

AGAINST THE CURRENT

Summing Up Labor's Hot Summer



Auto Workers Ready to Strike

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The UPS Contract — What Was Won, What Wasn't?

♦ BARRY EIDLIN

♦ KIM MOODY

GEO Struggle at University of Michigan

♦ KATHLEEN BROWN



A Letter from the Editors

Palestine and Empire

THE BRUTALITY OF the Israeli Occupation, the scale of Israel's continuing political turmoil, the undisguised Ku Klux Klan-ish murderous Israeli settlers' attacks on Palestinian civilians and towns, the deepening rage within the Palestinian population of the Occupied Territories and inside Israel — and the visible unease among the rulers of the United States' Middle East Arab allies — have pressured the U.S. government to pretend that it cares about Palestine. The key word here is “pretend.”

Policy in practice is illustrated by recent too-typical episodes. Amidst near-daily killings of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, President Biden welcomed Israeli president Isaac Herzog to the White House and the honor of addressing a joint session of Congress. This in itself, we must admit, was hardly surprising — given that Biden already disgraced himself and the country by similarly receiving the nationalist Hindu-supremacist Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, and followed in Donald Trump's footsteps to Saudi Arabia to be warmly greeted by mass murderer crown prince Mohammad bin Salman (whom Biden previously called a “pariah”).

After Congressional Progressive Caucus chair Pramila Jayapal, accurately if perhaps accidentally, publicly called Israel a “racist state,” a bipartisan Concurrent Resolution 57 repudiating such a heresy was rushed to the House of Representatives, where the vote passed 412-9-1. We pause briefly for the honor roll of those opposing the resolution: Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (NY), Rashida Tlaib (MI), Jamaal Bowman (NY), Summer Lee (PA), Ilhan Omar (MN), Cori Bush (MO), Andre Carson (IN), Delia Ramirez (IL) and Ayanna Pressley (MA). Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN), author of a bill (HR 3103) against U.S. aid for Israel's large-scale administrative detention of Palestinian children, voted “present.”

An atrocity mostly under the media radar is a Memorandum of Understanding between the U.S. and Israeli governments for opening visa-free travel between the two countries for their respective citizens. Under this Visa Waiver Program, naturally, the arrangement is reciprocal. But that is decidedly not the case at Ben-Gurion Airport, where Arab and Palestinian U.S. citizens are routinely hassled and frequently denied entry, especially if they are residents of Gaza. The MOU providing a 45-day test period for the waiver program has outraged Arab American activists who had been assured it wouldn't be implemented. (See the scathing commentary by James Zogby of the Arab American Institute, July 24, 2023, <https://james.zogby.com/>.)

In short, the Israeli state continues to get not only a free pass for gross human rights abuses in view of its status as a strategic U.S. ally — far from unique in that respect — but also enjoys the highest standing as a moral beacon, including among those same far-right Republicans who promote narratives of “Jewish space lasers” causing wildfires and George Soros spearheading the Illuminati plans for the new world order.

“Shared Fiction” Endangered

Nonetheless, strains are visible. They're detailed, for example, in an unusually-lengthy feature July 12 *New York Times* column by Thomas Friedman, “The U.S. Reassessment of Netanyahu Has Begun,” which deserves to be read in full and carefully for channeling the angst of the mainstream “pro-Israel” U.S. establishment.

Friedman is a Pulitzer Prize winner, formerly head of the Times' Jerusalem Bureau, known for his support of the Iraq war and longtime apologetics for Israeli “defensive” state terrorism — in short, a pillar of elite consensus. Today he writes that “the Biden team sees the far-right Israeli government, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, engaged in unprecedented radical behavior — under the cloak of judicial

‘reform’ — that is undermining our *shared interests* with Israel, our *shared values* and the *vitaly important shared fiction* about the status of the West Bank that has kept peace hopes there just barely alive.” (emphasis added)

Further down, Friedman gets explicit:

“One of the most important Israeli and American shared interests was the shared fiction that Israel's occupation of the West Bank was only temporary and one day there could be a two-state solution with the 2.9 million Palestinians there. Therefore, the U.S. doesn't need to worry about the now more than 500,000 Israeli settlers there...”

“Because of that shared fiction, the U.S. has almost always defended Israel in the U.N. and the International Court of Justice against various resolutions or judgments that it was not occupying the West Bank temporarily but actually annexing it permanently.

“The Israeli government is now doing its best to destroy that time-buying fiction...Netanyahu's steady destruction of this shared fiction is now posing a real problem for other U.S. and Israeli shared interests” (by which Friedman means the stability of Jordan, Israel's Abraham Accords with Gulf kingdoms, and normalization with Saudi Arabia. These rulers don't care about Palestine any more than Washington does, but their populations do.)

Two things stand out here. First is the extensive repetition of that loaded phrase “shared fiction,” as it's clear that Friedman wants to make sure that even the least attentive reader gets the point and its implications. Second, as experienced readers of Thomas Friedman know, he almost always leaves something out, often something quite significant: In this case, his own decades-long role helping to perpetrate precisely that shared fiction, always by blaming Palestinians for rejecting U.S.-Israeli “peace plans” to preserve the shimmering mirage of a two-state solution somewhere in an always-receding future.

From this and other commentators, and Biden's remark to CNN that Netanyahu's cabinet is “one of the most extreme” he's seen, it's emerging that Israel's conduct and internal state is becoming an irritant to the efficient operation of the U.S. empire.

To be clear, Israel remains a powerful asset, not a liability, to Washington's project of controlling the Middle East and its strategic assets through a system of regional alliances, as the hegemon itself continues to “pivot” towards the U.S. rivalry with China. We are still a long way from a genuine crisis in the U.S.-Israeli partnership, but the run amok character of the Netanyahu coalition, dependent as it is on extreme Jewish-supremacist nationalism, the settler movement and

continued on the inside back cover

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THIS SCOREBOARD COSTS U-M MORE THAN PAYING ALL GRAD WORKERS A LIVING WAGE.



The cost of the new scoreboard at the Big House? Forty-one million dollars. Estimated cost of paying graduate workers a living wage? Thirty-three million.

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Cover: Teamsters working at UPS practiced picketing in preparation for a possible August 1 strike. Now UAW members are practicing for a possible strike on September 15. <https://jimwestphoto.com>
Back Cover: U.S. Supreme Court. [Scotusblog](https://scotusblog.com)

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Falsely Claiming the United States Is a “Color Blind” Society Supreme Court vs. Affirmative Action

By Malik Miah

“WITH-LET-THEM-eat-cake obliviousness, today, the majority pulls the ripcord and announces ‘colorblindness for all’ by legal fiat. But deeming race irrelevant in law does not make it so in life.”

So wrote Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson in her dissenting opinion in *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina*, one of two cases decided June 29 that centered on affirmative action. Brown is the first African American woman on the court.

The hard conservative super majority on the Supreme Court, 6-3, falsely ruled that the United States is and has always been a “color blind” country. Race does not matter according to SCOTUS. While expected, the decision is a major blow to Black freedom and undermines equality for all.

Roberts’ Twisted Interpretation

Chief Justice John Roberts said the Founders (all white men) rejected race as a foundation of the newly independent country.

Of course, that was false. Like the British colonizers, they did not recognize nonwhites as citizens. Indigenous people were “savages” and slaves were property and less than human.

The ideology of white superiority is inherent in the Constitution and the three branches of government. One example is how Southern slaveholders received special political and economic influence in the Constitution because they were given extra representation for owning slaves.

Roberts and the majority know this history. Their decision was not based on new information or analysis of the Constitution. It was a political decision.

However, the majority needs cover. It had to seek Constitutional justification. Roberts referenced the 14th Amendment’s “equal protection” clause. (Clarence Thomas in a 58-page concurring brief gave a hard right “I am Black man from the South” rejection of affirmative action and civil rights advances.)

In the 14th Amendment there are three key clauses: The Citizenship Clause granted freed slaves full citizenship. The Due Process Clause granted fairness to former slaves and all citizens; and the Equal Protection Clause

Malik Miah is an advisory editor and regular columnist for Against the Current.



<https://jimwesphoto.com/>

extended the protection which whites had enjoyed but Black people did not. The latter was especially important in former slave states.

The reality of race was the underlying basis of the Reconstruction Amendments. The 13th, 14th and 15th amendments seek to overcome race, racism and subjugation of Black people. All were written by abolitionists in Congress.

Those three amendments codified the defeat of the slaveholders and signified a Second American Revolution. The original Constitution was a negative for Black people.

The Supreme Court majority argument is made up. There is no mention of building a “color blind” society in the founding documents. The bedrock of the capitalist system has always been institutionalized racial discrimination.

Dueling Black Justices

There was an extraordinary exchange between the two Black Justices — Clarence Thomas, the second Black Justice to serve, and Ketanji Brown, the first Black woman.

In sharp rebuttals, according to the June 29 *New York Times*, *Bloomberg* and other media sites:

“Justices Clarence Thomas and Ketanji Brown Jackson harshly criticized each other’s perspec-

tives, reflecting the deep divisions and passions Americans have over race and affirmative action. Even as they appeared to agree over the policy’s aim — remedying the longstanding discrimination and segregation of African Americans — they drew opposite conclusions on how and what to do.

“Both Thomas, now the longest serving Justice and Jackson, its newest member, were raised by Black families in the Jim Crow segregated South. Thomas attended Yale and Brown went to Harvard. Both were qualified but the policy of affirmative action got them admitted.

“In his concurring majority opinion, Justice Thomas called out Justice Jackson by name in a lengthy seven-page critique, singling out her views on race and leveling broader criticisms of liberal support for affirmative action.”

“As she sees things,” Thomas wrote, “we are all inexorably trapped in a fundamentally racist society, with the original sin of slavery and the historical subjugation of Black Americans still determining our lives today.”

In her dissent, Justice Jackson pointedly denounced his remarks as a “prolonged attack” that responded “to a dissent I did not write in order to assail an admissions program that is not the one U.N.C. [University of North Carolina] has crafted.”

In his lengthy opinion Thomas repeated a recurring theme in his writings and speeches over the years: his anger at Black people being portrayed as victims. (Some African Americans refer to this as Thomas’s own self-loathing.)

Justice Jackson pushed back sharply accusing Thomas of imagining her viewpoint and misunderstanding the underpinnings of her support for the policy of affirmative action.

“Gulf-sized race-based gaps exist with respect to the health, wealth and well-being of American citizens” but although those disparities emerged years ago, Brown added, “ignoring that history would be foolish because those inequities have “indisputably been passed down to the present day through the generations.”

“Despite these barriers,” she added, “Black people persisted.”

The Historical Lesson

Of course, the rollback of affirmative action programs at colleges began years ago. California passed a Proposition 1996, the first

state to do so. It made it illegal to use race- and gender-conscious hiring and admissions in public institutions. The first year after it was adopted, Black and Latino enrollment in the top universities like UCLA and UC Berkeley dropped by 40 percent and never recovered.

While the Court's ruling is narrowly aimed at college admissions, many employers are reviewing their "diversity" programs. The reality, however, is that the changing demographics here and abroad require a more educated and diverse workplace including in top management positions to compete in the global market.

The main historical lesson for supporters of equality of opportunities and results means going back to the streets. It took a revolution, the Civil War, to make former slaves citizens and weaken white supremacy.

It took another 100 years of uprisings and resistance to bring the fundamental change that put an end to Jim Crow. And part of that Civil Rights agenda was affirmative action. In 1965 President Johnson signed the Executive Order that implemented it.

But the far right, led by Ronald Reagan, opposed those changes. He called affirmative action "reverse discrimination" against whites.

The NAACP, founded in 1909, responded after the *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina* decision. NAACP President and CEO Derrick Johnson wrote in a statement:

"Today the Supreme Court has bowed to the personally held beliefs of an extremist minority. We will not allow hate-inspired people in power to turn back the clock and undermine our hard-won victories. The tricks of America's dark

past will not be tolerated. Let me be clear — affirmative action exists because we cannot rely on colleges, universities, and employers to enact admissions and hiring practices that embrace diversity, equity and inclusion. Race plays an undeniable role in shaping the identities and quality of life for Black Americans. In a society still scarred by the wounds of racial disparities, the Supreme Court has displayed a willful ignorance of our reality. The NAACP will not be deterred nor silenced in our fight to hold leaders and institutions accountable for their role in embracing diversity no matter what."

The challenge is to follow in the footsteps of previous generations — starting with the slave revolts and continuing through the mass Civil Rights struggles of the 20th century and today's Black Lives Matter movement. The battle must be engaged, and it will. ■

Supreme Court Denies Black Voting in Mississippi by Malik Miah

SO MUCH FOR the "color blind" society proclaimed by the United States Supreme Court in ruling June 30 to outlaw university affirmative action policies. That same day, but under the news media and public radar, the unelected body with lifetime appointment, made its full objective crystal clear.

The Court upheld a century old Mississippi law that was explicitly written and adopted to deny Black people in the state the right to vote in the state.

The Court rejected even hearing (you need four Justices to say yes) a challenge to a constitutional amendment adopted by Mississippi that opened the racist Jim Crow era.

The Justices left in place a state constitutional provision barring certain felons (mainly Blacks) from voting. The state argued that the provision, enacted 130 years ago, is no longer tainted by the racist intentions of its original authors because it has subsequently been updated on two occasions. Yet it is still in the state Constitution.

"We came here to exclude the Negro," said the president of the Mississippi constitutional convention. And they did.

Justice Jackson Exposes Hypocrisy

The Court's decision not to hear the case, brought by those seeking to officially overturn that clause, prompted a sharp dissenting opinion from the first Black woman Justice, Ketanji Brown Jackson, joined by fellow liberal Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the first Latina on the Court.

Jackson contrasted the decision with the conservatives' ban of affirmative action that said race could no longer be a factor in college admissions.

If the court viewed affirmative action as race discrimination, she said, then the Mississippi measure must be seen similarly.

"So, at the same time that the Court undertakes to slay other giants, Mississippians

can only hope they will not have to wait another century for another judicial knight-errant," she wrote. "Constitutional wrongs do not right themselves."

1890 Opens Jim Crow ERA

The measure was first enacted in 1890 at a time when whites in the Deep South were fighting back against post-Civil War efforts to ensure formerly enslaved Black people had equal rights.

The crimes listed then included bribery, theft, carjacking, bigamy and timber larceny. They have remained largely the same since then. Mississippi voters amended it to remove burglary in 1950, and added murder and rape in 1968.

The specific aim of the amendment to the state Constitution was to disproportionately prevent Black people from voting, by removing voting rights from felons convicted of what were thought to be "Black crimes" and declining to do the same for "white crimes."

It worked in convicting innocent Black people. It led to keeping people freed from slavery as second class to whites — enabling the total segregation of Black people in the southern states.

So-called "separate but equal" laws were passed. Black people lived separately, including determining where they could get medical care and education. The state's resources went disproportionately to whites. as is still the case in Mississippi — and most states.

Voting Rights Rarely Regained

Today, those convicted of any of 23 specific felonies in Mississippi permanently lose the right to vote. It continues to have a staggering effect — 16% of the Black voting-age population remains blocked from casting a ballot, as well as 10% of the overall voting age population, according to an estimate by The Sentencing Project, a criminal justice

nonprofit.

The state is about 38% Black, but Black people make up more than half of Mississippi's disenfranchised population.

Once a person loses their right to vote in the state, it is essentially impossible to get it back. To do so, a disenfranchised person must get the legislature to approve an individualized bill on their behalf by a supermajority in both chambers, then have the governor approve the bill.

There are no online instructions or applications, and lawmakers can reject or deny an application for any reason.

It is rare that anyone successfully makes it through the process. Between 1997 and 2022, an average of seven people successfully made it through the process each year, according to Blake Feldman, a criminal justice researcher in Mississippi.

Both a federal district judge and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit upheld Mississippi's policy. The modifications to the policy in 1950 and 1968, the Fifth Circuit court claimed, got rid of any discrimination in the original policy.

In 1974 the Supreme Court upheld that states could bar voting rights to those convicted of felonies. Since no Justice wrote a reason for not hearing the Mississippi appeal, it is assumed they saw it fitting alongside its earlier stance.

Justices Jackson and Sotomayor were the only two justices who declared their dissent from the denial. Jackson's opinion stated that the Fifth Circuit had committed "two egregious analytical errors that ought to be corrected."

Once again, the court's six far-right majority refusal to take the Mississippi case shows that their decision was political, not based on the Constitution — the basic democratic rights of Black people be damned. ■



Salvador Allende articulated the hopes of Chileans for social transformation and justice.

Chile 1973 — The Original 9/11

By Oscar Mendoza

AS THE DATE nears when we'll be marking half a century since the overthrow of the Salvador Allende government in Chile on September 11th, I'm taken back to that gray drizzly day when the future we had dreamt of disappeared in a wave of violence, death and repression. Fifty years on from the coup, does Allende's dream live on?

For me, the carefree days of youth came to an abrupt halt just over two weeks later to be followed by detention, torture and imprisonment, which ended only with expulsion and exile to Scotland in May 1975.

Allende's narrow victory in the presidential election of 4 September 1970, at the head of a multi-party center-left coalition, placed the undisputed leader of Chile's progressive forces in charge of the executive branch on the basis of a radical program of structural change.

His "Chilean way to socialism," which put the emphasis on democratic, pluralist and institutional means to achieve the profound economic and social transformations working people demanded, gave rise to the expression of a peaceful revolution that tasted of "empanadas and red wine." Chile would not be a new Cuba; it wouldn't follow any blueprint but rather make its own, based on our country's history and republican traditions.

As the first-ever Marxist democratically elected president, Allende's election created significant interest worldwide and became a

beacon of hope for progressive forces everywhere. His own long political career, which included stints as a government minister and member of both the lower and upper houses of Congress, brought about early support from European social democrats and many others.

The hope that Chile could deliver fundamental changes via the ballot box whilst charting its own path was also warmly received by the non-aligned movement in the midst of a rampant Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The joyful feelings that Allende's triumph unleashed among working people, urban and rural trade unions, artists and intellectuals, and the young contrasted greatly with the universally hostile reaction from industrialists, landowners, professional and trade associations.

The latter had expected former right wing President Jorge Alessandri to win on 4 September 1970, and their initial surprise and dismay soon gave way to outright antagonism and fierce opposition.

On the other hand, the US administration under Richard Nixon, with Henry Kissinger in the State Department, was conspiring with Chileans opposed to Allende even before he took up his post.¹

Before Allende's confirmation by Congress, a requisite step because he hadn't achieved an absolute majority of the popular vote, a botched kidnap attempt by an extreme right squad financed by the CIA resulted in the killing of the head of the army, General Rene Schneider.

Widely seen as a supporter of the constitution, Schneider embraced the concept of

the military staying out of politics, and was seen by Allende opponents as a major obstacle to their plans to prevent him from taking over from outgoing president Eduardo Frei. As he lay mortally wounded in the military hospital, Congress confirmed Allende by a large majority.

Early Success

Those Chileans enthused by the incoming Popular Unity administration put their faith in Allende's hands and in the first 40 measures set out in his program of government. The perception of widespread international solidarity for the construction of the new Chile also contributed to a strong feeling of energy and optimism.

As an initially conservative, religious, privately educated middle class teen, I experienced a damascene sort of conversion during 1971 when purely by chance I met and befriended one of Allende's private secretary's sons. At the same time, having enrolled at university in Santiago that March, I went to live with my older married sister whose husband was a committed member of Allende's socialist party and active at a high level of the party's internal structure.

Both those events in my life triggered my move towards the political left and what would become my lifelong *Allendismo*. Having enjoyed the privilege of spending social time, mostly on weekends at the El Canaveral home of my friend's mother, with Allende and his closest circle, I developed a deep affection for the man as well as a growing admiration and respect for the political leader.

I cherish those memories, which are both

Oscar Mendoza is a social scientist, specialist in international development and cooperation, former political prisoner between September 1973 and May 1975, based in Scotland since May 1975 (initially as a refugee until 1987).

reminders of days of great happiness and hope, and of deep sorrow and loss.

Of those measures with the greatest impact, both on supporters and detractors of Allende's government, it's worth highlighting the extension and acceleration of the agrarian reform program, initiated under Frei, which addressed the inefficient and non-productive *latifundia* system; the wholesale nationalization of U.S.-owned large-scale copper mines, the largest source of export income for the country; the expropriation and incorporation into the state-managed sector of unproductive factories across various areas of economic activity, with strong workers' participation; and the free distribution of a liter of milk (in the form of powder milk) to over three million children under 15 and lactating mothers, which made a significant impact on malnutrition levels and acted as a role model for others in the region.

Destabilization

The copper nationalization, which was approved unanimously by Congress in July 1971, became a major area of conflict with the U.S. administration and led to it orchestrating an economic siege of the Chilean economy. As Nixon put it, "I want the Chilean economy to squeal."

Deprived not only of U.S. aid but also of international loans and credits through U.S. pressure on multinational bodies, what could be deemed as a successful first year for Allende, fuelled by an expansionary fiscal policy that produced high levels of growth and employment, turned into a developing and growing economic, social and political crisis by the start of 1972.

A hitherto phenomenon only known to the poor, the inability to purchase basic goods, became a daily life challenge for most of the country as wholesale distributors and retail outlets started hoarding and limiting access to them, provoking long queues and rationing and widespread social discontent. Black market speculation, and profiteering, made things even worse.

As 1972 progressed, Chile turned increasingly polarized and U.S. foreign interference funded a wide range of opposition parties and groups. This led to an absolute absence of dialogue and the level of disruption caused by demonstrations and counterdemonstrations prevented ordinary people from carrying on with their daily lives on a regular basis.

The first worrying sign of the instability in the country was a national strike by road transport owners during October 1972, which paralyzed the country and made already scarce goods disappear from the stores. Allende's firm hand against this seditious movement, detaining the strike leaders, made matters worse and retail, industry, professional and opposition student associations joined the strike, bringing Chile to a

virtual halt.

At the same time, extreme right groups carried out terrorist attacks on national infrastructure. The end of the strikes was only secured on November 5th, when Allende appointed senior members of the armed forces to his cabinet, including the head of the army, General Carlos Prats, as interior minister.

Escalating Crisis

Things calmed down for a while and the summer recess was then focused on the upcoming parliamentary elections due in March 1973. The now united opposition of Frei's Christian democrats and right wing parties formed an electoral pact (CODE or Confederation for Democracy), in the hope of securing a two-thirds majority in Congress in order to impeach and depose Allende, and call for fresh presidential elections.

Confounding all expectations, Allende's Popular Unity coalition increased its share of the vote from 36% in 1970 to almost 44%, cancelling the idea that the president could be impeached and deposed by legal means whilst significantly strengthening the socialist and communist representation in Congress.

Armed forces members left the cabinet at this point. The reaction from the opposition and the U.S. administration was shock and bewilderment at first, unable to understand how in the midst of the serious economic and political crisis the government forces had increased their support.

Soon after, though, the determination to depose Allende centered on plans for a *coup d'état*. The dress rehearsal came three months later with the tank regiment putsch of 29 June, in what would be called the "Tancazo." Decisive leadership by Allende and the top brass loyal to the constitution and the law brought the insurrection to an end rapidly and with few casualties.

The signs were clear, however, and opposition politicians continued to openly call for a coup. The atmosphere of tension within government circles and in the Popular Unity parties, trade unions and other progressive forces was palpable and became more acute as the opposition majority in Congress pursued its campaign to declare Allende's government as unconstitutional.

At the same time, pro-coup army generals used their wives to demonstrate against general Prats, whom they saw as the major obstacle to a coup, and forced his resignation as head of the army at the end of August. Allende appointed general Pinochet, viewed as a loyalist, to replace Prats and the rest is history.

Coup. Martial Law, Mass Murder

As Allende prepared to deliver a speech calling for a referendum to overcome the political crisis in a democratic manner, in which he would have expressed his willingness to

step down if defeated at the ballot box, the military struck on the date chosen for the presidential announcement, September 11th 1973.

Although the coup was no surprise, the sheer brutality of the military overthrow of Allende's democratic government was hard to comprehend at first. The Moneda palace was burnt out after the air force bombardment. Allende was dead, and dozens of his close advisers, ministers, political leaders and his personal guard (the GAP), who had remained by his side, would be detained, many brutally tortured and murdered in the following days.

Martial law, including an overnight curfew, was imposed and Congress was disbanded. In the following days and months, thousands would be detained whilst others sought asylum in foreign embassies. Freedom of speech, of the press and of association were canceled. All of this went ahead with the tacit complicity of the judiciary, predominantly staffed by anti-Allende judges.

Just over two weeks after the coup, and having learnt that my best friend had been executed, I was detained whilst visiting my family. A long time later, I would discover that the order for my detention had been given by General Sergio Arellano Stark during his short stop in Curicó as part of the "caravan of death."²

Following secret military detention, I was eventually taken to the national football stadium which acted as the largest detention center in the country, where I spent a month before being transferred to the Penitentiary of Santiago. Much later and having endured a military "war tribunal," I was exiled and arrived in Scotland as a political refugee in May 1975.

Commemoration and the Future

As we near the day of the 50th anniversary, I believe that we should ask ourselves two questions: first, *what are we commemorating?* And, second, *does Allende's dream of a fairer and better Chile live on today?*

For me, the commemorations must center first and foremost on the figure of Allende and the achievements of the Popular Unity government. Internationally, and in keeping with the strong support his government enjoyed at the time, the figure of the

AMONG THE MANY analyses of the 1973 Chilean coup and workers' attempts to prevent and resist it, an important contemporaneous account is *Chile: The gorillas are amongst us*, by Helios Prieto (Pluto Press, 1974).

On the brutal economic policies in the aftermath, see for example *Victims of the Chilean Miracle: Workers and Neoliberalism in the Pinochet Era, 1973–2002*, Peter Winn, editor, Duke University Press, 2004.

martyred president is held in high esteem and his name adorns a large number of squares, avenues, streets and public buildings across all continents.

In an era when political leaders can be reviled and popular trust in politics is at an all-time low, it's fitting that a man whose political career was an example of democratic and personal integrity, and who was faithful to his promise to fulfill the program of government he was elected on, should be remembered.

For working people in Chile, including those past working age who cannot afford to retire on the meager pensions, and all those struggling to achieve gender equality, a clean and sustainable environment, indigenous peoples' rights, and other progressive causes, Allende offers a role model of consistency, hard work and perseverance in pursuit of a better future. *Allende vive!*

If we consider only the nationalization of large-scale copper mining in July 1971, the Popular Unity government's legacy to Chile has been immeasurable. The huge revenues derived since to the Chilean state have enabled the country to make significant strides towards development, a development that is only hampered by the neoliberal economic arrangements imposed by the Pinochet dictatorship with fire and blood, which Chileans have struggled to overcome ever since.

Furthermore, the success of the state copper corporation CODELCO offers a blueprint for the exploitation and management of Chile's large deposits of lithium, essential to the modern global economy, and for the anticipated large revenues to fuel further development.

The egalitarian ethos underpinning the Popular Unity government and its programmatic focus on the poorest and most vulnerable are very much needed today, when an acutely unequal and segregated Chile is riven by social conflict.

Naturally, and I think most importantly for those of us who were deeply affected by the brutal repression that the dictatorship unleashed on our country, the 50th anniversary offers a unique opportunity to remember the thousands of Chileans who endured detention and torture, often followed by exile, and for those killed and disappeared by the military. To the fallen, honor and glory!

It's also a chance to salute the courage, integrity and resilience of the relatives and friends who for five decades have campaigned to discover the truth and to achieve a measure of justice. Their sacrifices and tenacity are an example to us all. Standing shoulder to shoulder with them we affirm: nothing and nobody is forgotten!

Celebrate International Solidarity

Especially for those of us who were exiled, this date gives us the opportunity to celebrate international solidarity and to

express our thanks and appreciation to peoples across the world who welcomed us and offered us their friendship.

In many cases, their generosity of spirit helped us to heal our broken lives and build happy and fulfilled futures in their midst. To them, we express our eternal gratitude.

Those countless examples of solidarity with Chilean refugees in particular, and with the struggle to restore democracy to our homeland more generally, gain special relevance today when large numbers of people from a range of countries and regions flee wars, persecution and oppression. Asylum is a right and we all have a duty to extend them the hand of friendship in their hour of need. Our common humanity demands it.

And, perhaps more importantly, because a growing chorus of prominent extreme right political figures in Chile are openly justifying the military coup, it's essential to recall and relay the facts.

While deniers, for example, try to separate the human rights abuses and crimes against humanity perpetrated by the dictatorship from the actual overthrow of Allende's government, arguing that the latter was "necessary" and "welcomed" in the face of the critical situation in 1973, it's our duty to state clearly and unequivocally that the coup itself and the following horror were one and the same. And nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies the military's actions.

As current president Gabriel Boric puts it, the political challenges and conflicts can only be resolved with more democracy, not less. Stability and social progress demand dialogue and compromise, in order to serve the best interests of the country.

Allende's example for the generations that have followed serves as an inspiration for current efforts by the progressive Boric government in Chile: in relation to the central role of the state in the management of the vast lithium deposits and the recently approved

royalty tax for large scale mining; in respect of proposals for wider tax reform to fund significant improvements to pensions, health and education; in international cooperation both within Latin America and more widely, as exemplified by the wide-ranging trade agreement reached with the European Union at the end of 2022; also in environmental, human rights, scientific cooperation, arts and culture; in major infrastructure and housing.

Like Allende then, Boric faces relentless opposition by economic interests foreign and domestic, and the rightwing parties that emerged as the support base for the dictatorship and act as apologists for the coup. Nevertheless, we can conclude with confidence by affirming that fifty years on Allende's dream — a future where others would follow his example of dignity and faithful service to the people and build a more just and fair society — lives on.

In his final speech, broadcast by radio Magallanes shortly before the bombing of the presidential palace started, Allende told us that the quiet metal of his voice might be extinguished but that we would feel his presence always.

Given the huge number of commemorative events, many of them focused on the figure of Allende, ranging from films, plays, exhibitions, seminars and discussion fora, art works, concerts, rallies, processions and so on, both in Chile and across the world, we can be left in no doubt that Allende lives on as do his dreams for a better Chile.

Like him, let's all progressives have faith in Chile and its people. We shall overcome/*Venceremos!*

Notes

1. The best and most comprehensive account of U.S. intervention in the overthrow of Allende can be found in Peter Kornbluth's *The Pinochet File*, published by The New Press in 2003.
2. See "Sergio Arellano Stark, driver of the 'Caravan of Death' under Pinochet, dies at 94," *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2016.

Breakthrough in Guatemala

ON AUGUST 20, ANTI-CORRUPTION candidates Bernardo Arévalo and his running mate Karin Herrera, of the Semilla Movement, won with 59% of the vote in the runoff election, decisively defeating the National Hope Party. They won in 17 out of Guatemala's 22 departments. As the country's Convergence for Human Rights wrote, this occurred "in spite of an electoral climate marked by disinformation, criminal prosecution of members of the Semilla Movement, threats and intimidation of Supreme Electoral Tribunal judges, and attacks on various voting centers."

Indeed, several leading candidates and judges investigating corruption fled into exile before the first round of the election, held in June. The ruling elite has not given up and Rafael Curuchiche, head of the Special Prosecutor's Office, announced that the Public Ministry would continue the investigation against Semilla, the upstart party accused of falsifying information when it recently registered as a political party.

Semilla, is outnumbered in the Guatemalan Congress and will face difficulty as the Arévalo administration attempts to eradicate corruption and tackle long-neglected and urgent needs.

Arévalo is a sociologist whose father ushered in the first democratically-elected government in 1944 and ushered in what has become known as the Guatemalan Spring. This was then cut short by the CIA's assisted coup of 1954. Will this potential spring end with yet another rightwing takeover? ■

A Balance Sheet: The UPS Contract in Context

By Barry Eidlin

AT NOON ON July 25, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) issued a press release announcing that the union had reached a tentative agreement with package giant United Parcel Service (UPS).

The contract, covering 340,000 workers in every ZIP code in the United States, is the largest private sector union contract in North America, involving a company that handles 25 million parcels a day — equivalent to one quarter of all U.S. parcel volume and 6% of GDP.

One thing is clear: thanks to members' organizing, this is far and away the best contract ever negotiated at the company. The problems UPS workers will have to solve now are good problems to have.

Since kicking off the contract campaign in August 2022, Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien — who won election to the union's top leadership position in 2021 as part of a union reform coalition that promised more of a fighting stance against UPS — stated that if a deal was not ratified by July 31, 2023, Teamsters would strike on August 1.

UPS Teamsters organized "practice picket lines" at UPS facilities across the country, reaching small towns like Presque Isle, Maine and Minot, North Dakota. It sent a message to UPS management that Teamsters were "Ready To Strike If We Have To," as T-shirts and hoodies popular at the practice pickets read.

Talks had broken off July 5, with UPS saying it had "nothing more to give." The strike threat convinced UPS management that it did have more to give after all. On July 19, UPS and the IBT jointly announced that talks would resume on July 25. The press release announcing the tentative agreement came out just hours after talks resumed.

After a "two-person" committee meeting made up of representatives of all 176 IBT locals with UPS members nearly unanimously endorsed the agreement on July 31, members started voting on whether to ratify the agree-

These two articles — by Barry Eidlin and Kim Moody — evaluate the decision of the IBT General President O'Brien to accept the UPS offer. They summarize the importance of the campaign for a good contract and the willingness to strike if necessary. Both see the year-long campaign key to winning a number of the union's demands. Could they have gone out on strike and ended two-tier wages? Or at least narrowed the gap?

The agreement was passed so part-timers — who represent the majority of the UPS work force — got a raise, but continue to be stuck in a lower tier, as they have been for more than 40 years.

Having formed an alliance with the top leadership, how far can a rank-and-file caucus push its program for transparency and equality in one contract cycle? What was the balance of forces that could have resulted in a breakthrough had UPS workers gone on strike at this moment? What impact could it have had on other struggles? — The Editors

ment using an online voting system. Balloting closed on August 22 and the contract was approved by a wide margin.

The IBT had touted the tentative agreement as "historic," with O'Brien saying that "this contract sets a new standard in the labor movement and raises the bar for all workers." These are not empty claims. The agreement contains significant improvements for UPS workers, thanks in large part to the pressure that Teamsters created over a year-long contract campaign.

The agreement eliminates the two-tier driver classification that had sparked widespread member anger in the 2018 contract. It provides sizable wage increases, especially for the lowest-paid part-timers, which will do more to raise the wage floor at UPS than any previous contract. It also requires UPS to create more full-time jobs, provide protections against excessive heat, restrict management surveillance, and limit forced overtime, among other gains.

UPS Teamsters recognize these important wins. Still, some are left feeling that they could have won more. Ironically, this reticence stems from what won the union such a strong contract: heightened expectations due to member organizing.

Was this the best UPS contract the Team-

sters could have won? And will this contract lead to new energy on the part of rank-and-file UPS workers and workers throughout the logistics industry? To answer those questions, we first have to examine what was achieved by the new agreement.

What's in the Contract?

The signature Teamster demand going into negotiations was abolishing the hated second-tier driver classification, known as "22.4 drivers" after the article in the 2018 contract that created the tier. These 22.4 drivers did the same work as "Regular Package Car Drivers" (RPCDs), but were paid on average \$6 an hour less and had no right to limit overtime work.

Not only do tiers create lower-paid categories of workers, but they have a corrosive effect on union solidarity, creating divisions between different tiers of workers.

The agreement immediately abolishes the 22.4 classification. All 22.4 drivers will be reclassified as RPCDs and placed in the same wage progression as RPCDs.

For these roughly 25,000 UPS Teamsters, that will mean a \$6 hourly pay bump once they complete their four-year progression, on top of the general wage increases (GWI) negotiated in the new agreement. For a 22.4 driver at the current top rate of \$35.94 per hour, that amounts to an immediate wage increase of more than 23%, with a 36% increase over the life of the agreement.

Beyond the 22.4 issue, the union also won substantial wage increases for all job classifications. The wage-increase schedule is confusing, but the IBT put out a helpful chart that includes several different scenarios for different types of UPS workers. It shows that an RPCD who has reached the top rate (i.e. gone through the four-year wage progression) sees a wage bump from \$41.50 to \$49 per hour, an 18% wage increase over five years.

But in keeping with closing the gap between full-time and part-time Teamsters, the highest wage increases are reserved for those at the bottom of the wage scale. The tentative agreement creates a wage floor of \$21 per hour, \$5.50 above the current wage floor of \$15.50.

Taking the scenario for a part-time worker who has been at UPS for one year, their pay goes from \$16.65 per hour to \$25.75 per

Barry Eidlin is an associate professor of sociology at McGill University. His book, Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada was published by Cambridge University Press (2018). As a graduate student he was a head steward in UAW Local 2865 at UC Berkeley. A version of this article appeared in Jacobin.

hour—a 55% wage increase. The percentage increase drops as seniority increases: 47% for those between five and ten years, 41% for those between 10 and 15 years, and 33% for those with more than 15 years seniority, who would top out at \$35.89 per hour at the contract's end.

No UPS contract has ever included raises this large for part-time UPS Teamsters, going back to when the part-time tier was created in 1982. That contract cut part-timers' wages from \$12 to \$8 an hour, breaking the wage parity that had previously existed between part-timers and full-timers.

That rate remained frozen until the 1997 contract, where, after a momentous 15-day strike, part-time UPS Teamsters got a wage increase of 50 cents over five years, from \$8 to \$8.50. The 1997 rate stayed in place until the 2013 contract, which raised it to \$10 for most starting part-timers. The 2018 contract then raised the starting rate to \$15.50.

That is, in the 41 years between 1982 and 2023, UPS part-time wages increased by a nominal total of \$7.50 per hour. The current proposed contract raises starting part-time wages by \$7.50 per hour in five years, with those with five or more years getting raises of \$8 to \$9.

However, there are two important caveats to the wage package. First, the agreement creates a new tier of part-timers who will be hired after the agreement is ratified. They will start at the new \$21 per hour wage floor, but will only top out at \$23 after five years, as opposed to \$25.75 for those who started prior to ratification.

Second, many UPS part-timers work under “market-rate adjustments” (MRAs) that have already raised their wages well above \$15.50 per hour.

The agreement *does* create a new tier. Those hired after the agreement is ratified will not catch up to those hired before by the end of the agreement. Someone hired immediately before the agreement is ratified will be making \$2.75 per hour more than someone hired immediately afterward (\$25.75 as opposed to \$23.00).

But it's a peculiar tier. It will start at a wage rate 34% higher than that of part-timers starting prior to the agreement. So even though they would not catch up with existing part-timers over the course of the contract term, they would still be pulling up the bottom of the UPS wage distribution.

It would be preferable if that new tier was not in the agreement, but even with the tier, this agreement does far more to raise up the bottom than any previous UPS contract. The key thing to watch is what happens to the bottom of the UPS wage distribution over the next few contracts.

Regarding the second point, it is true that MRAs mean that many UPS part-timers are already making above \$15.50 per hour. But



Matt Leichenger

Can the enthusiasm in building for the 2023 contract be channeled into enforcing its provisions?

there are two things to keep in mind.

First, roughly 60,000 UPS part-timers are currently making less than the new proposed \$21 per hour wage floor. Those part-timers will get a significant pay bump above the GWI. Second, even where MRAs are in effect that raise the part-time wage floor above \$21 per hour, the \$7.50 GWI over five years would be on top of whatever MRA wage rate those part-timers currently get.

Louisville Local 89 (home local of General Secretary-Treasurer Fred Zuckerman) pointedly voted against recommending the agreement at the “two-person” meeting held after the tentative agreement was announced. Members did so specifically because they wanted assurances that the GWI raises would be on top of the MRA wage rates. Once they got those assurances, they switched to endorsing the deal.

Beyond wages, there are many other improvements in the agreement. The IBT again has a helpful list detailing more than 60 improvements. Highlights include:

- Requiring UPS to combine 15,000 current part-time jobs into 7,500 full-time jobs
- Implementing new safety and health protections against excessive heat
- Having Martin Luther King Jr Day as a paid holiday
- Limiting forced overtime for drivers
- Limiting driver surveillance and use of technology for discipline
- Improving transfer rights for part-time workers

In sum, the agreement is far and away the best contract ever negotiated at UPS — even compared to the 1997 contract won after a historic strike.

While keeping that first fact in mind, also keep a second fact in mind: but many UPS Teamsters recognize the contract's real gains, they are left with a feeling that it left unfinished business. Although most voted to ratify the agreement, especially in the more militant locals that have been out front throughout the contract campaign, they did so with less

probably with enthusiasm than one might expect given the significant gains.

Why would a contract that on its face is such a massive improvement generate a mixed response? Here we must take a key factor into account: workers' rising expectations.

Why No Strike?

Partly these rising expectations are part of a general trend throughout workplaces in the United States and Canada, which has been behind the “hot labor summer” we are currently experiencing. But a large part of it at UPS is the result of workers' expectations getting ratcheted up over the course of a one-year contract campaign — one where Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) activists played a critical role working alongside IBT leadership both as strategists and “ground troops” in the workplaces.

To his credit, O'Brien didn't just decline to tamp down expectations; he ratcheted them up even further. Indeed, in a move unusual for contract negotiations, he publicized tentative agreements reached on individual contract items as they were reached, rather than saving them up for a big reveal at the very end to make the gains look more impressive. This raised member expectations, while also putting pressure on the company and the union negotiating committee itself.

O'Brien also left plenty of room in the campaign for independent rank-and-file organizing. I have spoken to many UPS Teamsters over the past year who organized their own contract actions at their workplaces, sometimes against the wishes of their local officials. In some cases, their organizing prodded local union leaders into action, forcing them to go along with the contract campaign. TDU coordinated some of this, but some was organic.

But after all the preparation for a strike, O'Brien opted for a negotiated agreement without a strike. That disappointed many among the activist layer of UPS Teamsters.

It also disappointed others within the labor movement and the broader left, who

were gearing up to support what would have been one of the largest strikes in U.S. history with the hopes that such a strike would not only lead to a stronger contract for UPS Teamsters, but potentially serve as a catalyst for new union organizing and worker militancy throughout the country.

Given how much O'Brien did to ratchet up expectations and prepare rank-and-file Teamsters for a strike, why didn't he follow through and call a strike?

There are two reasons. First, even though O'Brien has proven his willingness to strike in the past, he remains attuned to the many risks of going on strike. For O'Brien, a strong settlement reached without a strike was his preferred outcome.

The rank-and-file Teamsters I have spoken to over the past year understood this, and none were expecting a strike, even after negotiations broke down on July 5. They understood that O'Brien was far more interested in displaying a credible strike threat for leverage than in actually leading a strike.

The second point is that, given what was in the tentative agreement, it is not clear what the big issue would have been that O'Brien could have used to motivate a strike.

The main issue going into negotiations was the 22.4 drivers, and that was resolved. Beyond that, among the issues that Teamsters mobilized around in the run-up to the contract negotiations, the agreement made gains on almost every one of them.

To be sure, many of those gains don't go nearly far enough. For example, UPS pledged to equip all new package cars with air-conditioning going forward but will only be installing fans on older package cars. That means it will take several years for the air-conditioning contract provision to become reality for many UPS drivers.

This is a shortcoming, but it is difficult to see that being the galvanizing issue that mobilizes 340,000 Teamsters to go out on strike — especially given that even those who led the campaign for heat protections didn't expect to win much of anything on the issue going into negotiations.

Some argue that the wage floor for part-timers should have been raised to \$25, not \$21 (or \$23 by the end of the agreement). Many Teamsters would likely agree with that in principle.

Indeed, TDU advocated for it, and it was reportedly among the opening union proposals when negotiations kicked off in April. (Bargaining committee members were required to sign nondisclosure agreements before bargaining got underway, making it difficult to confirm which proposals made it to the bargaining table.)

But as is invariably the case in contract negotiations, the opening proposals differ from what ends up in the tentative agreement. In this case, part-time wages in the

agreement will raise existing part-timers' wages to \$25.75 by the end of the five-year contract, while Teamsters who start after the contract is ratified will reach \$23. It may not be what UPS part-timers deserve, but it is a major accomplishment given where part-time wages currently stand and have stood for decades.

The Strike That Might Have Been

Could a strike have won more? It's an open question, one to which some Teamsters think the answer is "yes." But beyond the black and white of what's in the contract language, many UPS Teamsters understand the symbolic power a strike could have had.

When I asked a group of UPS Teamsters in the midst of the contract campaign whether they thought it would make a difference if they got a contract settlement with or without striking, one commented: "Pictures look a lot better than just saying, 'hey, we got a nice document with good letters on it.' ... [B]ecause theoretically, we get a good deal, not everyone would know about it. But we go on strike, it's gonna be on the news 24/7." Another added, "I think [a strike will] create motivation for the other unions."

For now, we have no way of knowing what broader effects a strike would have had. Instead, we have a negotiated agreement at UPS that has real, significant gains, but that has left some rank-and-file Teamster activists feeling that they could have won more.

While a frustrating outcome for some, this mitigated sentiment gives cause for optimism. That's because it signals rising worker expectations, a key factor that must be present if we expect to see any meaningful revival of working-class power in the United States.

As one UPS part-timer told me after voting yes on the agreement:

"I was ready to strike, but on almost every noneconomic issue for part-timers, we made gains. Maybe we could have gotten a bit more on the economics, but I'm not sure it was worth striking over. I think it's important for us to recognize a win, because we don't get them very often."

Also giving cause for optimism is the fact that we are already seeing broader effects of the UPS agreement beyond the Teamsters. It is galvanizing union supporters at Amazon, as they see the concrete difference that having a union can make in their work lives. News of the contract settlement has also led to a sharp uptick in people wanting to work at UPS — including, anecdotally, some of my tenured university professor colleagues, who now realize that they could make more delivering packages for UPS.

The fact is that what matters most is what comes afterwards. Will UPS Teamsters view the contract gains as a result of their own organizing? Will the energy and height-

ened expectations built up over the course of the year-long contract campaign translate into more militant day-to-day organizing, more stringent contract enforcement, more member involvement?

Then, beyond UPS, what will happen in locals where members got active around the contract in opposition to their local leaders? Will members challenge those officials and help build a new layer of reform-oriented local unions, which is critical to deepening the Teamster reform process?

As for TDU, it has gained a tremendous amount of credibility among a much broader array of Teamster activists through its work on the contract. Thousands tuned into TDU-organized webinars, and more participated in TDU-organized activities like parking lot meetings, rallies, and workshops. TDU can rightly take credit for playing a vital role in the union's contract campaign.

That said, even though its staff and budget are bigger than they have ever been, TDU remains a small operation relative to the size of the union in which it operates. It is a movement of thousands in a union of 1.3 million.

It remains a junior partner in a broad leadership coalition, albeit a partner that punches well above its weight. It has helped shift the center of gravity in the union away from a compliant, concessionary approach toward a more militant approach that has put the union back on offense.

The central challenge for TDU going forward is how to expand its reach and broaden its base of leader-organizers. Recognizing the challenges facing TDU and Teamster reform more generally after the UPS contract, overall, these are very good problems to have. They are certainly not problems anybody close to TDU thought they would be facing five years ago, when the last UPS contract was negotiated under previous General President James P. Hoffa.

So even if the 2023 UPS contract may not end up being etched in US labor's collective memory in the way the 1997 UPS strike was, the campaign around the contract has reshaped the organizing terrain for labor in a more positive direction.

In the meantime, the Teamsters leadership shouldn't be afraid of members whose expectations were raised so high that they are not completely satisfied. Those workers shouldn't be satisfied — however good this contract is, UPS Teamsters still aren't getting what they deserve.

That's not Sean O'Brien's fault, it's the fault of UPS and the broader economic system it operates within. In order to keep fighting Big Brown, Teamsters will need to maintain, expand, and deepen that sense of dissatisfaction and use it to organize more widely and deeply among more of their UPS coworkers. ■

The UPS Strike That Wasn't: Why the Rush to Settle?

By Kim Moody

THREE HUNDRED AND forty thousand Teamsters at UPS will not join the “hot summer’s” rising tide of strikes. Despite militant rhetoric from the leaders and the most massive rank-and-file strike preparations ever, the strike at logistics giant UPS that would undo the James Hoffa legacy of surrender to UPS, sound a Joshua-level blast that would bring down the walls of Amazon to unionization, and set new standards for the entire labor movement, was cancelled without further notice.

Although the strike deadline was dropped before a final tentative agreement was actually reached, the official reason for not striking was that the Teamsters had achieved an “historic agreement” with big wage increases and many improvements.

The new agreement was ratified by an 83.3% majority with a 58% turnout. This means that out of the 260,335 eligible to vote, 150,997 voted by electronic ballot: 130,303 voted in favor of the contract and 20,694 against. Despite big wage increases, part-timers will face five more years of *de facto* two-tier status in relation to full timers and newly hired part-timers.

To be sure, the wage increases are big and there are lots of improvements compared to anything seen at UPS for decades. It isn't your old time “sellout.” It is in many ways a significant step beyond the Teamster's Hoffa legacy.

But there are also serious shortcomings

Kim Moody is a founder of Labor Notes and author of several books on labor and politics. He is currently a visiting scholar at the University of Westminster in London, and a member of the University and College Union and the National Union of Journalists. His latest book is Breaking the Impasse: Electoral Politics, Mass Action & the New Socialist Movement in the United States (Haymarket Books). His previous books include On New Terrain: How Capital Is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War, An Injury to All: The Decline of American Unionism, Workers in a Lean World, Unions in the International Economy, and U.S. Labor in Trouble and Transition.



Teamster practice picket made the strike threat real. <https://jimwestphoto.com>

that will affect a growing number of UPS workers. The most important, I believe, is in relation to the part-time workers who compose that majority of the UPS workforce.

The promised “end of part-time poverty” was not achieved for all, and while two-tier pay for drivers were eliminated, the hourly gap between part-timers and full-time workers was not closed, and a two-tier setup was created for part-timers.

What Was Won, and Wasn't

Before we speculate on just why such a major concession was made without a strike, we need to look more closely at what part-timers did get.

First, all current part-timers, even most of those with above average “market rate adjustments,” will see a substantial permanent increase in hourly wages over the previous contract, which is one of the union's major metrics of success.

It will not be the starting rate of \$25 an hour originally talked about, which many saw as a minimum for a real step toward a decent living standard. That never made it to the bargaining table.

As of August 1, everyone gets a \$2.75 general wage increase (GWI) or a bump to at least \$21, whichever is bigger. According to the UPS Teamsters United fact sheets, this

amounts to immediate increases on average over the previous contract, ranging from 26% for those part-timers with less than five years on the job to 16% for those with the highest seniority.

This is far more than the 7% average first year wage increase Bloomberg calculates for all new union contracts negotiated in the first quarter of 2023.

The total general wage increase, including the jump from the previous contract, is \$7.25. But since the wage increase for everyone during the life of the contract itself (as opposed to the pre-contract jump) from August 1, 2023 through August 1, 2027 is actually \$4.75 an hour, the average annual increase over the life of the contract is less impressive. It varies from 5.7% for the 140,000 or so with

less than five years to 3.8% for the highest seniority.

Unless inflation remains at its currently low levels, the real gains during the contract will be minimal and the gap between full-time and part-time workers will remain substantial.

But here is where the problems get worse. Part-timers compose about 60% of the Teamster-represented UPS workforce, or slightly over 200,000 workers. According to a UPS Teamsters United Q&A sheet, “over 62,000 part-timers” with more than five years on the job “based on their original hire date” (Tentative Agreement, p.18) will get “longevity increases.”

This means that the remaining approximately 140,000 or 70% with less than five years fall into the lowest seniority bracket. During the life of the contract itself, they will see their wages rise from at least \$21 to \$25.75 in 2027. On the other hand, new hires who also start at \$21 will reach only \$23 by then. This is below current inflation.

The wage gap between part-timers with less than five years' seniority and new hires will rise, beginning in 2024 to 12% by 2027. No matter what the gains were above the old Hoffa contract, this is a two-tier setup with no end in sight.

Furthermore, the proportion of the lowest paid new hires can only grow. The turnover rate among UPS part-timers is extremely high. The fact that 70% of part-timers have less than five years on the job means that the turnover is massive, and that even if it slows down somewhat due to improvements as this contract advances, the proportion of those in the lowest tier will increase dramatically.

By 2027, a large majority of those who would have received \$25.75 will have left due to turnover or progressed into higher-seniority cohorts, replaced by thousands of “new” part-timers who will be stuck at \$23 an hour at most.

This is a boon to UPS, a bust for part-time workers’ living standards, and a threat to solidarity for the union. It will also be a drag on the negotiation of the next contract in 2028.

A Prosperous Company

It is difficult to see why the Teamsters made such a significant concession when they could have gotten more from a company whose operating revenue has nearly doubled in the last decade to over \$100 billion according to UPS’s SEC 10-K annual reports, and whose operating profits grew with some ups and downs by nearly ten times to over \$13 billion.

Even more telling is that UPS’s compensation and benefits bill, which includes those of management and CEO Carol Tomé’s \$19 million paycheck, increased by only 44% over this period — less than half the growth of revenue.

As a consequence, total compensation and benefit costs have fallen from 61% of operating costs to 48% since 2012 — and you can be sure it was not slumping management or executive remuneration that led the drop.

There is certainly room for improvement in that equation: room to close the gaps between current and future part-timers as well as between full-time and part-time workers; room to create a lot more than 7,500 new full-time jobs; and room to air-condition vans and trucks sooner, to mention a few items.

The contract economics were also on the Teamsters’ side. Each \$5 annual increase for all part-timers, the *New York Times* (July 24, 2023) reported, would cost UPS an extra \$850 million. That is less than one percent of UPS’s 2022 operating income and would raise UPS’s total compensation costs by less than two percent of operating income a year — even less assuming that the company continues to grow.

This would still leave the total compensation bill as a proportion of costs way below earlier levels. There is more than enough to bring new hires up to the current employee level — ending the two-tier setup — with enough left over for general wage increase or other improvements.

A two-week strike, on the other hand, would cost UPS an estimated \$3.2 billion and more in the long run as it would lose customers to FedEx, DHL, etc. So why did the Teamster leadership, after all the tough talk and genuine mass preparation, cancel a strike that could have prevented a two-tier system that will undermine average wages and worker solidarity in this contract and beyond?

The cancellation of the strike has at least two additional implications for the future of organized labor. One is that the hope that a strike and an “historic” agreement would have inspired Amazon workers to follow suit and organize will certainly be diminished. Of course they will continue to organize, but since most of them look more like UPS low-seniority part-time inside workers than the better-paid drivers it is not likely to be inspired by this contract.

The second more immediate missing “demonstration effect” is on the upcoming Big Three auto negotiations, where two-tier is a central issue and the need is strong for a strike to right that wrong. The new leadership of the United Auto Workers (UAW) may well lead a strike this fall, but it won’t be because of the example set by the Teamsters.

Some 85,000 workers at Kaiser Permanente also face a contract expiration in September. Or for that matter the 175,000 Hollywood workers on strike at the time the UPS strike vanished.

Strike Deadlines & Settlements

From the start, Teamster General President Sean O’Brien made clear that he would prefer a settlement without a strike, but insisted that if no agreement was reached and ratified by midnight July 31, 340,000 Teamsters would hit the bricks and “pulverize” UPS. In late June according to the industry publication *FreightWaves* (June 27, 2023) with time running out, he told UPS he wanted a tentative agreement within a week — or else.

The strike deadline was still in effect and the real threat was that there would be no contract extension. This was backed up by a 97% union vote in favor of striking if needed, and an accelerating mass mobilization of members in parking lot rallies, face-to-face meetings, training sessions, webinars, and eventually practice picketing blessed by the leadership but organized primarily by the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) under the umbrella of UPS Teamsters United.

At first the strategy worked, as UPS made concessions on a number of important questions: two-tier was eliminated for drivers, no driver-facing cameras in vehicles, no compulsory work on regular days off (sixth punch),

UPS promised that 7500 new full-time jobs would be created, air conditioning would eventually be installed in new vehicles and fans in old ones now, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was made a paid holiday. As *Labor*

Notes (#533, August 2023), which provides a vivid description of the mobilization, put it, “The wins so far are because UPS can see the strike threat is real.”

At that point, the union stuck to demanding big wage increases. UPS, on the other hand, continued to low-ball on wages and talks broke down on July 5. No new negotiations were scheduled. At that point a strike seemed inevitable. With time running out, how could the union get an agreement ratified before the midnight July 31 deadline?

According to Bloomberg’s *Daily Labor Report* (July 26, 2023) O’Brien got a call from a UPS representative somewhere during the week of July 17 saying they had a new offer. Obviously, the escalating mobilization of Teamster members and the approaching strike deadline had given UPS second thoughts.

The new offer was emailed to the Teamster leader, who said it was enough for new talks. On July 19 the two parties agreed to resume negotiations on Tuesday, July 25. The *New York Times* (July 24 update of a July 22 article), however, reported that on the weekend of July 22-23, before the talks, O’Brien announced the strike deadline would be called off if an agreement was reached.

Since no new deadline or timeline was set, in effect the strike threat was dropped. Yet on the 25th “within hours, a deal was done,” Bloomberg reported. This was the tentative agreement which included new wage increases, but also the two-tier part-time wage set-up.

What happened between July 5 and July 25 that allowed for such unusually rapid talks to agree on the contract’s complex wage structure? One question is why O’Brien and the leadership dropped the strike deadline before actually meeting with UPS.

A “Teamster spokeswoman” told the *New York Times*, “This is how you get a contract. Our pressure and deadline on UPS forced them to move in ways they hadn’t before.”

But why cancel the deadline before actually negotiating a new deal, if the deadline was part of the strategy? There’s no question that the TDU-led massive mobilization of members from August 2022 through the final days was key to moving UPS. That is what made the strike threat real.

Enter Biden and Celeste Drake

Teamster General President O’Brien is considered influential in Democratic Party circles in “deep blue” Massachusetts and has visited the White House a number of times. Perhaps expecting a favor, he publicly asked President Biden not to interfere in the UPS negotiations.

The evidence is clear, however, that the Biden administration took the possibility of a highly disruptive strike seriously and did intervene not simply to observe, but to prevent

a walkout at UPS. This meant that pressure was mainly on the union.

First, we know that Biden is very concerned about the state of the nation's already troubled logistics network due to its role in his aggressive trade and national security policies. Second, he is not averse to interfering in union negotiations to head off a strike or other disruptive action, and both the administration's prior interventions were in key logistics industries: the contentious West Coast longshore situation and, most notoriously, the rail talks.

UPS is a major link in the logistics network and a strike would have been highly disruptive. If Biden didn't think (rightly or wrongly) the strike threat was real in this case, why would he have bothered intervening in the first place? He certainly wasn't going to win labor votes that way in today's more strike-prone atmosphere.

So, quietly behind the scenes the Biden administration sent its agents to do what they could to prevent a strike. The *Washington Post* reported (July 26, 2023):

"Celeste Drake, deputy director for the labor and economy at the White House National Economic Council, served as the administration's point person on the UPS dispute, according to two people familiar with the matter, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe the administration's deliberations. White House aides encouraged both sides to reach a negotiation, the people said."

Celeste Drake was an appropriate choice to lead the intervention. She has a labor background, having worked for the Directors' Guild and before that the AFL-CIO. Her specialization there was trade and globalization policy.

At the White House she is both labor adviser to the National Economic Council, which is concerned with trade, supply chains and inflation, but also director of "Made in America," which promotes domestic manufacturing. Logistics are key factors in all of these.

Furthermore, she is a great believer in labor peace and the shared interests of labor and capital. "One of the benefits that the president sees in unions is that it provides an organized way for workers and employers to talk together and to negotiate in ways that are less disruptive. Employers and unions work together," she told Bloomberg in an August 2022 interview they headlined "New White House Labor Advisor Isn't Looking For a Fight."

In that interview, Drake also noted that "Covid had really exposed weaknesses in our supply chain." So, preventing further "weaknesses" was a reason to prevent a strike. We don't know for sure just how much either side gave up, but it seems likely that the part-time two-tier system was one of the union's contributions to labor peace.

Insofar as UPS conceded on anything, my bet is that it was the unique level of activism among "their" employees that moved the company more than requests from the administration.

As in most such interventions and "mediation" efforts, the union faced the real pressure since it was the potential disrupter. So it also agreed to drop the deadline before the actual negotiations that concretized the tentative agreement. O'Brien still could have gotten an agreement, maybe a better one, without a strike had he not surrendered the strike threat that was central to his strategy.

UPS had a lot to lose from a strike, and plenty of dough with which to make further concessions. Perhaps labor expert Barry Eidlin, who has followed events closely, is right in suggesting that O'Brien as a business unionist never intended to strike. But it is clear the Biden administration was not betting on that.

Big Business had asked Biden to ban a strike as he did in the railroad negotiations. At the same time, Bernie Sanders sent letters, one signed by 30 Senators and another by over 200 members of Congress, to UPS and the Teamsters upholding the union's right to strike and opposing a call for intervention. These were presumably meant for Biden's eyes as well.

Big Business got its way, but by the administration quietly helping to head off a strike rather than legally banning one.

Ratification, Rejection & the Future of Labor

Since the new Teamster leadership took office in 2022, all new agreements can now be rejected by a simple majority. The O'Brien-Zuckerman delegates at the 2021 Teamster convention succeeded in overturning the old two-thirds rule that had allowed Hoffa to impose the 2018 UPS agreement even when a majority voted against it.

While the current vote will be a test, it has to be said that so far this has not been a problem for the new leadership. They have succeeded in getting sizable majority ratifications for a number of important agreements without strikes. These include: the 2022 national Kroger warehouse agreement by 88%; the national carhaul contract in the same year at a less impressive 63%; the ABF freight contract "overwhelmingly" (no exact vote figures provided); and at TForce, the former UPS Freight sold in 2021, by 81%.

In all these cases the "two-person" national meeting of local union representatives that first approves or rejects any tentative agreement endorsed unanimously.

All but one of the 162 of the locals present at this year's UPS contract "two-person" meeting voted to endorse the tentative agreement. Fourteen of the total of 176 locals were absent for reasons that are not clear.

At first those from Local 89, Fred Zuckerman's home local at the giant Worldport UPS center, voted against. However, once they were satisfied that the wording on "market rate adjustments," which gives many of their members above-average wages, would not affect them they too urged a "yes" vote.

So no actual opposition emerged from this meeting of local leaders. While there is visible rank-and-file opposition largely through a new group called Teamsters Mobilize, and opposition or mixed feelings among TDU activists, the agreement was ratified by a majority membership vote on August 22.

This was predictable since TDU did not explicitly call for a "yes" or "no" vote, but stated that the new agreement is "a contract win we can be proud of."

If a strike was a lost opportunity, a post-ratification demobilization would be a tragedy. The high level of member activation that escalated over the past year can become the key to the future of the Teamsters and even of organized labor.

The most obvious immediate need for this is in enforcing the many changes in working conditions in the contract — since we can be sure that UPS management will do their mightiest to undermine and delay.

In any case, the brutal pace of work and management harassment at UPS will not magically disappear.

Furthermore, the active rank-and-file, which in practical terms means above all the thousands of TDU members and supporters who made the mobilization happen, should become a permanent force for change. For one thing, this activist layer needs to keep electing local union reform slates and clearing out the old-Hoffa supporters who still control many locals.

While the remaining old guard may not be acting as an organized conservative opposition, we know that many of them were a drag on the mobilization in their locals. Without this the reform process and a growing degree of militancy will not be concretely advanced. Simply changing the faces at the top is never enough.

In addition, Teamster rank-and-filers should become a regular presence on the picket lines of other unions, starting at the auto companies where 150,000 workers are preparing for a possible strike, at Kaiser Permanente where 85,000 workers face a contract expiration in September as well, and at organizing events at Amazon and elsewhere.

If the TDU-led ranks become a continuing visible force in the fight against capital and for union democracy, they can have an impact on other unions and workers seeking the same goals and help sustain the momentum of the "hot summer" despite the "biggest strike in history" that didn't happen. ■

The Long-Haul Grad Worker Strike: **GEO vs. University of Michigan** By Kathleen Brown

GRADUATE STUDENT WORKERS at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, organized as the Graduate Employees' Organization, AFT Local 3550, have taken on their employer in a months-long campaign struggle. Their six-week strike, the longest in the local's history, began on March 29 and continued through the end of the winter semester.

As part of a recent upsurge in higher ed militancy, graduate student workers contested the University of Michigan's neoliberal educational model that relies on precarious, low-paid instructors while charging exorbitant tuition fees.

Graduate student workers are foundational to a U-M degree: almost all undergraduates will take a course taught by a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) during their studies. Yet like other graduate workers elsewhere, grad labor is severely underpaid.

GSIs were paid \$24,000 a year, far below the cost of living. Low wages have been further eroded by double-digit rent increases and the rising cost of food, spurring grad workers to demand \$38,500 in recent contract negotiations — what economists at MIT identified as a living wage for one person without dependents.

Wider Demands and Ideological Battle

Yet graduate student workers' contract demands went beyond salary to focus on "demands of dignity" that would improve conditions for those beyond the narrowly defined bargaining unit.

GEO members called for better access to gender-affirming care for all Wolverines, expanded emergency funding for graduate students in abusive situations (a chronic and ongoing problem in academia, given the unchecked power an advisor has over their advisee), disability and COVID accommodations, and funding for an emergency, non-police response team as an alternative to armed police.

In our fight for these demands, graduate



Over 1000 Graduate Student Workers and allies rallied on the Diag at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor on the first day of the strike, March 29, 2023.
Geo Communications Committee

workers have taken on one of the nation's most powerful and wealthiest public higher education institutions, and challenged the balance of power on campus. Through this experience, graduate workers have learned key insights into how to contest management's power through a long-haul strike.

Ideologically, Human Resources painted our demand for \$38,500 as an "unrealistic" 60% wage raise, despite sitting on a University endowment of \$17 billion dollars. They insisted that we are "part-time" workers, and thus undeserving of a living wage — despite having the full-time job of teaching, research, and service work.

According to the financial audit by Dr. Howard Bunsis, the low cost of graduate labor and the University's high tuition means that grad instructors create \$200 million in surplus per year. In other words, graduate workers are not a charity case appealing to the Board of Regents with hat in hand, but a fundamental profit maker for the University.

In response to our looming strike vote, the University shifted tack and allocated tens of millions of dollars in additional summer funding for most doctoral students. Practically overnight, thousands of graduate workers' incomes jumped from \$24,000 to \$36,000 per year. This critical victory demonstrated what grads had argued all along: that the University could afford to pay us a living wage.

Yet at the bargaining table, HR refused to codify the new funding, arguing that this summer funding was "academic" in nature, not employment-based. U-M's refusal to put this new funding in a collective bargaining agreement shows that the fundamental conflict is not about money, but power.

In spite of its liberal reputation and governance by a majority of Democrats on the Board of Regents, the University of Michigan intensely opposed graduate workers at every juncture, trying to make an example out of us for the rest of U-M labor.

Administrators countered us with obstruction, legal challenges, withholding pay, retaliation and intimidation, criminalization of picketers, and even falsified grades in an attempt to settle the contract on their terms. Through all of this opposition, graduate workers stood firm: graduate student workers broke Michigan [anti]-labor law and withheld teaching and grading labor for over six weeks. The following is a summation of strategic considerations and key junctures of our 2023 contract campaign.

Long-Haul Strike

From the beginning of the contract campaign, graduate workers knew we had to build enough collective power to strike if we had any hope of winning significant contract gains. Unlike our nine-day strike in 2020,

Kathleen Brown is a PhD student at the University of Michigan and a vice president of GEO.

which developed in response to the COVID health crisis and the summer's uprising for Black Lives, we prepared for a multi-week strike after conversations with recent successful graduate strikers and *Labor Notes* organizers.

Student workers at Columbia University held out with a 10-week strike in 2021-2022, teaching assistants at Temple University struck for five weeks in winter 2023, and wildcat strikers at the University of California-Santa Cruz struck for 16 weeks in 2019. They demonstrated that longer-term strikes were more successful in the higher education setting because of the iterative nature of teaching and research.

A short, time-limited strike would not give us enough leverage to move the University significantly. Indeed, the University can easily wait out a one or two-week strike with little interruption of University operations. In contrast, we learned to think of our disruptive power as cumulative in nature. The strike was not a time-limited moment, but an ongoing disruption that increased our leverage over time.

Grades were a particular point of leverage because they were the "product" the University needed. Without grades, the University would have difficulty matriculating students, fulfilling required course credits, and meeting internal funding deadlines. This was borne out at the end of the semester when University officials increasingly ratcheted up the pressure on faculty submit grades, regardless of how they came up with them.

The Fight for Open Bargaining

Our first campaign fight was over the conditions of bargaining. From November 2022 to January 2023, graduate student workers fought for bargaining so that all union members — and even members of the public — could observe.

Traditionally, labor negotiations are led by a small bargaining team behind closed doors; members rely on the bargaining team to communicate what happens at the table and advise on what members should accept. Open bargaining turned this dynamic on its head: instead of relying on a small bargaining team to represent workers' interests behind closed doors, hundreds of graduate workers could directly hear HR's reasoning for why they didn't deserve a living wage.

The University of Michigan's Human Resources department fought for months to push through ground rules that would have limited the number of observers and restricted Zoom attendance. (Starbucks has taken a similar position, attempting to only have in-person bargaining, as a way to limit transparency and participation.)

When we would not back down, HR imposed a state mediator in an attempt to intimidate us. We responded with a march

on Human Resources representative Katie DeLong, delivering hundreds of letters written by GEO members, and later picketed incoming President Santa Ono's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion event, stating that there could be no DEI without a living wage.

The University's intransigence ultimately failed: over the course of the campaign, over one thousand workers and labor allies attended bargaining in person and on Zoom. Open bargaining created a large layer of workers who were deeply invested in negotiations.

Graduate workers talked to their co-workers about management's latest buffoonery and caucused together to craft counter-proposals, in real time. Hearing management tell us directly how little they knew or cared about graduate workers had a radicalizing effect: at one point lead negotiator Katie DeLong called students at U-M Flint and Dearborn campuses a "different class of student."

As labor organizer Jane McAlevey argued, if we could not control the conditions under which we bargained, how could we expect to win the contract we needed? Thus the fight over bargaining conditions was the first step toward winning a living wage.

While we placed importance on bargaining attendance, we maintained that we did not expect real wins to come from clever arguments at the table but from our ability to build enough power outside. The University hoped that time spent at the bargaining table would grind our proposals down to something they would approve, but members repeatedly voted to preserve our key demands.

Willingness to Break (anti) Labor Law

As months at the bargaining table failed to produce concrete wins, members escalated their actions. This involved classic structure tests that got progressively more workers involved: signing a petition, attending bargaining, participating in rallies and demonstrations, signing an "action readiness pledge," and finally pledging to strike, culminating in a 95% strike authorization vote by GSIs with a super-majority turnout in March 2023.

On March 29 at 10:24 AM, over one thousand graduate workers "walked away from 24k," marching through campus to the administrative building where grad workers pasted our demands to the door.

Since 1947, striking has been illegal for public employees in the state of Michigan under the Public Employees' Relation Act (PERA). In 2020, our nine-day COVID strike was ended by the University's decision to file an injunction against the union. Unsure of our ability to take on a big legal fight, union members voted to return to work.

Thus in 2023, we knew we would need to prepare to be enjoined and that the University would attempt to sue us back into the

classroom. If the judge ruled against us and we still continued to strike, our union could face thousands of dollars in fines and even possible (although unlikely), arrest of union officers.

Prepared for this possibility, GEO members indicated their willingness to break the law. Predictably, U-M filed for a temporary restraining order and a court order to get us back to work.

In April, 400 GEO members marched to the Washtenaw County Courthouse and picketed outside, while others observed prominent lawyers from Butzel Long (the same firm that represented former Michigan Governor Rick Snyder in Flint's poisoned water case) floundering along.

With the University unable to show proof that our strike caused "irreparable harm," Judge Carol Kuhnke denied the injunction. Elated, graduate workers took over the streets and marched back to campus.

When the University failed to end the strike through legal challenges, Human Resources turned to retaliation. They mandated that GSIs must weekly "attest" that they were working in order to be paid.

Those who did not fill out attestation forms lost their April paycheck. Withheld pay proved painful, and some GSIs lost 12% of their annual salary. GEO raised over \$300,000 in our hardship fund, but because our parent union American Federation of Teachers does not have a strike fund, most strikers lost their entire paychecks.

Falsified Grades as Strike-Breaking Tactic

As the end of the semester approached and thousands of assignments went ungraded, highly paid University administrators like Provost Laurie McCauley (salary \$574,000), the College of Literature, Sciences, and Arts Dean Anne Curzan (Salary \$509,000), and LSA Associate Dean Tim McKay (salary \$195,000) increased pressure on faculty to come up with missing grades.

On April 17, Associate Dean McKay instructed faculty on how they should calculate grades without GSI labor, telling faculty to give full credit on all outstanding assignments. In departments where GSIs were sole Instructors of Record, grades were fabricated outright by Department Chairs.

English Chair Gaurav Desai wrote to GSIs: "We have no choice in this matter. None of us are doing this willingly...We do not have any mechanisms for submitting 'real' grades. So any students with outstanding grades will receive an 'A.'"

Comparative Literature Chair Christopher Hill used McKay's instructions to submit grades: "I filed grades today for the seven sections of COMPLIT 122 whose instructors are on strike, and for COMPLIT 241...Overall, I used an approach specified by LSA...I did not evaluate any student work."

In the Germanic Department, Chair Andreas Gailus also admitted to inventing grades: “My plan, at the moment, is to give straight ‘A’s to all students in GSI-taught classes...I should also mention that the Dean’s office has been putting a lot of pressure since the end of the semester.”

In some departments, faculty members who did not (or could not) grade assignments in time were threatened with loss of merit pay and future appointments. Since the end of the semester, hundreds of GSIs have documented how grades were calculated without grading assignments, while others have documented complete grade fabrication.

Pickers in Handcuffs

The University of Michigan used the University’s Department of Safety and Security (DPSS) to increasingly surveil and intimidate picketers as the strike wore on. When graduate workers picketed events that millionaire President Santa J. Ono was to attend, police showed up in force. When picketers chanted outside the President’s Award and a School of Information “Fireside Chat,” President Ono’s chauffeured cars turned around.

On April 20, the same day Human Resources announced withheld pay from striking graduate workers, graduate workers found President Ono eating dinner in downtown Ann Arbor. After the picketing in front of the restaurant, Ono fled out the back door to his tinted-window SUV.

Graduate workers stood in front of his car with their hands out, demanding their lost paychecks, while the chauffeur pushed the car into the picketers. Undeterred, graduate workers stood firm and Ono called the university police, who responded to the off-campus call by handcuffing and detaining two graduate workers.

Only after bystanders began chanting were the two striking graduate workers released. The University filed charges against the graduate workers on April 29. Local Prosecutor Eli Savit, however, refused to pursue charges.

The University’s willingness to detain and file charges against graduate student workers instead of paying a living wage is not isolated to the University of Michigan. At the University of California-San Diego, UC administrators charged 59 graduate student workers with “physical assault,” and “disruption of university activities” when they protested an awards ceremony led by UCSD Chancellor Pradeep Khosla, who refused to implement a negotiated wage increase.

More recently, two UCSD graduate student workers and one post-doc were arrested by UCSD police for chalking pro-union slogans on University sidewalks and buildings. They face felony charges of conspiracy and vandalism. Both the experience

of U-M graduate student workers and those at UCSD show that University administrators see graduate student workers, organized and mobilized, as a direct threat.

The Threat of a Fall Strike

The impact of our six-week strike was not immediately felt, and grad workers continued to bargain over the summer, uncertain of if (or when) we would see substantive movement from management.

Finally, on August 2 the Board of Regents (majority Democrats) extended an “exploding offer” to graduate workers. The conditions of the offer required it to be ratified within 48 hours or withdrawn. Members viewed this as the first “real” offer from management that included several concessions on the part of the University: codifying summer funding to all Ph.D. students in the Rackham Graduate School in a side letter, and increasing salaries of Graduate Student Instructors in Ann Arbor by 20% across the life of the contract.

By 2026, Ph.D. students would be making over \$43,000 on the Ann Arbor campus. As an incentive to not strike, the Regents offered a \$1000 bonus to Fall GSIs.

At the same time, the offer excluded Dearborn PhDs and Ann Arbor Doctor of Musical Arts (DMAs) from the living wage proposal and would reinstate inequitable pay for Dearborn GSIs — reversing a hard-fought victory from 2017.

Nor did the University make much movement on COVID and disability accommodations, childcare subsidies, or gender-affirming health care, despite the low cost to the University.

Uncowed by the threat of the exploding offer, members voted to initiate a “Week of Discussion” to consider our next steps. Throughout dozens of meetings, grad workers collectively expressed that management’s August 2 offer fell short in the above areas, and on August 10 close to 900 GEO members voted overwhelmingly to send a counteroffer to HR.

The Settlement

GEO members were right not to be intimidated. Management responded by passing back their August 2 offer at the next bargaining session, very much unexploded.

This offer constituted the floor for negotiations and even included some new concessions, such as expanded Transitional Funding for all graduate students, not just graduate instructors. This would establish a fund that would permit graduate students to leave abusive supervisors without jeopardizing their funding. Additionally, the offer committed President Santa Ono to make a statement about our proposed non-police emergency response team.

Still, there was no movement on parental leave, Dearborn parity, DMAs, or low

fractions, and the proposed bonus had been rescinded.

When GEO members voted to sidestep the University’s “exploding offer” timeline, management began actively preparing for strike-breaking. GSIs were threatened with losing their paychecks again or being removed completely from their courses.

Instructors of Record courses have been a key target by management as they are a major source of leverage; IoR classes taught by sole instructors are more easily disrupted by a strike. In departments like German and Comparative Literature, Department Chairs attempted to remove Instructors of Record by rearranging course offerings; German canceled all classes normally taught by GSIs. In Psychology, GSI Instructors of Record have been asked to find their own replacement instructors in order to be approved to teach in the fall.

As the start of the semester neared, GEO President Jared Eno requested the University pass back its last best and final offer. On August 20, the University’s final offer included a living wage for Ann Arbor PhDs, expanded Transitional Funding, doubled parental leave, restored Fall 2023 bonuses, and dozens of concessions won throughout the nine-month campaign.

Although the offer did not reflect everything graduate workers wanted, it is a victory for graduate students that validates the strategy of the long-haul strike. On August 22, members overwhelmingly voted to accept the offer and to permit all members, whether teaching or not, to vote on its ratification.

Graduate student workers’ militancy and refusal to back down until we have won have unsettled campus labor and the Michigan labor movement.

Our strategy is a departure from standing management-labor relations, where labor sometimes threatens collective action but never truly gets out of control. These campaigns often defer to friendly relationships with the Regents at the University of Michigan who are Democrats and offer smaller concessions in exchange for labor peace.

In contrast, graduate student workers have engaged in a real contestation of power through our open-ended, long-haul strike. We have focused on building our own power first and foremost, bringing more and more workers into the contract campaign.

From securing open bargaining, defeating a court injunction, withstanding withheld pay, witnessing falsified grades and faculty scabbing, to facing down an exploding offer and the threat of fall termination, graduate student workers have endured challenge after challenge and prevailed. We built real workplace power that privileges a militant fight-back above all else, an approach we hope more of the labor movement takes up. ■

OPPENHEIMER: The Man, the Book, the Movie

By Cliff Conner

OPPENHEIMER

Written and directed by Christopher Nolan,
Universal Pictures, 2023.

American Prometheus:

The Triumph and Tragedy of
J. Robert Oppenheimer

By Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin,
Vintage Books, 2006.

OPPENHEIMER IS A biopic that spans the cultural spectrum from the sacred to the inane, from *Armageddon* to *Barbenheimer*. It is a Picassoesque time warp of dazzling images and sonic booms that some will find brilliant and others disorienting and confusing.

The cast of famous actors playing famous physicists is worth the price of admission, but blink and you will have missed Heisenberg or conflated Bohr, Born, and Bohm. You can't tell the players even with a program; they don't have numbers on their backs. But the transcendent value of the film is as a multilayered morality tale for a politically-polarized world.

The film's director, Christopher Nolan, had an admirable purpose: to confront the most important of all contemporary moral and social issues — the mind-numbing possibility that nuclear weapons could totally annihilate all human life. The public discourse has complacently downplayed this calamitous danger—whistling past the graveyard, so to speak — for the past seventy years or so.

That was facilitated, but not entirely explained, by the all-pervasive governmental secrecy designed to keep the public from interfering with U.S. military plans of global domination.¹

The Little Story within a Much Bigger Story

The film's core narrative is the life story of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the "father of the atomic bomb," as told in an excellent biography, *American Prometheus*.² As individual human lives go, Oppenheimer's was certainly an important and interesting one, and therefore fully worthy of biographical treatment.

His role in the creation of nuclear weap-

Cliff Conner, a historian of science, is the author of A People's History of Science (2005) and The Tragedy of American Science: From the Cold War to the Forever Wars (2022).

ons was essentially an administrative one, but no one was more instrumental in their successful development. Furthermore, as a pioneer of quantum physics in the United States, he must also be recognized as among the foremost American physicists of the 20th century.

But Oppenheimer's significance as a historical actor is miniscule in comparison with the context in which it unfolded. The creation, development, and deployment of the nuclear weapons themselves is the far more consequential story. To fully come to grips with the danger confronting humanity, more attention must be paid to the background of this film than to the foreground.

But First: The Smaller Story

Oppenheimer's personal story fuels the prototypical arguments over the degree of responsibility scientists bear for the consequences of the knowledge they create. To put it bluntly, how much blame does Oppenheimer deserve for unleashing the horrors of the nuclear age? How much personal responsibility does he bear for the massive death and destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

In a meeting with President Truman two months after the Hiroshima bombing, Oppenheimer meekly confessed to the president that he, Oppenheimer, felt he had "blood on his hands." Truman was angered by the implication that killing hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians was to be regretted, and afterwards was heard to grumble, "Blood on his hands, dammit, he hasn't half as much blood on his hands as I have."³

Although Truman believed he deserved praise for ordering the destruction of Hiroshima, he was admitting to one of history's most heinous war crimes. In my opinion, he accurately placed the moral onus where it belonged — on himself and his policymakers rather than on the scientists.

I would, however, also argue that right-wing Manhattan Project physicists like Edward Teller and Ernest O. Lawrence were indeed willingly complicit in the crimes against humanity.

Palpable Fear of a Nazi Nuke

Although Oppenheimer obviously felt remorse in the months and years following the bombing, his complicity in the matter was

also far from innocent.

To understand that requires knowing why he and so many other leading scientists agreed to work on the U.S. atomic bomb project in the first place: They were legitimately terrified by the thought that Nazi Germany's scientists might create such a weapon and use it to win the war and conquer the world. Many also estimated that Hitler's physicists were two years ahead of them in a race to create the bomb.

In fact, there was no race, because the German military command had concluded that neither they nor their enemies could possibly create a nuclear weapon in time to affect the outcome of the war.

Nonetheless, it was the palpable fear of a Nazi nuke that motivated the great majority of the Manhattan Project scientists. But when Germany surrendered in May 1945, many concluded that their efforts were no longer necessary. Japan had not yet surrendered, but the atomic bomb had not been created to use against Japan (which was known not to be working on an atomic weapon of their own).

Most important was the widespread recognition that Japan was at that point already militarily defeated despite not having formally surrendered. When General Dwight D. Eisenhower first learned (at the Potsdam Conference in late July) of the plan to drop atomic bombs on Japan, he told Secretary of War Henry Stimson that "the Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing."⁴

Truman and his Air Force generals, however, were determined to go full speed ahead, and Oppenheimer, despite later misgivings, was fully and enthusiastically at the helm. The first atomic bomb was successfully detonated on July 16 in the Trinity test in New Mexico and the second at Hiroshima on August 6.

After the Trinity test, 250 of the Manhattan Project scientists signed a petition urging Truman not to drop the bomb on Japan without warning, and without first giving them an opportunity to formally surrender.

Oppenheimer refused to sign the petition, and Truman and his military policymakers ignored it. With Oppenheimer's endorsement, it would have been significantly more difficult for them to ignore.

Although at that time Oppenheimer refused to heed the “defeated Japan” argument, in a speech three months after the bombing, he himself declared that the Hiroshima bomb was used “against an essentially defeated enemy,” and added, “it is a weapon for aggressors.”⁵

Most damning of all with regard to Oppenheimer’s culpability, in my opinion, was his close collaboration with the military on targeting the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

Two weeks before that fateful occasion, Oppenheimer sat down with General Thomas Farrell and Lieutenant Colonel John Moynahan, who were charged with supervising the bombing run over Hiroshima. He coached them on exactly where and how to drop the bomb for maximum destructive effect.

“Don’t let them detonate it too high,” Colonel Moynahan quoted Oppenheimer as telling them. “Don’t let it go up [higher] or the target won’t get as much damage.”⁶

Oppenheimer’s Flaws?

During and immediately following the war and his tenure as head of the Manhattan Project research efforts at Los Alamos, New Mexico, Oppenheimer projected a public persona of heroic stature. Meanwhile, he was making important enemies among warhawk policymakers who tried to undercut his authority by discrediting his character.

The primary wrecking tool they used against him was redbaiting, which was a potent weapon during the mass paranoia of the Cold War era. Secondarily, they circulated salacious information about his private sex life gleaned from FBI wiretaps.

Although Senator Joseph McCarthy was the most prominent demagogue among the red baiters, and “McCarthyism” provided the context of Oppenheimer’s troubles, McCarthy himself did not play as direct a role in Oppenheimer’s downfall as might be expected. Oppenheimer’s primary enemies — above all Lewis Strauss, head of the AEC (Atomic Energy Commission) — considered McCarthy a “clown” whom Oppenheimer could outsmart, so Strauss and his allies kept McCarthy at arm’s length in their campaign against Oppenheimer.⁷

Oppenheimer, almost everyone including his sympathetic biographers agree, was a flawed individual. Despite his brilliance as a scientist and an administrator, he exhibited a certain mix of arrogance and naïveté that caused him problems.

He underestimated his enemies and tended to flap his mouth too much in the mistaken belief that he could cleverly talk his way out of any compromising situation. Among other things, his glib tongue and misguided attempts to charm his enemies led him willy-nilly into “naming names” to the anticommunist inquisitors, a serious moral



J. Robert Oppenheimer, a flawed individual and a foremost 20th century physicist.

lapse that he came to bitterly regret.

Oppenheimer’s Communism

Was Oppenheimer a “card-carrying Communist”? That was the issue that dominated the public discourse on the case. Despite their obsessive efforts, J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI could never definitively prove that Oppenheimer had ever formally joined the Communist Party.

No one, least of all Oppenheimer himself, denied that as a young man he had been a “fellow traveler,” a close sympathizer of the CPUSA. The professional red baiters sought to equate Communist sympathies with espionage and treason. One declared, “more probably than not J. Robert Oppenheimer is an agent of the Soviet Union.”⁸

But Oppenheimer’s attraction to the CPUSA was of an altogether different character. As his biographers adequately demonstrate, he was essentially “a New Deal liberal in the 1930s committed to supporting and working for racial equality, consumer protection, labor union rights and free speech.”⁹ He was also drawn to the CPUSA’s support of antifascist forces fighting in the Spanish Civil War.

Nonetheless, in the 1950s, red baiting was a vile but potent political force in the United States that few were able to successfully rebuff, and Oppenheimer was especially vulnerable because he seemed reluctant to put up a fight against his accusers. Some commentators have attributed this to a martyr complex, but the complexities of Oppenheimer’s character render attempts to discern his motivations futile.

The broad outline and the outcome of the campaign against him, however, are

clear enough. Although a 1954 AEC hearing declared Oppenheimer to be a loyal citizen, it also deemed him a “security risk,” and therefore the top-secret security clearance allowing him to serve in government agencies and laboratories was rescinded (or, technically, not renewed).

This has long fed the narrative of Oppenheimer as a latter-day Galileo, a hero of science whose persecution by forces of ignorance and unreason ended in his tragic martyrdom. That portrayal requires some qualification.

In the polarized American public discourse, Oppenheimer was permanently disgraced and discredited in the eyes of those who were under the influence of the red baiters, but mainstream liberal and intellectual opinion quickly restored him to a pedestal of honor, as the film depicts in scenes where Oppenheimer is being fêted at a ceremony in December 1963 when President Lyndon Johnson awarded him the prestigious Enrico Fermi Prize for public service.

Meanwhile, in 1959 Oppenheimer’s longtime tormentor Lewis Strauss had himself suffered a bitter political disgrace by being denied Senate confirmation as Eisenhower’s secretary of commerce. The vote against Strauss was directly influenced by his contemptible behavior in the smear campaign against Oppenheimer.

And finally, although Oppenheimer lost his government positions when his security clearance was withheld, it was not as if, like many victims of McCarthyism, he’d been deprived of the ability to make a living. He remained a wealthy man and retained his highly prestigious position as head of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University.

He had lost, it is true, the ability to directly participate in making governmental nuclear policy, which he strongly coveted, but as a consolation prize of sorts, he remained among the foremost public intellectuals in the United States.

The Far More Consequential Story: Three Historic Turning Points

But if Oppenheimer’s personal fate was not really all that tragic, the rest of us have not been as fortunate. His legacy to us, thanks primarily to elected and unelected nuclear policymakers of the United States, is a world plagued by never-ending “proxy wars” and continuously teetering on the brink of self-annihilation.

The first of three major historical turning points was the original sin of embarking on the all-out effort to create an ultimate weapon of mass destruction. The immorality that entailed was qualified by the legitimate fear that not doing so would mean that the Nazis would do it.

The second was far less morally ambiguous: the decision to actually use that weapon

on Japan. The warhawks' claim that A-bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki was necessary to end the war without sacrificing more American GI lives has been thoroughly refuted by unbiased historians.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the American public's awareness of that reality continues to lag far behind the historians' revelations.

Throughout the war, American policymakers had urged the Soviet Union to invade Japan, but the USSR had been unable to do so as long as the Nazi armies required their full attention. That changed in May 1945 with the German surrender. At the Potsdam Conference in July, less than a month before the A-bombing of Hiroshima, Truman "extracted a promise from Stalin that the Soviet Union would declare war on Japan by August 15."¹¹

By the beginning of August, however, Truman and his advisors had become fully confident that their new ultrapowerful weapon was ready to deploy. Their strategy suddenly underwent a 180-degree reversal. The atomic bomb, they calculated, would be able to force a Japanese surrender without Soviet help, which meant that the United States would not have to share the spoils of victory in the Pacific with the USSR in the postwar period.

The timing of the bomb drops was thus dictated by the need to beat Stalin's August 15th deadline. That was the misanthropic motive for the single greatest crime against humanity in world history: incinerating and irradiating hundreds of thousands of Japanese men, women, and children on August 6th and 9th, 1945.

The cynicism of the nuclear policymakers was embedded in their strategies all along. The military commander of the Manhattan Project, General Leslie Groves, is portrayed as a good guy in the film and in the biography because for the most part he defended and protected Oppenheimer against his redbaiting enemies.

But if Groves was a hero of the small story, his role in the really important story was far from benign. His view of the mission to invent nuclear weapons was typical of the military mindset. In 1944, as he was heading the Manhattan Project, he made clear that its intended target was neither Germany nor Japan: "You realize of course that the main purpose of this project is to subdue the Russians."¹²

Ten years later in testimony to the AEC, he confirmed that outlook: "There was never from about two weeks from the time I took charge of this project any illusion on my part but that Russia is our enemy and that the project was conducted on that basis."¹³

The third, and most consequential of the Cold War turning points, was the decision by American policymakers to pursue the invention and production of a "Super Bomb."



Hiroshima atom bomb cloud, taken 30 minutes after detonation, six miles east of the hypocentre.

In Oppenheimer's meeting with Truman shortly after the Japanese surrender, Truman asked Oppenheimer to guess how long he thought it would take the Soviet Union to create an atomic bomb. Oppenheimer said he didn't know, to which Truman triumphantly replied: "Never!"¹⁴

None of the nuclear physicists had any such illusions; they knew the Soviet science

community was fully capable of producing an atomic bomb. The accurate answer was four years. In August 1949, the end of the U.S. nuclear monopoly prompted the policymakers to consider upping the ante by creating a thousand-times-more-powerful weapon envisioned by theoretical physicists: the thermonuclear or hydrogen bomb.

To his great credit, Oppenheimer was fervently on the morally right side of that policy debate. His rightwing colleagues Edward Teller and Ernest O. Lawrence were on the wrong side, which turned out to be the winning side — but their advocacy was most likely not the key factor in the tragic decision.

Oppenheimer had argued that such a weapon would have absolutely no legitimate military use — it could only serve as an instrument of genocide. Furthermore, it would mark the point of no return in a nuclear arms race that could only prove disastrous.

To the argument that the Soviet Union could not be trusted to uphold its end of an agreement to ban thermonuclear weapons, the physicists declared that trust was unnecessary. Inventing a hydrogen bomb, they explained, absolutely required testing, and secret thermonuclear explosions were impossible. Therefore, banning thermonuclear testing would be tantamount to a weapons ban, and no nation could violate the ban without the rest of the world knowing.

Oppenheimer chaired a committee composed mainly of nuclear physicists charged with advising the Atomic Energy Commission. Eight of its nine members met in October 1949 to discuss their position on the hydrogen bomb issue; they arrived at a consensus to "oppose a crash program to develop the Super on scientific, technical, and moral grounds."¹⁵

Truman gave lip-service to considering the humanistic arguments of the physicists, but his decision was dictated by the bloodthirsty Air Force generals and politicians who were clamoring for a first strike against the Soviet Union.

Senator Brien McMahon, chairman of the Joint Atomic Energy Committee, believed

war with the Soviet Union was "inevitable" and declared that the United States should "blow them off the face of the earth, quick, before they do the same to us."¹⁶

So it was no surprise when, on January 31, 1950, Truman publicly declared his support to the development of the hydrogen bomb. The rest, as the saying goes, is history. And here we are today, defenselessly surrounded by 10,000 thermonuclear warheads on hair triggers — the means of our own collective extinction as a species.

But What About Stalin...?

The primary public justification for creating thermonuclear weapons has always been, "If we don't do it, Stalin (or the Russians/Soviets/Communists) will." This, like the arguments for nuking Japan, was cynical and based on false premises. Following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Soviet archives were opened to historians, and they provided ample evidence that Stalin's main postwar concern was to avoid military conflict with the United States.

"At the end of World War II, Stalin reduced his army from 11,356,000 in May 1945 to 2,874,000 in June 1947 — suggesting that even under Stalin, the Soviet Union had neither the capability nor the intention to launch a war of aggression."¹⁷

By stoking anticommunist hysteria to scare the bejesus out of the American public, the U.S. architects of the Cold War bore far more responsibility than Stalin for the suicidal postwar nuclear arms race. The crucial arms control proposals advocated by Oppenheimer and his allies were never allowed an honest hearing.

I will give the final word to Isidor I. Rabi, who was Oppenheimer's peer as a theoretical physicist but far superior in moral wisdom. Despite their friendship and Rabi's admiration for Oppenheimer as a scientist, he resisted Oppenheimer's best efforts to entice him to join the laboratory at Los Alamos. Rabi told Oppenheimer that he didn't want "the culmination of three centuries of physics" to be a weapon of mass destruction.¹⁸ ■

Notes

1. See: Alex Wellerstein, *Restricted Data: The History of Nuclear Secrecy in the United States*, 2021.
2. Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, *American Prometheus*.
3. *Op cit.*, 332.
4. *Op cit.*, 301.
5. *Op cit.*, 324.
6. *Op cit.*, 314.
7. *Op cit.*, 471-472.
8. *Op cit.*, 478.
9. *Op cit.*, 500.
10. See: Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam: The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with the Soviet Union* (1965).
11. *American Prometheus*, 301.
12. *Op cit.*, 284.
13. *Op cit.*, 275.
14. *Op cit.*, 331.
15. *Op cit.*, 421.
16. *Op cit.*, 424.
17. *Op cit.*, 452.
18. *Op cit.*, 211-12.

AMLO's Mexico: Fourth Transformation? By Dan La Botz

MEXICO'S PRESIDENT ANDRÉS Manuel López Obrador (or AMLO) has now been in power for five years, long enough to assess the successes and failures of his administration and to look toward the future. AMLO was elected to his six-year term in 2018 by a landslide, with 54.71% of the vote while his closest competitor in the conservative National Action Party (PAN) won only 22.91%.

The party that AMLO had created, *Morena*, *Movimiento Regeneración Nacional* (National Regeneration Movement) —

Morena also means brown, the color of the common people of Mexico — won a majority of 55 seats in the Senate and a plurality of 156 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. With allied parties, *Morena* had a majority.

AMLO and *Morena* had put forward a democratic, inclusive, and progressive vision for the country. The media described AMLO as a leftist, and so it seemed to many. Some still think so.²

AMLO promised change. And things certainly needed changing. For 70 years, from 1928 to 2000, the country had been a one-party state, ruled by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) under which corruption and inequality prevailed (brilliantly depicted in the 1999 black comedy "Herod's Law").

Then from 2000 to 2018 it was governed by a series of corrupt and incompetent presidents from the conservative National Action Party (PAN) or the equally pro-business PRI. The results were disastrous, in some ways catastrophic.

When AMLO took office, he faced enormous challenges in leading his nation, then of 124 million souls. A few snapshots — and a trigger warning: The drug business earned hundreds of billions. The year he was elected, in 2018, 33,000 people were murdered in the drug wars; some 200,000 had been killed since 2006.

There were thousands of femicides, women murdered around the country. Some 48 journalists were killed in 2016; 42 in 2017. Over 100 politicians were assassinated during the 2018 election campaign. The minimum wage in 2018 was US\$135 a month, among the lowest in Latin America. Millions lived in poverty. Those in rural areas, the Indigenous, and women were poorer than others, often much poorer.

Dan La Botz is the author of several books on Mexico and Nicaragua. His most recent book is a novel, Trotsky in Tijuana (<https://trotskyintijuana.com/>). He is a member of Solidarity. He would like to thank Jeff Hermanson, Daniela Spenser, and especially Dawn Paley for sharing their knowledge of Mexico with him. The opinions in this article are his own, as are any mistakes.



Has AMLO's "Fourth Transformation" stalled?

Corruption was rampant. Former Veracruz governor Javier Duarte, for example, stole US\$3 billion, leaving his state in bankruptcy. The police were notoriously corrupt and violent: murdering, raping and torturing with impunity. When the army was mobilized for the drug war in the early 2000s, soldiers soon did much the same.

Given all that, it is not surprising that millions of younger Mexicans had migrated to the United States, many better educated than those who stayed behind. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of

Central Americans and others passed through Mexico, exploited by coyotes, robbed by the police, some murdered by gangs, some suffocating in truck trailers as they tried to make their way to the United States.

Since January of 1994 when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect, the Mexican economy existed in a complex, quasi-common market with the United States and Canada. U.S. and Canadian foreign direct investment, and that from other countries, amounted to tens of billions of dollars a year.

Foreign investors created new industrial zones with hundreds of factories and millions of workers in the *maquiladora* plants (mostly on the U.S.-Mexico border), in auto plants (U.S., Japanese, and German) a little further south, and in many other industries.

When AMLO's term began, almost all of those workers were controlled by a corporatist system of labor relations where the state protected its "official" labor unions, which in turn protected employers from real unions, keeping productivity high and wages low. Most workers could not vote for the union they wanted, could not vote on the contract, and risked their jobs if they spoke up.

That was Mexico when AMLO was inaugurated — a permanent social tragedy. AMLO promised that his new government would carry out the "Fourth Transformation," a fundamental change in the country that would usher in a new era and a better future for all Mexicans.

He compared this 4T, as it came to be called, to Mexico's other great transformative periods: the Independence struggle that lasted from 1810-1821 and established Mexico as a sovereign nation; the Reform period of 1855-1876 that expelled the French who had invaded and conquered Mexico and also broke the power of the conservative parties and the Church, establishing a liberal state; and the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1940 that gave land to peasants, labor rights to workers, and nationalized the British and American oil industry.

Clearly AMLO imagined that he, Morena and Mexico would do great things. AMLO not only put his administration in a historical framework, he also imbued it with a mystique. He believed the force was with him.

So these are the questions: *Are we seeing a Fourth Transformation? Has AMLO carried out the structural changes that would be necessary for a genuine progressive transformation? If not, what is happening in Mexico?*

The Caudillo

The first problem of AMLO's government has been the man himself. AMLO is a *caudillo*, a charismatic leader of authoritarian populist tendencies, a larger-than-life-size figure who dominates his party, political life, and the national media. But as one academic observes, "unlike other charismatic leftist leaders who came to power with the backing of major social movements or a mass party, as Evo Morales in Bolivia or Lula in Brazil, AMLO commands a largely personalistic movement supported by unorganized popular constituencies."³

AMLO has gradually mesmerized a large segment of society. A master of symbolic gestures, AMLO declined to live in *Los Pinos*, the presidential palace, and turned it into a museum open to the public. He stopped using and eventually sold off Mexico's luxurious presidential airplane, instead taking commercial flights. He also unloaded the fleet of presidential automobiles.

To fight corruption, he said he wanted a "poor" government, a state of "Franciscan poverty." He himself took a 40% pay cut and stripped former presidents of their pensions. His personal austerity, he suggested, would be a model of "republican austerity" for other government officials, and he laid off many of them and reduced everyone's salary.

All this, he said, was central to the fight against corruption. And of course it enhanced his popularity amongst the masses, many of whom had come to loathe the worse than worthless PRI and PAN governments and resent the wealthy elite. Initially he had the support of 80% of the population.

AMLO is a populist who blames the country's "*fifi*" (we might say "posh") elite, whom he also calls an economic mafia, for creating the neoliberal economic system and perpetuating the country's political corruption. He uses his position to slam not only the elite but also political opponents and the media. They are bad, the people are good.

And so he speaks directly to the people. His *mañaneras*, daily 7:00 a.m. press conferences — there have been about a thousand of them — average 90 minutes but some last for hours. They are watched by 13.2 million viewers.

Caudillismo, the domination of such leaders, almost always men, is an historic feature of Mexico since its founding. The *caudillo* as president reinforces that model of leadership throughout the society, in political parties, in labor unions, community groups and social movements.

It is a style and a system that tends to engender clique politics, favoritism, nepotism and corruption. The presidential *caudillo* may have a vast popular following and organize enormous rallies, may be beloved by the people — but participation in a rally does not equal a voice in government, and certainly not popular control of the state. AMLO concentrates power in his own hands.

Historically, *caudillos* emerged from the military. The *caudillo*

was a man on a horse. AMLO did not emerge from the military, but he has increasingly relied on it. The army, the navy, the marines, and the national guard deal with crime, handle immigration, own banks that distribute social welfare payments, and run the airports and the new Maya Train. As president he is, of course, the commander in chief.

The Caudillo and Covid

We can see how *caudillismo* affected AMLO's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, which was very like Donald Trump's.⁴ As Covid began to appear in Mexico, AMLO not only ignored but disdained scientists' and physicians' public health recommendations. In one of his *mañaneras* in late March 2020 he held up two amulets that he said protected him, suggesting divine providence or magical powers.

He urged people to continue to go about their business, to use public transportation, go to restaurants, to keep the economy humming. He told people to keep hugging each other and for months afterwards he continued to mingle in his crowds of admirers, shaking hands and kissing babies.

Only very gradually and too late did his government begin to make recommendations on social distancing, masking and other safety practices. Even then he publicly flouted the rules himself. Of course, like Trump, AMLO got Covid.

There was also, however, the problem of the healthcare system. For years Mexico had been cutting the health budget, and AMLO himself, imposing his republican austerity, did the same, cutting the health budget and laying off 10,000 medical professionals in 2019. Health workers protested, blocking highways to call attention to the need for supplies.

There were not enough medicines. Mexico had too few ventilators and not enough hospital beds.⁵ AMLO later reversed these policies, but the change came too little and too late. With poor presidential leadership and an inadequate public health system, Mexico had 7,633,355 Covid cases and 334,336 deaths between January 23, 2020 and July 12, 2023.

These deaths are proportionally on a par with the United States under Trump, who did an equally poor job. AMLO bears responsibility for that loss of hundreds of thousands of lives. With such a health crisis, the economy also suffered: "The Mexican economy shrank 4.5% in 2020 as the pandemic ravaged factories, businesses and households. It was the greatest contraction since the 1994 Tequila Crisis that followed a peso devaluation."⁶

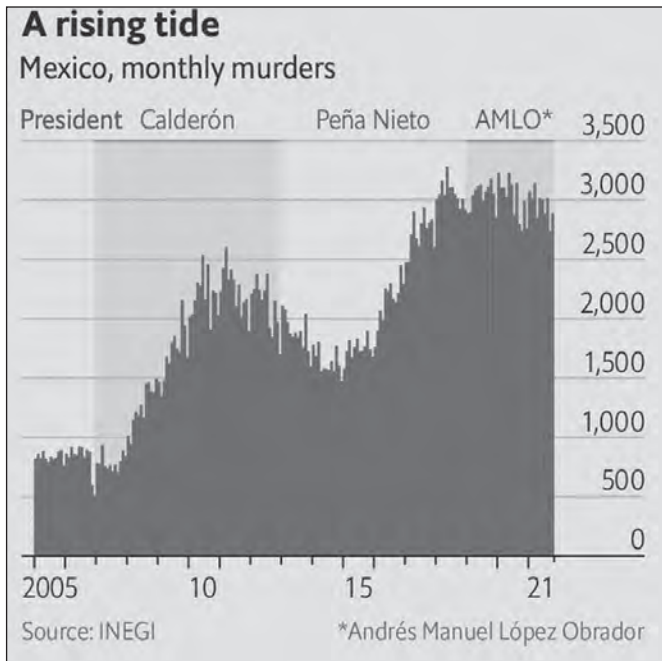
Since Covid the economy has improved, growing significantly in the last year, but given its long history of erratic growth spurts, the significance of the recent uptick is unclear.

Drug Cartels and Ayotzinapa

AMLO has also been faced with the enormous challenge of Mexico's drug cartels, which run a multi-billion-dollar business, maintain small, well-armed private armies, exercise control over cities and entire states, and buy politicians, police, and military officers.

In 2006 PAN president Felipe Calderón launched a full-scale drug war, mobilizing the army against the cartels, splitting the cartels into smaller, competing, and more violent organizations. The violence took tens of thousands of lives and the army engaged in widespread human rights violations.

Mexican attitudes toward the drug war violence changed in September 26, 2014 when 43 male students at the Ayotzinapa



Rural Teachers' College were kidnapped and murdered in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico.

Every year the students of Ayotzinapa had commandeered city buses and drove them to Mexico City to commemorate the Tlatelolco Massacre of 1968. But in 2014 the students were gathered up and disappeared either by a drug gang, by local politicians and the police, or by the army or, as became clear, by some combination of those.

The students' disappearance led to national and international protests, the Guerrero governor and other politicians were forced to resign.⁷ Various agencies of the Mexican government conducted investigations which in turn were discredited by a U.N. investigation, but the crime remained unsolved and the perpetrators unpunished.

AMLO stood with the people against the PRD politicians in Guerrero, demanding that the PRI national government provide answers.

When he became president, AMLO created a Commission for Truth and Access to Justice that once again investigated the kidnappings and declared it a "state crime." Warrants were issued for the arrest of 88 people, military commanders, soldiers, police officers and drug gang members.

Still, with authorities hiding evidence, lying, and torturing witnesses, the crime remained unsolved and top officials untouched. Only three students' remains were found and no one was tried and convicted.

Inter-American Human Rights Commission's experts who had investigated the crime for eight years ended its work in July, 2023 saying, "The evidence demonstrates that several authorities knew what was happening or had important information that has not been provided, perhaps because they thought it could expose their personnel who might have been involved."

As Tyler Mattiace of Human Rights Watch told the *Washington Post*, "President López Obrador made a commitment to Ayotzinapa when he was first elected. But when push came to shove and he had to choose between pursuing truth and justice for Ayotzinapa or protecting the military, he chose to protect the military."

As a candidate AMLO had promised to send the soldiers back to the barracks and handle the drug crisis differently; he would offer *abrazos, no balazos* (hugs not bullets) to the lower-level cartel soldiers and workers, like growers and distributors.

But he soon decided he needed some bullets. In 2019 the Mexican congress agreed to create a 60,000-member national guard — made up of Federal police, army and navy troops — provided that it remained under civilian control. But with the government still losing the drug war, in September 2022 congress, infuriating human rights groups, voted to militarize the guard, which by then numbered 115,000. AMLO broke his promise of demilitarization.

Nor did remilitarization of the drug war solve the problem; in 2022 Mexico had some 42,888 homicides. When the drug war began, it was often argued that most victims were cartel soldiers, killed fighting each other or dying fighting the Mexican police, army or guard. After Ayotzinapa, it seemed, the cartels working with the politicians, police, and army were killing the people.

Despite thousands of arrests, the drug war against the Sinaloa cartel, the Gulf cartel and half a dozen others went on under AMLO with Mexico having lost more than 360,000 lives since it was launched in 2006.⁸

In the same period, 100,000 people have been disappeared, most of whom can be presumed to have been murdered. Amidst this slaughter there is the issue of femicide, the murder of women, with total of 3,754 reported in 2020.

Throughout these years before and during the AMLO presidency there have been large demonstrations against the government for its failure to stop the violence and to solve the crimes, and protests against the authorities' human rights abuses. These movements, often led by survivors — mothers, husbands, wives, friends — have had little impact. Meanwhile fentanyl — cheaper to produce and with a growing U.S. market — has made the cartels even richer.

AMLO and the Migrants

When campaigning for president, AMLO suggested he would be the protector and defender of the migrants, most of them Central Americans, passing through Mexico.⁹ The migrants from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, as well as Cuba and Venezuela, are fleeing economic hardship, political repression, or the drug cartels' violence. Other migrants come from Africa and Asia with similar issues.

AMLO's government initially offered migrants humanitarian visas to work or study in Mexico, but then abandoned the program. Under pressure from Trump, who threatened to raise tariffs on Mexican products, AMLO agreed to stop the migrants from crossing Mexico. He sent 25,000 National Guard troops to the Guatemalan border who used tear gas against families with children.

Migrants were not permitted to leave Mexico's southernmost state of Chiapas. Carlos Heredia, an academic, rights advocate, and former PRD representative in the legislature, told the press, "We have sold our souls and become the wall."

At a migrant camp in Ciudad Juárez this past April, a fire killed 39 Central and South American migrants held in a prison-like facility as the staff ran away. AMLO blamed the victims saying they had set their mattresses on fires.

Activists in Juárez protested. "The police, be they municipal

or state level, can put [a migrant] in jail just for being in the street or for getting on a bus, that's been the policy since López Obrador took office," said Graciela Delgado Ramírez, a Juárez activist.

*"Here there's a wall, but it's not like Trump's wall. Here the wall is made up of people, where the National Guard, the police, and the bus stations won't let anyone through."*¹⁰

Under President Biden's most recent policy, migrants must wait in Mexico for an appointment made by app, to make their appeal for asylum at the U.S. border. So thousands of migrants are still being held in squalid camps along the U.S.-Mexico border in dangerous cities and towns many overrun by the cartels where they wait for their asylum hearings.

The whole holding camp system is in violation of both U.S. and international law, which says people can seek asylum at the border. Yet AMLO permits the holding camps on Mexican soil.

Economic Development

Early on, AMLO's government published a National Economic Development Plan for 2019-24 full of idealistic language about participatory democracy, promises of wonderful social programs, and development based on increased investment. Though he criticized his neoliberal predecessors for having privatized over 250 state-owned companies, he did not propose to reverse the problem.¹¹

As I wrote in 2018, "López Obrador promised once again, as he had so often in his campaign, that the investments of Mexican and foreign stockholders would not only be safe in Mexico, but would make decent profits under his honest administration."¹²

He met regularly with bankers and told them that the financial sector should be self-regulated, like the press.¹³ He appointed eight businessmen, two of them heads of the major TV networks, to his council of economic advisors.

As a candidate he had opposed the construction of Mexico's US\$13 billion New International Airport at Texcoco which, he argued, was over budget, riddled with corruption, and a danger to the environment. By the time he became president, the airport was 20% completed and contracts had been signed for most of the rest.

Still, AMLO wanted the project stopped. With no legal power to do so, he organized a completely unconstitutional referendum on the airport's future. Only about one million people participated, just 1.2% of voters, with most polling places in the president's strongholds. Some 69% voted to reject the Texcoco airport.

When the referendum was challenged because of its illegality, AMLO used his executive authority and the claim of national security to quash the Texcoco airport. The new "Felipe Ángeles" airport in Santa Lucía has been built on an air force base — militarization again.

AMLO looked for inspiration to the past era of President Lázaro Cárdenas, who in 1938 had nationalized the British and American oil companies, putting oil at the center of Mexican economic plans. Oil had been the past; it would be the future. AMLO invested US\$8 billion in a refinery in Tabasco, his home state.

But Mexico is no longer one of the top oil producing nations in the world. Production is declining, and the refinery does not improve that, since foreign oil is still cheaper.¹⁴ And with concerns about fossil fuels contributing to climate change, a



Parents of the Ayotzinapa students continue to demand answers to the 2014 disappearance.

Mexican Green New Deal would have been a better call.

The economic framework remained unchanged. In AMLO's first year and a half in office, the Mexican economy continued to be situated in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that was negotiated in 1993. Beginning on January 1, 2020, it was replaced by the U.S.-Mexico-Canada-Agreement (USMC), a treaty negotiated by AMLO's predecessor.

Most economists believe the general impact of the new treaty is negligible, but the USMC Annex 23-A required Mexico to improve collective bargaining and Annex 31-A created The Rapid Response Labor Mechanism. These provisions, which gave workers and independent unions a tool, would have an important impact as we will see below.

AMLO went to Washington, DC in January 2021 to celebrate the new trade agreement and to make nice with President Donald Trump who had called Mexican immigrants "criminals, drug dealers, and rapists." Trump thanked AMLO for his help in reducing immigration from Central America. When asked about their relationship, AMLO said, "We are friends, and we're going to keep being friends."

The treaty in general, however, was a ratification of the role of U.S. and Canadian corporate investment in Mexico — accepting and reaffirming foreign economic imperialism.

The pride of AMLO's economic development program is the Maya Train, about 950 miles long and connecting the southeastern states of Quintana Roo, Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche and Yucatán. The plan was to connect the major cities and archeological sites, increase production, commerce and tourism, and thus generate employment and raise incomes in the country's poorest region.

The train would be built in the state of Hidalgo and would create over one million jobs, AMLO promised and be done by Christmas of this year. All along the route, the president promised, there would be schools and housing built.



ance of their sons. IACHR/flickr

Indigenous groups, environmentalists and archeologists have criticized the project, arguing that it will destroy the rainforests and lead to damage to the ancient Mayan cities and temples, and they warn that it threatens the Great Maya Aquifer that supplies drinking water to millions.

The president calls his critics “the pseudo-environmentalists financed by the United States government.” He said that “not one tree will be removed,” but of course, to build a train through the jungle, thousands have been.

One critic, Gerardo Ceballos, an ecology professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico as well as a member of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, told the press, “Anyone who knows the area, scientifically speaking, is concerned about where the train will pass: over one of the largest caves and underwater systems on the planet. And the train will collapse.”

The project, originally priced at about US\$6 billion, is now projected by the president to be over UD\$20 billion, while plans to connect Merida, the region’s largest city, and the small state of Campeche have been scrapped.

Meanwhile around the project there is tremendous land speculation, with pressure on local people, exerted by Mexico’s tourist agency and the army, to sell their land. The military is helping to build and will run the train, which is called a national security project.¹⁵

Clearly the Tren Maya is disorganizing, disrupting and permanently alerting the Mayan communities, which have had no role in decisions about the project. Whether it will bring the benefits to the Mexican economy that AMLO claims remains an open question.

Recently AMLO paid US\$6 billion to nationalize six Spanish-owned power plants. This gives the Federal Electric Company 56% of total Mexican electric energy production.

The United States and Canada opposed nationalization, no doubt seeing it as a dangerous example. AMLO proclaimed, “Mexico is an independent and free country, not a colony or a protectorate of the United States. Cooperation? Yes. Submission? No. Long live the oil expropriation.”

Yet this act does not fundamentally alter Mexico’s relationship to the United States and Canada, and does not represent an important part of an economic development program.

“The Poor First”

AMLO, sounding like the theology of liberation in the Catholic Church, stated that as president he would put “the poor first.” His government abolished many previous government poverty programs and gave cash payments to certain vulnerable groups, particularly the elderly and students under 15 years of age. Money for the poor is distributed through 13,000 banks run by the military.

Such targeted social welfare programs are characteristic of the very neoliberal policies that AMLO claims to oppose. Many on the left would argue that universal programs such as free

or subsidized housing, education and health care for all are far superior to those that target specific poor groups.

A large part of the poor labor in the informal economy of businesses or are self-employed, in both cases untaxed, unregulated, and not participating in the government’s social security institutions that provide workers with healthcare and pensions.

These are men and women who work as street vendors, employees of small shops, or delivery workers directed by apps, and many others. Wages are generally low but hard to measure. The informal sector represents 29% of the total economy, while informal employment represents 59% of total employment.

AMLO’s administration allocated billions to help the poor, but didn’t always spend all of it. Records of what was spent for social programs were not transparent, making it difficult to really understand their impact. Some fear that such targeted programs contributed to corruption, though the evidence for that was not clear either.

Some programs simply failed. Youth Constructing the Future signed up a million young people to get jobs but found work for only 15,000. Máximo Ernesto Jaramillo-Molina in an article titled “More for the Rich, Less for the Poor” argues that government data shows that — while more funds than ever are going to social welfare programs — significantly more of that money is going to the rich and less to the poor.¹⁶

In 2020 Oxfam reported that 60% of Mexico’s poor were ineligible for three of the main social welfare programs. At the same time, military spending increased and often exceeded what had been budgeted.¹⁷

Finally, during Covid, unlike the United States and countries in Europe, AMLO declined to create significant special programs during the pandemic. Consequently, despite AMLO’s vaunted social programs, little has actually been done to improve the lives of the poor.

Julio Boltvinik, who writes the “Moral Economy” column for *La Jornada*, a paper that has supported AMLO, demonstrates that today there are 98 million poor people in Mexico, just as there were when AMLO took office. (August 7, 2023) Mexico *como vamos* reports that “Mexico’s GDP per capita remains at 2015 levels, indicating eight years of lag and regression.”

Taxes are a related issue. AMLO has refused to carry out a fiscal reform that would provide more money for social programs and government projects. Mexico has among the lowest taxes in Latin America, and the OECD reports that tax evasion in Mexico has been estimated to be around 3% of GDP or 27% of the total revenue of the main taxes. AMLO has not raised taxes on the rich nor done much to end tax cheating, both of which would be good governance if not structural reform.

The formal working class — people with regular jobs with legally registered employers — has done better. As AMLO was taking office, the Mexican government increased the national minimum wage from around US\$4.40 per day to approximately US\$5. In the border region, closer to the United States where things are more expensive, the minimum wage was set at US\$9 per day.

Seeing that such things were possible, in January 2019 in Matamoros tens of thousands of workers in the *maquiladoras*, half of them women, struck dozens of plants. Using social media to organize, they demanded a 20% wage increase. The strike affected Ford and GM plants in the United States.

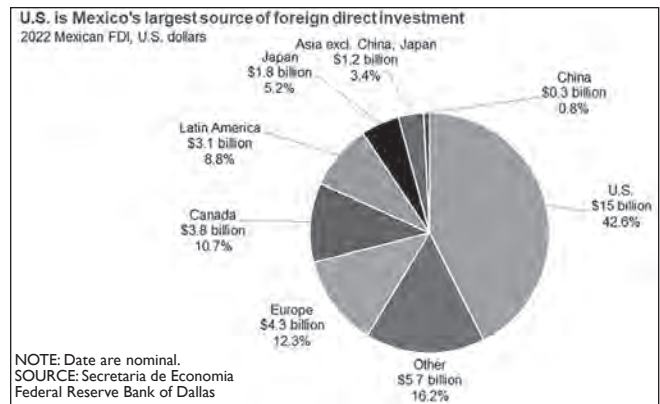
When such strikes occurred under the former PRI and PAN governments, the president, the Secretary of the Interior and Secretary of Labor would support the companies and labor boards would declare the strikes illegal. With the tacit approval of government officials, corporate managers, and union officials the strike leaders would be fired and force would be used to break up workers' rallies and disperse picket lines. The strike would be crushed.

But this time, AMLO's government took a position of benevolent neutrality, letting the corporations and the workers fight it out without state coercion — and the workers won. Since then, throughout Mexico there have been a series of victories by unions of miners, auto workers and auto glass workers, among others.

These organizing efforts and strikes have been led by independent unions and coalitions such as *La Liga* which is organizing manufacturing plants in several cities. Still the old corporatist unions, those historically controlled by the state and protecting the bosses, remain dominant and it will take a national organization with international connections to transform the Mexican labor movement.¹⁸

Other sectors of society are also in movement. The feminist movement in Mexico, with tens of thousands marching with purple banners on March 8, International Women's Day, remains a force.

In the past few years, women won a victory for abortion rights. Mexico's Supreme Court decriminalized abortion in September of 2021 and several states also legalized abortion, yet some have not. In some states abortion is still considered



homicide and as many as 200 women remain in prison convicted of abortion. Women are both challenging abortion laws and providing information and abortion pills to women who need them.¹⁹

Today violence against women, LGBTQ and trans people is at the top of the feminist agenda. AMLO has attempted to coopt the women's movement and has called the independent feminists "middle class conservatives" who oppose his Fourth Transformation.²⁰

Politics, the Left, and the Future

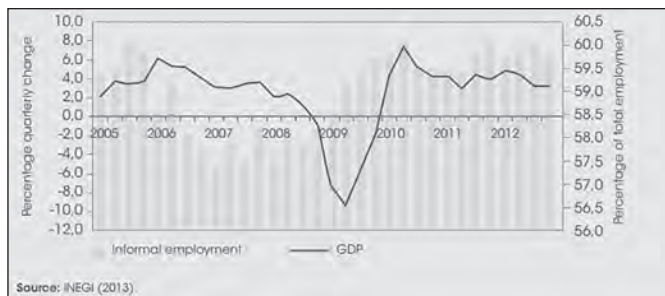
Ramón I. Centeno calls the AMLO government a "fake left" administration that produced "a failed post-neoliberal economic transition."²¹ Even worse, it sets the stage, if not now in the near future, for a backlash from the right. And there is no genuine left party.

There are today seven parties with a national registration. We have mentioned the PRI, PAN, PRD and *Morena*. The left-nationalist PRD, once progressive, evolved into a corrupt party like the PRI from whose loins it had sprung. There are also the small social democratic Citizens Movement, the Green Ecologist Party, and the Labor Party.

The Greens are an opportunistic party previously allied with the PRI and now supporting *Morena*. The Labor Party (PT), a Stalinist party that supports North Korea, was previously allied with the PRD and now supports *Morena*.

There is no significant far left in Mexico today. From the

Mexico: Informal Economy Employment as % of Total Employment



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The feminist movement in Mexico has maintained its militancy and independence under the AMLO administration.

1960s to the 1980s, Mexico like other countries in Latin America, Europe and the United States, experienced a rapid growth of leftist groups — Mexican nationalists, Guevarists, Maoists and Trotskyists, as well as the pro-Soviet Communist Party of Mexico (CPM), which joined with some of the new left and became the Unified Socialist Party of Mexico (PSUM).

The left was a small but significant social and political force.²² The new left of that period furnished activists for the peasant, labor, and community movements, created parties that tried to give expression to the needs and desires of working people.

All that is gone now. The Communists (PSUM) died by euthanasia, entering the PRD. The Trotskyist parties lost support and their legal status. The Maoists' national organizations disappeared, leaving groups of local activists.

The unfortunate lack of a far left in Mexico deprives the social movements of individuals and groups with a critical anti-capitalist analysis, strategic ideas about organizing for social

change, a vision of socialism, and a commitment to immerse themselves in the movements. It also means there is no electoral alternative to the fundamentally conservative major parties.

The constitution permits a president to serve only one six-year term. AMLO, with the tacit approval of *Morena*, will choose his successor. The leading candidates are Mexico City mayor Claudia Sheinbaum, foreign secretary Marcelo Ebrard and interior minister Adán Augusto López.

Sheinbaum appears to be AMLO's personal favorite, but whether the country can nominate and elect a first woman president who is also Jewish remains to be seen. Former president Vicente Fox of the PAN recently referred to her contemptuously as the "Bulgarian Jew." In any case, while AMLO still has 60% support in the country, charisma is not transferable.

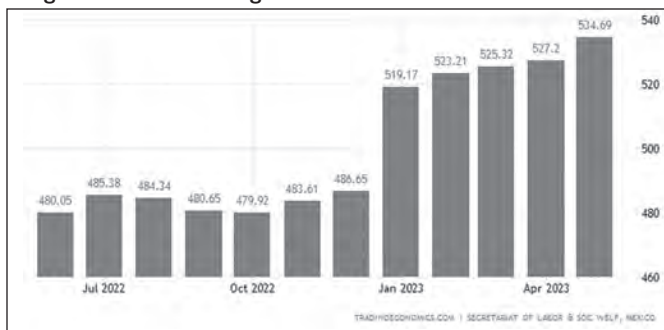
As the election approaches, AMLO is taking no chances. He has seen to it that the National Electoral Institute, which oversees elections, has had its budget cut and its personnel reduced.

He has attacked Xochitl Gálvez, an Indigenous woman, engineer and would-be PAN candidate. She says that her origins are humbler than AMLO's. He called her part of the corrupt elite, a millionaire, an attack that has only made her more popular.

AMLO is almost done and there has been no Fourth Transformation. AMLO failed to deal with Covid, to stop the drug violence, and to really lift up the poor, at the same time that he's undermined democracy and militarized society. His fake left has sown confusion and will over time generate disillusionment and cynicism.

A new Mexican left will have to be built from the bottom up, by workers and farmers, by women and indigenous people, by society's discontents. It's necessary to begin again. ■

Wages in Manufacturing in Mexico



A Contribution to the Debate: **“Imperial Decline” in the Ukraine War** By David Finkel

MY SHORT PIECE ON “imperial blowback” posted on the Solidarity webzine (<https://solidarity-us.org/a-brief-comment-imperial-blowback-then-and-now/>, June 28, 2023) was primarily intended to draw parallels between the Prigozhin putsch (or whatever that thing was) in Russia and the domestic consequences in the United States of the calamitous U.S. wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

That main theme seems to have attracted little critical response. On the other hand, a lively debate emerged in the comments posted below the article, which I’d encourage readers to check out for themselves. As the back-and-forth began to take on the character of a flame war, I’m attempting to sum up the debate here.

I hope readers will keep in mind that the war itself becomes more horrific by the week, with Russia turning to systematic bombing of Ukraine’s grain storage facilities, a blood transfusion center and civilian targets around the country, retaliating against Ukraine’s growing capacity to strike Russian military shipping and targets behind the lines.

Rather than responding to bits and pieces of invective in the comments on my webzine piece, I will focus here on arguments raised in the two extended contributions in particular from reader Jim Levitt. Although I’ll quote from Levitt’s posts, I do suggest reading them in full for context.

Whose Defensive War?

Levitt and some other critics contend that it’s Russia, not Ukraine, waging a defensive war against an imminent threat of NATO/U.S. encirclement, if not invasion. Jim goes a big step further, claiming that U.S. imperialism is “facing an existential defeat” in the Ukraine war. If the first of these is hard to swallow, I’ll explain why the second strikes me as something to choke on.

In a July 6 post, Levitt writes:

“This war could have been avoided had the Ukraine regime and its US, UK, French and German backers, adhered to the [post-1914] Minsk Accords. Poroshenko, Hollande, Merkel have all openly admitted they had no intention of implementing the agreements they signed,

instead seeking to use the time available to build up the military force needed to destroy the significant portion of the population that aligned with Russia. We have ample evidence that US/ NATO had made post-coup Ukraine a de facto member of NATO, yet another in the long line of US betrayals of commitments to not move NATO ‘one inch to the east’ after Gorbachev agreed to the reunification of Germany. The Russians are absolutely correct in their assessment that the US is ‘not agreement capable.’ At what point does Russia have the right to say ‘enough?’”

This is a fairly representative narrative circulating on the left. There are significant problems with it, beginning with the factual detail that *Russia invaded Ukraine* — and not for the first time in February 2022. In the wake of the 2014 upheaval, Moscow created the Luhansk and Donetsk fake “peoples republics,” with the agency of so-called “volunteer soldiers on vacation” which we now know to have been the Wagner group.

International law is quite clear that attacking another country is allowed only in response to an aggressive attack, or an imminent threat. Although very real issues were inflamed by NATO’s reckless post-1991 expansion, there was no such imminent threat to Russia.

U.S. imperialism, of course, has repeatedly ignored that same prohibition, as when it invaded Iraq with catastrophic results (as well as countries like Panama and Grenada that couldn’t fight back). But the crimes of one imperial power don’t offset those of another.

War is indeed “the continuation of politics by other means” (Clausewitz), but the outbreak of war itself can alter the politics as well as raising the stakes and terrible costs of the conflict. That’s partly why for the present discussion we need to bracket the endless sterile debate about the so-called “U.S. Maidan coup,” which is a mirror image of the Western narrative of a unified people’s democratic uprising. It is hopelessly naïve to ignore the reality that the United States, European Union and Russia were all up to their ears in Ukraine before, during and after the Maidan events.

There are competent accounts of what occurred — for example, Yuliya Yurchenko’s *Ukraine and the Empire of Capital. From Marketisation to Armed Conflict*, which is as scathing

in its treatment of Washington, the EU and the Ukrainian oligarchs as it is of Moscow — which are worth studying, but should not divert us from the fundamental issue of which side is the aggressor here.

As complex as Maidan was, Russia was indeed “provoked” — first and foremost, by the refusal of the clear majority of the Ukrainian people to join Vladimir Putin’s “Novorossiya” expansionist project. And with the full-scale Russian invasion, the alternatives facing Ukraine are survival or enslavement — and this is the paramount question right now, not the quarrels in the international left about whose provocation came first.

Neither Levitt nor I nor other anti-imperialist observers have any competence to judge what the populations of Donetsk, Luhansk or Crimea — especially the Indigenous Crimean Tatars — might be thinking now. They should ultimately have the democratic right to decide their own futures, when that choice becomes possible free of occupation and coercion. As difficult as such a scenario may be under any conditions, it’s clearly impossible if Russia imposes a territorial amputation of Ukraine.

As for the immediate situation, Russia’s concentration on destroying Ukraine’s grain stores and export facilities may be some kind of negotiating ploy, or a sign of desperation, or just sadistic revenge. It’s hard to say, but it doesn’t appear to represent military confidence, and it can hardly enhance Russia’s standing with starvation-threatened nations in the Global South.

An “Existential Defeat”?

When it comes to the state of the U.S. empire and NATO, there are starkly contrasting perceptions of reality. Jim Levitt’s July 6 and July 8 posts lay out the claim that this war is weakening U.S. imperialism. While again you can read it in full, I think the following excerpt captures the essence:

“We spent our entire lives working toward the end of US imperialism. Now the Empire is tottering, facing an existential defeat... As to imperialism ‘tottering’: yes, the hold of the US is getting shakier by the month. Sanctions on Russia have actually done most damage to the US vassals in Europe, Germany most especially. European prosperity has been built on cheap,

David Finkel is an editor of *Against the Current* and member of the *Ukraine Solidarity Network*.



"NATO Summit Leaves Ukrainians Frustrated," says the Atlantic Council, but Washington's authority is alive and thriving.

reliable energy imported from Russia. The US deliberately destroyed that when it blew up the Nordstream pipelines, an act of war against its own supposed allies.

"The 'tilt' expressed by the development of BRICS, etc, is all toward China and Russia, not toward the US. Increased bilateral trade conducted in yuan, ruble, rupee and other non-dollar currencies, and moves to build a bank clearing system independent of the US-controlled SWIFT all point to a weakening of the US ability to crush countries that dare step out of line.

"NATO has been 'revived'? Because Sweden and Finland signed on? Bringing exactly what to the table other than increased military spending extracted from their populations? European industry shuts down or moves, all while billions are funneled to the war project..."

I really think we are glimpsing an alternative ideological universe here. [On a point of detail, we should also set aside the obscure question about whether the United States, or pro-Ukraine operatives, or just who blew up the Nordstream 2 pipeline, and who benefited. It hardly much matters now.]

To be sure, the fantasy entertained by some Western ideologues, that sanctions would bring the collapse of the Russian economy, was an absurdity. But let's look at what's happening in the real world of NATO expansion (quite apart from the fact that 90 percent of global trade is still conducted in U.S. dollars).

Right here and now, it's *not* the Biden administration that's trying to fast-track NATO membership with the full treaty protection it would bring for Ukraine. On the contrary, it's the countries of Eastern Europe pushing hardest for that course — which includes Poland, often in history an enemy rather than ally of Ukraine — and as they live in the shadows of Russia, it's not hard to see why.

Most of all, they're looking to the United States guarantees of protection. So much for the U.S. hold "getting shakier by the

month." Regardless of the war's outcome in an ultimate Ukrainian victory, or military stalemate, or forced territorial amputation, Washington's "leadership" of the Western alliance is firmly reestablished after a period of uncertainty.

Further, as NATO declarations make clear, U.S. leadership is successfully enlisting its partners in the growing rivalry with China. The anti-imperialist left may wish it were different, but there's no point trying to deceive ourselves.

On the purely military front, U.S. support for Ukraine is not all that it could or needs to be. By many accounts, U.S. advisors gave sophisticated "training" to Ukrainian forces in highly coordinated operations for their much-advertised spring counteroffensive. But without the necessary air power (the F-16s that Ukraine requested from the beginning) those methods don't work, resulting in big losses for very few gains until the Ukrainian military shifted back to the smaller-unit probes and improvised assaults they know best.

To pinpoint what's most important for the United States and NATO, I think Levitt and some others on the left are missing the big point. It's laid out in an important piece by Grey Anderson and Thomas Meaney, "NATO Isn't What It Says It Is" (*New York Times*, July 12, 2023). The authors write that

"NATO, from its origins, was never primarily concerned with aggregating military power... Rather, it set out to bind Western Europe to a far vaster project of a U.S.-led world order... In that mission, it has proved remarkably successful."

The point is worth spelling out: *"In fact, NATO is working exactly as it was designed by postwar U.S. planners, drawing Europe into a dependency on American power that reduces its room for maneuver. Far from a costly charity program, NATO secures American influence in Europe on the cheap. U.S. contributions to NATO and other security assistance*

programs in Europe account for a tiny fraction of the Pentagon's annual budget — less than 6 percent by a recent estimate. And the war has only strengthened America's hand."

Indeed, in the years preceding this war, voices and governments in Europe were increasingly questioning NATO's mission, and U.S. dominance. No more — the alliance's reinvigorated energy and purpose is thanks to Vladimir Putin's awesome strategic "genius," as Donald Trump called it. Is that what "existential defeat" looks like?

Despite our sharp differences, I want to thank Jim Levitt and others who commented on my "Imperial Blowback" piece. Discussions like these are where ideas and analyses can be clarified and tested.

Empire in Decline, and Why?

Finally, I would offer a quite different scenario as to why, the U.S.-centered empire actually is "in decline" although far from "facing an existential defeat."

On one level the answer is obvious: The post-1991 euphoria over the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the notion that the moment of U.S. global dominance and triumph of the neoliberal economic order would be unchallenged and permanent, is itself worth examining as a case study in the production of ideology.

It's noteworthy how many purportedly intelligent wonks actually believed that end-of-history, new-world-order myth, no doubt in considerable part because they were well-paid to promulgate it. In any event, there was no way the U.S. "unipolar moment" would be permanent. It was becoming shaky well before the catastrophic events of 9/11 and the following upheavals.

The actual rhythm of U.S. imperial decline was rapidly accelerated by George W. Bush's disastrous wars (with plenty of bipartisan support) in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with the 2008 financial collapse and then the Great Recession, and rapid rise of China to the world's second largest economy. Those stories have been well documented and don't need repeating here.

In a kind of appalling symmetry, Russia's annexationist invasion of Ukraine and Putin's too-apparent designs for a 21st century version of the Tsarist empire have actually restored much of the military prestige and political authority that the United States had lost. That's what our present debate is about. And with all the shakiness in the world economy and financial system, the U.S. economy remains by far the strongest — especially with China facing major internal economic and demographic problems.

Is there then a serious threat to U.S. imperial power? I believe there actually is — but not really from the war in Ukraine, or Russia, certainly not BRICS, or even the

continued on page 30

Do We Need Them?

Banking for the Billions

By Luke Pretz

OVER THE COURSE of March and April 2023 three banks failed, the result of a cocktail of interest rate increases and poor risk management strategies by bankers, spooking venture capitalists and start-ups who withdrew their money *en masse*.

The failure of Silicon Valley Bank, First Republic Bank, and Signature Bank and their subsequent inability to cover the debts they owed, including deposits, exceeded the scale of the first year of the 2008 Financial Crisis. (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/business/bank-failures-svb-first-republic-signature.html>)

Compounding the crisis was the fact that the vast majority of deposits in the three banks that failed were uninsured. Having most or, in the case of Silicon Valley Bank, virtually all deposits in excess of the \$250,000 Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation insurance limit meant that roughly half a trillion dollars in deposits were unprotected on the banks' ledgers.

Fortunately for the depositors at those banks, many super-wealthy, the Federal Reserve and FDIC waived the deposit insurance limit and guaranteed everyone their money.

Motivated by the cloud of uncertainty surrounding the late-pandemic global economy, the Federal Reserve acted quickly to ensure that other banks had access to the funding needed to secure them against any potential wave of panic withdrawals and revelations of weak bank balance sheets.

The Federal Reserve also stepped in as a lender of last resort making loans available to banks via the discount window, 90-day loans, and the establishment of the Bank Term Funding Program, which are one-year loans collateralized by Treasury Bonds held by the banks.

The swift actions by the Fed, to ensure that banking institutions would have access to the credit they needed to ensure adequate funds to pay their debts to other lenders on time, appear to have stabilized the financial sector for the time being.

As does any economic crisis, near crisis, or glimpse at a crisis to come, this most recent set of bank failures give us a chance to

Luke Pretz is an economist, independent researcher, and member of the Center for Popular Economics' research collective.

peer into the hidden abode of the capitalist system and take stock of its inner workings. The crisis gives us a chance to pause and ask what are banks and what is their role in a capitalist society?

Importantly, the near financial crisis this spring, which demonstrated the risks of an economic system that relies on financial speculation, also gives us a chance to reflect on whether banks will be a feature of a democratic and socialist society.

This article takes up that challenge, looking under the hood of the capitalist system. In the first half, banking and finance in a capitalist society is critically described. Special attention will be paid to how capitalist banking limits economic democracy and the role that banking plays in stemming economic crises for the capitalist class.

The second half of the article explores the role of banking, or the lack thereof, in a socialist society; both market socialist and planned socialist systems will be considered. Again, special attention will be paid to the constraints that banking and financial markets place on democracy and worker self-direction.

What is a Bank?

At their core, commercial banks — the banks important for households — are institutions that make loans in the hope that those who borrow the money can pay it back in full plus interest and fees.

Investment banks on the other hand are banks that act as consultants and underwriters to firms wanting to create securities like stocks and bonds. Investment banks make money by charging consultant fees, and by selling the securities they create with those firms for more money than they paid for them.

Following passage of the Banking Act of 1933, commonly referred to as Glass-Steagall, there was a clear division between the types of banking institutions. But by the 1980s and 1990s the legal distinction between commercial and investment banking was severely weakened.

By 1999 the Financial Services Modernization Act was passed, repealing the portions of the Banking Act that made the commercial/investment banking distinction.

This created the legal conditions for the 2008 Financial Crisis.

Banks, by virtue of their charter, are enabled to issue loans by electronically creating liquid funds (aka money) to loan to businesses or individuals. Banks also use these liquid funds to purchase financial assets like stocks or bonds. Loans, stocks, bonds, and other financial instruments are assets because they are either a flow of funds paid to the bank, or can be sold to pay back a bank's debts — usually both.

A bank's debts, or liabilities, are the origin of the liquid funds that they transferred to other entities while making loans — they create the electronic funds with which those entities purchased assets, or made loans based on the funds that *they* have received.

The money that people or businesses deposit into a bank is a liability to the bank — the bank must give the depositors the money in their accounts when they demand it, and pay the bank's debts when they come due. To do this, the value of the bank's assets needs to be great enough to cover that cost, and it must be able to liquidate (turn into transferable funds) those funds fast enough.

In theory, a bank could electronically create funds to pay back those loans in the same way that they did to make their loans, but in practice only the Federal Reserve is able to do this on a large scale. Since everything is denominated in U.S. dollars, the Federal Reserve could refuse to honor the electronic funds that a bank created out of thin air, which reins in a bank's ability to create funds completely autonomously.

Put another way, banks are sites where funds are created and allocated to households, individuals and businesses in the form of loans. Banks are constrained by regulatory requirements on their balance sheets and, ultimately, by the willingness of the government to recognize those funds.

From this overview, it's clear that banks have a huge influence over what types of businesses operate and what types of purchases happen and, importantly, how many of them.

Like any other capitalist business, banks are motivated by one thing — profit. A bank's profits are derived from interest on loans, fees for various financial services, and

capital gains. The presence of the profit motive creates an incentive for banks to make as many loans as possible, which means loaning out or purchasing the greatest possible amount of financial assets within the legal and monetary constraints they face.

There is always the possibility that borrowers might not be able to pay back their loans, and if enough loans do not get paid back the banks that made those loans run the risk of not being able to make good on their own debt obligations, including paying depositors for the deposits in their accounts.

The consequence of that risk is enhanced as banks attempt to loan out increasingly large sums.

As banks issue more debts, their financial cushion between solvency and insolvency, their ability to cover their financial obligations to depositors and creditors, shrinks.

Central banking institutions like the Federal Reserve and other regulatory agencies attempt to manage that tendency by requiring banks to hold

certain amounts of capital on their balance sheets. Capital is the term for funds that a bank was able to use to make loans or purchase assets.

Those regulatory agencies walk a fine line: If the capital requirement is too great then there will be insufficient credit to keep the capitalist economy running smoothly in the medium term, or banks might push back politically when their ability to make profit is limited.

Capitalism as a Circuit

To fully appreciate banking's role in capitalism and economic crises, it is helpful to think of capitalism as a circuit. At one end capital in the form of money flows into the circuit as the means through which capitalists hire workers, acquire raw materials, and procure the machinery they need to produce their product.

The workers hired are put to work transforming those raw materials into a new

commodity, one which the business owners hope is more valuable than the money advanced to produce it. The finished product is then marketed and sold, a process that the business owners hope produces a profit — without a guarantee that it will.

If the circuit is disrupted at any point, such as a breakdown in the process of acquiring funding, resources and workers, or in selling the product, an individual firm runs the risk of going out of business because it's unable to cover or recover the costs of production.

At the macro level, if the disruptions to the circuit of capitalist production are systemic and extend beyond a handful of producers, the economy as a whole may be thrown into crisis through a series of cascading effects on adjacent industries — such as real estate development and lumber — and affect their ability to repay creditors.

The banking and financial system plays a key role smoothing out potential disruptions by loaning out money to capitalists to begin the process of producing commodities, expand productive capacities, or cover costs until they can sell their inventories.

Banks and financial institutions facilitate the transformation of commodities produced into commodities sold, through credit issued to individuals, including home loans, and other forms of consumer debt.

Limits on Banks' Ability

Banking and finance's ability to smooth out the circuit of capital is not unlimited because they are integrated into the circuit that they help smooth. If disruptions and their cascading effects begin to mount, the profit margins on the loans begin to shrink as borrowers are unable to keep up with their payments.

If the disruptions in the circuit of capitalist production become too great, banks may find themselves unable to make good on their obligation to their depositors and other creditors, leading to the sort of bank failures we saw during the 2008 financial crisis.

Finance and the overall economy have self-reinforcing tendencies towards instabil-

ity. When the economy is doing well, banks and other entities (including individuals and households) foresee more good times and act accordingly. There are only so many low-risk investments to make, so banks make increasingly risky investments or pass on the opportunity to profit.

This dynamic produces asset bubbles like the housing bubble we saw burst in 2008. Housing seemed like a sound investment because banks and other capitalists kept pumping investment into it — until they could not. The bursting of such bubbles and the recessions that follow cause the exact opposite problem; when capital most needs financing the basis for it is no longer there.

Banks, Planning, and Democracy

Banks are like economic planners in a capitalist economy. They pool and direct the flow of capital in an economy because of their outsized role in determining which firms and consumers get access to loans and credit.

The profit motive is the basis for a bank's judgement regarding who gets access to credit and who doesn't. The industries that are the most profitable and appear to have potential for growth over the term of the loan get the green light, while those that might be socially desirable but are less likely to turn a profit get passed over.

The poorest and most socially disadvantaged workers in our society are either denied access to credit that could be used to gain access to housing, healthcare or transportation, or are granted access at great financial and personal cost.

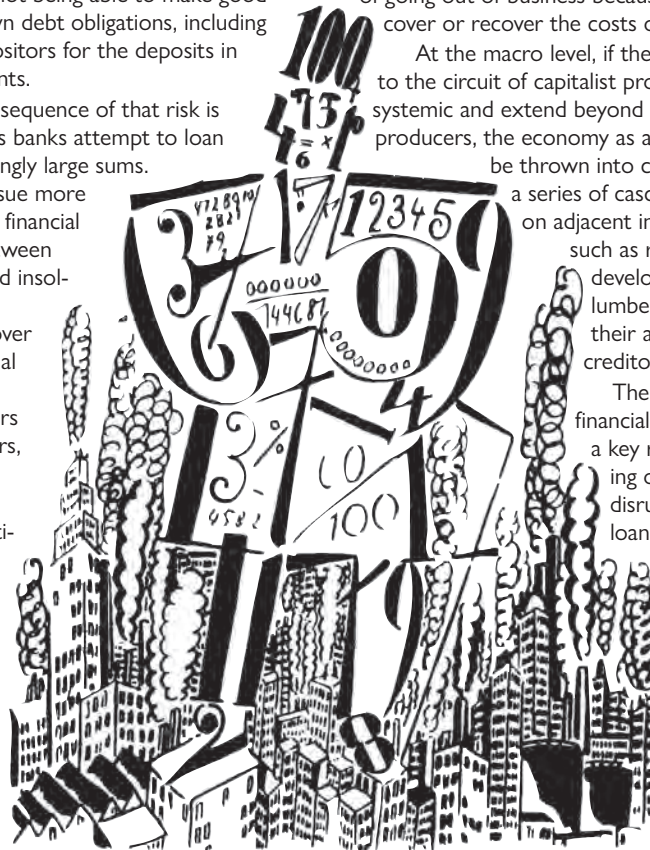
The centrality of profit-driven banking and finance in a capitalist economy is yet another undemocratic feature of the capitalist world we live and work in. Our lives are structured around the struggle against the top-down power of our bosses on the shop floor and in the office at the micro level.

At the macro level, life in capitalism is defined by our struggle, as the working class, to wrest control of funding and investment from the profit-driven banking system, big business, and their counterparts in government.

Those institutions continue to invest in fossil fuels, weapons manufacturers, prisons and other environmentally and socially damaging industries that will provide profits. At the same time, the world continues to spiral deeper into a crisis fueled by those same investments.

The resignation that much of the working class feels in the face of those converging crises is symptomatic of the undemocratic nature of our society. People increasingly understand that the crises, especially the climate crisis, requires marshalling society's resources to decarbonize how we produce and consume while also mitigating the current effects of climate change.

We know what needs to be done, but



"Mr. X of the United States" (1926) Frans Masereel

we lack the ability to directly influence what sort of enterprises and projects get prioritized because workers are excluded from the boardrooms of banking institutions.

Even if workers had a consequential seat on every bank's board of directors, we would still be faced with the dilemma that the profit motive imposes on all businesses. Our choice in a capitalist society would remain, either to maximize profits by investing in socially and environmentally corrosive policies that further exploitation, or get crushed by the competition.

A Socialist Future and Banks

Until workers wrest control of resource allocation from banking, finance and profit-seeking capitalists and refuse the power of their bosses at work, we will be unable to address the challenges that loom large in an egalitarian and pro-social manner.

What, then, happens to banking and finance once we do so and we begin building a democratic and socialist society? Does banking persist but under the direction of workers' committees? Is it relegated to the dustbin of history? Something else?

A partial answer to this question depends on how you envision a socialist society functioning.

For *market socialists* the answer is yes, banks will persist — i.e. for those who believe a socialist society will use markets as the primary means for allocating resources, and where most production would happen in independent worker cooperatives.¹

At the very least there would need to be a bank-like institution that would keep track of how much money each consumer and cooperative has, and would facilitate the procurement of inputs for the goods and services they produce.

Moreover, because wealth denominated in terms of money would be individually held by consumers and cooperatives, there will be the need to pool individually accumulated wealth to channel it into larger scale projects much like we already have in a capitalist economy.

Some Marxist theorists like John Roemer and Thomas Weisskopf have advocated for additional forms of finance that act as analogues for the stock market, to further facilitate the allocation of resources to firms in a market socialist economy.

The market socialist approach and its reliance on banking and finance would reproduce many of the same problems of capitalist banking. The socialist bank, seeking not to waste the wealth stored in its vaults, would behave much like a profit-maximizing capitalist bank and would prioritize financing projects that would guarantee the return of the funds loaned out — at the expense of socially desirable projects with a lower return on investment.

Similarly, participants in the socialist stock market would likely invest their funds in those worker cooperatives most likely to return their capital to them.

The worker cooperatives would also be in competition with one another and incentivized to engage in cost-cutting measures that are harmful to workers and communities, in order to demonstrate their commitment to profitability.

The market socialist system of banking and finance would similarly reproduce the undemocratic aspects present in capitalist society. The reliance on market mechanisms to determine how resources are allocated would diminish our ability to consciously, democratically, and directly allocate resources, placing a wall of market relations between us and the satisfaction of social needs.

Planned Socialist Economies and Banks

Alternatively, models of socialism that primarily allocate resources through democratic planning mechanisms largely eschew banking and finance.

Banks would not play a significant role in planned socialist economies, because there isn't the need for borrowing and lending through a profit-driven process to facilitate the start-up or growth of a firm, or to smooth over potential crises.

If collective control of resources and wealth is the starting point, then what remains is determining our needs and how to best satisfy them as a collective.

This of course is easier said than done. Valiant attempts at building a system of planning that did not rely on private property or markets were attempted, all of which ultimately failed at constructing something lasting. As socialists, what is important is that we learn from these past attempts in order to bring about something lasting.

In the Soviet experience² planning was orchestrated in a very top-down manner, with a few people at the top determining where resources would be invested, how much would be produced by each industry, and which enterprises would produce that output.

The planning committee *Gosplan* operated on a system of material balances where they assessed the resources that were available and what was needed, and matched the required resources to the goods and services that needed to be produced. This task was executed by a set of experts, with rank-and-file workers and households almost entirely excluded from the planning process.

Banking did exist in the Soviet Union, a singular state *Gosbank*. It was primarily used as an accounting tool for allocating funds for procurement by state enterprises and to facilitate foreign investment.

As such, *Gosbank* was subordinated to the planning process and acted more as a conduit for dispensing resources and funding rather than as the mechanism which decided which enterprise got what. So while banking did exist, its role was relatively minor compared to the role that banking plays in a capitalist

“Imperial Decline” — continued from page 27

challenge from China (although that's more important as the central emerging longterm global rivalry).

Rather, the *internal dysfunction of the U.S. political system* and the potential for a massive crisis of legitimacy, along with elements of social disintegration, constitute the real threat to U.S. power. The symptoms include mass shootings on a once-a-day-plus schedule, the epidemic of fatal drug overdoses, and systemic failures to address grotesque inequalities.

These are factors that we've been covering in articles and editorials (for example in our previous issue, “Noise As Usual’ — Or Crisis Now?” in ATC 225, and “It's All Out in the Open,” ATC 220, September-October 2022).

The potential exists for serious crises in the U.S. political system, due in part to the transformation of the Republican Party from a more-or-less traditional corporate conservatism to a white-supremacist, Christian-nationalist Trump cult. The political dysfunction of a ruling class that failed to intervene in the Republican Party to neutralize the power of Donald Trump, when it could have done so, is an astonishing spectacle in itself.

Much of the world, and elites in particular, are agape at the prospects of a 2024 Biden-Trump rematch and have no idea of what U.S. policies might look like in the aftermath of a possible far-right takeover of government — let alone if there's a better-organized effort to overthrow election results as in the 2020 “dress rehearsal.” None of this self-inflicted mess, however, reflects a U.S. “defeat” in Ukraine.

This isn't the place to ponder the details of these and other contingencies. But none other than Richard Haass, outgoing honcho of the Council on Foreign Relations, opines about the biggest factor in global instability — “it's us” — and I think he's on to something. (“To Foreign Policy Veteran, the Real Danger Is at Home,” *New York Times*, July 1, 2023)

Hanging over all this is what Nature is telling us in the appalling summer of 2023 with huge parts of North America, Europe and Asia burning up or flooding out, with the biggest part of the hurricane season still to come. No imperialist power struggle can begin to resolve a crisis that only an ecosocialist transformation could address. ■

society.

In many regards the highly centralized approach to economic planning was initially effective at developing USSR's industrial capacity and improving the standard of living for many of its inhabitants through massive infrastructural projects. The logic behind its effectiveness was that the Soviet economy could identify economic and social needs and direct materials to satisfy those needs without the mediation of the market mechanism, unlike the chaotic and unplanned economic development of capitalist societies.

This approach to planning was incredibly undemocratic and excluded rank and file workers, students, parents and all manner of consumers who were left out of the decision-making process. The undemocratic nature of the system produced contradictions that led to inefficiencies in the planning process, especially as it related to consumer goods, and a high degree of state coercion.

As the Soviet economy became increasingly industrialized and increasingly complex so did the task of top-down planning. Without the households and workers who consume and perform the work thoroughly integrated into the planning process, how could planners accurately predict the variety and number of things like shoes, home decor, clothing, etc?

The use of coercion and force to compel Soviet workers into action was also a consequence of the lack of democracy within the Soviet society. Who wants to work in a society that only values their ability to work in fulfillment of a plan in which they have no say nor really reap the rewards?

Democratic and Participatory Systems

Democratic and participatory planning is an alternative to both profit driven systems of market allocation and bureaucratic top-down central planning.³ The basic premise of democratic planning is that all people involved or affected by the use of a set of resources have the right to participate in the process of deciding how those resources will be used.

Proposals for democratically planned economic systems abandon markets, including financial markets, which allocate resources based on profitability rather than social or personal need. They also abandon markets because of their undemocratic nature.

Similarly, proposals for democratically planned economic systems reject the highly centralized mode of planning because it shuts out those who have the on-the-ground knowledge and experience to best judge how resources are spent and how needs are met.

While there are numerous proposals for how democratic and participatory planning would take place, their unifying theme is that the planning process involves three parties — those doing the work of producing, those consuming, and the various constituencies

that are affected by the work and consumption.

Households and workers would estimate how much of what they want to consume and produce, respectively. If there was a mismatch between the parties they would engage in a process of negotiation that would result in adjusted estimated consumption and production plans.

The process of negotiating these plans extend beyond quantitative questions and into qualitative questions about how these plans will be fulfilled. At this point various community constituencies enter into the conversation about resource allocation.

People invested in preserving certain parts of the landscape, reducing noise, or preserving a community hangout have a chance to intervene. While these conversations might be challenging or cumbersome at times, they open up space for a community to self-determine what it values and how it wants to proceed.

In doing so, space is created for new knowledge and information to be registered in the planning process that would not emerge if we were relying on capitalists or a committee of central planners to make those decisions. As a result, decisions would more directly represent the community they affect and more accurately satisfy their needs.

Where do banks fit in in a democratically planned economy? In the initial stages of building a democratic and socialist society

it might be the case that a national banking system would be necessary, especially if the economy existed amidst non-socialist economies or as a part of a constellation of independent socialist economies.

In this case the banking system would act as conduit between economies that were not totally integrated with one another, serving as a mechanism for wealth transfers and trade between economies. The goal however, would be to ultimately eliminate the need for banking altogether, entrusting the process of planning and allocation to the people best suited to the task — us. ■

Notes

1. John Roemer lays out a vision of a market socialist society in his short book *Free to Lose: An Introduction to Marxist Economic Philosophy*. The collection of essays *Equal Shares: Making Market Socialism Work* also presents a case for market socialism. For a critical perspective on market socialism David McNally's *Against the Market: Political Economy, Market Socialism and the Marxist Critique* is an excellent introduction.
2. Chapter 2 of George Garvey's *Money, Financial Flows, and Credit in the Soviet Union* presents a good history of the development of the Soviet financial system through the reforms of the 1960s. Robert Brenner's articles, "The Soviet Union & Eastern Europe, Part 1," in *Against the Current* #30, January-February 1991 and "Soviet Union-Eastern Europe, Part II," *ATC* #31, March-April 1991 present a clear picture of the structure of the Soviet economy and its limitations.
3. Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel's book *Looking Forward: Participatory Economics for the Twenty First Century* and Pat Devine's article "Participatory Planning Through Negotiated Coordination," *Science & Society*, Vol. 66, No. 1, Spring 2002, 72-85 layout thorough visions of what a participatory, democratic, and planned economy could look like

The following appeal was issued July 26, 2023 by the Russian Socialist Movement:

A FEW HOURS ago it became known that the FSB [Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation — editor] had opened a criminal case against well-known left-wing political scientist and sociologist, editor of the *Rabkor* online magazine Boris Kagarlitsky. The formal reason for initiating the case was the alleged "justification of terrorism," but we are absolutely sure that the persecution of Kagarlitsky is a political reprisal for his views.

Recently, Boris has been actively commenting on the current political situation, openly criticizing both the domestic and foreign policies of the Russian authorities.

The regime repeatedly tried to silence the political scientist — in 2018, the Institute of Globalization and Social Movements (ISMO), headed by Kagarlitsky, was recognized as a foreign agent, and in April last year, the status of a foreign agent was assigned to himself.

Having started his activity back in the Soviet Union, Kagarlitsky was first imprisoned during the rule of Yuri Andropov. Under Yeltsin, during the events of October 1993, he opposed the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet, for which he was detained and severely beaten. In 2021, for calls to participate in protests after the elections to the State Duma, he served 10 days of administrative arrest. Now Kagarlitsky can go to jail for up to five years.

The criminal case against Boris Kagarlitsky is an attack on the entire left movement. You can disagree as much as you like with individual statements and conclusions made by him in different periods of public activity, but we will resolve all our contradictions in the course of an open and honest discussion, when Boris is free.

We call on all socialist and communist organizations to organize a broad solidarity campaign and demand the immediate release of Boris Kagarlitsky and all political prisoners.

In his latest articles and speeches, Kagarlitsky remained invariably optimistic about the prospects for the current Russian government, or rather, their absence. Objective reality shows that this optimism is fully justified — starting a total cleansing of the remnants of civil society, the authorities are trying to plug a leak the size of a core with a bottle cap.

Organize a broad solidarity campaign and demand the immediate release of Boris Kagarlitsky and all political prisoners!

Petition campaigns for Kagarlitsky's freedom are circulating. One of these is online at: <https://www.change.org/p/free-boris-kagarlitsky>.

REVIEW

Revolution in Retrospect & Prospect By Michael Principe

Revolution:

An Intellectual History

By Enzo Traverso

Verso, 2021, 464 pages, \$34.95 cloth.

REVOLUTION, ENZO TRAVERSO'S impressive engagement with revolutionary theory, practice and imagery, is filled with noteworthy insights and nuanced connections between ideas and events that will cause the reader — even when familiar with the subjects — to pause, reflect and reconsider the material.

Traverso states his intent regarding the expansive topic of revolution: “[M]y book does not pretend to transmit the lessons of the past; it is simply an attempt at critical knowledge and interpretation. This is the main task that my generation can accomplish today.” (xv)

From this perspective, those who identify with or see themselves as participants in a revolutionary project, have been propelled, perhaps unhappily, into a time of partial introspection, but a period that can, from within, hopefully muster the conceptual resources to open a new revolutionary sequence.

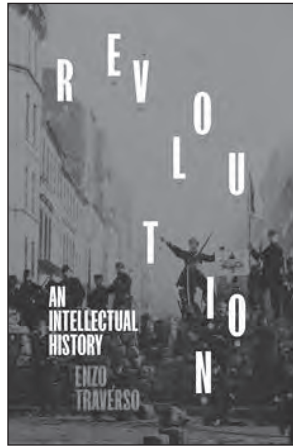
Telling us early on that his method in approaching revolution is inspired by both Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin (9), the book is in part a meditation on images, including Benjamin's concept of dialectical image, to which Traverso repeatedly returns.

A few pages later Traverso tells the reader his methodology lies singularly in Benjamin's “concept of the ‘dialectical image,’ which grasps at the same time a historical source and its interpretation.” (26)

This theoretical scaffolding is intentionally loose. What is clear is that this mode of thinking about history opposes progressive, linear or deterministic understandings. Benjamin criticized the theorists of the Second International on this point.

Traverso sees much of Marxist thought since then as still affected by this approach. In contrast, he writes that “The dialectical images emerge from the combination of two essential procedures of historical investigation: collection and montage.” (26)

Michael Principe is professor of philosophy at Middle Tennessee State University and chapter vice-president for United Campus Workers-Communication Workers of America (Local 3865). He is a member of the Middle Tennessee branch of Solidarity.



For Benjamin, the hope is that a way forward can be found that redeems the past and can initiate, via revolution, a new, truer history. Employing a similar method, Traverso hopes to reveal the relevance of the past for left-wing radicalism which he asserts must move “far beyond the legacy of exhausted political models (parties, strategies) ...” (27)

This task is a mighty one toward whose end

Traverso piles image upon dialectical image. At one level, he counts as images to be analyzed the following: “locomotives, bodies, statues, columns, barricades, flags, sites, paintings, posters, dates, singular lives...” (27) All of these and more also compose larger imagistic constructions which constitute the main body of Traverso's text.

While Benjamin criticizes some Marxist understandings of history, he does so only in the sense that they mimic bourgeois historiography. Traverso, on the other hand, is interested in applying Benjamin's methodology to the self-understandings of Marxist and radical theory and practice over the large swath of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Locomotives and Brakes

The meditative tone is set in the introduction through a wonderfully insightful engagement with the painting, *The Raft of the Medusa* by Théodore Géricault, read as an allegory expressing both resignation and hope for the shipwreck of revolutions.

In the painting, barely visible on the horizon, is a ship that might save those clinging to the raft. Traverso offers up a compelling analysis of the painting's substantial influence on revolutionary iconography. He concludes, though, that the “shipwreck of twentieth-century revolutions,” is still waiting for its raft. (9)

In less metaphorical terms, speaking of revolutions, he writes, “The key to durably preserving their liberating potential has not yet been found...” (25) With this, the tone is set for the entirety of what follows.

Each chapter can be read as providing a dialectical image. Considering them separately gives some sense of Traverso's scope and method.

Chapter 1, “The Locomotives of History,” begins with Marx's famous remark that “revolutions are the locomotives of history,” which, as Traverso indicates, was written in an era of industrialization and “railway fever.”

From there, he explores locomotive imagery in the revolutionary tradition, as well as the way in which trains contributed to industrial capitalism's development of “homogeneous, global time.” (41)

The chapter's collection of ideas and images contains the observation that it was through passenger trains that the word “class” entered wide usage, discussions of the role of trains in the Mexican Revolution and in the civil war following the 1917 Russian revolution, including Trotsky's “staff headquarters on wheels.”

For Traverso, however, this imagery is also problematic insofar as it “attributes to this process a character both teleological (rails and known destinations) and mechanical (the speed and power of an engine) that hurts Marx's vision of [revolutionary] politics.” (50)

By the time that Rosa Luxemburg writes *The Accumulation of Capital*, the imagery has shifted considerably: “With the railways in the van, and ruin in the rear capital leads the way, its passage is marked by universal destruction.” (60)

The shelf-life of the image ultimately expires. Traverso concludes the chapter again citing Benjamin: “Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train — namely the human race — to activate the emergency brake.” Traverso adds, “Today, railways evoke Auschwitz sooner than glorious revolutions.” (77)

Chapter 2, “Revolutionary Bodies,” again presents the reader with an array of understandings regarding bodies in revolutionary thought and practice. Traverso begins with the observations of participants in and observers of revolution “astonished by the unexpected and extraordinary spectacle of the strength of human beings who suddenly merged and acted as a single body.” (80)

From there he gives accounts of the violence, often ritualized, committed on bodies from the French revolution through the Spanish civil war, and beyond. He records how the bodies of revolutionaries are themselves animalized in anti-Bolshevik propaganda posters, or when Winston Churchill writes that the Russian revolution installed “an animal form of barbarism,” embodied by “swarms of typhus-bearing vermin or troops of ferocious

baboons amid the ruins of cities and corpses of their victims.” (92)

Detailed discussions of the meaning of Lenin’s preserved body, Alexander Bogdanov’s speculations on the possibility of immortality in the communist utopian future, the sexual liberation and the later puritanical asceticism that followed the Russian revolution, and Soviet debates on Taylorism (the productive body) are all part of the montage created by Traverso.

Memory, Legacy, Iconography

Chapter 3, “Concepts, Symbols, Realms of Memory,” weaves together more disparate elements. The concept of revolution itself is interrogated. Traverso tells the reader that revolutions “have rarely created ‘realms of memory’ shared on a global scale.” (148) They are, even when universally recognized, distinctly national events.

Nonetheless, the concept of revolution itself, he tells us, carries a “universal legacy,” though only with the French revolution does it acquire the meaning of “social and political rupture.” Previously its meaning, borrowed from astronomy, is more akin to rotation.

Hence the Glorious Revolution of 1688 is so-named by the British insofar as it marks a restoration of monarchy. The American revolution is similarly so-called only in retrospect, with “revolution” largely replacing “War of Independence.”

On Traverso’s analysis, when revolutions operate as rupture, an empty space opens where the new political form is undetermined. Filling this space in the Marxist tradition has been the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” which Traverso believes is too insubstantial and slides too easily into authoritarianism.

The assortment of symbols insightfully and sometimes controversially discussed here is vast. The lens through which Traverso views the erection of a long list of monuments and museums is particularly artful. In most cases, he argues, this represents domestication, a backward-looking temporality, and the end of revolutionary dynamism.

Worth noting too is Traverso’s interrogation of the image of barricades representing an insurgent people, which he sees as eventually supplanted by a vision of revolutionaries as part of an organized military operation. Iconic images like the storming of the Winter Palace in Serge Eisenstein’s *October* helped cement this vision, even though the Palace was never stormed in this way.

In “iconizing” an event, the revolutionary tradition separates it from the present. Traverso writes, “In this way, ideas were incorporated into a scholastic cannon — the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism — and symbols created a frozen archive ready to be exhibited in the rooms of a museum.” (217)

Chapter 4, “The Revolutionary Intellec-

tual, 1848-1945,” reads a bit like a sociological study. Exactly what is a revolutionary intellectual? Traverso concludes the chapter with an ideal type which includes: ideological commitment, utopianism, moral commitment, bohemian marginality, mobility, and cosmopolitanism.

He includes tables listing 124 intellectuals from the 19th and 20th centuries, from Russia, Central and Western Europe, the Americas, and the Colonial world, indicating education level (almost all have university educations), occupation (journalism dominates), whether imprisoned (most), killed, participated in revolutions, or held power (very few — mostly Russians who were later victims of Stalin).

Among the issues explored in this context are the relationship of intellectuals to social class, Marxism’s more ambivalent view of bohemian intellectuals in contrast to that found in anarchism, and the complicated relationships of intellectuals to all forms of state power.

Negative Liberty or Liberation?

Chapter 5, “Between Freedom and Liberation,” navigates the varied terrain of attempts to demystify and “unveil the hypocrisy and deception of capitalist freedom.” (341) This kind of freedom, Traverso notes, is what Isaiah Berlin called negative liberty — atomized individuals and a market society. He observes that this “genealogy of freedom has today triumphed with the World Bank and the IMF.” (338)

The key distinction Traverso analyzes is between freedom as a static condition already existing in the world versus freedom as a liberatory project: “From the French Revolution onwards, freedom cannot be dissociated from liberation, that is from the representation of human beings breaking the chains of oppression, demolishing the walls of despotism and going to the barricades.” (347)

Such an approach runs up against attempts at bourgeois domestication or co-optation. As an imagistic example, Traverso examines a number of images of slaves being “given” freedom from above, by their white or colonial masters. Citing Herbert Marcuse, Traverso speaks to the way proclamations of freedom within the status quo

can become empty and hide new forms of oppression, whether overtly totalitarian or in a subtler form in “one-dimensional” society.

In this context, Traverso adds to his assemblage some of the conceptions of freedom put forward by 20th century philosophers, including accounts of Sartre, Foucault, Arendt and Fanon. In his brief discussion of Sartrian existentialism, he leans heavily on Marcuse’s criticisms of an ontological freedom that “remains the same before, during, and after the totalitarian enslavement of man.” (354)

Unfortunately, Traverso engages not at all with the large postwar output of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir attempting to develop a social and liberatory conception of existentialist freedom.

Traverso sees Foucault and Arendt as somewhat equivocal figures. While Foucault, more popular on the left than Arendt, is capable of interesting analyses of power, it is a power that cannot be “destroyed through ‘liberating’ action.” In fact, Foucault “simply evacuates the question of liberation.” (357)

Hannah Arendt, for Traverso, leaves a slightly larger space for liberation, but only as an ephemeral act, separated from freedom which must be institutionalized in a republican political system that lacks social content, i.e. does not include “emancipation from economic and social oppression...” He concludes that Arendt “defended a strange concept of freedom, swinging between Rosa Luxemburg and Tocqueville...”

With Fanon, liberation connects directly to anticolonialism. Here, Traverso offers a neutral, descriptive take on Fanon’s idea that the liberatory violence of the colonized is necessary and regenerative.

Long Road to Liberatory Freedom

Working through the theory and practice of liberatory freedom as connected to anti-colonialism, socialism and feminism, Traverso returns regularly to the contrast between the emotional and subjective intensity of liberation versus its problematic institutionalization. In this context, Rosa Luxemburg’s “severe” criticisms of the Bolsheviks in power found in *The Russian Revolution* are cited several times throughout the book, as well as serving as one of the epigraphs to this

ENZO TRAVERSO’S STUDIES comprise an important body of work on European history, including the Nazi genocide, modernity and Marxism. His article “Inside the European Cataclysm” of 1914-45 appeared in *ATC* 176 (May-June 2015). *Against the Current* has reviewed a number of Traverso’s books. The following are accessible in our online archive at <https://againstthecurrent.org/>.

Peter Drucker reviewed *The Marxists and the Jewish Question. The History of a*

Debate in *ATC* 65 (November-December 1996). Michael Löwy reviewed *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* in *ATC* 190 (September-October 2017). David Finkel reviewed *The End of Jewish Modernity* in *ATC* 194 (May-June 2018). Alan Wald reviewed *The Origins of Nazi Violence* in *ATC* 112 (September-October 2004); *Fire and Blood. The European Civil War 1914-1945* in *ATC* 183 (July-August 2016); and *The New Faces of Fascism. Populism and the Far Right* in *ATC* 201 (July-August 2019). ■

chapter.

Liberation from time is the final piece of the constellation of fragments composing the image of freedom and liberation.

Traverso charts a clear line from Ludite machine-breakers who “were simply expressing their radical rejection of the capitalist organization of time” (378) to Marx’s repeated remarks that the proper measure of progress is not work but free time, to Paul Lafarge advocating a three-hour workday, writing from prison that the proletariat must proclaim “the Rights of Laziness, a thousand times more noble and more sacred than the anaemic Rights of Man concocted by the metaphysical lawyers of the bourgeois revolution.” (381)

Traverso concludes with an account of Benjamin’s “messianic time” which includes “a vision of history as an open temporality.” As Benjamin understood it, “the past was at the same time permanently threatened and never altogether lost; it haunted the present, and could be reactivated.” (385)

Revolutionary temporality is here dialectical, rather than linear or fixed.

Chapter 6, “Historicizing Communism,” opens with an important epigraph from Marx and Engels’ *The German Ideology* which reflects the positive moment of Traverso’s evaluation of communism as movement, rather than entrenched party or regime: “Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.”

As he takes stock of communism’s legacy after the fall of the Soviet Union, this isn’t, though, the image that dominates. With a sober voice, Traverso writes that “The binary vision of a revolutionary Bolshevism opposed to a Stalinist counterrevolution allows one to distinguish between emancipatory violence and totalitarian repression — which is crucial — but also hides the connections that unite them and avoids any interrogation about their genetic link.” (399)

The brutality of the white counterrevolution forced the Bolsheviks into “pitiless” dictatorship, writes Traverso, with Stalinism emerging as part of the process that was the Russian revolution. The international communist movement became thereafter characterized as a mass revolutionary army.

Extending into the 1960s, radical movements “obsessively” emphasized a violent clash with the state. While accepting the idea of emancipatory violence, communism’s legacy and meaning for Traverso includes both “The happiness of insurgent Havana on the first of January 1959 and the terror of the Cambodian killing fields...” (433)

While communism as social democracy in postwar western Europe also has a lineage with the October revolution, observes

Traverso, it too, with the fall of the Soviet Union, met its end in the 1980s, turning into neoliberalism.

In the short epilogue, the temporal perspective shifts very briefly to the present and future. While the “collapse of communism as regime also took with it communism as revolution,” a new generation is reconstructing a distinctive utopian imagination:

“The experiences of the ‘alter-globalization’ movement, the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the Spanish Indignados, Syriza, the French Nuit debout and gilets jaunes, feminist and LGBT movements, and Black Lives Matter, are steps in the process of building a new revolutionary imagination... severed from twentieth-century history and deprived of a usable legacy.” (443)

Traverso still asserts, though, that there is a need to “extract the emancipatory core of communism” from the “field of ruins” that is the past which still must be “worked through” by the new generation.

His closing sentences again evoke Benjamin with the hope that through new battles and new constellations, “the past will re-emerge and memory ‘flash up’. Revolutions cannot be scheduled, they always come unexpectedly.” (444)

Closure or Possibility?

This Benjamin-like ending is a bit abrupt and in some tension with what has come before. The overriding theme of the book is that of closure and failure. Twentieth Century communism, writes Traverso, reaches something like the endpoint of the “dialectic of enlightenment,” with technical rationality reigning supreme. (351)

For Benjamin, the meaning of the past is never fixed. Prior revolutionary projects may seem dead, but they can live again and find

success now or in the future. Traverso seems both to agree with this and, at the same time, fix the meaning of communism’s past.

Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” which inhabits the deep background of the entirety of Traverso’s book, is born from profound desperation. As fascism spreads triumphantly across Europe, Benjamin, just months before his suicide, still entertains the hope that, the revolutionary proletariat, characterized by him as the Messiah, can change the course of history at any moment. The necessary subjectification or class consciousness arrives through seeing things obscured by bourgeois ideology.

Here Benjamin’s notion of the dialectical image is key. While idiosyncratic, he clearly locates himself in the Marxist tradition, examining the conditions for the proletariat to recognize itself as a class in-itself.

Traverso’s images lead us forward less directly. Hence the emphasis on endings, rather than radical possibility.

Finally, to the extent that *Revolution* contains a tension between overarching closure and fraught possibility, we might interpret it too as a large-scale potentially explosive dialectical image illuminating what was previously obscured. What Traverso sees as the wreckage of the revolutionary past in itself contains no rational order that might guarantee a successful extraction of “communism’s emancipatory core.”

The future is permanently undecided, and will be made by us. Read this way, the book’s affirmative moment may, without predicting the future, and in the spirit of Benjamin, unsettle today’s radical consciousness enough to intimate the possibility of a future historical break. ■

A World on Fire

“WITH GLOBAL TEMPERATURE records breaking and fires and floods raging around the world, our house is truly on fire.” Kristina Dahl, principal client scientist at the Union of Concerned Scientists, made this statement in an interview with CNBC.

This summer wildfire season in Canada provides a stunning sample of the global climate disasters that scientists were predicting to occur by the end of this century — now occurring 75 years ahead of schedule. The country has never experienced anything resembling it.

On any given day, over 1000 fires are burning in western Canadian forests — but also in the east, in Quebec and Nova Scotia, on unprecedented scales. Early in the season, by June 27, Canadian fires had already surpassed the previous total seasonal record, set in 1989, when it reached 18.8 million acres.

Before mid-July this year, the burn area was at 23 million acres. As of August 21, it stood at 37.8 million acres, twice the previous total record, consumed by over 5800 fires, with the season by no means over as it annually runs through October. At least four firefighters have tragically died, and the disruption of mass evacuations especially in the British Columbia and North West Territories is dramatic. Indigenous First Nations communities are particularly hard hit.

Almost the entire 20,000 population of Yellowknife, the NWT capital, was forced to flee as the wildfire reached within ten miles of the city. Providing refuge in Alberta, shelters, hotel rooms and emergency facilities are bursting.

Canada of course is no exception — with fires ravaging vulnerable regions from Italy and Greece to Tenerife in Spain’s Canary Islands and western U.S. states, including the unimaginable horror of Maui. It’s more than global warming — it’s a deadly global warning. ■

REVIEW

Aaron Lecklider's *Love's Next Meeting*

The Red and the Queer

By Alan Wald

Love's Next Meeting:

The Forgotten History of Homosexuality and the Left in American Culture

By Aaron Lecklider

University of California Press, 2021, 354 pages, \$19.95 hardback.

AARON LECKLIDER'S DAZZLING and disarming book is nothing less than the excavation of a crime scene. In sleuth-like fashion, the author has tracked down overwhelming evidence of a disquieting cover-up of the sizable presence of sexual dissidents within the mid-twentieth century Communist Left.

Pithy and provocative, *Love's Next Meeting* is the culmination of Lecklider's years long deep dive into the question of why sexual dissidents were attracted to the Old Left even though the Left officially rejected them.

The scope and exact character of this interaction between the two pariah identities — Red and Queer — has been long shrouded in mystery and mythology. All the same, his ensuing analysis is rendered in vivid prose that interlaces extraordinary archival research, inventive readings of neglected literary texts, and a panoply of astute conceptual insights.

Undeniably, homosexuality's relation to Communism is a tough subject to address at any time, but especially in this 21st century moment when a new Far Left's desired alliance of sexual dissidents and radicalism has become Ron DeSantis's worst nightmare.

In Florida and in many parts of the United States, gender non-conformists are up against not only harassment, vandalism, and assault, but a growing onslaught of bills banning transition care, limiting participation in competitive sports, dictating which bathrooms can and can't be used, restricting drag shows, and preventing schools from acknowledging students' identities.

And even though there may be a boomlet of talk in liberal circles about Bernie Sanders-style socialism, fearmongering about Marxism remains sufficiently entrenched from the Cold War so that labeling someone a "Communist" is the equivalent of spewing a hate epithet to much of the population.

Even so, there is probably no one better

Alan Wald is an editor of Against the Current and a member of Solidarity.

suit than Lecklider to tackle unapologetically and courageously what MAGA Republicans and others might see as a toxic combination of outlaw identities.

A cultural historian and professor of American Studies at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, and the author of an earlier volume about outsider intellectuals called *Inventing the Egghead* (2013), Lecklider has written a consistently intelligent and engaging book that is worthy of its subject.

With grace, wit and no small amount of taboo-skewering, he puts into conversation the deeply intertwined histories of what he calls "straight, gay, or otherwise queer" people (6) and the radical anti-capitalist movement. Optimistically, his achievement offers a foreglow of a more inclusive future for the study of the Far Left, one that is more accurate while also upholding the principles of queer pride, freedom, and acceptance.

Sexual Dissidence and the Left

I'm not entirely certain how one reviews a book that introduces scores of names of individuals and organizations probably unfamiliar to the general reader. Moving progressively through at least four decades, with sections devoted to broad arenas such as labor, literature, antifascism, and the Cold War, Lecklider gleefully seizes and spins our political imagination as he repeatedly demonstrates how allegedly "deviant" sexual identities propel one toward social justice activism.

The eight chapters of the book are also a considered and sometimes unexpected commentary on the history of U.S. Communism. Here Lecklider frequently shines a revelatory light on various phases and policies of the CP-USA, as well as the party's membership composition and the artistic practices it inspired.

To be sure, some of this information is not entirely breaking news. Since the late 1980s, at a minimum, feminist scholars have discussed radical women writers, lesbian and straight, such as Josephine Herbst and Agnes Smedley.



Agnes Smedley

There are also specialists in African American literature who have treated gay and bisexual pro-Communists such as Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, and biographers have discussed Harry Hay (a former Communist turned founder of the homophile movement) and Anna Rochester (a Communist intellectual who was the life partner of labor researcher Grace Hutchins). These and other scholars have often aimed at "Queering the Left," the goal of which is to denaturalize conventional gender classifications to show them as socially and historically fashioned.

Lecklider certainly builds on, and acknowledges, this earlier work, but his own broader agenda is somewhat different and announced early in the book:

"It is my hope that careful consideration of the sexual and political deviance of the Left in American culture will demystify the attraction of the Left for many sexual dissidents, suggest the complexity of the relationship between homosexuality and the Left before sexual liberation [the 1960s], and reframe the politics of sexuality in moments when repression has been too often made into the whole story." (14)

In terms of "reframing," he articulates an ostensible contradiction at the heart of this revisionist project, one that I find to be an effective lens by which to grasp an extremely complex phenomenon that can't be captured by a single paradigm.

On the one hand, "The relationship between homosexuality and the Left was never easy. The vigorous opposition to homosexuality in American culture was often recapitulated on the Left, and at times leftists seemed to take a special interest in marginalizing homosexuals."

Then, on the other hand, "neither... the Left — or even the Communist Party — [was] defined entirely by cultural conservatism. Efforts to politicize homosexuality and envision homosexuals as part of a radical community disrupt notions of the Left as overly invested in disciplining gay men and women." (114)

This book ought to be the last nail in the coffin of "straightwashing" — obscuring history by making queer people appear heterosexual. Writing lucidly, and mostly

avoiding specialized jargon, Lecklider is so far ahead of the curve on research and rethinking that *Love's Next Meeting* can be said to establish a brand-new perspective for investigation.

Beyond Reductive Class Analysis

The volume kicks off with a singular narrative about Edward Melcarth (1914-72), an artist who was proudly homosexual and a member of the CP-USA from 1944 to 1948. Yet Lecklider is soon constructing the service roads to his main argument through a sequence of composite groupings of large numbers of actors and events.

One complicating factor to keep in mind: Even though Lecklider prioritizes Communism and homosexuals, other kinds of Marxists (especially Trotskyists) and sexual non-conformists come into play. Sometimes both political and sexual identifications are imprecise due to partial information or uncertain terminology, especially since there are many kinds of "Communist" identity and the exact definition of "queer" is variable across time and circumstances.

In his first chapter, Lecklider probes biographies and writings that reveal lived experiences of individuals. Among the most illuminating discussions is that of the romantic and political relationship between poets John Malcolm Brinnin (1916-1998), famous as author of *Dylan Thomas in America* (1955), and Kimon Friar (1911-1993), best-known for his translation of Nicos Kazantzakis's *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* (1958).

Both were members of the Young Communist League at the University of Michigan in the late 1930s, and their personal correspondence, to my knowledge never previously analyzed, documents their commitment to living homosexual lives while devoted to socialist commitment.

In Chapter 2, Lecklider shows how sexual politics inflected the Left beyond reductive class analysis to address issues such as free love, birth control, obscenity laws, and prostitution. This narrative begins with an "Anti-Obscenity Ball" hosted by the CP-USA's magazine *New Masses* in 1927, and goes on to examine various cartoons and columns in the publication, along with a satirical book called *Whither, Whither, After Sex, What?* (1930), to which several Communists contributed.

Following a discussion of figures such as *Modern Quarterly* editor V. F. Calverton (George Goetz, 1900-1940), and the race



Above, Kimon Friar, translator and writer; right, John Malcolm Brinnin, poet.

and sex dynamics of the Scottsboro Case (the Alabama frame-up of Black youth on false rape charges in 1931), Lecklider concludes: "Though the Left did not offer a consistently articulated politics around sexuality, neither was the subject of sex verboten in leftist print culture." (74)

Riddled With Contradiction

The section of the book on the treatment of homosexuality in Left publications commences with the rather astonishing early 1930s publication *San Francisco Spokesman* (later, *The Spokesman*). Edited by John Pittman (1906-1993), a lifelong Communist journalist, this African American newspaper issued a defense of homosexuality that was powerful and fiery.

Nevertheless, the prevailing treatment in Left magazines was quite different, a practice that "routinely produced work that cast homosexuals as reactionary and caricatured political enemies by depicting them as homosexuals." (79) Lecklider shows us a number of Communist cartoons that are disconcertingly homophobic.

Published writings about homosexuality in prison, penned by Communist victims of the state such as Benjamin Gitlow (1891-1965), took a distance from homosexuality while also offering "an opportunity to explore the social context of deviance." (92)

Turning to the homosexual presence as perceived in unions and among sex workers, Lecklider starts by exploring "The connec-

tion between occupational lives and queer identities..." (116) First and foremost are the maritime industries, which "incubated radical labor organizations that acknowledged sexual dissidents among their rank and file." (118)

This time the argument is illustrated by remarkable cartoons (often by Communist Pele deLappe, 1916-2007) that sympathetically depict both "queer solidarity and...male femininity." (127) Lecklider's discussion of sex work once again shows a dual character to the Left-wing response, acknowledging the economic motivations of those involved in the trade while characterizing it as "debased and exploitative." (118)

The discussions of "the woman question" in Chapter 5 and the production of "proletarian literature" (especially by writers of color) in Chapter 6 take us back to familiar sites

for the examination of radical gender politics. In the former area, Lecklider argues that the rebel politics of the CP-USA "attracted women who imagined their sexual dissidence as consistent with, and even essential to, revolutionary struggle." (151)

In treating the literary Left, he focuses on what he calls the "Queer Radicalism" of *Knock on Any Door* (1947) by Willard Motley (1909-1965) and the "Proletarian Burlesque" in *The Hanging on Union Square* (1935) by H. T. Tsiang (1899-1971). From divergent perspectives, these novels

"revealed how sexual dissidents could resist the state, threaten capitalism, and offer alternative avenues for pursuing queer pleasure and intimacy." (230)

Finally, there are two closing chapters about the impact and legacy of the Popular Front. The first, subtitled "Queer Antifascism," addresses how the anti-fascist movement allowed sexual dissidents to see themselves as key players in the democratization of the United States.

The last, subtitled "Deviant Politics in the Cold War," shows how both Communism and sexual dissidents were relegated back to the sidelines after World War II with the help of the homophile movement. The Mattachine Society (founded in 1950 as a national gay rights organization), for example, aimed to normalize itself by purging former Communists and militants in an effort to gain equal rights for "respectable" citizens.

A brief "Coda" is then attached, reminding the reader of John Malcolm Brinnin's 1942 poem "Waiting," from which Lecklider's book borrows a line for its title: "Of love's next meeting in a threatened space." (242)



Lecklider describes his discovery of an envelope among Brinnin's private papers at the University of Delaware Library that contained a feather sent from his lover, Kimon Friar, 85 years earlier.

For Brinnin, the phrase about "love's next meeting" in "Waiting" probably epitomized the dream of a shared future among comrades, sexual desire fused with political liberation. In examining the still-decomposing feather, which has a "pungent stench," Lecklider identifies the now-smelly plumage with the fate of that same utopian hope:

"Exposed to the air, its stark physicality, its fleshy reminder that it had once been attached to something that lived and breathed, reveals a complicated story of faith and loss; promise and betrayal; closeness and distance; fall and lift. It is, like the men who exchanged it, riddled with contradiction." (297)

Ghost of Homophobia Past

After finishing this book, no one should be able to approach

Communism and the Left with a presupposition of invisibility regarding queer activists, or the view that pro-Communist literature was limited to some occasional stereotypical representations of gay life.

At the same time, one is unlikely to forget sickening displays of prejudice that Lecklider cites, such as dictator Joseph Stalin's labeling of the views of Scottish gay Communist Harry Whyte (1907-1960), who claimed that homosexuals could be good comrades, those of "an idiot and a degenerate." (79)

Regretfully, despite impressive sites of homosexual acceptance by Leftists, as in the maritime industries, CP-USA members were not about to hit the dance floor of the annual *New Masses* ball singing "Glad to be Gay."

Nonetheless, the effort to cover as much previously uncharted ground as Lecklider attempts in *Love's Next Meeting* presents challenges that even the most sophisticated scholar can have difficulty in sorting out.

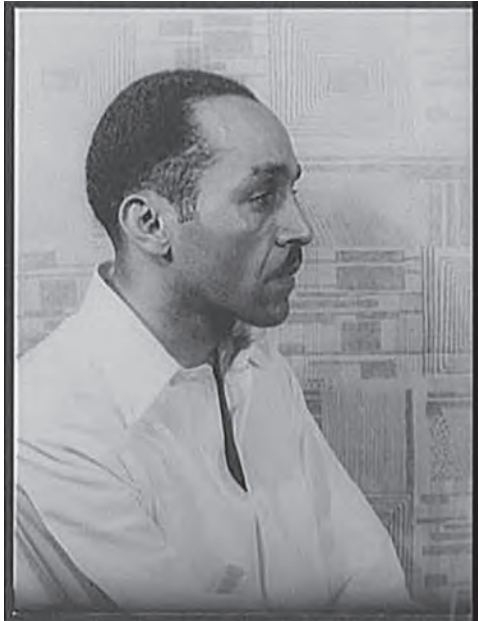
For the most part, I find *Love's Next Meeting* measured and persuasive, but none of us have the perfect solution when facing a situation where a massive amount of material must be squeezed into a constricted space. Too often Lecklider gives us only snippets of intricate lives, episodes, and political topics that can lend themselves to misunderstand-

ings or a variety of interpretations.

What happened to the remarkable John Pittman — did he sustain his fight for homosexual rights and dignity during his decades in the CP-USA (including a stint in Moscow), or succumb to the prevailing attitudes?

When and why did Brinnin and Friar leave the Communist movement, and how did their politics (and relationship) evolve after the 1930s? Sometimes the meaning of one's writings or views at a particular moment, or the character of one's political commitment and understanding of one's own sexuality, becomes clarified in the context of fuller biographical details.

In the case of H. T. Tsiang, the rather rosy and unproblematic description of this mega-eccentric's relations with the CP-USA is only possible by Lecklider's omitting reference to the public denunciation of Tsiang in



Willard Motley, novelist, 1947. Photo by Carl Van Vechten, Library of Congress.

the editorial section of the *New Masses* ("Between Ourselves") on 27 August 1935. At that time, it was declared that Tsiang was "not much of a writer," "his career as a Revolutionary is such as to hinder more than help," and that he was "unwanted at radical gatherings."

Left Alternatives

A clearer perspective on CP-USA cultural practice might be gained by comparisons with other Marxist tendencies, but the references to Trotskyism seem to be slipshod.

One example is the original and thoughtful discussion of an "intersectional critique of race and sexuality that placed Black homosexuality at its center" (101) in "Just Boys," a story published in a 1934 collection by fiction writer James T. Farrell (1904-79). Lecklider explains that

"Farrell's work did not adhere as close to an official Communist Party position on race as did Pittman's — [because] Farrell was, like Claude McKay, a Trotskyist." (101)

Farrell had, of course, read Trotsky — like Mike Gold and other Communists — but he was pro-Communist when he wrote that story and for several years to come. Farrell continued to contribute to the *New Masses* and *Daily Worker*, only switching allegiance to the politics of Trotskyism when the Moscow Trials began in 1936.

In McKay's case, there is no evidence of Trotskyist affiliation or activism, or even that much in the way of ideological agreement, although he had expressed considerable admiration for Trotsky a decade earlier (as reflected in his 1937 memoir, *A Long Way from Home*) and eventually became anti-Stalin.

The point here is not the minor one of misdating, since errors of this type can be found in any large scholarly book. The question implied is whether and how "Trotskyism" might have provided a different and perhaps even superior perspective in literature addressing the race/gender nexus.

Apropos Farrell, this would require a comparison of his writings before and after his Trotskyist political evolution, a difficult task in light of his extreme productivity, uncertainty as to when particular manuscripts were initially composed, and the change in his subject matter after leaving Chicago for New York.

Another approach to ascertaining an



H. T. Tsiang, novelist.

alternative attitude to homosexuality might be to compare reviews of the same books with queer subject matter that were published in the Communist and Trotskyist press. This would enable one to note distinctions between the two political movements' approaches to gender.

To take up this latter option, one might note that both the Communist *New Masses* (17 June 1947) and

Trotskyist *Militant* (5 June 1948) reviewed Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* in a friendly manner, possibly because Motley collaborated with both movements. The two reviews were by competent literary experts, James Light, later a specialist on Nathanael

West, and Paul Schapiro [a pseudonym for Paul Siegel], an eminent Shakespearean scholar.

As it turns out, references to homosexuality are invisible in each of the publications, and the name of Owen (the protagonist Nick Romano's male lover) is never mentioned. Light does make a reference to Nick Romano's "jackrolling" (without specifying that the target of this mugging was gay men), but Schapiro only cites Nick's failed marriage, stating that his impotence was the result of visiting cheap prostitutes.

My guess is that the two political movements were not dramatically far apart in their conventional thinking and blind spots on this subject, although one might expect more from the Trotskyists as they did not have to follow the increasingly reactionary Soviet line on homosexuals. According to Lecklider "the Communists banned 'degenerates' as early as 1938, and later specifically named 'homosexuality' as a grounds for disciplinary action." (270)

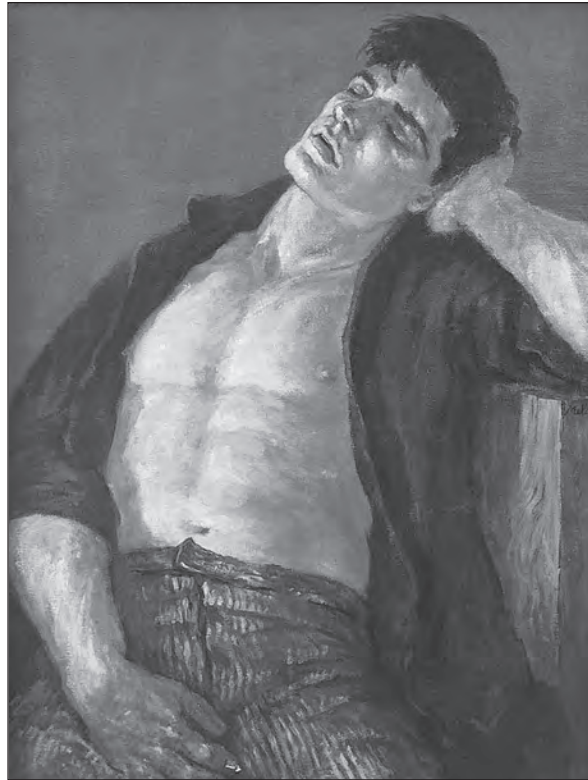
Lecklider also identifies Max Eastman (1883-1969) as a Trotskyist, which is more or less accurate apart from organizational affiliation, but he then seems confused about the subject of Eastman's well-known *Artists in Uniform* (1934). This is a study of repression of the arts under Stalin, as made clear by its subtitle, *A Study in Literature and Bureaucracy*.

Instead, *Love's Next Meeting* treats the book as an attack on "political writing" (27), a work advocating "manly writing" and "a tough realism" associated with Communist Mike Gold (1894-1967) — "that confronted social problems with open eyes and curled fists" (225). Ultimately, Lecklider declares Eastman "a champion of proletarian literature" (248), surely a misnomer for this romanticist author of *Colors of Life: Poems and Songs and Sonnets* (1918) and the novel *Venture* (1927).

Lecklider's approach of homing in on snippets of biographies and history with a sharp gaze on gender has the virtue of dispensing important insights even without telling the whole story. Yet some things are missed, or at least unclear.

The portrait of Willard Motley is fluent and engrossing, but he concludes that "Motley's novel [*Knock on Any Door*] departs from some of the proletarian literature that dominated the 1930s by omitting a Communist revolution or a labor strike." (208) On the one hand, I can't recall any radical fiction of the era depicting a Communist revolution; on the other, a labor strike is clearly part of the highly significant climax of *Knock on Any Door*.

The last pages alternate between the scenes of Nick Romano's execution by the



Edward Melcarth's "Junkie with Open Shirt," oil on canvas.

state and those of those of his old reform school friend Tommy being beaten by antiunion thugs precisely for his attempt to organize a strike. This juxtaposition actually confirms Lecklider's overall argument.

Rethinking the Future

The minor blemishes cited above are handily outweighed by Lecklider's success in establishing an overwhelming foundation for a more inclusive history. Other matters raised by limitations in *Love's Next Meeting* will need to be a component of ongoing discussions by the present and next generations of scholars.

For instance, Lecklider takes his distance from Stalin's Soviet Union several times but not very informatively for non-specialists, and sometimes he can rely on sarcastic asides.

One instance comes after quoting the 1940 *New Masses* statement of Communist writer Ruth McKenney (1911-72) that "women [in the Soviet Union] have been unconditionally and completely emancipated." Lecklider then quips: "To write, perchance to dream..." (154)

What might be more helpful, three decades after 1989, would be a substantially clearer perspective on what the social formation known as the USSR actually had been, and why it went so awry. We are told that the circumstances faced by the Bolsheviks in the decades after the Revolution were tough, but to what degree were dreams such

as McKenney's actually preposterous illusions, or understandable errors of judgment in light of contingent circumstances?

Were the actors in this book living a total lie in this regard, or were they feeding off an optimism closer to a half-truth? And what might this genre of political misapprehension tell us about the ingredients required for a more effective and long-lasting Red-Queer alliance?

There is also the need for researchers to undertake additional in-depth and critical interrogations of the kinds of identities and motives held by many of the individuals presented in this book, especially since gender expression and self-identity could be different in each decade.

To take one example, we could use more elaboration than Lecklider provides about the motives of Communists in same-sex relations who publicly repudiated other queers in vile terms. Anna Rochester, for instance, came forward to offer discrediting testimony against former Soviet intelligence agent Whittaker Chambers (1901-61) to the



Edward Melcarth, artist.

effect that he was a "homosexual pervert" (43); and CP-USA leader (and eventual chairwoman) Elizabeth Gurley Flynn (1890-1964) wrote in her memoirs that in prison "the disgusting lesbian performances were unbearable." (89)

Were these cynical attempts to prove their party loyalty by presenting the CP-USA line on "degenerates," or were these two

women genuinely muddled in some sense as to the reality of their own sexual orientation? Could it be that, like many cisgender people then and even now, they lacked a clear-eyed understanding of their own erotic needs and drives? One suspects a complex web of motives that is not always provided in *Love's Next Meeting*.

Still, at least we now understand much better how little we have understood aspects of the history of radicalism. Lecklider's compelling journey into yesterday surely holds promising implications for scholarship to come; if *Love's Next Meeting* doesn't reinvigorate interest in further research into sexuality and the Left, nothing will.

Far-reaching as well may be the germaneness of this book for those of us on the activist Left: A rethinking of the past can also assist in rethinking the future. ■

REVIEW

The Novel as Biography By Ted McTaggart

Radek:

A Novel

By Stefan Heym
Monthly Review Press, 2022,
616 pages, \$28 paper.

KARL RADEK IS best known to the world for his role in the Russian Revolution and the early years of the Soviet state and Communist International. A sometime ally of Leon Trotsky's Bolshevik-Leninist Opposition, Radek capitulated to Stalin following a period of exile in Siberia in the late 1920s before eventually perishing in the Great Purges of the following decade.

Born Karl Bernhardovich Sobelsohn in 1885 to a Lithuanian-Jewish family in what is now Lviv, Ukraine (then known as Lemberg, part of the Austria-Hungarian empire) in Radek, like many of the leaders of the Russian Revolution, led a life that knew no national boundaries.

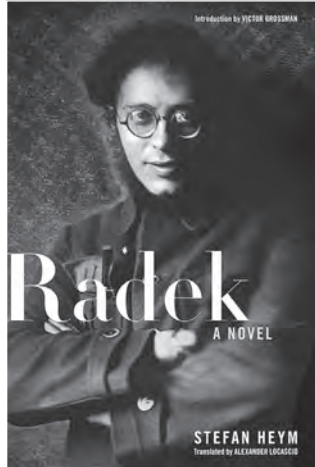
He joined the revolutionary social-democracy in Poland shortly before the 1905 revolution, where he played an active role in Warsaw as a member of Rosa Luxemburg's Social-Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SKDPiL), and in a number of exile communities of revolutionary socialists throughout Europe between 1905 and 1917.

In his 1995 novel *Radek*, published in English translation for the first time last year by Monthly Review Press, Stefan Heym portrays Karl Radek as not only a man of the world but a perpetual outsider — a socially awkward contrarian with stereotypically Jewish features, thick glasses and a big mouth. In this, Heym likely saw in Karl Radek something of a kindred spirit.

Born Helmut Flieg to a Jewish family in Chemnitz, Germany in 1913, Heym was bullied as a child for being Jewish and was expelled from high school after publishing a poem critical of German militarism. After relocating to Berlin in the early 1930s, he fled to Prague in 1933, then to the United States after winning a scholarship to the University of Chicago in 1935.

After years working on German-language left-wing publications in the United States, in 1942 he published an English language novel, *Hostages*, which was made into a Hollywood

Ted McTaggart is a registered nurse and union activist. He is a member of Solidarity.



feature the next year. By this time, Heym had enlisted in the U.S. military where he put his language skills to use as a propagandist. He continued in this role in the postwar years until his left-wing political views cost him his job.

Little, Brown published two more English language novels by Heym — *The Crusaders* in 1948 and *The Eyes of Reason* in 1951 — before the anti-Communist climate caused Heym to flee once

more, now back to East Berlin.

Heym's next English-language novel, *Goldsborough*, about striking miners in Pennsylvania, could not find a commercial publisher in the United States, though it was published in the original English in East Germany, and then in 1934 by Howard Fast's Blue Heron Press.

German translations of this and prior English language novels established Heym as a celebrated novelist and journalist in East Germany. He straddled a fine line between critic and apologist for the East German regime that allowed him to be tolerated to a greater or lesser degree.

After the collapse of the German Democratic Republic, Heym was elected in 1994 to the Bundestag as a non-party candidate for the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS) — a precursor by merger to Die Linke. He continued to publish novels until his sudden death in 2001.

The Novel as Biography

While works like Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* and Baz Luhrmann's *Elvis* have intentionally blurred lines between historical record and fiction to good effect, Heym struggles to translate Radek's life story into the narrative format of a novel. The reader is left to wonder whether *Radek* would not have been more successful as a traditional biography — a major advantage of which would be references.

The 600-plus page novel is separated into eight "books," roughly corresponding to major episodes in Radek's life and political activity. Childhood and adolescence are skipped over entirely, and his participation in the 1905 revolution is only fleetingly referenced.

The novel opens with Radek's exclusion from the German Social-Democracy due to allegations from a fraternal organization, Luxemburg's SDKPiL, regarding Radek's moral character — failure to repay loans, stealing books from the party library, and befouling a comrade's guest bedroom. The veracity of the allegations are never completely clarified, but the incident serves to introduce strained relationship between Radek and Luxemburg, as well as her partner and fellow SDKPiL leader Leo Jogiches, that resurfaces periodically throughout the novel.

From here, the novel plods along through the highlights of Radek's years in exile through 1917. For hundreds of pages, we tread well-worn territory — the betrayal of the major parties of the Second International in August 1914, the Zimmerwald conference, the armored train through Germany on which Radek accompanied Lenin.

The writing is labored; as a premonition to the SPD's betrayal in Germany, we are treated to pages of dialogue between Radek and Karl Liebknecht about how the German working class might respond when imperialist war inevitably breaks out; this and other similar exchanges throughout the book seem entirely unnecessary, as for example is the recounting of what happened at Zimmerwald.

Slightly more obscure is the story of Radek with Leon Trotsky at the negotiations for a separate peace with Germany in Brest after the Russian Revolution. Nevertheless, there is little to be found in this section that could not have been better portrayed in a proper biography or historical work.

Character development is a weak point throughout but particularly noticeable in Heym's portrayals of women. Even those women who play key roles in revolutionary history and Radek's own life are described first and foremost by their physical characteristics; both Radek and Heym seem unaware or unconcerned of the degree of sacrifice made by Radek's wife Rosa, a physician, both in their years of exile and after the Russian Revolution.

As the primary breadwinner of the family, she appears to play a maternal figure both to their daughter and to Radek himself, who appears to lose all interest in Rosa soon after the birth of the child and only seems to regain any appreciation of her a few years later after the death of his new lover, the aristocrat turned journalist-revolutionary Larissa Reissner.

Adventure and Downfall

Radek takes on more of the characteristics of a novel during the Civil War years when Karl is forced to go incognito into Germany to provide assistance to the fledgling German Communist Party during the tumultuous weeks ending in Luxemburg and Liebknecht's deaths. Radek's challenges getting into and out of Germany, and surreal confinement in a palatial German prison where he learns he has been named the ambassador of Soviet Ukraine, are not without literary merit but not particularly compelling.

A subsequent mission into Germany around the time of the 1921 March action finds Radek and Reissner at a fancy hotel in disguise as tourists, evading the detection of German military officers also staying there. This episode has the feel of a James Bond adventure which, while exciting and fun, seems out of place within the broader novel.

In tone and substance, the novel is most successful in chronicling Radek's political downfall following Stalin's consolidation of

power. As a member of the United Opposition together with Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev, Radek takes a leading role in an anti-Stalinist demonstration on the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution. It would be the Opposition's last gasp.

Radek subsequently faces exile to Siberia where, together with fellow exiles Preobrazhensky and Smilga, he continues to profess allegiance to the Opposition for a period of time before ultimately capitulating as a condition of return to Moscow. Despite his rehabilitation into the Stalinist machinery, Radek is downgraded from his quarters in the Kremlin to a squalid basement apartment and ekes out a meager existence as a journalist.

Radek's life after his return to Moscow is permeated by an anxious, claustrophobic spirit. Tortured by the compromises he has had to make for his own survival, Radek tries to ease his conscience by writing ironic odes to Stalin that he imagines to be biting satire, but are taken by readers and censors alike at face value.

Heym knew all too well the fine line that must be walked by a critical-minded journalist in a Stalinist regime tolerant of criticism only within the strictest of parameters. It is likely for this reason that this part of the novel connects so effectively where earlier sections fall short.

After waiting for years for the other shoe to drop, Radek is finally accused of taking some part in the conspiracy to assassinate Kirov, a Stalinist leader in Leningrad killed in 1934. Zinoviev, Kamenev and many other Old Bolsheviks were also implicated in the regime's frameup campaign (along with Trotsky, at the time in exile in France).

While spared summary execution in a farcical trial, he is sentenced to 10 years in prison. On Radek's fate following sentencing, Heym offers no speculation, saying only that "No one knows who murdered him, and when, and in which camp, and on whose orders." Heym and the reader alike can make an educated guess on whose orders the murder took place. ■

UAW Mobilizing, Contract Deadlines Nearing by Dianne Feeley

AS UAW CONTRACTS with the Detroit Three expire at midnight September 14, it looks like the companies are far from settling. Having raked in over a quarter of a trillion dollars in the last decade, they are balking at newly elected UAW President Shawn Fain's demand that "Record profits deserve record contracts."

Wearing "End Tiers" and "No Concessions" T-shirts, hundreds of workers and their families turned out to demonstrate their willingness to fight for a good contract at the rally UAW Region 1 on Sunday, August 20. The short program featured Fain, Region 1 director LaShawn English, and U.S. Congressional representative Haley Stevens.

Fain took on the argument that the UAW has set expectations too high. Why is it okay that CEOs reward themselves with 40% increases in their benefits package but wrong for workers to make such a demand?

Wages have stagnated over a generation, the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) given up during the bailout has not been restored, and a tiered workforce means some workers have drastically fewer wages and benefits. Those issues, along with an end to forced overtime, the right to have both job security and a life beyond the workplace, are essential to win as companies restructure.

Negotiations between the corporations and the UAW traditionally begin with the union president staging highly photographed handshakes with the CEOs of each company. That didn't happen this year. Instead,

Dianne is a retired autoworker active in Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), which spearheaded the one-member, one-vote referendum.

President Fain shook hands with workers at Ford, GM and Stellantis plants, listening to workers' demands and answering questions.

At the same time UAW staff passed out cards and encouraged members to sign up to receive weekly updates by text or email. Since then Fain has been holding short and weekly Facebook Live updates.

In addition to the Facebook Live updates, the UAW's website and Facebook pages have short videos that include workers' stories. The latest features a fourth generation Ford worker who describes her experience as a single mom working as a temp for six years in four different plants before becoming fulltime.

This inclusion and transparency is a sea change from how the UAW leadership functioned over the last half century. It used to be that negotiations were walled off from members, and the UAW Communications Department typically issued "no comment" responses to the media's questions.

In contrast, the newly elected UAW leadership — the first directly elected in a one-person, one vote mail-in ballot — developed a militant No Concessions, No Tiers strategy as the contract deadline rapidly approaches. They have provided a clear list of members' demands, taken on the companies line, encouraged regions and locals to prepare a contract campaign, and through the union's Organizing Department set up online trainings so that members are empowered to

develop actions with co-workers.

Borrowing methods developed during the Teamster contract campaign at UPS, these include having members sign cards in order to receive weekly updates, asking members to wear buttons and red shirts with slogans to work on Wednesdays, encouraging 10-minute parking lot rallies and practice picketing. Whether or not the local leadership is plugged into the campaign, autoworkers are encouraged to be actively involved.

Fain has called for locals to conduct votes to authorize a strike mandate if negotiations are not progressing. He added, "As a union, we have to lead the fight for economic justice — not just for ourselves but for the entire working class" matched the sentiment of the crowd. Clearly the slogan on the UAW website, "Our generation's defining moment at the Big Three" captures the mood of autoworkers as September 15 approaches. ■



August 20 rally: Stellantis worker Kiada Shanklin (wearing a T-shirt saying "I have three major reasons to strike") and her three children with UAW President Shawn Fain (right). UAW

REVIEW

Anarcho-Marxism, Anyone? By Paul Buhle

Revolutionary Affinities:

Toward a Marxist-Anarchist Solidarity

By Michael Löwy and Olivier Besancenot,

Translated by David Campbell

Oakland: PM Press, 2023, 192 pages, \$18.95 paper.

WHAT HAPPENED TO the anarchists? Or the sometimes — seemingly strong — links between anarchists and socialists in specific struggles and on specific issues?

We could ask the question across much of the past century, not just in the United States or Europe but across parts of Latin America, Asia and the Global South as well as before and after 1920.

Up until the First World War — it is fair to generalize — an optimism about a post-capitalist future, and a kind of good-cheered openness of radical perspectives existed quite despite all the polemics and the usual factional brawling.

The War cast a dark shadow upon optimism. The Russian Revolution raised hopes in ways that only the Paris Commune had done earlier. But years before Stalin secured his grip, it had become clear that capitalism as a system had held on, that Washington was in charge of the world system, and that revolution there was likely to remain severely problematic.

The economic crisis and the Great Depression, the threatened collapse of capitalism at large or in the United States, did not restore the pre-1920 moods. Goodbye to the grandest dreams of anarchism, or that is my own short version of radical history.

Exceptions abound, even apart from the Spanish 1930s. Politics and culture during the 1960s; the near-decade between the collapse of the East Bloc and the aftermath of the “Teamsters and Turtles” protests (around the World Trade Organization) in Seattle, 1999; and the sudden appearance/disappearance of Occupy all offered moments.

The moments did not endure. Anarchism, and the links to the Marxist Left, seemed only to appear in order to vanish, or rather, vanish into the intellectual world, hardly ever to return.

A Difficult Unity

Michael Löwy and Olivier Besancenot seek to cast new light on the subject, and while their arguments are more suggestive

Paul Buhle is — and never mind the delays in publication — coeditor with Mari Jo Buhle of the Encyclopedia of the American Left, third edition.



than persuasive, that's fine. We need more suggestive ideas these days.

Since its original publication in France nine years ago, the book has been updated with new material that covers the extraordinary anarchist-Marxist collaboration in Rojava (the Kurdish part of northern Syria), with a strong female presence and the inspiration of deep-ecologist Murray Bookchin.

The authors' aim is not just to “put things in a new light,” but to promote a “Red-Black Future”; that is, to encourage collaboration of Marxists and anarchists to unify against the new, neo-fascist Right, as they have already started doing in places in Europe. The authors believe that there is an earlier hidden tradition of such a convergence (revealed by looking at the Paris Commune, rethinking Kronstadt, examining Louise Michel, Andre Breton, Walter Benjamin, and the Zapatistas' Subcomandante Marcos among others).

Löwy is a prolific author of wide-ranging works on Marxism, liberation theology and ecosocialism among other topics. Besancenot is a veteran trade unionist, former postal worker and revolutionary socialist French presidential candidate and founding member of the New Anticapitalist Party.

A chapter of this book on the Russian Revolution helpfully complicates our ideas about the Kronstadt Rebellion (1921) and the whole relationship of the vast social conflicts, including the very real anarchist influences in Russia, and how the stresses of the moment (above all the threat of the counterrevolutionary Whites, supported by the United States) narrowed the possibilities dramatically.

C.L.R. James argued, intermittently, not so much that the Bolshevik leadership was mistaken but that it had chosen the path of iron discipline too easily. This is the general drift of the argument in *Revolutionary Affinities* as well, and for me a convincing one.

Had the Revolution not been attacked so severely from the outside, alternatives would not likely have been seen as representing the mortal dangers from the Whites. Fighting “(t)he common enemy of the black and red together” (89) illustrated by the anarchists'

armed defense of the offices of *Pravda*, might have been viewed as the act of comrades.

One cannot quite imagine Lenin, who met and praised Ukrainian anarchist Nester Makhno, making a pact with him, or the Bolsheviks coming to a common front with the Jewish Bund, in anything except common resistance to the Whites — but we cannot say.

This theme of possible unity/solidarity carries over to other subjects and historical periods in curious and intriguing ways. Many moments in history presented real options, especially to the ordinary Leninist or anarchist or social democrat or unaffiliated worker who might have felt an unspecific attachment to all of them as comrades in the struggle.

I wish they had taken up the Scottish syndicalists, revolutionaries on the Clydeside during the First World War, passing later through the British Communist Party uncomfortably because Scottish/Gaelic nationalism was shunted aside and because the erstwhile syndicalists did not fit anywhere, least of all in Stalinist movements.

Radical Idea of Freedom

The authors point, notably, toward Surrealism. Walter Benjamin, who has been too little considered as somewhere between Marxism and Anarchism, observed that “since Bakunin, Europe has lacked a radical idea of freedom. The Surrealists have one.” (111)

By the later 1930s, Trotsky specifically looked to Surrealists to create a new cultural front in the formation of the International Federation for Independent Revolutionary Art. An idea too little and too late, it lacked the common aesthetic tastes of radicalized workers, but also the organic qualities of the Popular Front's (and CIO's) real ethnic working-class base.

That is to say, within the United States, especially but not only Slavs, Jews, Greeks and Hungarians shared a more realist-oriented folk culture carried over into popular culture, sometimes evoked very successfully by Woody Guthrie or New Deal theater *a la* “Pins and Needles.”

Under different circumstances, surrealism might have found its footing in the postwar world of Bohemians, later Beatniks and 1960s rebels. Or at least the surrealists of later times, up to the present, have believed.

Anarchism had an especially cultural renaissance immediately following the Second

continued on page41

REVIEW

The Myth of California Exposed By Dianne Feeley

California, A Slave State

By Jean Pfaelzer

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023, 520 pages, \$35 paper.

EDUCATED IN SAN Francisco schools, I was brought up on the romantic vision of Father Junipero Sierra and his work with the Indigenous population. (He was canonized by the Catholic Church in 2015 over the strenuous objections of Native People.)

For six years I attended school directly across from Mission Dolores, often exploring its small cemetery. On our family vacations from San Francisco to Santa Monica, we stopped at various missions. Our favorites were Mission San Juan Capistrano, where we fed the birds, and Mission Santa Barbara.

While I eagerly studied California history and looked forward to becoming, like a friend of my mother's, active in the Native Daughters of the Golden West.

In reviewing my childhood understanding of California's history, the only story that contradicted my rosy view was my mother's explaining that Fumi, her co-worker, owned the family farm — because her parents, born in Japan, were forbidden by California law from owning land.

My mother thought this was a ridiculous law, but she never mentioned that during World War II the Japanese community, including Fumi, were viewed as potential terrorists, and forcibly deported to a concentration camp.

Drawn to liberation theology in the early 1960s and then radicalized by the Vietnam war, I'd long ago concluded the mission system was a colonial institution. So when I saw an ad for Jean Pfaelzer's recently published *California A Slave State* I knew I had to read it.

She has previously authored *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* and *Rebecca Harding Davis: Origins of Social Realism*. She is a professor of American Studies at the University of Delaware.

Pfaelzer's 500-page book is a series of indictments that outline how various invaders — Spanish, Russian and American — exploited the population. As the author summarizes, "Each empire imposed a distinct system of human bondage for its role in a global economy." (19)

Pfaelzer notes that the estimated popula-

Dianne Feeley grew up in San Francisco in the 1950s, but lives in Michigan where there were also Indian boarding schools. She is an editor of Against the Current.

tion at the time the first Franciscan mission was set up in 1769 was 310,000. *Within a century it was reduced to 18,000.*

The prologue sets the stage with the story of T'tc-tsa, a Wailaki who witnessed a massacre of 100 men including her father and brother by U.S. soldiers in 1861. First sold at the age of 10 to a hog farmer, she escaped, trekking 80 miles back to her mother.

Over the years T'tc-tsa was sold from one farmer to another as a domestic servant and sexual slave. She suffered several miscarriages but kept escaping and returning to her mother. At the end of her life, she worked as an ethnographic informant, interviewing other Native Americans.

Her oral history is part of the WPA archive of Native Americans but her language, along with most other Indigenous California languages, is no longer considered a living language.

T'tc-tsa's testimony of her people's genocide, and her many years enslaved in a state that declared it would never "tolerate" slavery, is not only the book's prologue, but also its conclusion:

"I hear people tell 'bout what Indian do early days to white man. Nobody ever tell it what white man do to Indian: That's [the] reason I tell it. That's history. That's true. I seen it myself." (15)

The Stories in Several Acts

Over 16 chapters, a prologue, introduction and epilogue, the author maintains that not only was California a slave state but that it condones vicious forms of involuntary servitude today.

She weaves together the story of what Kevin Bales labels the "old slavery" that was based on legal ownership of other human beings with the "new slavery" of "brutal mechanism of control — debt, threats of violence, and human trafficking." (19)

The first four chapters take up the colonialism of the Spanish and Russians, then outline the birth of California as a "free" state. The following chapters discuss the existence of slavery in the Indigenous, Black and Chinese communities between statehood and the 1880s.

Chapter 13 is a transitional chapter, beginning with the development of the carceral state from its beginnings and followed by a 20th century look at the same institution. Chapter 15 summarizes the role that California's 12 Indian boarding schools played in kidnapping Indian children to "Kill the Indian...

and save the man." (341)

The final chapter and brief epilogue discuss the cases of bondage that exist today and challenge the reader to insist on an end to slavery. Detailed notes take up another hundred pages, acknowledging current historians such as Bales, Andrés Reséndez and Marisa Fuentes.

Missions and Settler Plunder

Jean Pfaelzer starts her story by describing the Spanish mission system over its 65 years of existence, when it held about 200,000 Native People in bondage. The chain of missions paired with military presidios served the dual purpose of blocking the Russian and British empires, and transforming the landscape into agricultural land.

This regime had been perfected by Spanish explorers had in areas from Peru to Mexico. It forced the Indigenous people to leave their settlements, food sources and spiritual practices.

Backed by the military, the Franciscans were in charge of teaching Native Californians a work ethic and "spirituality" based on violence and subjugation. Throughout that period, as Chapter 2 recounts, Indigenous Californians resisted colonialism by running away, burning down buildings or boldly attacking fortifications.

When Mexico won freedom from Spain in 1829, it abolished the slave trade and emancipated all slaves including those "held to service" in California.

Four years later when Mexico seized the mission lands, although the Indigenous population sought to reclaim their land, large tracts were snapped up by ex-military officers and large ranchers. Some Indigenous people were able to return to tribal villages, but most became homeless.

While most non-Californians don't realize there were Russian colonies in northern California, their settlements were mainly to drop off Indigenous hunters from along the Alaskan coast to hunt for valuable sea otter pelts.

Starting in the mid-18th century, Russian merchant ships had organized a massive hunt of sea otters along the Pacific coast. As the supply gave out along the Alaskan coast, Native hunters with their kayaks were forcibly taken as far south as the San Francisco Bay, dropped off on various islands or bluffs and left to fend for themselves while they stockpiled pelts and awaited the ships' return.

Three to four feet in length, each pelt



The children in this undated photo of residents at a California Indian Board School have been striped of their identities.

amazingly sold for \$3500 (the equivalent of \$70,000 today and in contrast to a beaver pelt that cost four dollars) in China and Russia.

As the sea otter was fished to extinction, and California territory became part of Mexico, the Russians withdrew. In just a century they had brutalized and displaced the Alaskan Native People, decimating 400,000 seals and about 100,000 sea otters and foxes.

Enter the Americans

Although Pfaelzer spends little time on the 1846-48 U.S.-Mexican war, she notes that it ended with Mexico losing one-third of its territory to the United States — areas that we now call Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Texas, Utah, Wyoming.

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that the United States and Mexico signed in 1848 banned slavery, as well as promising citizenship and land rights to the Indigenous population. This, along with the cultural rights outlined in the treaty, were never respected.

Until the discovery of gold later in 1848, settlers were primarily cattle ranchers or merchants. But once gold was discovered, the race was on. Nearly 200,000 arrived over the next two years, including 2000 enslaved Black people, mostly men.

The Constitutional Debate

The 1849 Constitutional Convention that brought California into the United States revoked the short-lived promise of Indian citizenship. The miners' delegate also convinced the body that enslaved Blacks should not compete with white miners, and therefore

slavery should be banned.

Thus slavery was banned, not out of an abolitionist sentiment but the desire to maintain white supremacy, particularly in the mine fields. For those of us who grew up proud that California came into the country as a free state, this comes as a shock.

The author provides not only testimony from delegates and newspapers about the outcome of this debate, but the subsequent struggle of both free and enslaved Blacks to win their rights. Just because the state constitution banned slavery didn't stop some slaveholders in practice.

When slaveholders were taking their "property" to a place where slavery was forbidden, they forced slaves to sign indenture "contracts" or kept their families hostage back home on the plantation. Many worked for their owners digging for gold, while others were rented out. Pfaelzer even cites one case where the slave was the owner's son.

With the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act free Black people flocked to California as well, whether opening shops, restaurants and hotels or mining for gold. Pfaelzer describes the communities that grew up:

"Across California, free and enslaved Blacks created their own neighborhoods, schools, and churches, living on the edge of freedom. At first paths for Black women entrepreneurs were limited, with little to invest but their bodies." (133)

However this community was threatened by passage of California's 1852 Fugitive Slave Act and limited by the reality that Black people were unable to testify in court against white citizens. One response was the Black community's effective organization of an underground railroad that ran from San

Diego to Vancouver, British Columbia. They also organized several Colored Conventions, published their own newspapers. Once the state ratified the 14th Amendment Black men began to vote.

Although Native people resisted domination from the time of the missions, they were less successful than the Black community in winning some battles. While Indigenous people were composed of many tribes and more than 100 languages, that was no longer the case for the Black community.

Another reason that Pfaelzer doesn't explicitly mention — although she does quote Frederick Douglass several times — is the existence of the growth of a national abolitionist movement. She does point to the tragedy that the two oppressed communities resisted on their own rather than being able to struggle together to overturn the injustices they experienced.

To maintain white control over the goldfields, California's first legislature passed a foreign miners' tax (between \$3 to \$20 a month). Between 1852 and 1870 Chinese miners paid \$18 million into the fund, representing one-quarter to one-half of the state's revenue.

Chinese Brutalized

Armed white vigilantes rounded up and assaulted Chinese and Latin American miners. According to Pfaelzer, many of the Chileans left but the Chinese, with a more significant debt, could not return home until those were paid off in full.

Many Chinese men and their families, like the Black community, started small businesses. In their case it was restaurants, laundries, brothels, gambling houses. As with the Black and Indigenous communities, they were marked as being dirty and immoral.

Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney (author of the infamous *Dred Scott* decision) ruled that California could expel Chinese miners because they "were more likely to produce physical or moral evil among its citizens." (249)

As early as 1866 the state legislature passed the Act for the Suppression of Chinese Houses of Ill-Fame. By 1875 Congress passed the Page Act, the first ban on immigrants — and an act that targeted Chinese women, who could only migrate as spouses.

Chapters 11 and 12 outline the racist and gendered propaganda that politicians used to portray Chinese women as diseased and how, despite the passage of the 14th Amendment, they stood by while the women were confined in caged brothels.

Pfaelzer comments that the existence of Chinese prostitutes was "still a prop for their bachelor lifestyle and fantasies of frontier freedom" (266) between the Gold Rush years through the Chinese anti-immigration laws of the 1880s, only to be displaced by bans on



Chinese laborers in California: exploited in the Gold Rush and in the construction of the railroads and blocked from uniting with their families.

interracial sex and marriage which persisted until the 1960s.

Following the sections on the Chinese community, the author devotes two chapters to the development of the carceral state. From the beginning, convict labor would be a way of generating profit. Convicts built San Quentin and Folsom prisons as well as roads, bridges and dams, worked in a jute mill located within the prison — or just recently dismantled toxic computers.

This historical prison-as-business model has been combined with a policy of deliberate torture and sadism, including flogging, waterboarding and allowing sexual assaults. Inmates have been subjected to sexual and genetic research, including sterilization.

Some of these practices have been stopped, overwhelmingly because of prisoner resistance. The author concludes by pointing out the legal loophole in the 13th Amendment, which bans slavery “except as a punishment for crime.” This sanctioning of a form of human bondage needs to be outlawed.

Genocide and Reparations

Three hundred and fifty-seven Indian boarding schools existed throughout the United States, most run by Christian dominations and funded by the government. Children, some as young as three, were forcibly taken from their families and placed in far-away schools — even across state borders.

By 1890, over 6000 California Indigenous children were enrolled. This was fully half of all of the state’s Indigenous children. Punishment — for their own good, of course — was frequent.

Their hair was cut, they were issued uniforms if they were boys or frocks if they were girls, punished if they spoke anything other than English, taught a different religion, forbidden to use body paint or dance.

They learned to read and write and were trained in life skills appropriate for low-wage workers. If lighter skinned, they might be programmed into a better job track. Discouraged from talking with their siblings, corrected when they spoke of “we” rather than “I,” children were often malnourished.

But children were in school only an average of 80 days a year. For the most part they were quickly assigned to work as farmworkers and domestics, clocking in something like 84 hours a week. Unsupervised, they were sexually vulnerable; their small wage sent directly to the school.

Anarcho-Marxism, Anyone? — *continued from page 41*

World War, with a strong sympathy or affiliation in the new Pacifica Network and among sparkling young poets. It would be difficult, it was difficult, to pin the “anarchist” label upon the new left, but Student Syndicalism hinted at the underlying sentiment of experimentalism. Perhaps — personally speaking — so did the use of marijuana between demonstrations and alongside all kinds of campaigns. The desire to reach beyond the limits of political ideas hinted at possibilities that faded too early and too easily.

Along the road to recovering what amounts to bits and pieces, the authors come to the Zapatistas and argue effectively that the willingness not to seize power or main-

Interestingly enough, the author not only points to the rebellions that broke out at the schools, but also notes the resilience of children who did not accept their place as menial workers in a white-dominated society.

Although many children lost their own language, some Native Americans have concluded that the schools did unintentionally unite “survivors of many tribes, and like the missions, forged new bases of community, spirituality, and survival. Forced contact between people of different tribes gave rise to a pan-Indian collective voice that honored the food, ritual, language, clothing, spiritual, and family traditions of diverse tribes.” (357)

The final chapter of *California, A Slave State* summarizes what the author sees as the continuance of slavery today: human trafficking, sex trafficking and the treatment that undocumented immigrants encounter. Many lack legal status and work in illegal or marginal industries. Although the level of surveillance differs, the author regards them as unfree laborers.

Her epilogue then takes up the question of what reparations are owed to all of those who have been direct or indirect victims of slavery. Recognizing that some consequences of slavery and institutionalized racism are easier to rectify than others, she sees that “all forms of reparation depend on witnesses, evidence, and history.” (383)

Thus descendants of enslaved people will not all want the same compensation. While toppling statues and renaming streets may be one element, reparations require “a collective reckoning and valuation of the magnitude of what has been taken.” (385)

California, A Slave State is a monumental book bringing together diverse experiences of slavery to expose what has been hidden in the myth of California, the golden state. The author employs the tool of critical race theory to reveal how colonialism built the road to capitalism, and highlights not only the pain oppressed people endured but their continued resistance to injustice. ■

tain armed struggle points to some different possibility ahead.

Ecological survival demands new forms, new ideas, a new degree of patience in working out the possibilities of collective decisions and resistance to rule from above, even rule from above with the best intent. If there is something especially admirable about this small volume, it must be the unwillingness to share the pessimism that sweeps upon many of us, with the direness of the present scene.

Löwy and Besancenot prove themselves able to look at discrete moments, at discrete movements, and see connections that we would otherwise miss. This is a book to read and ponder. ■

ultra-Orthodox fundamentalism, doesn't bode well.

All proportions guarded, of course. Compared to the state of Israeli politics and the deadly degenerative spiral in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, a much bigger threat to the prestige and power of the U.S. empire is the *internal state of U.S. politics*, where the cult leader and dominant presidential candidate of the Republican Party engaged in major criminal conduct before, during and after his calamitous term in the White House. Where the present electoral cycle may leave the United States' status in the world is another complex and unfolding discussion.

Disaster on the Ground

This is not at all to discount the gravity of circumstances in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The highly-publicized first part of the "judicial reform," stripping Israel's (far from progressive or pro-Palestinian) Supreme Court of the power to nullify laws as "unreasonable" — in the absence of a written Constitution for the country — has already brought Israel closer to a full-scale rupture than any time since a notorious armed confrontation between the official Haganah and Menahem Begin's rightwing Irgun militia in the very early days of the state.

It remains to be seen whether the Supreme Court itself might escalate the crisis by declaring the *new law itself* to be "unreasonable."

The announced refusal of elite reserve military officers — thousands are reported to have resigned — to continue their service may not come to fruition, but even such a threat constitutes a genuine earthquake in the Israeli context. It's rather astonishing that protest mobilizations have continued even during Israeli military operations in Jenin, Nablus and other Palestinian population centers.

There's more to come. A piece of the "reform," less reported here because it's harder to summarize, will remove judicial nominations from professional bodies and put them in the hands of parliamentary committees — which in the highly disciplined Israeli political party system means control by party bosses of the ruling coalition, crippling the relative independence of the judiciary.

The protests seem likely to continue as much of the Israeli-Jewish population see the reform as "the end of democracy" — for themselves. They have not taken up issues of anti-Arab discrimination or found much resonance among Palestinian Israeli citizens. That's the movement's Achilles heel. Nonetheless the changes would have consequences — if for example the electoral commission bars Arab-led parties from running on grounds of "insufficient loyalty to the Jewish state" and the Court can't overturn the exclusion, or stop townships from declaring themselves officially "Jewish only."

Unquestionably, however, the core disaster is on the ground in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and that's where the real danger may lie not only for Israel but even for imperial "stability." The eruption of settler violence has revealed the depth of truly nazi-like attitudes and action. An Israeli writer, Yuval Noah Hariri, attended a pro-democracy rally in the town of Beit Shemesh, where they were confronted by a smaller pro-government counter-demonstration with a loudspeaker blaring songs, including a celebration of the February settler burning of Hawara:

"(T)he leader of the Religious Zionism party, Finance Minister

Bezalel Smotrich, supported the attack and publicly called for Hawara to be 'wiped out.' In a similar spirit, the pro-government loudspeakers in Beit Shemesh sounded out the following gleeful song:

"Who is going up in flames now? — Hawara!

Houses and cars! — Hawara!

*They are evacuating old ladies, women and young girls,
it is burning all night! — Hawara!*

Burn their trucks! — Hawara!

Burn the roads and cars! — Hawara!

"I later looked for the song on YouTube, and found that it's had thousands of views. One Israeli YouTube channel accompanied with it a request of viewers to share, 'with all your might, to show everyone that just as Hawara is burning, so is our faith.' I hummed the tune, and thought about the meaning of 'destruction.'" ("Can Judaism survive a messianic dictatorship in Israel?" Haaretz, July 13, 2023)

If that isn't frightening, you're not paying attention. But the dissident Israel historian Ilan Pappé also writes that

"(t)his is a rare moment in history that opens opportunities for those struggling for liberation and justice in Palestine... a time to energize the popular Palestinian resistance and unite both the Palestinians and their supporters around an agreed vision and program." (Palestine Chronicle, August 3, 2023)

As chilling as it is, the vicious military and settler violence is also having an impact on sectors of U.S. society. While the Democratic Party leadership remains unshakably committed to the Israeli-partnership, sympathy with Palestine is growing among the voting base and especially young people.

More of the U.S. Jewish community is becoming alienated and angry, particularly as the pillar of the Zionist lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) turns more and more to supporting rightwing politicians including election-denying Trump Republicans. In the face of state-level attempts to criminalize Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions activism, support for the BDS movement is gaining ground.

Congressional Representative Betty McCollum has reintroduced the above-mentioned "Defending the Human Rights of Palestinian Children and Families Living Under Israeli Military Occupation Act," which her website describes as a bill "to prohibit Israel from using U.S. taxpayer dollars on the military detention, abuse, or ill-treatment of Palestinian children in Israeli military detention; to support the seizure and destruction of Palestinian property and homes in violation of international humanitarian law; or on any support or assistance for Israel's unilateral annexation of Palestinian territory in violation of international humanitarian law."

These changes in public sentiment are far from what's needed in a long struggle against U.S. support for Israeli racism and apartheid, as well as the other brutal structures of oppression undergirding imperialist dominance in the region. As Ilan Pappé writes, it's a fight "rooted in the Palestinian struggle for democracy and self-determination ever since 1918. The future liberated and de-Zionised Palestine may look now as a fantasy, but...it has the best chance to galvanize locally, regionally and globally every person with a modicum of decency. It would also provide a safe place for anyone living in historical Palestine at the present or for whoever was expelled from there."

Toward such a vision, the emerging cracks in elite circles, which are likely to deepen, open possibilities for enhanced, effective solidarity activism. ■

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