<sup>27</sup>

## VIII. The Promise of "Dissident Communism"

Let me conclude by returning to the beginning. Why was this trilogy assembled in this particular form? As the general Preface explains, by the late 20th century the traditions of Communism and Social Democracy had become "largely discredited," so that "would-be revolutionaries" are at this point obligated "to understand what had happened — and also to locate strengths, positive lessons, and durable insights among

the failures.”

Something, though, has been missing: scholarship and primary sources about “the dissident currents” of the Far Left. These lesser traditions, together with the more mainstream ones, “have actually had a significant impact upon labor and socialist movements that have been of some importance in the shaping of [our] country’s history.”<sup>28</sup>

To address this deficiency, the trilogy we have just inspected will “provide substantial resources for scholars and — we hope — for activists, but they by no means constitute a definitive account of U.S. Trotskyism.” This approach, modestly placing Trotskyism within a larger context of “dissident currents” complementary to the mainstream Left, advances a methodology that appears to be refreshingly wide angle rather than narrow.<sup>29</sup>

Thus in contrast to the more familiar “red thread” method of Trotsky himself, which insists that Trotskyism is the only true successor of Lenin’s Bolshevism, the trilogy presents this legacy far more humbly as a dissident critique within a larger community. While aspects of the trilogy are not always consistent with this aim, those who want to say “good riddance” to the vitriolic and strident certitude that has plagued so much Marxism-Leninism of the past should welcome the standpoint that Le Blanc proposes in these volumes.

What next? Although there is much to be learned from this documentary trilogy about the efforts of one small Marxist tendency three-quarters of a century ago, it would be irresponsible to sit around celebrating some glorious heritage while the present intervenes in unexpected ways. These tomes are about the past but who can avoid thinking of the present?

As I have tried to demonstrate, there are productive as well as unproductive ways of exploring this history; and there are occasions when we must look deeper at what we *think* we see. Above all, revolutionary socialism is not a spectator sport and it will be a new activist generation that ultimately determines how we might look back on this material to move us forward. One need not be convinced that there exists some roadmap from the past, but only that there is intelligence to be salvaged for use in our present contest to fashion an alternative future.<sup>30</sup>

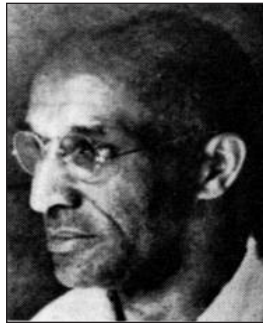
For radicals of several generations, and various Left political backgrounds, the question before us now is relatively straightforward: Will the project of building a mass, revolutionary socialist movement devoted to the defense of the international working class come crashing down amidst our disunity and distrust? Or can it be made to rest more strongly on a stable foundation?

Fueling the flames of contemporary resistance and solidarity is the point, but I have raised critical questions about these volumes because that mission requires ever more objectivity and accuracy in our historical reconstructions. Can we be strategically detached, and constructively critical, toward this writing while refusing to be above the fray? Like literature teacher John Keating (played by Robin Williams) in *Dead Poets Society*, the point is not to perform an elegy but to foster a reclamation of rebel spirits. ■

## Notes

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/16/arts/christopher-hitchens-is-dead-at-62-obituary.html?auth=login-email&login=email>
2. <https://www.channel4.com/news/hitchens-dies-age-62>. According to the *Guardian*, Hitchens was a member of the British Trotskyist group International Socialists from

1966 to 1976. See <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/dec/16/christopher-hitchens-obituary>. Other sources quote Galloway as using “popinjay” instead of “lunatic.” Two years later the *New York Times* gave brief mention to the election of Socialist Alternative member and Trotskyist Kshama Sawant to the Seattle City Council; see “Rare Elected Voice for Socialism,” *New York Times*, 29 December 2013, Section A, 23.



Ernest Rice McKinney, Black socialist active in the unemployed movement of the 1930s.

3. Part III, 1.
4. Originally, the three-volume documentary history was published in hardback by the “Historical Materialism Book Series” of Brill Academic Publishers in 2017, but it is now available in paperback through Haymarket Books at a much reduced (although still hefty) price.
5. Part III, 504.
6. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pablo/bio/index.htm>
7. Part III, 3.
8. Part III, 16. These are all well-known African-American political activists.
9. Part III, 19.
10. I will try to avoid repeating the various analyses of SWP history that I have already provided primarily in Wald, *The New York Intellectuals* (1987); Le Blanc et al, *Trotskyism in the United States* (1996); and Wald, “A Winter’s Tale Told in Memoirs,” *Against the Current* #153 (July-August 2011), available at: <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/153/p3317/>; and “Bohemian Bolsheviks After World War II: A Minority Within a Minority,” *Labour/Le Travail* 70 (Fall): 159-86.

11. I have met and mostly interviewed the following contributors: B. J. Widick, Farrell Dobbs, George Novack, Felix Morrow, Joseph Hansen, Jean Van Heijenoort, George Breitman, Bert Cochran, Raya Dunayevskaya, Frank Glass, Tom Kerry, Sam Gordon, Michel Raptis, Milton Zaslow, David Weiss, Evelyn Reed, Hedda Garza, Myra Weiss, Fred Halstead, Jean Tussey, and Joyce Cowley. Regrettably, all are now deceased.

12. Of course, some writings providing background studies and alternative views on specific subjects are cited in the prefaces and introductions. However, in recommending alternative models, I find that some reader-friendly approaches to the study of primary material are handled more effectively in Albert Fried, *Communism in America: A Documentary History* (1997) and in the many Pathfinder Press volumes of writings by Cannon, Novack, and Trotsky edited by George Breitman, Naomi Allen, Les Evans, and others.

13. Sadly, George Clarke (1913-64) appears as little more than a punching bag in these volumes, although he was a central leader of the Trotskyist movement for nearly a quarter of a century and author of a vast number of writings on political theory and practical interventions. Clarke was an all-around political activist, a superb speaker and educator, who served as a member of the national committee, the organizer of the New York local, national election campaign manager, editor of the *Militant* and Fourth International, and SWP representative in Canada and Europe. In the labor movement he was an organizer for the UAW in the CIO and served as a merchant seaman in World War II where his ship was torpedoed and he survived in a lifeboat for several days. At the age of 51 Clarke was killed instantly in a car accident. Farrell Dobbs and Felix Morrow gave eulogies at his funeral.

14. Part II, 18, 19. Prior to the arrival of C. L. R. James in the United States in late 1938, the main Black activist in the SWP was Ernest Rice McKinney, a former Socialist, Communist, and follower of A. J. Muste who was antipathetic to special demands for African-American workers. A crucial contribution to understanding the 1930s views of Trotskyism on race can be found in *Race and Revolution* by Max Shachtman (2003), edited and introduced by Christopher Phelps.

15. Part I, 7. Variants of this are deployed in the introductions.

16. Part II, 3.

17. Part II, 20.

18. Part II, 342. Van Der Linden’s book is *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union* (2009).

19. This is quoted in <https://newpol.org/anticapitalist-strategy-and-the-question-of-organization/>

20. See Peter Drucker’s *Max Shachtman and His Left* (1993) for a refreshingly heterodox, sympathetic but critical view of the strengths and failures of Shachtman’s political leadership. See also the informative critique by ATC Managing Editor David Finkel <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/57/p2645>.

21. Part II, 492.

22. Shachtman referring to Cannon and his supporters as “A clique with a leader-cult” isn’t very nice.

23. See <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/letter-nation-young-radical/>

24. See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/hansen/1944/02/jail.htm>

25. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1952): <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/>

26. Part II, 157.

27. Christopher Phelps, “The Closet in the Party: The Young Socialist Alliance, the Socialist Workers Party, and Homosexuality, 1962-70,” *Labor: Studies in Working Class History* 10, 4 (Winter 2013): 11-38.

28. Part I, X.

29. Part I, X. A six-volume series edited by Le Blanc is currently in the process of appearing under the heading of “Dissident Communism in the United States.” The Trotskyist trilogy comprises only three volumes; the others include a collection called *The “American Exceptionalism” of Jay Lovestone and his Comrades, 1929-40* (2015), about the organized supporters of Nikolai Bukharin who were usually called “Communist Party (Opposition),” and two yet-to-be-published collections that engage “Independent Marxism,” by which is meant those unaffiliated with major political groupings.

30. To some extent, that is the key to the success of Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicalism in America: The US Left Since the Second World War* (2015). See my review in *ATC* #179 (November-December 2015): <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/179/p4527/>

## Nonviolence and Black Self-Defense By Dick J. Reavis

WHILE THE POST-World War II Southern Civil Rights Movement is viewed as a non-violent movement, reality is more complicated. Charles Cobb, Jr., who was a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field secretary from 1962-67, points out that mass marches and other forms of direct action necessitated nonviolence in the face of government officials and the presence of a well-armed KKK.

“Sit-ins at lunch counters, Freedom Rides, walking picket lines — these were all direct actions at and inside white-owned facilities, and for tactical and strategic reasons, required an acceptance of nonviolent discipline,” Cobb observes in *This Nonviolence Stuff’ll Get You Killed* (2014). But, he continues, “as the Freedom Movement began to emphasize work in rural communities, it became clear that nonviolence—both the practice and the idea—had its limits.”

While some central movement figures like James Lawson were committed to a pacifist framework, someone like the late John R. Salter, Jr. (Hunter Gray) who sat in with his students at Jackson lunch counters, was definitely not.

In fact, many direct actions were supported by defense squads that discretely stayed in the background, defending activists after the sun went down. This was especially true in Mississippi.

Most defense squads in Mississippi arose from kinship groups or circles of friends who belonged to the National Association of Colored People (NAACP), the state’s largest civil rights organization. Despite its usual hesitation about activism, the NAACP never formally disavowed self-defense. Indeed its most celebrated martyr, Mississippi state chairman Medgar Evers, kept a pistol and a rifle in his car.

### Defending Mass Action with Guns

The controversy over nonviolence and self-defense began when Robert F. Williams, a World War II Marine, returned to his hometown, Monroe, North Carolina (pop. 10,882), in 1955. He joined a small NAACP chapter, and within two years became

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Robert F. Williams, with his wife Mabel. In the 1950s they were NAACP activists challenging segregation in Monroe, North Carolina. As a veteran, and in response to Klan counterdemonstrations, Robert F. Williams organized a self-defense unit.

president, expanded its membership and persuaded it to take an activist turn. First, “without any friction at all,” they won the right for Blacks to use the municipal library.

The NAACP chapter then set its sights on a whites-only swimming pool, built by Franklin Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration and maintained with city funds. The NAACP did not demand integration, but instead asked that a pool be built in Newtown, Monroe’s small ghetto, or if not, that the existing pool be reserved on two days each week for Black swimmers. When local authorities refused, the Monroe chapter began months of protests around the pool’s perimeter.

The Ku Klux Klan staged counterdemonstrations; on some days hundreds of white people turned out. Scuffles broke out, guns were flashed and sometimes fired. Williams responded by chartering a National Rifle Association club and recruiting a coterie of veterans as members. Nights were tense as many as 20 stood guard at his house or that of the NAACP chapter’s vice-president, physician Dr. Albert E. Perry.

During the summer of 1957, participants in a Klan motorcade through Newtown fired into Perry’s house. According to Williams, who recounted his story five years later in *Negroes with Guns*, “We shot it out with the Klan and repelled their attack and the Klan didn’t have any more stomach for this type of fight.”

But the Kluxers didn’t cease their coun-

terdemonstrations and motorcades. During what can only be described as an interracial free-for-all on Aug. 27, 1961, some 300 angry African Americans halted a car that they believed had been seen bearing a banner with the legend “Open Season on Coons.”

Inside was Bruce Stegall and his wife, both white. When the mob threatened the couple, Williams offered the Stegalls refuge in his home. For taking them in, he and several others were later indicted on trumped-up state kidnapping charges.

Forced to flee, Williams, his wife, Mabel, and son were spirited out of the country by defense committees in the United States and Canada.

### When to Employ Self-Defense?

The difference between violent and nonviolent actions often took surprising or unpredictable forms. Cobb recounts an August, 1962 incident after he drove 18 people from Ruleville (1960 pop. 1,902\*) to Indianola (pop. 6,714), the county seat, so they could take the required literacy test. But they were refused permission and returned home. That night raiders fired into the house of Joe and Rebecca McDonald, both in their 60s. Although they had a shotgun, they chose to protect themselves by lying down in a cast iron bathtub.

One the other hand, one afternoon in early August, 1964, the sons of Janie Brewer — Veto, Jesse, Luther and Haden — attempted to register to vote in Tallahatchie

\*Unless otherwise noted, all population figures cited are from the 1960 Census.



county, Mississippi. Because she expected nightriders to assault her house that night, Brewer, then in her 90s, ordered her sons and a couple of visiting civil rights activists to lie in surrounding cotton fields, shotguns and rifles at the ready.

Meanwhile she and Margaret Block, a SNCC organizer, prepared Molotov cocktails in Brewer's kitchen. Block told Cobb that Brewer was "spilling gas everywhere. And I'm like 'Dam[n] if we get burned up in here, everyone was going to swear the Klan did it [and] it's going to be Mrs. Brewer burning us up.'"

Block reported that "As the sheriff and a 'truckload' of Klansmen approached the farmhouse ... someone shown a floodlight on them. Others fired into the air. Brewer stood on the front porch ready hurl a Molotov cocktail. Everyone, including the county sheriff, fled. Night riders never returned to the Brewer farm."

These two stories illustrate some of the complications of the doctrines of non-violence and self-defense in the movement. Nonviolence meant finding a way to endure. Self-defense meant using fists or firearms — even Molotov cocktails — to force assailants to desist. But the two were often intertwined; split-second decisions had to be made. And this was particularly true in the rural Deep South.

In his 2013 *We Will Shoot Back* Akinyele Omowale Umoja, a professor at Georgia State University, recounts the history of armed self-defense in Mississippi. Like Cobb, he does not ignore its perils, as when, with others, Johnnie Nobles of McComb (1960 pop. 12,020) spent a night on guard in a dry cleaning shop that was a refuge for activists.

During their vigil, an unseen figure stopped outside and the guard force heard a thump on the porch. Thinking it was a bomb, Noble told Umoja, "we throw the door open and had guns on him." It took a few seconds for the guards to recognize the presumptive bomb-thrower — as a neighborhood newspaper carrier. Fortunately, no shot was fired.

"Black defenders who could have opened up with killing gunfire usually refrained. In place after place, a few rounds fired into the air were enough to cause terrorists to flee," Cobb notes.

Organizers found that older Mississippians were especially averse to the idea of passive resistance. David Dennis, the state director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), a national group dedicated to pacifist means, had an early experience when he first visited Canton (pop. 9,707).

A local CORE organizer asked him to speak to a supporter, C.O. Chinn, who habitually sat, armed, in his pickup truck outside the church where mass meetings were held. Dennis recalled:

*"I went outside to talk to him. He's sitting in the back of his truck with a shotgun across his lap and a pistol by his side. I introduced myself; told him about CORE's nonviolent philosophy. He listened. Then, very calmly he told me: 'This is my town and these are my people. I'm here to protect my people and even if you don't like this I'm not going anywhere. So maybe you better leave.'"*

Although defense squads did not prevent dozens of assassinations, both Cobb and Umoja argue that they repelled nightriders and prevented assaults on demonstrators.

Despite the formal profession of pacifism by the organizations that organized widely across the state, armed self-defense became orthodox in 1966, when those who sponsored the Meredith March invited the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an armed group from northern Louisiana, to provide protection.

After Medgar Evers' assassination in 1963, his older brother Charles [who just died in July 2020, age 95 — ed.] came back from Chicago to become the NAACP's state director. He tapped as an aide Rudy Shields, a Chicago friend, former paratrooper and Mississippi native. Umoja pays particular attention to Shields because he sees him as a transitional figure in the Movement's mid-'60s shift from pacifism to self-defense, from civil rights to Black Power.

In Natchez (pop. 24,000) the pistol-toting Shields formed a group composed mostly of middle-aged military veterans to protect a 1965 voter registration campaign and a consumer boycott that Evers called. Shields also deployed a squad of younger men, mostly in their late teens, to harass people who ignored boycott orders.

The names of those who didn't observe the boycott were read in NAACP meetings. According to a local activist whom Umoja cites, "Folks go shop, break the boycott, they didn't get home with the damn groceries...cause somebody was waiting for them when they got there."

Umoja probably overstates the charge by asserting that "The Natchez Movement resorted to terror within the Black community to enforce its decisions." But enforcement worked. After three months "twenty-three White businesses conceded to hiring or promoting Black workers to the position of clerk," he notes.

Shields subsequently became legendary for boycotts in some two dozen smaller — and seemingly hopeless — towns. These included settlements like Belzoni (pop. 4,142), Centreville (pop. 1,229) Fayetteville (pop. 16,250), Port Gibson (pop. 2,861), Woodville (pop. 1,856) and even Byhalia (pop. 702).

The Mississippi Sovereignty Commission, whose job was spying on the movement, reported that the 1968 Belzoni boycott

was 80% effective. Conservatives in the movement, who initially regarded enforcement not as self-defense, but as "retaliatory violence," soon held their tongues. But boycotts were not telegenic, and they usually took months to win. In 1969 the Mississippi legislature outlawed them.

"For the strategy of nonviolence to work in Mississippi, the federal government would have to intervene with force to provide to provide security from the forces of white supremacist terrorism," Umoja observes.

Dr. King wrangled National Guard protection from President Johnson for at least portions of the Selma and Meredith marches, but when organizers in the South reported threats to FBI agents, they were usually denied assistance.

Even field staffers for CORE and SNCC turned for protection to armed volunteers. Shields transformed informal self-defense groups into militias, setting up makeshift rifle ranges, establishing discipline and chains of command. He sometimes organized them under the aegis of the Deacons.

Often merely the sight of the Deacons defused dangers, as in 1967 in Centreville, when parties to a white mob trained guns on a voting rights demonstrators. Twenty-five members of the Wilkinson county Deacons showed up. "We pulled in here and started unloading all of this heavy artillery and they loaded up and left," former Deacon James Young told Umoja.

### Defense in the Delta

Most of the actions that Cobb and Umoja chronicle happened in the Mississippi Delta. That designation is geographically accurate, but leftists from an earlier generation would have instead applied a demographic term, the Black Belt, the zone where some 200 contiguous counties once had an African-American majority.

Mississippi in 1960 was divided into 82 counties, 29 of them with Black majorities. Twenty-five of those were in the Delta, a stretch running as many as four counties deep along the Mississippi River, the state's border with Louisiana. Of three dozen towns Cobb and Umoja mention as sites of movement campaigns, at least two-thirds were in the Mississippi Black Belt.

Repression had always been more severe in the Black Belt. Self-defense was a tradition there, not anything new. I learned this as a civil rights worker in Alabama. Most Black Belt families kept a shotgun or rifle in their home.

In 1966, a Black farmer in Marengo county — Mr. Agee as I knew him — was sent to Washington D.C. to testify about discrimination in the federal agricultural programs. Teddy Kennedy led him to his Senate office, let him rock in JFK's chair, and introduced him to an FBI agent, who gave Agee his card,

saying “Call us if you have any trouble when you get home.”

Agee did have trouble, the night after he returned. A car passed his house and its occupants fired shots in its direction. Relatives and civil rights’ workers gathered in the wake of the shots — the relatives with weapons in their hands.

One of the civil rights workers telephoned Kennedy’s FBI man. He said that the drive-by was “a local matter” in which the Bureau couldn’t intervene. The agent then called the county sheriff’s office. None of the locals would have called there because its deputies were rumored to be Klansmen.

Sure enough, deputies came out, four of them. They roughed-up and arrested a pair who had gathered to prevent the shooters’ return: a nephew of the farmer and me.

### Changing Circumstances

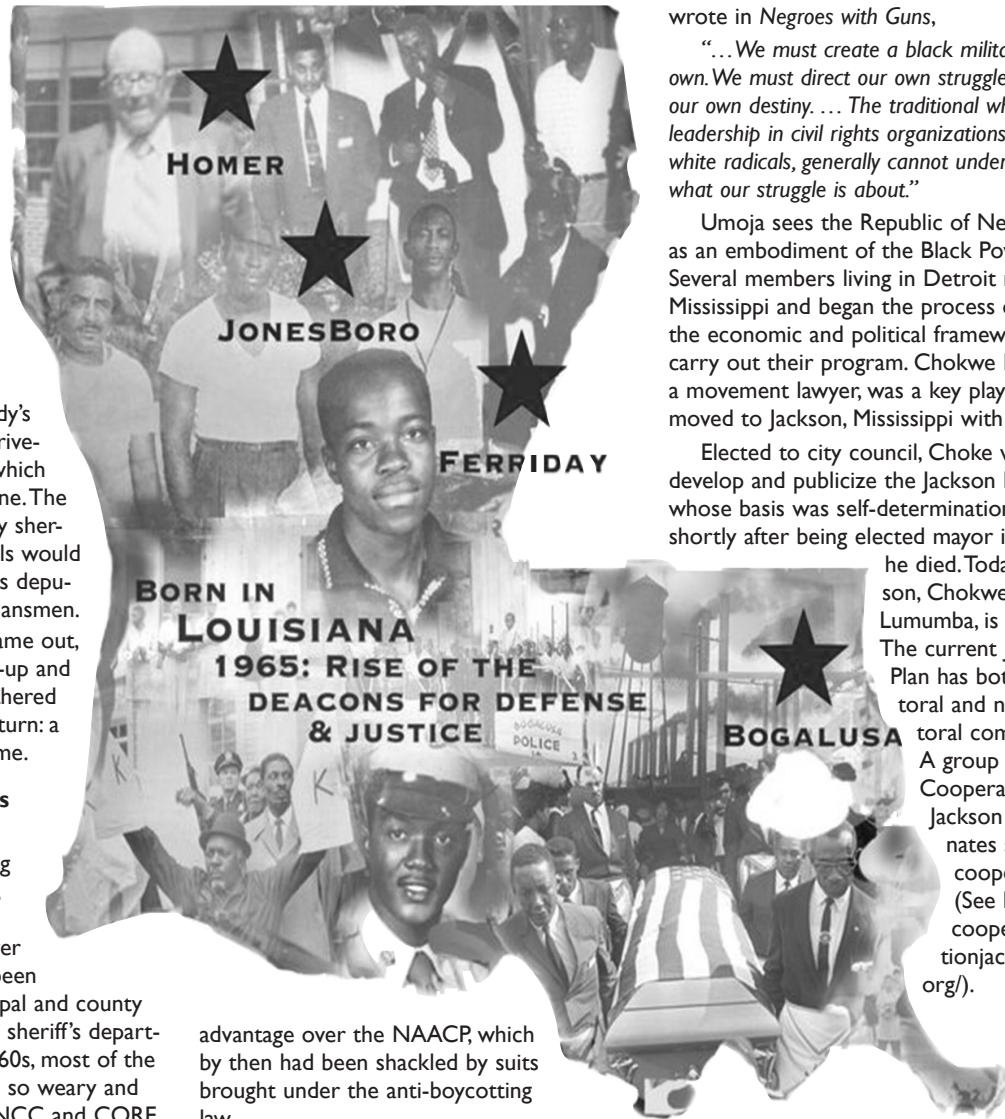
The passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, eliminating poll taxes and literacy tests, made Black Power plausible in the Black Belt. Black Power meant sweeping what had been White Power out of municipal and county offices, especially police and sheriff’s departments. By the close of the ’60s, most of the doctrine’s proponents were so weary and wary of whites that both SNCC and CORE had jawboned their white staffers into leaving the Movement.

Although most African Americans in the counties where Shields organized wanted civic and income parity, many did not welcome desegregation across the board. Among other things, it promised to decimate Black-owned businesses and institutions that had struggled for solvency for a century, including the public schools.

Lewis Williams, an army veteran and self-defender, told Umoja that “Rudy felt like if we were separated, we were better and we were stronger, because when you have white people teaching your children, then what they get is the white concept of life.”

In 1974 Shields took his talents to the United League, a Mississippi organization headed by Alfred “Skip” Robinson, a bricklayer and longtime figure in the Black Belt. Robinson’s home had been bombed in 1965, but the following year he’d fearlessly organized a boycott in Holly Springs (pop. 5,621).

As an independent grassroots group, the UL wasn’t incorporated and was therefore was immune to civil suits. That gave it an



Alyssa Berry/LS Manship School News Service

advantage over the NAACP, which by then had been shackled by suits brought under the anti-boycotting law.

Thanks to the UL, the Mississippi Movement thrived during the ’70s, when liberation efforts were flagging in the rest of the South. But in 1981 Robinson left the United League to join the Nation of Islam. Umoja writes that the UL was unable to survive “the division created in its ranks by the conversion of Robinson and his associates to the NOI and their repudiation of insurgent activism.”

### Envisioning a Black Republic

Given the existence of a majority-Black section of the South, the idea of building an independent government there seemed to be an alternative to humiliation and repression. One section of the Northern Black Power movement called for a Republic of New Africa. At its founding convention in 1968 it chose Robert F. Williams as its president.

Through the years of exile, hosting the short wave program “Radio Free Dixie” and publishing his book and monthly magazine *The Crusader*, Williams became known as the intellectual author of Black Power. As he

wrote in *Negroes with Guns*,

“... We must create a black militancy of our own. We must direct our own struggle, achieve our own destiny. ... The traditional white liberal leadership in civil rights organizations, and even white radicals, generally cannot understand what our struggle is about.”

Umoja sees the Republic of New Africa as an embodiment of the Black Power idea. Several members living in Detroit moved to Mississippi and began the process of building the economic and political framework to carry out their program. Chokwe Lumumba, a movement lawyer, was a key player who moved to Jackson, Mississippi with his family.

Elected to city council, Choke worked to develop and publicize the Jackson Program, whose basis was self-determination. But shortly after being elected mayor in 2013,

he died. Today his son, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, is mayor. The current Jackson Plan has both electoral and non-electoral components.

A group called Cooperation Jackson coordinates several cooperatives. (See <https://cooperationjackson.org/>).

Robert F. Williams returned to the United States in 1969, but it took six years for the charges against him to be dismissed. He settled near Detroit and spoke on several occasions to political meetings as a Black revolutionary. But he didn’t find a way to work with the Republic of New Africa, and died in Michigan 25 years ago. Rosa Parks gave the eulogy at his funeral, saying:

“The sacrifices he made, and what he did, should go down in history and never be forgotten.” ■

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## A Discussion with Gilbert Achcar: Behind Lebanon's Catastrophe

*Suzi Weissman interviewed Gilbert Achcar for her program on Jacobin Radio, August 8, 2020 on the massive August 4 chemical explosion and subsequent political upheaval in Lebanon. The discussion took place shortly before the Lebanese government resigned.*

*Gilbert Achcar, a native of Lebanon, is professor of Development Studies and International Relations at SOAS, University of London. His most recent book is *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising of 2016, a sequel to The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising (2013)*. This is an abridged version of his recorded remarks, transcribed by Meleiza Figueroa.*

EXPERTS HAVE ESTIMATED that the power of the blast was something like 1500 kilotons of TNT, which would amount to one-tenth of the power of the Hiroshima blast. It devastated houses over a very big radius.

They saw it in the island of Cyprus, which is more than 150 miles away from Lebanon. It was gigantic — very simply put, one of the biggest explosions of all time, short of nuclear ones. And you can get a sense of what it meant since it has been estimated at one-tenth of Hiroshima.

Close to 300,000 people instantly turned homeless. I'm lucky that no one of my close relatives was injured. Even though their homes were severely damaged — with all the glass shattered, doors and window frames exploded — the flats weren't completely devastated.

The amount of destruction is unbelievable. It's like if there were a car bomb every 100 meters or 200 meters over a very large radius. The Lebanese have been used to car bombs: Beirut is a city that has been so much the theater of all sorts of violence but nothing compares to this.

### **Criminal Negligence and Sectarianism**

It's more than neglect, it's criminal negligence if you know that you have something like this in the heart of a city and leave it in place for years. Fortunately, it was on the edge of the sea; had it been located in the middle of the city, the devastation would have been of course much, much bigger. But part of the blast went in the sea.

That anyone could leave such a quantity of highly explosive material for so long in such a place without any of the necessary

precautions is just mind-boggling. You can't understand how any people, any responsible people, including I would say even the people working there... I mean imagine Suzi, that you were working in a place like this and you know that there is this thing and you know how dangerous it is.

You would go on strike — you'd say we can't work here and we won't work here until this is cleared. But the problem is they didn't do anything. Every few months a report sent to the authorities about that storage, about the necessity to do something, but nothing was done.

It's a very corrupt government, probably one of the most corrupt on earth. And there are plenty of them, as you know. But this one is very, very much corrupt, based on the partition of power based on religions and sects.

The political system of Lebanon is sectarian, basically a division of the spoils and the positions of power among warlords and political leaders. And you have this combination of an economic sector where the banking sector plays a major and central role, that is connected to the political class which dominates the system in Lebanon.

This is what produced what you have, a country whose rulers hide their money outside. They have been making billions and billions of dollars through every kind of trick you may think of, including all sorts of traffic in connection with the surrounding countries, with Syria, and so forth.

It has been a money-laundering country, money originating from the cultivation of drugs and from every traffic you can think of. Whatever illicit or criminal activities you can think of, you will find them exerted in Lebanon, with the difference that they are exerted by the ruling class, the country's ruling groups.

Hence there was a huge anger that started long before this blast, and burst out on the 17th of October last year in a popular uprising whose key slogan was, "All of them means all of them!"

### **Resentment and Despair**

It was to my surprise that [on the occasion of French president Macron's visit] tens of thousands of people signed a petition demanding that Lebanon be put again under French Colonial mandate for 10 years.

Of course, it is likely that even those who launched it are aware that it can't fly but it's a gesture of despair, of resentment, of anger, saying that the guys ruling us are not up to the task and we need international rule or something like it. Some people would put it in a less colonial way and ask for the United Nations to rule the country.

There have been demands like that but of course that's going nowhere. It's people venting their anger and as you said, the fact is that those who rule Lebanon are not interested in getting the support of the whole population. They are catering each for their own constituency.

That's a sectarian system and within the sectarian system you have a sub-sectarian political system, with every leader essentially interested in preserving the allegiance of his — and I mean his because there's no her, or almost no her — constituency, and that's how it works.

So you have a number of such allegiances, but no allegiance to the whole, to the public interest. I'm not speaking here of the true kind of social allegiance that a socialist would attend to, I'm just speaking in terms of what a bourgeois state is supposed to do under normal conditions and in order to ensure a minimum of hegemony, of consent, as you said, among the population.

Nothing of this is done and with the economic collapse and the huge depreciation of the local currency, the country has become divided, cut in two. It's no longer what you have in the bank that makes a difference, or your income. It's whether it is in Lebanese liras, the Lebanese currency, or in dollars.

If you are constantly getting dollars from abroad — they call them "fresh dollars" — you can withdraw them from the bank. If your dollars are not "fresh," that is, if you had, say, \$100,000 in the bank a year ago, you can't withdraw it — except in Lebanese currency at the exchange rate fixed by the government, which is way below the market rate. So you can imagine what it means for those whose income is in the Lebanese currency.

This has turned a huge number of people into poverty. Close to half the population is now below the poverty line according to estimates — double the proportion prior to last fall — in a country that wasn't regarded

as poor, compared to other countries of the Global South.

Lebanon was a relatively better off country, but it's gone through a major collapse, as we have seen in other countries such as Argentina where the local currency collapsed. The Lebanese economy is dollarized — and many of the rulers store their money in dollars abroad.

Since they're getting "fresh money" from their foreign accounts or from their sponsors — because many of them are linked to foreign states, whether the Saudi Kingdom or Iran or others — they don't care about the rest of the population.

### Neoliberal Before Neoliberalism

Lebanon has been neoliberal before neoliberalism. This is a country of wild capitalism, savage capitalism. It's been like that for a very long time. It has long been regarded as a fiscal paradise, one of the world's prominent fiscal paradises, referring to tax-heaven countries where there is bank secrecy enabling money-laundering and where a lot of things happen below the surface.

No one is going to be worried as long as they have connections among the rulers and are giving these rulers a share of the pie. It has been like this for very long time. The country went into civil war as you know, in 1975, for 15 years there were ups and downs during those years, for sure, but they are regarded as one long period of war, which ended officially in 1990.

It ended through an agreement between the Syrian regime and the Saudi monarchy, that was sponsored by the United States. The key figure for years was Rafik al-Hariri [assassinated in 2005 — ed.], who was prime minister and presided over the country's postwar reconstruction, which was done on a crudely neoliberal basis.

All the terrible features of the Lebanese capitalist system that existed before 1975 were reproduced and even worse because of the conditions created by the war. So that's what you have: a mafia-like, a gangster-like kind of state, with the difference is that it's not one ruled by one single mafia. And it's perhaps better not to have one single mafia ruling your country, but competing mafias. The Lebanese equivalent of countervailing powers is different mafias balancing each other, though they eventually cooperate in exploiting the country.

### Engerized Protests

Today — we're speaking on Saturday, the eighth of August — has seen major demonstrations in the central parts of the city with, for the first time, occupation of ministries. Three ministries have been occupied. There were also attempts at occupying other ministries and the headquarters of the Bankers Association of Lebanon was

attacked.

People know what they are targeting. They are targeting the whole political system and the economic system; and they see, very rightly so, that the two systems are completely intertwined, combined as a machinery of exploitation and of criminal negligence.

The new explosion has been absolutely spectacular, as you said, but the criminal negligence didn't start and end there. Lebanon's level of pollution is appalling. This is a country where you have garbage stacking up in the streets, a country where you don't have a regular and reliable supply of electricity, a country, that is, where very basic requirements of modern life are not ensured.

Criminal negligence didn't start on the fourth of August 2020; it's been there for many, many years, and the country's condition is unhealthy by many standards. The probability of diseases of certain kinds, including cancer, are quite high in Lebanon because of all that.

Today's protests have really gone qualitatively one step further in the form of struggle beyond what we have seen before, with to the occupation of ministries. Add to this that, symbolically, the protesters have hanged in the city center six cardboard figures representing the six key political leaders of the country.

In the good tradition of the sectarian distribution of power, they've chosen two Christians, two Muslim Sunnis and two Muslim Shia. So you had the President of the Republic and a rival political Christian figure; you had Saad al-Hariri, the Prime Minister right before the uprising last October, the son of the famous Rafik Hariri who was Prime Minister during the 1990s; and you had Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader and his close ally who leads another sectarian Shiite organization that is called Amal.

These six cardboard figures were hanged in Martyrs' Square. All this is symbolic, of course. It's like the petition about French tutelage in that it reveals the level of anger. All this is very worrying, I should also say: the level of anger in the country is such that anything can happen any time. This is, after all, a country that has been through wars and wars.

The previous uprising that started on 17 October last year and went on for several weeks, was a huge mass movement that covered the whole country. It was truly the first broad popular movement encompassing all parts of the country and people of all religious denominations, Christians and Muslims alike.

But it had subsided due to various factors, one of them being the pandemic. As in other countries, the pandemic has played a counter-revolutionary role in some way; it's managed to stop movements in some coun-

tries in a very demobilizing way.

Take Algeria, for instance, where they had every week a huge demonstration: this stopped with COVID, because of the pandemic, which the government used as an opportunity to repress the movement. So that was part of the story, in addition to the fact that the movement in Lebanon didn't have a recognized representation and still doesn't have one.

It doesn't have any organized leadership — I'm not speaking of a centralized leadership, but of any kind of coordination that can speak in the name of the movement and put forward demands in a systematic way. In the absence of that, the movement went down, until you had this huge explosion.

It's a new beginning now. It wasn't a huge outpouring of people today in Beirut. It was estimated that fewer than 10,000 people were there, but these were people braving not only the pandemic but also other risks as it has become dangerous today to walk in central Beirut because of the shattered glass and all that can fall from devastated buildings. So we'll have to see how the movement goes on.

### Uncertain Regional Outlook

The bigger picture is difficult to tell, precisely because of the problem that I mentioned. The issue is that in what was called the Second Arab Spring, four countries were involved, which are Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon, with a major difference between three of them — Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon — and Sudan, the only country where you have a multitiered leadership of the mass movements, very democratic and very horizontal, including neighborhood committees.

In organization there is strength. Strength is not only in unity as the motto says, but also in organization. And that's what is lacking in Lebanon and that's why it's quite difficult to guess what will happen out of that, especially now that you have a new international intervention illustrated by Macron's visit. It will be followed by an attempt by Western governments to do something out of the crisis.

I'm afraid that they will use Lebanon again to settle regional and international accounts. This country, Suzi, has been for several decades a theater of regional and international wars. Foreign powers settled their accounts there at the expense of the country and of its population: the Saudi Kingdom, Iran, the United States, Israel, Syria, Iraq and others.

Because of the lack of organization, I don't see yet a possibility of a real democratic renewal, a radical democratic and social renewal of the country. But we should hope at least that this new tragedy will give a powerful impetus to the buildup of such a movement. ■

# REVIEW

## Studying for a New World By Joe Stapleton

### **Beyond Education:**

Radical Studying for Another World

By Eli Meyerhoff

University of Minnesota Press, 2019,  
277 pages, \$24.95 paperback.

THEORY WITHOUT PRAXIS is empty; praxis without theory is blind. That Leninist twist on the old Kantian formula is perhaps never more necessary to remember than in times of crisis.

Though written before COVID-19 and the police murder of George Floyd, Eli Meyerhoff's book *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World* represents one of those theoretical interventions without which our praxis can end up wandering around in the dark.

Nowhere is our present crisis felt more acutely than in public education. COVID-19 and the government's non-response to the pandemic has left teachers such as myself in limbo for much of the spring and summer.

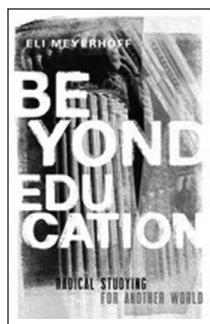
We have no good options. Many of us will be forced to risk our lives returning to in-person instruction; many of us will be expected to be effective using online instruction tools we have not been trained in; still more, undoubtedly, will face the possibility of layoffs as a result of austerity measures as districts claim a loss of tax revenue.

Just as important, the murder of George Floyd has pushed many of our students into activist roles, demanding the removal of School Resource Officers (SROs), or police officers stationed at schools, from school buildings. The international uprisings have also further intensified focus on the built-in class and racial inequalities of the public education system.

The beginning of Meyerhoff's book is a critique of the cottage industry of the "education crisis." Our education system, both K-12 and post-secondary, is perceived as somehow failing in its mission, as less effective than it used to be. Innumerable grifters/innovators have written enough books to fill a library on various solutions to this crisis of education.

### **Propping Up the System**

Meyerhoff's book is a reminder of the crucial role that education as a mode of study has played in providing institutional



and philosophical support for capitalist accumulation. For teachers, this confirms what we've always known: the crises we experience in our classrooms are concentrated reflections of crises within the capitalist mode of production.

Crises of capitalist accumulation are translated to education workers

as crises of public education. And just as Covid-19 has laid bare and exploded the contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production, so has it done for public education. After all, their contradictions are one and the same.

Meyerhoff's historical-critical analysis exposes ways in which the education system reinforces and props up capitalist modes of accumulation. On the other hand, persistent attacks on public education from the right expose how capital is invested in dismantling one of the last truly universal social programs left in this country.

Many teachers' unions are recognizing this contradiction. In our union local, we say we want to defend and transform public education — we must defend it from privatization while understanding that it must be transformed if it is to shed the oppressive practices it carries over from the mode of production it supports.

This position of playing both defense and offense is difficult during normal times. In the present crisis, the stakes of the outcome of this struggle have never been higher. So what are teachers to do?

The following are lessons drawn both from the analysis in Meyerhoff's book and the current struggle.

### **Issues for Fighting Back**

Support student demands for the removal of SROs. Every year, in an effort to address racist practices in schools, school districts all over the country put on anti-racist training and implicit bias workshops. They adopt the Black Lives Matter In Schools demands, and some even send teachers to weekend-long lectures on the history of racism in the United States put on by the Racial Equity Institute.

Yet every year, there are still significant disparities in how white students are punished relative to non-white students, non-

white students still feel unsafe in schools, and resources remain unevenly distributed. These problems are not the result of individual teachers having racist opinions — they are reflections of social problems.

As Meyerhoff points out, these issues are longstanding problems at the very root of our education system. In his study of the 1960s "dropout crisis," he shows a cartoon in which young Black people migrating from rural to urban areas were portrayed as so many sticks of "social dynamite," a dangerous mass with revolutionary potential.

They were a problem to be solved — and the education system still treats its students of color this way. The school-to-prison pipeline, the mechanism by which Black students' school misbehavior is punished as criminal activity, is unobstructed by merely training teachers to think differently.

The single most effective way to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline and make schools significantly less racist, is to remove SROs from school buildings. Policing is a racist institution designed to lock up poor people of color. If the agents of this institution no longer have such easy access to this demographic during the school day, they won't be as effective.

This demand, being pushed by students all over the country, is winning as Denver, Minneapolis and Oakland have already removed SROs from their buildings. Teachers' unions should get behind this even if they don't think they can win it right now. The international uprisings resulting from the police murder of George Floyd have unlocked a door in mass consciousness. Teachers should play a role in pushing it open.

### **The Present Crisis**

*Organize the rank-and-file.* There are no shortcuts to deep, fighting unions that can exercise power. Throughout *Beyond Education*, Meyerhoff wages a war on political and philosophical closure, the act of cutting off possibilities through the imposition of too-easy "solutions" that suppress disagreement.

In his study of the Experimental College of the Twin Cities (ExCo), which Meyerhoff himself played a role in organizing, he believes it was precisely this impulse to shut down discussion and paper over contradictions that led to the project's demise.

Here in the South, where union density

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Joe Stapleton is a public high school English teacher in North Carolina and a member of NCAE.

is very low, the NEA's decision to support any Democratic Party politician no matter what serves as a way of papering over the conflicts of the area.

There are a great many teachers, especially in rural areas, who will never vote Democrat and will not join a union that is seen as an unthinking water-carrier for the Democratic Party. The NEA's position implies that somehow if we can just get the right people in charge, the problems with the education system can be fixed through policy — not militant worker action.

But those teachers opposed to the Democratic Party experience the same workplace conditions as their fellow teachers who support it.

As we saw in West Virginia and Arizona a few years ago, many teachers who won't vote for Democrats will go on strike — and win. This is the kind of action teachers' unions should be focusing on.

Similar to how an unorganized rent strike swept the country during April and May simply because many people could not pay their rent, we might be looking at an

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unorganized wildcat strike among teachers unwilling to risk their lives for in-person instruction.

In a fascinating study of the black plague in Europe, Meyerhoff examines how non-human actors in history, such as germs, play a significant role in the class struggle. For example, the flu epidemic during the Second World War probably affected the course of world history as much as any fighting.

COVID-19 is undoubtedly playing a similar world-historical role, albeit on a smaller scale. Regardless, teachers should not go back to work if they are being forced into in-person instruction. There isn't a school district in the country equipped to handle safe in-person instruction right now.

I found *Beyond Education* to be a thorough and provocative book with plenty to say to our moment. It deserves an equally thorough review, but given Meyerhoff's political commitments, I am sure he is just as appreciative of the use of his book as a theoretical jumping-off point for militant praxis. ■

## A Life of Struggle and Organizing: C.T. Vivian, Teacher of Nonviolence

By Malik Miah

THE SAME DAY that civil rights icon John Lewis died, one of his teachers of nonviolent direct action also passed away in Atlanta. Rev. C.T. Vivian (Cordy Tindell Vivian) was 95 years old, just two weeks before his 96th birthday.

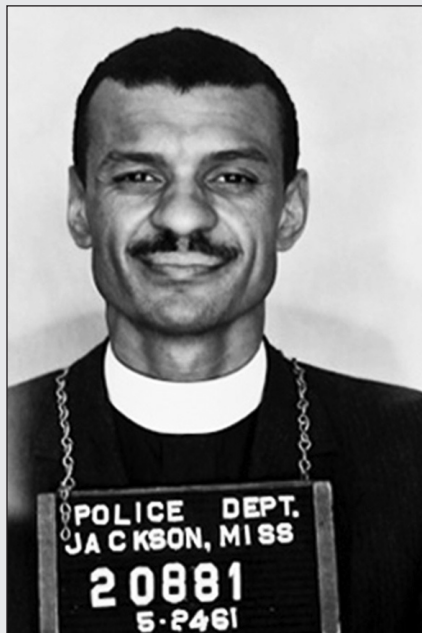
Unlike Lewis who decided to run for elected office in Atlanta, first a City Council member and then Congress in 1986, Vivian continued to be an organizer, activist and teacher. Martin Luther King called him "the greatest preacher to ever live."

Vivian was born in Boonville, Missouri, and later his family moved to Illinois. Vivian's first sit in occurred in 1947 in Peoria, Illinois where, as a young worker, he helped to successfully desegregate a cafeteria.

He went to Nashville to study for the ministry at the American Baptist Theological Seminary in 1957, the same seminary John Lewis, James Bevel and Bernard Lafayette attended.

In Nashville he heard Martin Luther King, Jr. preach nonviolence and in 1958 began attending Rev. James Lawson's trainings. Like Lawson, he was more than a decade older than the young students, and saw them as key to build the fight.

Along with Lawson, who spoke at Lewis's funeral this July, he absorbed the philosophy and strategy of Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent direct action. As a



C.T. Vivian was part of the team that James Lawson put together to successfully challenge segregation in downtown Jackson.

participant in the Nashville sit-ins, he went on to lead nonviolent sit-ins, boycotts and voter registration drives in Birmingham, Alabama, St. Augustine, Florida and Jackson, Mississippi. He was also a Freedom Rider, replacing one of the original 13.

As an activist Vivian was frequently arrested, jailed and beaten. Once as

he tried to escort a group of African Americans to register to vote, he was punched so hard in the face by Selma Sheriff Jim Clark on the steps of the courthouse that the sheriff broke his own hand. With blood streaming down his face, Vivian got up and continued speaking as police shoved him aside. He was arrested later that day for "criminal provocation."

As a Baptist minister, member of Dr. King's inner circle of advisers and a close friend of King, Vivian was the national director of some 85 local affiliate chapters of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) from 1963 to 1966.

Wherever he lived, north or south, he set up various educational and civil rights organizations, lectured widely and wrote an assessment of the civil rights movement, *Black Power and the American Myth* (1970). He was known for thinking strategically, and not just moving to action.

Vivian spoke to Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now!* in 2015 outside the historic Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, Alabama, on the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday:

*"There is nothing we haven't done for this nation. We've died for it. But it's been overlooked, what we've done for it. But we kept knowing the scriptures. We kept living by faith. We kept understanding that it's something deeper than politics that makes life worth living."* ■

# REVIEW

Fares Aren't Fair:

## Experiments in Free Public Transit By Joshua DeVries

### Free Public Transit

And Why We Don't Pay to Ride Elevators

Edited by Judith Delheim and Jason Prince  
Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2018,  
250 pages, \$26.99 paper.

AMONG THE FEW positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, some localities have taken the impressive step of implementing free transit. Several cities in Ohio, including Akron, Canton, Toledo and Youngstown announced free fares as of March 16. Towns in Vermont and Nevada have done so as well.

Unfortunately, local officials are quite clear that these are only temporary for health purposes and will be reversed once it is "safe."

Over the last several decades, though, many cities around the world have experimented with free transit. *Free Public Transit* editors Judith Delheim and Jason Prince collect a dozen-and-half essays of these stories written by activists, academics and journalists involved in the issue.

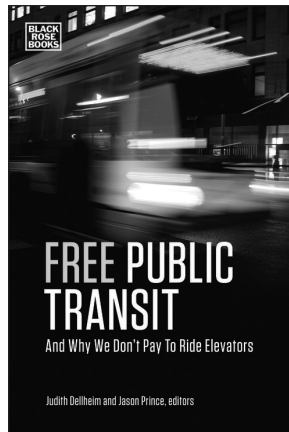
Many cities have reduced or even given free fares for specific groups, generally the elderly or students. Delheim and Prince compile pieces on more political efforts.

The main part of the book consists of 15 articles of implementation and struggles around free transit in 14 cities or regions. (Two chapters are about Bologna, Italy.) Half of these are in Western Europe, three in Canada and the United States but the editors also include chapters on Brazil, Mexico and China.

The local chapters are bookended by four broader essays, two by the editors and two by a city development researcher. These provide some theoretical overviews and concrete proposals.

As is to be expected in a collection like this, some are more inspiring and well written than others. On the whole, it's well

*Joshua DeVries has been president of ATU Local 1549 in Austin and financial secretary for AFA (flight attendants) Council 70 in Philadelphia, both now sadly gone. He was also an active member of ATU Local 1005 in Minnesota and General Secretary Treasurer of the IWW. He is now a data wrangler in Austin, Texas.*



worth reading for transit activists or any class-conscious activist considering projects that confront capital's control of our lives, and are winnable on a local level.

### In the Beginning

Perhaps the most inspiring example is Bologna, Italy in the 1970s. Long run by the

Communists, "Red Bologna" also had a tradition of public participation and a strong democratic spirit in the citizenry.

In a chapter taken from the English translation of his section of *Red Bologna*, Swiss journalist Max Jäggi details the amazing changes brought about in a city that "had more cars in proportion to population than any city in Italy except Turin," where "pedestrians were relegated to second class road users," buses had "used up most of their petrol in standing still" and "200,000 cars a day poured into the Centro Storico and created an almost permanent haze over the area, causing the leaves in parks to turn grey."

The reasons for the successes of the project are myriad, but among the most important were a coherent and specific vision of the changes, public involvement and a visionary administration. The Communists recognized that while they had not "developed a concept of socialism in one city," still "they have provided norms of conduct and public management different from those" which had prevailed in Italy.

The beauty of the plan was that it drew a picture of a Bologna where humans, not cars, were the center of planning. Pedestrian zones were created in the city center and nearby neighborhoods. Large investments were made in transit; fares were done away with during rush hour and very cheap at other times; private automobiles were rendered uneconomic for daily work commutes and buses were given preference.

Motorists retained unrestricted access to a mere one fourth of city streets. Other were open only to local residents or busi-

ness deliveries, to buses or cabs, at certain times of day, or in some cases, only to pedestrians.

There was strong opposition from predictable quarters, but by involving residents in discussions and public debates, city leaders built strong support.

Within two years, car trips into the city dropped 25% and transit use rose 50%. According to Jäggi in 1974, "Now Bologna's street scene has changed. Children play basketball and old people rest on benches in the Piazza del Unitá — in the workers' district of Bologna — where before endless queues of cars idled at traffic lights."

### Hasselt, Germany: Brie on Limburgers

Michael Brie, a professor with the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation in Berlin and policy committee member of the party *Die Linke*, describes another success, this one in the Flemish Belgian city of Hasselt, capitol of the province of Limburg.

A mid-sized city of less than 80,000, the medieval town was being destroyed by increasing traffic. Surprising most, Steve Stevaert of the Flemish Socialist Party (social democrats) was elected mayor in 1994, partially on a platform opposing "new infrastructure for automobiles and proposing instead a city for people."

Bringing together union, local business, environmental, social equity as well as regional economic interests, he won with an explicit vision opposing "car friendly" cities.

Each day 150,000 people from the surrounding area, twice as many as live in Hasselt, come into town to shop, and 40,000 students as well. Some 22% more people work in Hasselt than live there. Most of these traveled by car.

Mayor Stevaert ended transit fares, but as in Bologna, that was only part of the program. The brakes were applied to a proposed third ring road, and the inner ring reduced from four to two lanes.

Bicycle and pedestrian spaces were increased. Two-thirds of city center parking spaces were repurposed and rates for those remaining substantially increased. Commercial delivery times were restricted and speed limits lowered.

The result was a 13-times increase in transit passenger trips between 1996 and 2006 while the population increased by

just 5%. This obviously required a significant increase in spending on public transit. They added new buses, a dense network of stations, a coordinated link to regional transport and headways (times between buses) on lines were decreased to just five minutes in many cases.

There were costs associated, but less than \$30 per resident per year. Even this only counts the transit budget and ignores savings in medical expenses from decreased pollution and increased exercise, not to mention personal gas costs.

It wasn't an unmitigated success. Most people still have cars and still use them, but on a qualitative level, they improved the livability of the city center.

In 2012, the social democrats had to form a local coalition with the Greens and the Christian Democrats, a party supporting austerity measures. This led to an end to universal free fares, although retirees, those under 20 and those with low incomes could still ride free. Fares for others were raised to just 60 euro cents. The culture had shifted, though, and traffic jams did not return.

### **Brazil: From Dream to Nightmare**

In ones of the few chapters that ventured outside the developed world, Paula Aftimus and Daniel Santini covered Brazil. Aftimus is a Brazilian journalist and Santini is a project coordinator for the Brazilian office of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

In June 2013 in response to another transit fare increase, the Free Pass Movement (MPL in Portuguese) led demonstrations as thousands took to the streets in cities across Brazil. Cops with "black Robocop suits, big shields and a vast armory ... used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowds," shooting out the eye of a reporter covering the actions in São Paulo.

Intended to spook the populace, the brutality of the government instead made people angrier and "protests grew larger after each act of repression."

Workers and families joined crowds of students. Demands for free transit grew to include education and public health policies. Nervous about the support the public showed for the demonstrators, the fare increases were scrapped and the federal government promised new programs addressing the other issues.

Plans and demands for free transit went back to the end of Brazil's two-decade military dictatorship in 1985. The closest came in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city. The city's first woman mayor, Luiza Erundina, was elected in 1988. Her transportation secretary, Lucio Gregori, was a supporter of free transit and drew up plans for the public and private sector to finance it. The private sector and their corporate media led a campaign and defeated it.

Gregori argued for separating the cost of running a transit system from fares, noting that private business is the greatest beneficiary of transit and therefore should pay for it. Erundina was later elected five times as a federal representative, presented and eventually won the addition of transport as a social right in the Brazilian constitution.

Sadly, as with most constitutional guarantees, not only in Brazil, this one remains unfulfilled.

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*To win support, change can't simply come from on high, but whether it comes from a popular movement or elected officials, in order to succeed it must be broadly consultative.*

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### **Theoretical Conclusions and Lessons**

In a compilation written by a variety of authors, the success of free transit movements, the quality of writing and the coherence of politics vary widely from chapter to chapter, but on the whole, it's a valuable addition to the library of those thinking about mobility as a right.

Some of the chapters with the least success do present analyses of the losses. The most valuable theoretical and strategic insights are in the local examples. In the most successful and inspiring examples, we can pick out some important lessons.

It helps to have both base involvement and a radical or at least supportive city administration. Maintaining substantial changes requires a broad focus beyond just free fares. These factors may seem obvious, but the specific lessons from the case studies are essential for activists.

Unfortunately, the chapters explicitly approaching theory and vision do not offer as much.

Jan Sheurer, a research fellow at Curtin University in Perth, Australia, studying social and cultural aspects of mobility and disruptive transport technologies, presents opening and closing chapters for the book.

He makes some dubious claims, including an argument that car "sharing" (i.e. private taxis with a website) outfits like Uber and Lyft "blur the boundaries between public and private transport," ignoring the dominance of the industry by such private profit-driven companies.

Sheurer also claims that autonomous vehicles will lead to reduced traffic but doesn't address how to prevent each person from using their own autonomous vehicle.

He puts forth, seeming as a positive effect, that Uber, Lyft and autonomous vehicles "may enable transit operators do

away with a sizable portion of their staff." This glosses over transit unions, the most organized force pushing for greater transit. Many of his suggestions are apolitical and technocratic, assuming that political change can be made with just a good idea rather than through organization and power.

Despite that, in his second chapter Sheurer presents what looks like a useful tool he and colleagues developed to chart a multi-variate, quantitative map of effects of access to transit on property values. He proposes additional property taxes to nab windfall profits that currently accrue to real estate owners.

There are issues with the property tax model (why not use an aggressively graduated income and wealth tax?) – but it does present an interesting use of data which he points out could lead to greater utilization of land held by speculators near transit.

Regardless of any issues with the attempts at theory, the local examples easily outweigh any criticism. They demonstrate the value of blending base struggles with government leadership.

The modern left has a tendency to crane its head back, always looking at the highest elected bodies. Without explicitly addressing it, the victories presented here demonstrate the value of lowly transit authorities and city councils as well as the necessity of wide-scale involvement.

The examples in the book that were the most successful tended to be both broad and specific. As the Bolognese said, "Free fares were just the beginning." In addition to a variety of methods of pulling people into transit: free fares, frequent service, dense networks, there are also forces to push people out of private cars: reduced road access, fewer and more expensive parking spaces, lower speed limits.

To win support, change can't simply come from on high, but whether it comes from a popular movement or elected officials, in order to succeed it must be broadly consultative.

Transportation costs in money and time can be substantial for those who have no option other than a mediocre or poor city bus. Recent events in two generally right-wing states offer the possibility of an issue that could be used to organize and to win.

In 2019, the council in Kansas City, Missouri approved a move to a universal free fare system. Also last year, Houston's transit authority paused their plan for contactless payment in order to consider free public transit.

Places like Luxembourg or Estonia (save this chapter for dessert) with the plausibility of nationwide free transport may seem a world away from our political experiences in the USA, but if it can happen in Texas and Missouri, it can happen anywhere. ■



# REVIEW

## Building and Expanding the Movement: The Fight for Indigenous Liberation

By Brian Ward

### **As Long as Grass Grows:**

The Indigenous Struggle for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock

By Dina Gilio-Whitaker

Beacon Press, 2019, 222 pages.

### **Standing with Standing Rock:**

Voices from the #NODAPL Movement

Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon, editors

University of Minnesota Press, 2019, 420 pages.

### **Speaking of Indigenous Politics:** Conversations with Activist, Scholars, and Tribal Leaders.

J. Kéhaulani Kauanui, editor

University of Minnesota Press, 2018, 400 pages.

THIS YEAR'S INDEPENDENCE Day celebrations included President Trump giving a divisive right-wing speech in front of four racist presidents who expanded the settler state on Mt. Rushmore in South Dakota.<sup>1</sup>

Mt. Rushmore is in the Black Hills known as He Sapa to the Oceti Sakowin, the seven council fires or Lakota, Dakota and Nakota (the Sioux), which is sacred to the Oceti Sakowin. He Sapa was stolen by the United States and in 1980 the Supreme Court confirmed that they were stolen.<sup>2</sup>

The Oceti Sakowin have refused the money, instead demanding the land back. Outside the Trump event, Indigenous activists blocked the road and many were arrested.<sup>3</sup> Trump's speech was vile; to Indigenous people, however, a nationalistic and racist speech on stolen land is nothing new.

On the flip side, a court decided that the Dakota Access Pipeline must be stalled and all oil removed following the 2016 stand-off at Standing Rock led by the Hunkpapa Lakota.

The resistance in 2016 successfully stopped the pipeline for a limited amount of time until Trump reignited the process.<sup>4</sup>

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*Brian Ward is an educator, socialist and activist who lives in Madison, Wisconsin (occupied Ho-Chunk Land), and has lived and worked on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, home of the Oglala Lakota Nation. He contributed to the book 101 Changemakers: Rebels and Radicals Who Changed U.S. History (Haymarket, 2012) and his writing has appeared in The Nation, Truthout, New Politics, Science for the People, Red Madison, Socialist Worker, International Socialist Review, Against the Current and other publications.*

The decision comes on the heels of a nationwide uprising against systemic racism following the murder of George Floyd, forcing many Americans to reflect on the racist past and present of United States.

The movement has also included the toppling of statues of racists and colonizers including Confederate Generals and Christopher Columbus. Many have even started to question union generals who fought Indigenous people during and after the Civil War — including President Lincoln, who ordered the largest mass execution in U.S. history with 38 Dakota men hanged in 1862 following an uprising against settlers in what is known as Minnesota today.<sup>5</sup>

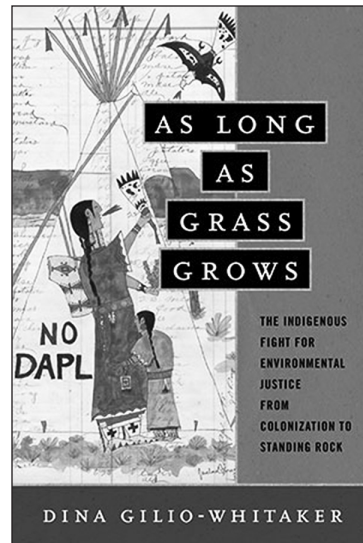
The movement has also forced the notorious Washington football team to change its racist name, following decades of pressure against Indigenous mascots.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the Supreme Court ruled that half of Oklahoma is still “Indian Country” in a legal sense, marking an important victory for Tribal Sovereignty.<sup>7</sup>

### **Centuries of Indigenous Resistance**

Idle No More, the struggle against the Keystone XL pipeline, and the struggle at Standing Rock mark only the most recent wave of mass Indigenous action. Indigenous resistance has happened for centuries. This time, more non-Indigenous people are pulling back the curtains to see the brutality of the American state.

In this context, there has been a renaissance of Indigenous writers who are gaining mass appeal. The U.S. left has had a history of overlooking or downplaying the role of settler colonialism while not seeing Indigenous liberation as a central fight for a future revolution on Turtle Island (North America).

These writers are forcing people to radicalize and grapple with its history and ongoing process. These writers include some of the authors of the books reviewed here. They include *As Long as Grass Grows* by



Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes), *Standing with Standing Rock* edited by Nick Estes (Lower Brule Sioux Tribe) and Jaskiran Dhillon and *Speaking of Indigenous Politics* edited by J. Kéhaulani Kauanui (Kanaka Maoli [Native Hawaiian]). All three are valuable resources for the movement to take a closer look at settler colonialism today.

Gilio-Whitaker is a lecturer of American Indian studies

at California State University, San Marcos and also co-author of the book *All the Real Indians Died Off* with Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. Her title is a reference to language that was often in treaties between the U.S. government and Indigenous nations promising them land “as long as grass grows.”

She is the first author to do a comprehensive look at the role of settler colonialism and the resistance connected to the environmental justice movement.

Covering a wide range of material from the removal policy to environmental justice theory to the Indigenous perspective of land as medicine, this book is must-read for every activist interested in fighting for a habitable planet and centering Indigenous liberation and the struggle against settler colonialism in that effort.

The subtitle, “The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock,” is a clear recognition that the mobilization we saw at Standing Rock is connected to a long tradition of struggle for environmental justice. The book is situated with the framework of settler colonialism (and capitalism) and the ideology of white supremacy being a system that is destroying our planet.

The author's introduction lays out her argument looking at the principles of nationhood and self-determination which are tools Indigenous people have always used to “defend and remain on their land and the life those lands give them.” She continues:

"From the intrusions of the earliest colonists into Native gardens, to the havoc wreaked by railroads and the imposition of reservations boundaries, to today's pipeline and fracking conflicts, Indigenous peoples have been forced into never-ending battles of resistance."<sup>8</sup>

She goes on to say that "the implicit question this book asks is what does environmental justice look like when Indigenous peoples are at the center?" This has been the key question for the movement, and many non-Indigenous people are starting to understand that treaty rights are a way to stop some of these fossil fuel companies.

The slogan at Standing Rock was "Mni Wiconi," which is the Lakota word for "Water is Life," recognizing that we all need water to live.

### Growing Solidarity

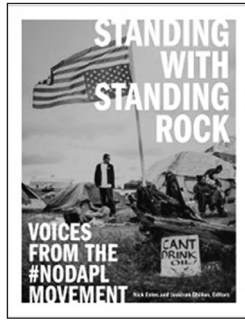
Today we have started to see a multi-racial fightback against pipelines, such as the Black Hills Alliance in the 1980s, Cowboy-Indian Alliance against Keystone XL and the struggle at Standing Rock.<sup>9</sup>

All brought non-Indigenous and Indigenous people together, while centering the Indigenous struggle. The history that Gilio-Whitaker examines is key to understanding how the current environmental movement is becoming more and more diverse with people of color, specifically Indigenous people, leading the way.

Chief Phil Lane, who is Dakota and Chicksaw, reflected on some of the recent outrage of settler ranchers' land being taken for pipeline construction. Gilio-Whitaker quotes Lane at length on a meeting between Natives and non-native farmers.

"Those ranchers came in and spoke to that council, and they shared their heart... So finally we came back after the treaty signing... we had about ten or fifteen ranchers there, they all got up to speak...and one after another they got up and said they're infuriated. They said... How could this happen? How can people take our land? How can they do this to us? And of course...we didn't see a smile but everybody knew what we was thinking about from our side.... So finally this last sister got up to speak and she just said, 'I just am so infuriated, they're coming and taking our land...they just can't do it without our consent.... This is our land that our families have lived in since...you know, how long they have been there.' And said, 'They're treating us just like...just like...,' and then one of the relatives said, 'Just like the Indians.' And all of the [sic] sudden there was this beautiful pause and every's like, 'Yes!' And one of my relatives walked over to her and says, 'Welcome to the tribe, welcome to the tribe.'"<sup>10</sup>

Nick Estes, assistant professor of American Studies at the University of New Mexico and co-founder of The Red Nation,<sup>11</sup> wrote his debut book, *Our History is the Future* in 2019.<sup>12</sup> The book has been an



Dakota Access Pipeline, Estes has followed up *Our History is the Future* with *Standing with Standing Rock*, co-edited with Jaskiran Dhillon, associate professor of global studies and anthropology at The New School. The book brings to life the voices of those who stood up at Standing Rock and enables the reader to experience the beauty, brutality and vision of a different future

The book features over 30 authors ranging from well-known Kim TallBear and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz to Standing Rock Sioux Tribal chairman David Archambault, II to journalists and activists on the ground. It is organized in six sections ranging from the resistance to political landscape to environmental colonization, centering the struggle for the environment as an anti-colonial struggle.

This book will help you think through the movement and get you started down a path of digging deeper into the struggle against settler colonialism.

### Indian Country to Palestine

The Dakota Access Pipeline struggle may have gotten the most attention but Indigenous people have been fighting for centuries and their voices need to be amplified. J. Kéhaulani Kauanui edited the book *Speaking of Indigenous Politics*, a compilation of interviews based on the radio show called "From Native New England and Beyond."<sup>13</sup>

Kauanui is a professor of American studies and anthropology at Wesleyan University.

The book features 27 interviews as the subtitle of the books says "with activists, scholars and tribal leaders." Kauanui picked these specific interviews from her radio show because of their important work in the movement against settler colonialism.

She goes beyond Indian Country and her Native Hawai'i and goes into settler colonialism in Palestine with Omar Barghouti, discussing the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement and Steven Salaita, making the connection between settler colonialism in Israel and the United States.

The book features some well-known Indigenous activists and writers such as Sarah Deer, Suzan Shown Harjo, Winona

important guide for so many on the left who have started to deconstruct their ideas on settler colonialism.

In the spirit of celebrating what might be a temporary victory stopping the

LaDuke, Paul Chaat Smith, Philip J. Deloria and many more.

Like *As Long as Grass Grows* and *Standing with Standing Rock*, this is an excellent book for readers sick of the same old narratives of old white historians telling the story of Indigenous people. These are the voices of those fighting.

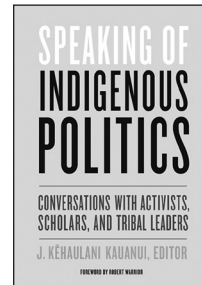
During this time of struggle against racism, white supremacy and colonialism we must engage with the United States' brutal past. This country and capitalism came "driving from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt," as Karl Marx put it.<sup>14</sup>

Settler colonialism is not just from the past but is an ongoing process in the United States. Many are starting to question this systematic oppression from the streets of Minneapolis to Albuquerque to Columbus, Ohio.

Books like *As Long as Grass Grows*, *Standing with Standing Rock* and *Speaking of Indigenous Politics* provide a framework for readers to explore and learn as they are immersed in the movement. ■

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# REVIEW

## At Home in the World By Dan Georgakas

**I Never Left Home**  
Poet, Feminist, Revolutionary  
by Margaret Randall  
Durham, NC: Duke University Press,  
2020, 336 pages, \$29.95 cloth.

*I NEVER LEFT Home* is a passionate account of the perspectives of the radical generation of the 1960s as experienced by the extraordinary Margaret Randall. Active all her adult life as a poet, feminist and revolutionary, Randall writes candidly of her experiences in the political and artistic movements in New York (1958-61), Mexico (1961-68), Cuba (1969-1980), Nicaragua (1980-84), and the American Southwest (1984- ).

The book begins and ends in the Southwest. Its initial chapters are about her experiences as a restless youth, and later chapters, those of a returned expatriate.

Before considering those aspects of her life, it is useful to reflect on her comments on the radical and artistic movements in which she became involved. While she is critical of various shortcomings of those movements, her insightful judgments remind us of accomplishments we sometimes undervalue.

In the mid-1950s, after a brief courtship, Randall, just about to turn 20, married Sam Jacobs, who was a year older. They immediately embarked for Europe with a vague hope of finding a way to India.

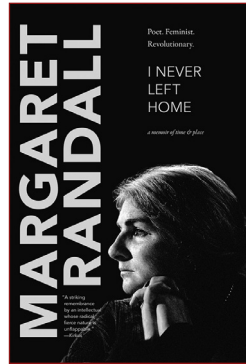
Although their year and a half in Europe, mostly Spain, proved to be exciting, their life style was eccentric and economically perilous. She describes their relationship as “miserable,” capped by a troubled Jacobs burning all her poetry. Nonetheless, her chronicle captures a time when young American rebels ventured overseas, not to spend “a year abroad,” but as a cultural break from the American mainstream.

Upon returning to the United States, Randall attended the University of New Mexico where she befriended artist Elaine de Kooning, a visiting professor, who Randall considers her “first real mentor.”

When de Kooning returned to New York City, Randall decided to do likewise. Their friendship would bring Randall into the

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*Dan Georgakas is the author of Detroit: I Do Mind Dying and My Detroit: Growing up Greek and American in Motor City.*



now famed circle of abstract expressionist painters who gathered nightly at the Cedar Bar to debate the visual revolutions they espoused. Her visits to de Kooning's studio also resulted in “a rapid series of seven portraits of me.”

Randall does not indulge in behind-the-scenes gossip or comment much about the political mindsets of the artists, but she muses on how success affected different individuals.

Vividly rendered are the dynamic artistic visions at play and the accompanying contempt for the images of a culture embodied in popular novels such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.

In New York, she also came into contact with some of the era's leading political radicals, jazz musicians, and literary activists. These included poets such as William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, LeRoi Jones (not yet Amara Baraka) and Denise Levertov. She even spent an afternoon with Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe.

### Arts and Radicalism

Working for Spanish Refugee Aid, the Fair Play for Cuba Committee and the ban-the-bomb movement, Randall interacted with a spectrum of radical thinkers that included Hannah Arendt, Paul Goodman, Mary McCarthy, Ammon Hennacy, and Dwight Macdonald.

Her first public protest involved a demonstration supporting Portuguese sailors seeking asylum after mutinying against the Portuguese dictatorship. McCarthyism had been so effective in dampening public protest that only a dozen demonstrators took part.

Randall considers her New York years as a cultural turning point in her life. Visual artists had profoundly affected her with “their conviction that art in and of itself — when it was good and goes all the way — can be life-changing.”

Her literary contacts solidified her artistic ambitions and gave her a new sense of confidence that, “I would someday be the writer I needed to be, and that I could learn to be her anywhere.”

Randall gave birth to her son Gregory in 1960. Without giving many details, Randall writes of wanting to be a moth-

er but also wanting to raise the child on her own. Gregory's father was poet Joel Oppenheimer, who wasn't aware of her wishes. He only met his son decades later, but they formed a cordial relationship.

After a brief return to Albuquerque, in 1961, Randall, with Gregory in tow, decided to seriously explore the culture of Mexico which had always fascinated her.

She quickly became involved with American expatriates and Mexican poets in Mexico City. Wanting to create a bridge between English-language and Spanish-language writers, she and Mexican poet Sergio Mondragon launched a new magazine titled *El Corno Emplumado* (*The Plumed Horn*).

By publishing in two languages, *El Corno* sought to be a forum where writers could interact with one another on equal terms. During its eight-year existence, *El Corno* was the hemisphere's most important bi-cultural literary publication.

In addition to its quarterly 200-page issue, *El Corno* published 20 literary collections in various languages. It survived financially on donations, subscriptions, and bookstore sales. The editors were unpaid.

A sense of *El Corno's* outreach is reflected in the broad range of its contributors. Just a few of the better-known writers include Ernesto Cardenal, Thomas Merton, Pablo Neruda, Charles Bukowski, Julio Cortazar, Ezra Pound, Walter Lowenfels, and Octavio Paz. Randall whimsically recalls that among work not accepted were three anti-war poems by a boxer then named Cassius Clay and a poem by Norman Mailer.

Randall and Mondragon became romantically involved. They eventually wed and had two children: Sarah (1963) and Ximena (1964). As the years passed, Mondragon and Randall increasingly tilted in different literary directions. Mondragon became entranced with Buddhist thought while Randall became quite appreciative of political poets, some of whom were involved in armed struggle.

Their dissolving relationship ended when Mondragon's views led him to join a group that believed nirvana could only be achieved by men. Randall more or less edited the journal solo until she developed a relationship with Robert Cohen, a highly political American poet who would father Randall's fourth child Ana (1969) and would have a hand in editing the final issue of *El Corno*.

As the 1968 Olympic Games approached, the Mexican government feared massive

political dissent would mar the stable image the government wanted to project. A campaign against dissidents was launched that ultimately resulted in the armed forces firing on 10,000 university and high school students, killing hundreds.

### Dissent and Exile

Many radicals went into hiding or exile. A smaller number formed guerilla movements.

Even though Randall had married a Mexican, the authorities made it clear that they perceived her as a foreign agitator and considered *El Corno* a voice of dissent. The continued publication of the magazine became impossible and Randall began to fear for the safety of her family.

The United States considered her Mexican marriage to be a rejection of American citizenship, making her only legal travel document her Mexican passport which had been "lost" by the police. Judging Cuba to be the only dependable haven, Cohen turned to his political contacts and Randall to the Cuban writers she had published in *El Corno*.

Getting Randall's children to Cuba proved relatively easy and Cohen could use his American passport to travel. Randall, however, spent a harrowing and dangerous six months getting out of Mexico and navigating her way through various nations to reach Cuba.

Given that Randall has written extensively of her 11 years in Cuba, the current memoir is mostly oriented to dealing with the refugee community and her sense of the growing authoritarian nature of the government. Randall reminds radicals who have been disheartened by Cuba's present conditions that during what she calls "the Glory Years," Cuba was the indispensable haven for revolutionary socialists, especially those from Latin America.

She recounts how Cuba provided political revolutionaries with medical treatment, military training and sanctuary from oppressive regimes. Many of those she interacted with would return to revolutionary struggles in their native lands. She recalls how Daniel Ortega used her mimeograph machine to print agitational Sandinista literature.

During her Cuba years, Randall wrote, edited, or translated a hundred books of prose and poetry of varying lengths. She became well known for her writing about grassroots organizations, particularly those of women. Readers wanting more specifics regarding her own daily life can consult the complete bibliography of her works included at the end of her memoir.

### To Nicaragua and Home

Despite her support of the Castro regime, Randall earned the ire of party-line Fidelistas by writing critically on topics such as the suppression of Cuban gays.

Randall also was increasingly disturbed as Cuban governance became more top-down and rigid. A detailed account of this process can be found in Gregory Randall's *To Have Been There Then: Memories of Cuba*.

For reasons Randall never fully fathomed, she found her contacts and commissions with the government diminishing. This led her to conclude her time in Cuba was no longer as fruitful as she wanted it to be. In 1980, she decided to go to Nicaragua to be part of the Sandinista revolution.

The Nicaraguan leadership welcomed Randall. Just as she had had written the landmark *Women of Cuba*, she now wrote *Sandino's Daughters* about women in Nicaragua. Her enthusiasm for the revolution, however, was greatly dampened by what she felt was the dismissive treatment of the numerous female Sandinista leaders, including military commanders and national organizers.

She painfully recounts how over a four-year period she saw the sexism of Ortega feeding the transformation of the Sandinista government into an authoritarian regime. She had written speeches for Tomas Borge, a legendary founder of the Sandinista movement, but laments how his misogyny distorted his political integrity.

As the Contra offensive heated up, she felt exhausted and felt a need to return home to retrieve her own culture. She consulted a therapist who gave her "permission" to make the move even though her comrades were still in struggle.

Although allowed entry to the United States, Randall was soon faced with a deportation order. Invoking the McCarran-Walter Act, the government accused her of writing that went beyond "mere dissent" to a realm "beyond the good order and happiness of the United States."

Her resistance to this characterization of her work quickly evoked overwhelming support from the nation's leading writers accompanied by many well-known political voices such as those of Barney Frank, Ron Dellums, Howard Zinn and Jessica Mitford. More than twenty-six defense committees were formed on her behalf.

Her five-year struggle in the courts, led by the Center for Constitutional Rights, ended with the deportation order rescinded and her American citizenship fully restored. A second attempt to deport her quickly fizzled, but Randall chronicles the severe threatening actions and pressures with which she had to cope.

### The Long Struggle

Concurrent with her legal struggles, Randall worked with a therapist to help her re-adjust to being in the United States after a quarter century's absence. During those sessions, Randall recovered memory of how

as a child, she had been sexually abused by her grandfather, with the knowledge of her grandmother.

She only writes briefly about this psychological breakthrough other than to link it to a life-long mushroom phobia and how her recovered memory caused tensions with her parents.

During the early years of her return, she became involved with and married Floyce Alexander, a poet. Their marriage lasted one year. She notes wistfully that, "As with so many men in my life, we would have been better served by remaining friends rather than becoming romantically involved."

Such was not the case when Randall met Barbara Beyers, who proved to be the love of her life. Randall's description of their relationship is engaging and detailed.

This was not a case of coming out of the closet, but finding and accepting the love of another woman by someone who had always been a feminist. Randall writes about how her new sexual identity led her to rethink the status of women in the movements in which she'd been active.

Her concluding chapters also deal with her relationship with her children, which she notes, "hasn't always been smooth." She reflects on the unusual strains her life choices placed on them and regrets not spending more time tending their needs.

She is comforted, however, that all four have prospered. Sarah and Ximena reside in Mexico, Gregory in Uruguay, and Ana in Brooklyn. The details conveyed about how each related to their various fathers and her lesbian identity is fascinating, but too involved for this review to take up.

Since her return to the United States, Randall has added to her artistic endeavors by working as a serious photographer specializing in images of her beloved Southwest. She has remained active in literary, political and feminist circles.

At age 83, the frail health of Barbara, whom she has married, and her own fragility caused by a fall, limit her activism to literary projects. Her present political orientation may be reflected in the three authors she chose to use as front pieces: Bertolt Brecht, Victor Serge, and Rosa Luxemburg.

Randall has included her own poetry at various points in her narrative. Closely tied to her experiences, the poems take on a universal dimension difficult to express in conventional history. They often echo her intent to offer a "memoir of time and place."

The powerful unifying thread in her chronicle is her conviction that artistic and political visions are inseparable. Randall suggests that daring to dream improbable dreams is the start of the process that can make those dreams materialize. (See an interview at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iU3BgQ7hiIM&feature=youtu.be>.) ■

# The Larry Kramer Paradox

By Peter Drucker

IN DYING ON May 27, 2020, Larry Kramer showed one last time his keen sense of timing. After many years when AIDS had rarely generated big headlines in the United States, there are now lively discussions of the lessons of the struggle against AIDS for the current struggle against COVID-19.<sup>1</sup>

As a key founder of Gay Men's Health Crisis and, even more importantly, of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), Kramer was an icon of the earlier battle. His death was and is an occasion to reflect on it.

Kramer's obituaries often combined admiration with exasperation, unavoidably focusing on the man's personality, which dovetailed with and left its mark on ACT UP's militant style. In truth, he embraced and redeemed the stereotype, beloved of anti-gay bigots, of the loud, quarrelsome queen — joined in Kramer's case to the stereotype of the loud, quarrelsome New York Jew.

Many gay men of Kramer's generation, active in 1950s "homophile" groups like the Mattachine Society, had adopted personas that almost ostentatiously departed from that stereotype: they were discreet, quiet, calm, endlessly patient, slow to anger, virtually impervious to insult. Not Kramer.

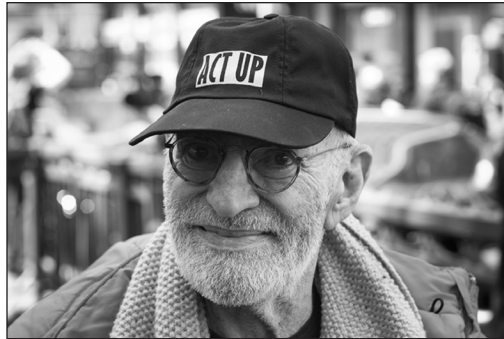
This was, in a sense, surprising. From a middle-class family and a graduate of Yale, he could have squeezed himself into a mold of WASP reserve. Instead he became a champion of trumpeting inconvenient truths and picking fights that often needed to be picked.

Yet obituaries noted with wonder how people he picked fights with sometimes ended up as devoted friends. This was the case for example with Dr. Anthony Fauci, key in the 1980s in managing the federal bureaucracy's response to AIDS, and even more prominent today as the sane face (alongside Trump's lunatic visage) of the U.S. government's response to COVID-19.

Kramer began by calling Fauci "a murderer and an incompetent idiot." Today Fauci

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*Peter Drucker is an advisory editor of Against the Current, a former participant in ACT UP San Francisco and ACT UP New York, and the author of Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism (Haymarket).*



says, "We loved each other."<sup>2</sup> He credits Kramer and ACT UP with teaching him an enormous amount about fighting epidemics, not from a lofty scientific and bureaucratic eminence, but in a way that enlists and joins with infected people themselves.

"I had to change," Fauci says, "from a conventional bench scientist into a public-health activist who happened to work for the federal government."<sup>3</sup>

Another unlikely sometime friend was Tony Kushner, like Kramer a gay playwright, unlike Kramer a stalwart defender of left-wing causes. Kushner was often frustrated at Kramer's lack of a broad progressive vision. He thought Kramer "was relentless but not revolutionary." But he credited Kramer with holding to "a terrible, galvanizing truth:

LARRY KRAMER (BORN Laurence David Kramer, 1935-2020) died of pneumonia at age 84. From a middle-class Jewish family in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Kramer launched a career as a screenwriter and then became an award-winning playwright, novelist, essayist and political activist. He is survived by his spouse, David Webster.

His first Hollywood movie credit was for *Women in Love* (1969); his most well-known play is *The Normal Heart* (1985), a largely autobiographical work set during the rise of the HIV/AIDS crisis. *The Destiny of Me* (1992) picks up where *The Normal Heart* left off. It was a double Obie Award winner and received the Lortel Award for Outstanding Play of the Year. Kramer's novels include *Faggots* (1988) and *The American People Part 1: Search for my Heart* (2015). ■

Liberation from oppression is, in the most concrete sense, a matter of life and death."<sup>4</sup>

## Militancy and Sex

What made both Fauci and Kushner (at times reluctant) fans of Kramer was the militancy that uniquely characterized ACT UP. At a time when the thousands of deaths from AIDS in the United States were widely and easily ignored, ACT UP shouted down the powerful, disrupted their press moments, and blocked the entrances to their headquarters.

The left in those days was caught in a routine of holding demonstrations that adopted radical rhetoric but were orderly and even boring. ACT UP was boundlessly creative, both in the bold, colorful images it plastered cities with and in the rowdy diversity of its actions.

As the unacknowledged godfather of a later generation of activism,<sup>5</sup> its example can still inspire people today who face the challenges of mobilizing against injustice while (at least sometimes, where possible) respecting distancing.

In these ways Larry Kramer was an appropriate figurehead for ACT UP, even its rightful icon. But ACT UP's legacy is far richer than his. It upheld a vision of sexual liberation at a time when AIDS seemed to spell the end of sexual liberation.

It began building anti-racist, anti-sexist, class-based alliances that prefigured a later generation of queer intersectionality. And it initiated a shift from gay male identity to queer fluidity. In these three respects, Kramer played a more problematic role, and makes a more unlikely icon.

Today, even among people too young to have personally experienced them, the 1970s are remembered as a lost golden age of gay sex: the bars, the baths, the discos, the tearooms, the piers along the Hudson and more.

ACT UP could not restore that lost time, but it resolutely refused to renounce it. Even before ACT UP came along, AIDS activists like Michael Callen had developed and disseminated safe sex practices that health officials were often initially too timid to even mention.<sup>6</sup>

Today, when many health departments routinely give non-moralistic advice about

sex during COVID-19, it is hard to imagine how radical safe sex education was in the 1980s. This was after all a time when “homosexual propaganda” was illegal, not just in Russia but in Thatcher’s Britain and in many U.S. states.

This was not a cause that Larry Kramer particularly embraced. The famous 1983 article that made his name, “1,112 and Counting,” was not only an indictment of government inaction but also a complaint:

*“I am sick of guys who moan that giving up careless sex until this blows over is worse than death. How can they value life so little and cocks and asses so much?... I am sick of guys who think that all being gay means is sex in the first place. I am sick of guys who can only think with their cocks.”*

The article did not mention safe sex as an option. This was in keeping with the publication that at that point was Kramer’s main claim to fame in gay circles: the 1978 novel *Faggots*. The book was part of a genre that tried to square the circle by courting readers with prurient descriptions of emotionless male-male sex, yet ending with moralistic condemnations.

In response to an earlier fundraising appeal by Kramer for Gay Men’s Health Crisis, gay playwright Robert Chesley wrote,

*“I think the concealed meaning in Kramer’s emotionalism is the triumph of guilt: that gay men deserve to die for their promiscuity. In his novel Faggots, Kramer told us that sex is dirty and that we ought not to be doing what we’re doing.... Read anything by Kramer closely. I think you’ll find that the subtext is always: the wages of gay sin are death.”*<sup>8</sup>

This was not a message for which Kramer found much an audience in ACT UP. Yet he never entirely gave it up. In a 2004 speech, he said, “Does it occur to you that we brought this plague of AIDS upon ourselves?... And you are still doing it. You are still murdering each other.”<sup>9</sup>

What lives on from ACT UP today, and rightly, is not this spirit of blaming the victims, but Michael Callen and Robert Chesley’s insistence on a sex-positive response to the epidemic.

### Transformational Agenda

ACT UP began as a group of overwhelmingly gay white men. Yet it emerged at a time when national lesbian/gay organizing, like the first lesbian/gay march on Washington in 1979, was strenuously trying to address issues of racism and sexism and represent the full range of the community, although it did not yet explicitly include trans or intersex people and was just beginning to include bisexuals.

ACT UP adopted that spirit early on. A group of experienced, left-oriented lesbians played a disproportionately important role from the start. Caucuses of people of color quickly formed and won space, time and

representation.

Within a few years ACT UP had broadened its demands around AIDS to try to mobilize allies for a radical, transformational agenda. Reaching out to the union movement and the National Organization for Women, for instance, it tried to join forces in a national coalition for universal health care.

Unfortunately, even while ACT UP gained strength, other social movements were going on the defensive and retreating as neoliberalism prevailed under Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. But as the documentary *United in Anger* shows, a leading group in ACT UP fought hard for transformational politics, even as others, becoming impressive self-taught experts, began pursuing careers in the nascent world of AIDS NGOs.<sup>10</sup>

By the mid-1990s, even as AIDS spread as a devastating pandemic over much of the world, the increasing efficacy of anti-retroviral drugs increased HIV-positive gay men’s odds of survival in the United States, which (along with so many deaths) cut into ACT UP’s base of support.

This facilitated the growing strength of a gay conservative wing, visible by the century’s end in the domination of the fourth national march by the Human Rights Campaign Fund and Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches.

Still, the radical vision developed in ACT UP remains as a legacy. In recent decades it has been stronger in movements in other countries, like South Africa’s Treatment Action Campaign.

Coalition politics was never Larry Kramer’s forte, however. As Tony Kushner writes,

*“Larry ... was an unapologetic tribalist. I often told him that I felt this amounted to a willed limitation of empathy, fatal to the necessity of building solidarity with other communities fighting for justice, enfranchisement, emancipation. He told me that I was too easily distracted and insufficiently loyal to ‘our people.’”*<sup>11</sup>

### Queer Diversity

Kramer’s “tribalism” cut him off from new developments in the 1990s, particularly the rise of Queer Nation groups and of queer theory. With contradictions and at varied tempos, the LGBTIQ left gradually moved away from the defense of any one clearly defined and sharply demarcated community, toward a greater appreciation of the diversity of different crosscutting sexual communities.

Awareness also grew of the importance of understanding how sexual identities interact with others: racial, ethnic, gender, disability-related and more.

In the explosion today of anti-racist mobilizations, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter

— championed from 2013 by a group of radical queer women of color — coexists openly with #BlackQueerLivesMatter and #BlackTransLivesMatter.

Here too the legacy that ACT UP eventually began to develop lives on — even if Larry Kramer might have trouble recognizing what has become of his crusade. Even as many statues are being knocked off their pedestals, we should not be too quick to consign Larry Kramer to the ignominy to which the likes of Andrew Jackson are rightly being consigned.

With thousands, even millions of people beginning to take action for the first time, mobilizations will inevitably be full of confused and contradictory ideas. Change is born of contradictions; built on contradictions. It would be a fatal error to limit movements to the ranks of the already woke — as if anyone ever is entirely woke.

In the fights being waged now, there should still be room for a scrappy ancestor who recognized, in Kushner’s words, the “terrible, galvanizing truth: Liberation from oppression is, in the most concrete sense, a matter of life and death.” ■

### Notes

1. Summed up cogently by Canadian AIDS activist and queer historian Gary Kinsman in his blog ‘Radical Noise’: <https://radicalnoise.ca/2020/05/04/gary-kinsman-learning-from-aids-activism-for-surviving-the-covid-19-pandemic-to-be-in-sick-of-the-system-why-the-covid-19-recovery-must-be-revolutionary-from-between-the-lines-may-2020/>.
2. “‘We Loved Each Other’: Fauci Recalls Larry Kramer, Friend and Nemesis,” *New York Times*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/27/health/larry-kramer-anthony-fauci.html>.
3. Michael Spector, “How Anthony Fauci Became America’s Doctor,” *New Yorker*, April 10, 2020, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/04/20/how-anthony-fauci-became-americas-doctor>.
4. “Tony Kushner: Larry Kramer Spoke the Truths We Needed to Hear,” *New York Times*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/29/opinion/larry-kramer.html>.
5. See Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk eds., *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization*, London/New York: Verso, 2002.
6. See Martin Duberman, *Hold Tight Gently: Michael Callen, Essex Hemphill, and the Battlefield of AIDS*, New York/London: New Press, 2014. See also my review: “AIDS Then and Now: A Blood-Drenched Battlefield,” *Against the Current* no. 173, Nov./Dec. 2014, <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/173/p4296/>.
7. Larry Kramer, “1,112 and Counting,” *New York Native*, March 14-27, 1983, available at [http://bilerico.lgbtqnation.com/2011/06/larry\\_kramers\\_historic\\_essay\\_aids\\_at\\_30.php](http://bilerico.lgbtqnation.com/2011/06/larry_kramers_historic_essay_aids_at_30.php).
8. Robert Chesley, “A Hidden Message?,” *New York Native*, October 5-18, 1981. Thanks to Paul Friedman of the New York Public Library for scanning this letter and sending it to me as soon as the library started reopening. Thanks as well to Brian Weaver of the San Francisco Public Library and Isaac Fellman of the San Francisco GLBT Historical Society Archives for their help during the lockdown. To read some of Chesley’s too little-known plays, see *Hard Plays/Stiff Parts: The Homoerotic Plays of Robert Chesley*, San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1990. Full disclosure: by October 1981 Chesley was the ex of my then and current partner, Christopher Beck.
9. Cited at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Larry\\_Kramer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Larry_Kramer).
10. See <http://www.unitedinanger.com/>. I pointed out the increasingly racialized demographics of AIDS in an article in 1989 (“The Transformation of AIDS: Polarization of a Movement,” *Against The Current* no. 19).
11. Kushner, *op.cit.*

governing party will be prepared to seriously *fight* for. Remember for example how president Obama in 2009 put forward a “public option” for health care but withdrew it without a struggle. As for Biden, behind shopworn phrases about “healing America” that mean nothing substantive, his honest campaign theme might be: *I’ll fight for nothing, and that’s what I’ll deliver.*

It should hardly be necessary to detail the fact that nothing in Biden’s political record deserves progressive, let alone socialist, support. His Senate career runs from presiding over the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings, to enthusiastic advocacy of “tough on crime” legislation leading to mass incarceration in America, to supporting the disastrous and criminal Iraq war, from “ending welfare as we know it” to sweetheart sponsorship of the interests of the credit card industry headquartered in Delaware.

All this establishes Biden’s credentials as a 100% corporate Democrat. Like the Clintons, Biden has performed the formidable political trick of winning the support of blue-collar working class and especially Black voters, while spearheading the awful neoliberal programs that have brought pain and destruction to so many in those communities. Those very policies ultimately brought us the Donald Trump presidency, from whose disintegration Biden now stands to benefit.

Dozens if not hundreds of Trump executive orders need to be immediately cancelled — the Muslim travel ban, mass immigrant detention and family separation, massive assaults on the environment and women’s rights. It’s entirely unclear whether Biden would repeal these peremptorily, or even if he’s been asked about them. Beyond that, it should be clear by now that facing the economic carnage caused by COVID-19 requires a massive economic stimulus, to bail out people not banks and corporations — by some estimates amounting to 40% of the annual U.S. GDP (as estimated for example by leftwing economist Jack Rasmus).

That’s vastly beyond the inadequate post-2008 program of the Obama administration. Nothing suggests that Biden is interested in fighting for anything on that scale, without which the likelihood of a prolonged and deep Depression looms.

## **The Alternatives?**

The horrific implications of a second Trump term can’t be overstated, however unlikely it may presently appear. An irresistible imperative — the removal of Trump and the white-supremacist Republican administration, by the largest possible vote — confronts an immovable object, the corporate neoliberalism of the real Democratic Party led by Pelosi, Schumer, Biden, the Clintons, and, yes, Obama.

We don’t think that many folks on the left have illusions that Joe Biden himself represents anything positive beyond being not-Trump. There are, and will be, differing views about how much the Democratic progressive wing could influence his administration (more than verbally). In any case, the difficult choice facing serious progressive folks in this presidential election, we believe, needs to be posed this way: *What electoral choice can both oust Trump and advance the prospects for the movements that are challenging the brutal*

*racial capitalism of this society and spearheading the struggles for social justice, for human rights, for labor, for a future without climate and environmental collapse?*

The argument to “vote for the Democratic lesser evil to defeat the rightwing menace,” repeated on an endless feedback loop ever electoral cycle, has no attraction for us — but that doesn’t automatically tell us what’s appropriate *this time.*

There are two basic options (in addition to work on local races and ballot initiatives). One is summed up in the formula “Dump Trump, Fight Biden,” seeing a vote for Biden and Kamala Harris as an unavoidable necessity — at least in states where the outcome is not certain while the struggle against what he represents must also begin immediately.

This argument holds that the imperative to defeat Trump in 2020 outweighs whatever openings might exist for an independent progressive, third-party alternative — and that no such alternative is presently strong enough to be meaningful.

The alternative argument contends that precisely now, the importance of supporting independent, anti-capitalist politics is paramount, and that in the 2020 election that option is embodied in the Green Party campaign of Howie Hawkins and Angela Walker, on an unabashed ecosocialist program. (See Howie Hawkins’ “Which Green New Deal?” and his statement on running for president published in *ATC* 203, November-December 2019.)

Throughout his campaign for the Green Party nomination, Hawkins has stressed not only its program but also the importance of building the party as a meaningful political force and voice of the movements. Due to restrictive and oppressive ballot access laws backed by both capitalist parties, the Green Party is on the ballot in between 27-32 states. [See Angela Walker’s statement in this issue.]

Hawkins has stated that “for the Greens, every state is a battleground,” and we have no doubt that the consciousness of many dedicated activists is a battleground as well. Among members of the socialist-feminist organization Solidarity that sponsors this magazine, opinion is divided — as we expect it is in other currents on the left. (While making no formal endorsement, Solidarity held a poll of the membership to establish the balance of views. See page 10 of this issue.)

In any case, we don’t see “sitting it out” as a viable option. Whatever choice any of our readers make, the crisis and the struggles ahead will last long past the nasty, brutish and long U.S. electoral slog. The changes we most desperately need will come, as they always do, through mass action from below. The mass movements have won the significant gains in recent years for LGBT rights, progress toward decent wages, and a modicum of protection, however fragile it remains, for immigrant youth.

Most dramatically, #Black Lives Matter has put racial justice, police violence and mass incarceration on the political agenda and in cultural expression, from street paintings to sports uniforms and even corporate promos. To be sure, all that’s both a signifier of changing consciousness and the system’s effort to safely contain it. What’s been achieved remains a very long way from the deep changes we need, but the discussion in society has changed, and the task is to sustain and accelerate it. ■

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