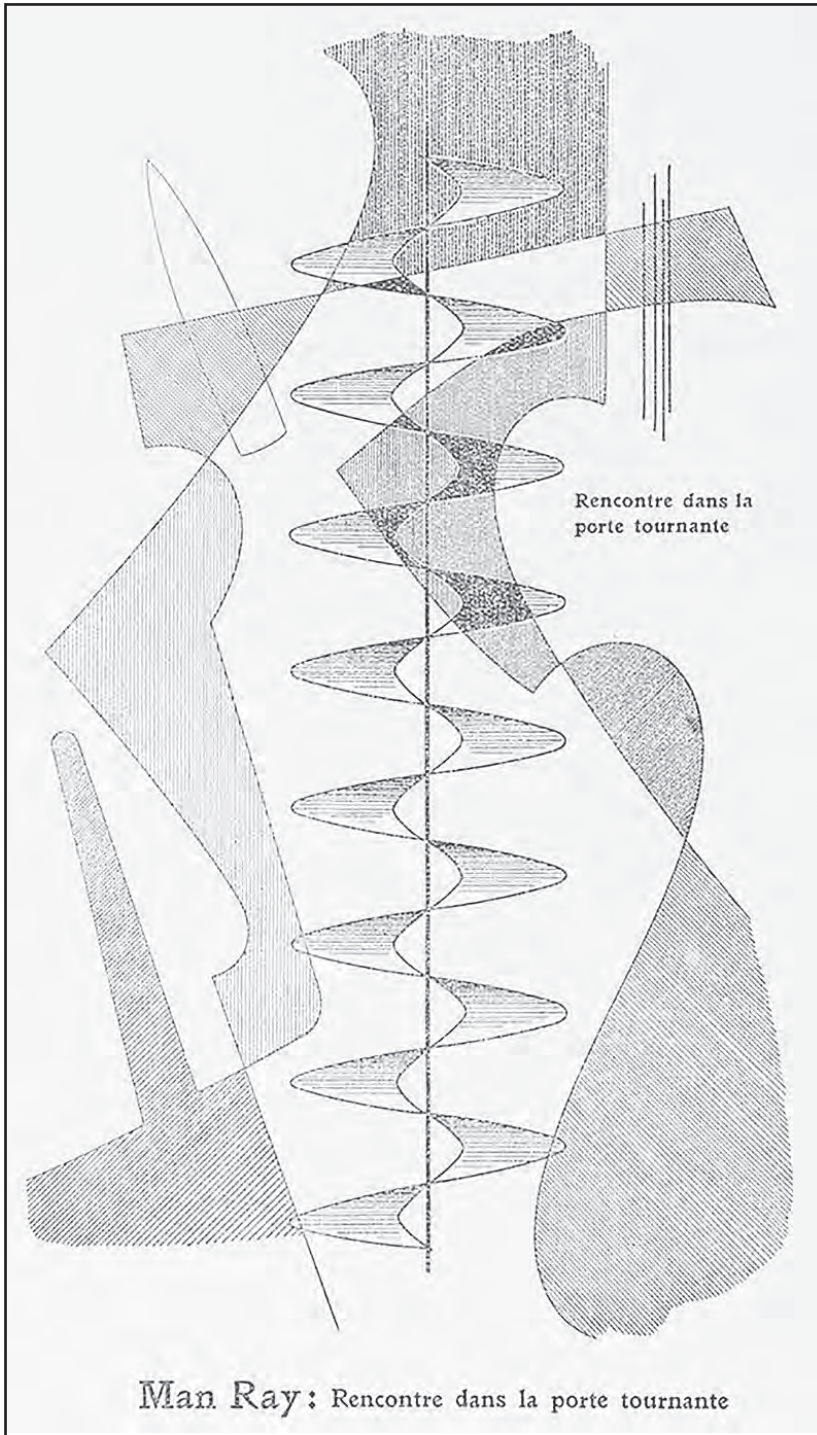


AGAINST THE CURRENT

A SOCIALIST JOURNAL



Beyond Reality A Century of Surrealism

◆ Alexander Billet

The UAW and Southern Organizing

◆ Joseph van der Naald &
Michael Goldfield

Repression of Russian Left Activists

◆ Ivan Petrov

Dubious Notions, False Paths

◆ Michael Löwy

An Interview with Chicano Angeleno activist Alvaro Maldonado

◆ Promise Li



A Letter from the Editors

Election and Widening War

WITH WAR AND genocide spreading from Palestine to Lebanon and Iran, with Florida and southern states inundated by the twin biggest climate-change flood disasters in U.S. history, and people's general insecurity about their own and the country's future, the United States lurches toward what's called "the most consequential election in our lifetime" that may resolve little or nothing.

The outcome isn't known as *Against the Current* goes to press a couple weeks before November 5, but will be shortly after or before this issue reaches our subscribers — or possibly the results, unless they're unexpectedly decisive, might be rejected as illegitimate by close to half the country, with a looming potential for constitutional crisis and chaos.

Rather than speculate on the outcome, we'll look here at the confluence of domestic and global factors that go into making such a volatile moment in U.S. politics, set to persist well after November 5.

1) *The 2024 presidential election rides on likely razor-thin margins in seven or so "swing states,"* so that a few tens of thousands of votes either way outweigh 150 or 160 million cast nationwide — the product of the United States' uniquely absurd Electoral College system.

The latter is not only grotesquely undemocratic but vulnerable to all kinds of voter-suppression and other schemes at state levels. This includes threats that election results might not be certified by local officials or hopelessly delayed by bureaucratic obstruction (such as a new Georgia ballot hand-count requirement, voter roll purges and barriers to registration).

The MAGA-run Republican Party in particular is openly putting in place the mechanics for a multi-front Grand Theft Election game to be rolled out in vote counts and certification battles — procedural, legal and potentially physical. And while these moves are pretty well publicized, the Democrats are contributing their share to voter suppression through various pretexts to exclude the Green Party and other options from state ballots.

Arsenal of Genocide

2) *U.S. elections conventionally don't hinge on international issues.* In 2024, however, it's impossible to overlook the explosion in the Middle East, where the United States plays the central role as the arsenal of genocide. Israel's war now entails the depopulation of southern Lebanon, and a potential risk to the very survival of that country — while northern Gaza undergoes what Palestinian officials call "genocide within genocide."

Throughout the year-long destruction of Gaza, the Biden administration has pontificated about Israel's right to "defend itself," while bleating about its own "round the clock" brokering negotiations for ceasefire and hostage release deals. The government of Benjamin Netanyahu, driven both by his personal need to stay in power and by the ideological goal of continuing and expanding the war, has openly sabotaged these efforts. In the process it has essentially abandoned the Israeli hostages in Gaza captivity.

It's also entirely clear that Netanyahu (like Russia's Vladimir Putin) intends to boost the chances of Donald Trump's return to the White House. Yet faced with Netanyahu's contempt, the U.S. president responds with more and more weapons transfers to Israel. That amounts to Biden pouring gasoline on the fire he claims to be trying to put out — with predictable results.

Biden sends unlimited weaponry to Israel — with no restraints, even when U.S. law explicitly forbids arming

human rights violators. Meanwhile Biden refuses to give Ukraine permission to use American-supplied weapons to attack the Russian bases that launch terror bombing raids on Ukraine's people and its critical infrastructure.

The Gaza massacre continues. That now constitutes mass murder for its own sake, with the real death toll by now almost surely well into six figures. Meanwhile and mostly under the daily headline radar, the Israeli military and heavily armed settlers rampage with murderous impunity in West Bank Palestinian villages.

Amidst this came the stunning sequence of events, beginning with Israel's assassination in Tehran of Hamas leader Ismael Haniyeh — who served as the organization's negotiator for a ceasefire and hostage release deal. This was followed in Lebanon by the detonation of Hezbollah's pagers and walkie-talkies, systematic assassinations of its leadership, and bombings carried out with U.S.-supplied weapons with little regard for civilian death and destruction in densely populated neighborhoods.

A million desperate Lebanese civilians are displaced not only from the south of the country but districts of Beirut as well. It's the height of delusion to think that somehow these atrocities wouldn't feed back into U.S. politics, from the November election to events well into the future. The impact on the Arab-American vote in November is just for openers. Additional factors include the alienation of sectors of the Democrats' progressive voter base, the bitter polarization on university campuses and punitive repression of pro-Palestinian activism.

Israel's assault on Lebanon is an "incursion" which no sane observer expects to remain "limited." And Netanyahu's ultimate dream, to bring the United States into a war with Iran, may be changing from fantasy to reality (and more likely if Trump returns to office).

Even though Israel's military and intelligence services were so unprepared for the October 7, 2023 Hamas raid, for the past 18 years they've prepared the war to destroy Hezbollah — ever since the inconclusive end of the 2006 33-day war. Inevitably this is also a war against Lebanon itself that may lead to the total collapse of that fragile state. Netanyahu himself has warned the Lebanese population to "rise up against Hezbollah" or suffer the fate of Gaza.

Undoubtedly U.S. and probably other allies' intelligence agencies assisted Israel in the astounding penetration of Hezbollah's security infrastructure. Furthermore Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah apparently believed, along with most commentators and probably Washington and Tehran too, that its rocket exchanges with Israel would remain "within bounds" short of full-scale-out war. That was a fatal miscalculation, and not Israel's intention.

Whatever happens next, Israel has torn an enormous

continued on the inside back cover

AGAINST THE CURRENT

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This year's Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee conference was attended by hundreds. Seated on stage are former Biden administration officials, who resigned over U.S. collaboration in the war on Gaza. <https://jimwestphoto.com>

2 A Century of Surrealism

Alexander Billet

4 Arab & Muslim Voters' Anger Grows

Malik Miah

6 Dubious Notions & False Paths

Michael Löwy

8 Repression of Russian Left Activists

Ivan Petrov

13 Devouring the Chinese People

Lok Mui Lok

15 Purges, Corruption & Servility

Dora María Téllez

16 The 2024 British Elections

Kim Moody

25 A Discussion with Alvaro Maldonado

interviewed by Promise Li

31 Joe Sacco: Comics for Palestine

Hank Kennedy

Cover: Man Ray, c. 1921-1922, *Rencontre dans la porte tournante* (*Meeting in the Revolving Door*), published on the cover of *Der Sturm*, Volume 13, Number 3, March 5, 1922.

Back Cover: UAW supporters at Mercedes lost the vote but vow to continue their campaign. BY-NC-SA

Essay on Labor Organizing

20 The UAW & Southern Organizing

Joseph van der Naald &
Michael Goldfield

Reviews

32 A Film and Its Controversies

Frann Michel

34 Queering China in a Chinese World

Peter Drucker

36 Antinomies of the U.S. Founders

Joel Wendland-Liu

39 Emancipation from Racism

Giselle Gerolami

40 In Pristine or Troubled Waters?

Steve Wattenmaker

41 The Labor of Health Care

Ted McTaggart

In Memoriam

43 Ellen Spence Poteet, 1960-2024

Alan Wald

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

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Beyond Reality: On A Century of Surrealism

By Alexander Billet

FEW WORDS IN today's vernacular are as exhausted as "surreal." Used to describe everything from celebrity sightings to deodorant commercials, it occupies a similar space as "Kafkaesque" and "Orwellian" — a literary or aesthetic posture mentioned so frequently that its meaning dulls.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that the surreal is simply strange, that it's just another imprecise descriptor drifting through the thin gruel of whatever comes after postmodernism. That seems to be the thrust of many commemorations of surrealism's 100th birthday, designed as they are to be bought and giggled over in a museum gift shop. Strangeness is certainly part of surrealism, though to leave it at that would be woefully insufficient.

The first order of business, then, is to reestablish surrealism's original meaning. *Surréalisme*, a word coined by Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917: *sur*, meaning "beyond," and *réalisme*, "realism."

To go beyond reality. How can we not crave this? We are bombarded on a daily basis by headlines that declare us expendable and unworthy. Endless wars, jobs that sort us into ever more isolation while paying us less, governments that revel in their indifference and cruelty. In this context, orchestrated moments of the quirky or unexpected become a safety valve, a window of difference metabolized into the repressive same.

This is not what the writers and artists who called themselves surrealists had in mind for their movement. Theirs was not a rebellion for the sake of rebellion, still less for the sake of conformity.

They had seen first-hand the carnage of World War I, the use of industrial technology to kill thousands in an instant, rendering whole swathes of Europe into pits of mud and barbed wire and dead bodies. They



Robert Delaunay illustration on the cover of Yan Goll's *Surréalisme, Manifeste du surréalisme*

watched as Italy fell to fascism, while France and Germany sunk into a complacent decadence buoyed by crushing poverty.

A perverse bourgeois calculus of prosperity and suffering had prevailed. The rationalization of life had made it cheap and easily disposed of. To the surrealists, this culture sought not to inspire but to sort and arrange the human condition into a gray, predictable pattern.

Writing of what he termed this "realistic attitude" in 1924's

Manifesto of Surrealism, André Breton wrote "I loathe it, for it is made up of mediocrity, hate, and dull conceit. It is this attitude which today gives birth to these ridiculous books, these insulting plays. It constantly feeds on and derives strength from the newspapers and stultifies both science and art by assiduously flattering the lowest of tastes; clarity bordering on stupidity, a dog's life."

"A gothic Marxism"

Second order of business: reclaim surrealism as a revolutionary project. It wasn't merely that Breton, Pierre Naville, Luis Buñuel, Benjamin Peret and other poets and artists who founded the movement also happened to consider themselves Marxists and communists. Theirs was, in the words of Margaret Cohen in her book *Profane Illumination*, "a gothic Marxism."

Michael Löwy elaborates, describing this as "a Marxist genealogy that is fascinated with the irrational aspects of the social process; as a genealogy that tries to study how the irrational penetrates existing society, and dreams of using the irrational to bring about social change."

Provocative? Yes. But potent. The psyche fractured by postwar capital contained countless overshadowed dimensions, repressed impulses that threw into question the prevailing order's seeming impregnability. Influenced

by Freudian psychoanalysis, the surrealists saw something radical and liberatory in these diverted desires, and sought to unearth them.

The aesthetic practices of the surrealists, therefore — the automatic writing, the experiments with hypnosis, Breton's "pure psychic automatism" — were not simply aesthetic practices. To place an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table — paraphrasing the *Comte de Lautreamont* — was not just a collection of items that "shouldn't" go together. It was a challenge to the reader to divine meaning from this seemingly mundane yet nonsensical pairing.

What might this meaning be? And what might emerge from these revealed gaps between what is and what could be?

Surefire blueprints weren't in the surrealists' wheelhouse, but they did look to the hidden corners of existence, the traces and phantoms of chance, the places and practices of the conquered and exploited, to help them understand.

Third order: dispel the myth that surrealism was only a white, European movement. This would surely be news to the likes of Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, or Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, all of whom either counted themselves part of the surrealist movement or were politically and artistically close to them.

Disagreement over whether Rivera might be counted a surrealist is valid — though his ability to tease out the utopian from the absurd and thrilling collision of history cannot be denied.

Kahlo's paintings — fantastic, revelatory, slipping between dream and reality — require far less qualification. That both were communists is well known, and their valorization of colonized indigenous and Latin American peoples was central to their communism.

The Césaires deserve as much recognition. By the time their European counterparts had made contact with them in Martinique during World War II, Suzanne and Aimé had already been publishing their own surrealist publication, the militantly anticolonial *Tropiques*. The years after the war saw Aimé elected a member of French parliament as a Communist, and he would continue to publish some of the most unique poetry, theatre, and essays in the surrealist canon.

As for Suzanne, his wife, she was as great

Alexander Billet is a writer, critic, and artist based in Los Angeles. His first book, *Shake the City: Experiments In Space and Time, Music and Crisis* (2022, 1968 Press), was recently translated into Portuguese by Brazilian publisher *Sobinfluencia Edicoes*. More of his work can be found through his website, alexanderbillet.com.



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/index.php?curid=31878747>

Opening of the Max Ernst exhibition at the gallery Au Sans Pareil (37 avenue Kléber, Paris), May 2, 1921. From left to right: René Hilsum, Benjamin Péret, Serge Charchoune, Philippe Soupault on top of the ladder with a bicycle under his arm, Jacques Rigaut (upside down), André Breton and Simone Kahn.

a talent, overshadowed not just thanks to patriarchy but her death at the relatively young age of 50 in 1966. “Surrealism lives!” she would declare in a 1943 essay, in which she credits the movement with giving voice to lives “everywhere — in New York, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, Canada, and Algiers — other voices also resound: voices that would not be what they are (either in timbre or resonance) without surrealism.”

Fourth order: make clear that, however much surrealism reflected the early 20th century’s retrograde ideas of gender and sexuality, its dialectic points toward the subversion of these same mores.

Cohen euphemistically calls out Breton’s “assertive heterosexuality.” More straightforward descriptions might just be sexism and homophobia, which led him to exclude and expel many queer and women surrealists.

This, however, didn’t stop queer and women surrealists from existing, or from using the movement’s aesthetic strategies to explode the strictures of sexuality. Consider, for example, Claude Cahun. Born Lucy Renee Mathilde Schwob, she dressed in men’s clothes and explored the permeable borders of gender roles in her photomontages. “Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation,” she wrote in her autobiography. “Neuter is the only gender that always suits me.”

During World War II, Cahun founded the anti-fascist group *Contre Attaque*, whose members found creative and original ways to

undermine occupying Nazi troops. She was arrested in 1944 and sentenced to death. She was spared by the end of the war, but her time in prison permanently damaged her health.

Though some feminists have criticized the use of sexualized imagery in surrealist art, women surrealists have argued that, at their best, these images sought to question rather than reinforce. “If I cut off the credits from my films,” said Argentinian filmmaker Nelly Kaplan, “people wouldn’t be able to tell if they were made by a man or a woman.” The history of surrealist feminism is rich.

[See *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, edited by Penelope Rosemont (University of Texas Press) —ed.]

The Ordinary Is Surreal

Fifth and final order: to assert that the surreal is ordinary, and the ordinary is surreal. Intrinsic in the contradictions that make life a grating hell are also the possibilities of transcendence, though what that transcendence looks like isn’t always so clear.

One might be surprised by the works counted by their makers as surrealist. This includes one of the great American novels of the 20th century, so often misunderstood as a work of straightforward realism: Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. As Robin D.G. Kelley writes in *Freedom Dreams*, Wright saw much of his work as sitting comfortably in the radical oeuvre of surrealism.

“Wright did not try to pass off *Native Son*

as social realism or proletarian realism,” writes Kelley. “Rather, it is a psychological journey that attempts to communicate what’s incommunicable; it is about alienation and yearning for something, but Wright isn’t sure exactly what it is.”

For sure, the brutal actions of Wright’s protagonist Bigger Thomas spring from a lifetime of racism, degradation, and dehumanization. What Wright forces us to ask, however, is why such inhuman treatment produces more of the same, and what becomes of the human that, despite everything, continues to exist. And why the urge to escape — not just prison but circumstance itself — is such a strong one.

The alienation, the quotidian violence and celebrated cruelties, these surround us even more than they perhaps did in the time of Wright, of Breton, of Césaire. They are no longer so strange, but remain eldritch and uncanny, as if we’re watching film of a fictionalized life we are also forced to live.

Breton once provocatively wrote that “The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd.” That’s no longer so rare an occurrence. It happens regularly in American schools and public spaces.

This essay is written at a time when the surreal is being employed in a worrisome manner: U.S. Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris and her running mate Tim Walz have decided their best line of attack against Donald Trump and the Republicans is to repeatedly and fervently call them “weird.”

Leaving aside the question of efficacy, one has to wonder whether there are long-term ramifications for the American imagination. To hear the American liberal speak, all one has to do to stop the rise of authoritarianism is cling fiercely to a sane and civilized reality. Never mind that that reality is what brought us to this brink in the first place.

For every vision of a different and better order — be it the end of segregation or the idea of a world without war — at first seems “weird” too. The impulse toward freedom and hope, buried as it is under all sorts of useless, alienating work and garbage ideology, appears foreign. Our senses aren’t sure how to understand it at first. Which doesn’t make it any less human. The need to go beyond, to escape, to discover a life of collective meaning, persists. ■

Harris, Trump, or Neither? Arab & Muslim Voters' Anger Grows

By Malik Miah

[THIS ARTICLE WAS written for *Against the Current* before the November election. —ed.]

AMONG THE MOST significant political developments in the 2024 presidential election is that Arab, Palestinian and Muslim communities are rejecting the party of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris for their support of genocide in Gaza, Palestine, and Lebanon.

Arab Americans see their families being bombed and slaughtered. While in the recent past they mostly voted Democratic, many reject the arguments of progressive liberals (and some socialist leftists) that critical support to Harris is better than “allowing Trump to win.”

A revealing survey in Michigan indicates the deep anger of Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) last month published a survey that showed Green Party candidate Jill Stein leading Harris among Muslim voters in three battleground states, Arizona, Michigan and Wisconsin. (It's not clear whether the survey reflected the weight of African-American Muslims —ed.)

The Muslim Public Affairs Council also recently endorsed Stein, who was arrested this spring at a pro-Palestinian rally at Columbia University in New York.

She has visited Dearborn, Michigan several times during her campaign. Dearborn has a large Arab American population and has the first Arab American mayor in the country, Abdullah Hammoud, and is a center of pro-Palestinian opposition to Israel's war.

Dearborn is part of the district that elected the only Palestinian American in Congress, Rashida Tlaib, and includes South Asian Muslims in a largely Black section of Detroit.

The CAIR survey found 40% of Michigan's Muslim-American voters plan to back Jill Stein, while 18% support Republican Donald Trump, 12% want Vice President Kamala Harris, and 4% plan to vote for independent candidate Cornel West, according to Michigan Public radio reporting.

Power of the “Uncommitted”

In Michigan more than 100,000 voted “uncommitted” during the state's February Democratic presidential primary. Biden was the winner in Michigan over Trump in 2020

Malik Miah is an ATC advisory editor and regular columnist.

with a 154,188-vote margin.

The uncommitted movement, aimed at pressuring the Democratic candidate to call for a permanent ceasefire and halt military aid to Israel, expanded to about 700,000 voters nationwide. But the Democratic National Convention refused a request for a single Palestinian-American delegate to speak.

CAIR's statistics for Michigan were part of a national survey of 1,159 Muslim voters conducted August 25-27, after Vice President Kamala Harris accepted the Democratic nomination. Nationally, they found 29.4% of American Muslims planning to vote for Harris, 29.1% for Stein, 11.2% for Trump, 4.2% for Cornel West. A sizeable 16.5% were yet undecided, while 8.8% did not plan to vote.

Only Stein has ballot status on enough states to win the 270 Electoral College vote to become president. (Ballot exclusion of third parties is another subject of how the electoral system is legally rigged for the Democrats and Republicans.)

Appealing to Arab Communities

While Harris has remained aligned with Biden's support for Israel, Cornel West has worked to court Arab voters in Dearborn through roundtable meetings with donors and Muslim community leaders, as well as campaign stops to address the “catastrophe” in Gaza that drew hundreds in Dearborn, according to *Politico*.

Both West and Stein addressed the September 12-14 national convention of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) in Dearborn, where many remain frustrated with their choices for president, according to the *Detroit Free Press*.

“It breaks my heart as a Democrat because I thought human rights matter for everyone,” Terry Ahwal, director of the ADC's Michigan chapter told the news site. Harris is “better than Biden,” she said. “She's using words like Palestinian dignity, but these are words when we continue to send weapons.”

“I'm still undecided and unhappy,” said Osama Siblani, publisher of the Dearborn-based *Arab American News*. Harris' “speech during the DNC was not sufficient for me to make a decision. ... She's not different, she's part of the administration. She has made it very clear what she will do when she becomes president. ... And therefore,

right now, Trump is not a choice, neither is Kamala Harris. But there are 60 days from today, and there is plenty of time for them.”

The CAIR survey found that 69.1% of American Muslims said they generally vote for the Democratic Party, but a staggering 94% said they disapprove of Biden's job performance, with 98.2% dissatisfied with his handling of the conflict in Gaza.

“Despite this discontent, Muslim voters remain highly engaged, with 82.1% indicating they are ‘very likely’ to vote in the upcoming Presidential election,” CAIR reports.

That so many Arab Americans and Muslims — unlike the broader Black, Latino or Asian populations — reject Harris should not be a surprise. Tens of thousands of Palestinian Arabs have had family members killed by Israel's criminal regime during the Biden-Harris tenure.

ADC, the largest Arab American civil

THE ARAB AMERICAN Institute has released a detailed poll of Arab American voting intentions for the presidential election, compared to the breakdown in 2020. It's online at <https://www.aaiusa.org/library/the-arab-american-vote-2024>.

The poll confirms the enormous decline in support for the Democratic ticket in the wake of the Gaza genocide and the Biden administration's complicity. (While the poll was conducted before the Israeli offensive in Lebanon, the damage for the Democrats is probably even greater now.)

The poll suggests that any pro-Palestinian gesture by Kamala Harris — even symbolically allowing a Palestinian-American speaker at the Democratic convention — would significantly reduce the damage. The campaign's failure to show any sign of backing away from full-throated support for Israel's war speaks volumes, and may have a significant impact on the outcome.

The poll indicates third-party support among Arab American voters not exceeding about 12 percent — considerably less than the ADC and CAIR surveys, but still significant by historical comparison. The poll's important information and conclusions are worth checking out in full. ■



At the ADC convention, hundreds of people gathered to discuss the ongoing catastrophe in Gaza.

https://jimwestphoto.com

rights group, usually holds its annual convention called “ArabCon” in Washington, D.C. or a nearby city, but this year decided to “come home” to Dearborn, which has the highest percentage of Arab American residents among U.S. cities.

As Michigan is a swing state, Arab American activists are seeking to lessen the unconditional support for Israel of the two main parties. The failure of that effort is why there is so little support for Harris or Trump.

“Hide Your Head in a Bag”

Racist anti-Palestinian bias was on full display at a September 17 Senate hearing that was intended to discuss the massive increase in hate crimes targeting various communities, as well as the dehumanizing rhetoric that has fueled that increase.

The hearing was motivated, in part, by the horrific murder of six-year-old Wade Al Fayoumi and the shooting of three Palestinian students in Vermont. ADC had joined the Muslim Civic Coalition and partner organizations in calling for a hearing which would center and elevate Arab, Muslim, and, most importantly, Palestinian voices.

Republican members of the Committee immediately ignored the stated purpose of the hearing and focused on the discomfort of some Jewish university students.

Adding insult upon injury, Senator John Kennedy (R-LA) used his time to smear expert witness Maya Berry, Executive Director of the Arab American Institute, a Muslim Arab American woman.

Kennedy repeatedly declared that she supported terrorism and told her that she should “hide her head in a bag.”

ADC National Executive Director Abed Ayoub commented,

“ADC is intimately familiar with the consequences of dehumanizing, demonizing rhetoric. While we had hoped for better, what we saw yesterday was a clear demonstration of how elected officials view Arab, Muslim, and Palestinian Americans.”

“I am disgusted by the treatment of my fellow community leader, Maya Berry, who has worked tirelessly to support our community. There is no place for this level of disrespect anywhere — especially in Congress.”

Smear Against Rashida Tlaib

The witchhunt against Palestinian voices and supporters also occurred on one of the country’s largest news outlets. CNN hosts Jake Tapper and Dana Bash have performed a masterclass in journalistic malpractice — better described in this case as “lying.”

Both anchors devoted concerted airtime to accusing Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib of antisemitism based on a comment they attributed to the Palestinian American member of Congress — a comment *she never came close to making.*

Anyone watching CNN’s “State of the Union” with Tapper on Sunday, or “Inside Politics” with Dana Bash on Monday, would have heard that Tlaib questioned Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel’s ability to fairly do her job because Nessel is Jewish.

It didn’t matter to the primetime journalists that Tlaib’s recent criticism of Nessel *did not in any way mention or refer to the attorney general’s Jewish faith or identity.* Both are seen as progressive Democrats.

The lie stems from Tlaib’s comments on Nessel’s decision to prosecute 11 Gaza solidarity protesters from the University of Michigan. The student demonstrators are facing overreaching criminal charges for camping out on their own college campus to protest the funding of Israel’s genocidal war.

“We’ve had the right to dissent, the right to protest,” Tlaib told the *Detroit Metro Times.*

“We’ve done it for climate, the immigrant rights movement, for Black lives, and even around issues of injustice among water shutoffs.”

“But it seems that the attorney general decided if the issue was Palestine, she was going to treat it differently, and that alone speaks volumes about possible biases within the agency she runs.”

Tlaib’s accusation of anti-Palestinian bias, which is institutionally rampant nationwide, was immediately twisted by Nessel into an alleged antisemitic attack. “Rashida should not use my religion to imply I cannot perform my job fairly as Attorney General. It’s anti-Semitic and wrong,” wrote Nessel on X.

This started the smear campaign picked up by CNN and others. CNN’s Tapper did not follow basic journalistic standards like checking quotes, took it as given that Tlaib had accused Nessel of bias as a Jewish prose-

cutor. Said Tapper:

“Congresswoman Tlaib is suggesting that she shouldn’t be prosecuting these individuals that Nessel says broke the law and that she’s only doing it because she’s Jewish.”

The next day, CNN’s Bash doubled down on the smear. Bash said without equivocation that Tlaib accused “the state’s Jewish attorney general” of “letting her religion influence her job.” Bash then called it a “sad reality” that Michigan governor Gretchen Whitmer failed to condemn this incident of anti-Semitism, which never occurred.

Not incredibly, Tapper and Bash kept going even as the *Metro Times* journalist Steve Neavling, whose interview set off the fracas repeatedly admonished them that Tlaib had said no such thing.

Neavling spent two days attempting to counteract the lies, tweeting at Tapper and Bash, and publishing an explicit fact-checking report in the *Metro Times.*

In a follow-up response to Bash’s segment, Neavling wrote, “Now Dana Bash from CNN is lying about what happened. U.S. Representative @RashidaTlaib did not say Nessel filed the charges because she’s Jewish. She said there is an anti-Palestinian attitude among many institutions, and most of them are not run by Jewish people.”

Even though it had been clearly established that Tlaib made *no such claim* about Nessel, a group of 21 House Democrats released a statement that “implying these cases are being handled unfairly due to her religious background is antisemitic, deeply disturbing, and unacceptable.” Neither Biden nor Harris came to Tlaib’s defense.

The Black Vote

It is noteworthy that many Black people support the fight of Palestinians for self-determination. Whether a majority will vote, if they bother to vote, for Harris, it will not be enthusiastic. Working-class Black people face low wages, inflation for basic commodities, health costs, and unaffordable housing. Democrats including Harris offer little relief. Harris has said she opposes any special programs for Black people, including reparations.

Harris nevertheless will get an overwhelming support from Black women, along with most Black men. Black elites use nationalist rhetoric to win Black political support for Democrats. But there are many young Black people — men and women — who are uneasy with Biden-Harris support to Israel. Some even say, “Is Trump really a greater danger to freedom?”

The lesson of all bourgeois elections in imperialist countries is that fundamental change doesn’t happen by presidential elections. Parties like the Greens explain this and use their candidates to speak truth to power.

Arab and Muslim communities in Michigan understand this better than other oppressed communities. ■

Discussing the Climate Crisis: Dubious Notions & False Paths

By Michael Löwy

IN THE CONVENTIONAL truisms about climate crisis, we find a large number point — knowingly or unknowingly — in false directions. I am not referring here to denialist speeches (like those of Senator James Inhofe, who recently died), but to those who claim to offer “green” or “sustainable solutions.”

Some of these come from half- or quarter-truths while others are based on fake news, lies and mystifications. Many are full of good will and good intentions, but would take us in the wrong direction.

If we continue with these slogans — even if painted green — we will find ourselves in a blind alley. I offer the following 10 examples as ones to avoid.

1. We must “save the planet.”

We encounter this slogan everywhere: on billboards, in the press, in magazines, in the declarations of political leaders, etc. But this is nonsense.

Planet Earth is no way in danger! Whatever the climate, it will continue to revolve around the sun for the next few billion years. What is threatened by global warming are multiple forms of the existing web of life on this planet, including ours: the species *Homo sapiens*.

“Saving the planet” gives the false impression that the crisis is something external to us, somewhere else, that it does not implicate us directly. It suggests that we are not asking people to worry about their own or their children’s lives, but about a hazy abstraction, “the planet.”

No wonder that less political people respond: “I’m too busy with my problems to worry about ‘the planet.’”

2. “Take action” to save the planet.

This commonplace slogan, infinitely satiated, is a variation of the previous formula.

It contains a half-truth: everyone must personally contribute to avoiding the catastrophe. But it conveys the illusion that to make “small gestures” — turning off the lights, turning off the faucet, etc. — will avoid the worst.

This article, directed primarily to European readers, was written before this summer’s catastrophic wildfires and floods on multiple continents. Michael Löwy’s numerous books and articles include Ecosocialism: A Radical Alternative to Capitalist Catastrophe (Haymarket Books).

We thus eliminate — consciously or not — the need for profound structural changes in the current mode of production and consumption. These structural changes challenge the very foundation of capitalist production and society based on profit maximization.

3. The polar bear is in danger.

A photo we find everywhere shows a poor polar bear trying to survive among melting blocks of ice. Certainly, the life of the polar bear — and many other species in the polar regions — is threatened. While this image may arouse the compassion of a few generous souls, it does not directly seem to concern most of the population.

But the melting of polar ice is a threat not only for the brave polar bear, but for half, if not more, of humanity who live in large cities by the sea. The immense glaciers of Greenland and Antarctica will raise sea levels by tens of meters — however, only a few meters will submerge cities like Venice, Amsterdam, London, New York, Rio de Janeiro, Shanghai and Hong Kong.

This is not going to happen next year of course, but scientists note that the melting of these glaciers is accelerating. It is impossible to predict how quickly it will take place. In fact, many factors are currently difficult to calculate.

By highlighting only the poor polar bear, we hide the fact that this is a terrifying affair that concerns us all.

4. Vulnerable nations (Bangladesh, for example) suffer greatly from climate change.

This is a half-truth. Yes, warming will (and already does) acutely affect poor countries in the Global South, which are least responsible for CO₂ emissions. And it is true that these countries will be the most impacted by climatic disasters, hurricanes, drought, and a reduction of water sources.

But it is a mistake to imagine that the countries of the North will not be affected by these same dangers. Have we not witnessed terrible forest fires in the United States, Canada, and Australia? Haven’t heat waves caused many victims in Europe? Haven’t we seen increased frequency and strength in hurricanes as they batter the U.S. Gulf and Atlantic states? We could multiply the examples.

If we maintain the impression that threats

only concern the peoples of the South, only a minority of convinced internationalists will understand the danger. However, sooner or later all of humanity will face unprecedented disasters. We must explain to the populations of the North how this threat directly affects them too.

5. Around the year 2100, the temperature is liable to rise by 3.5 degrees C, or an almost unimaginable 6.3 degrees Fahrenheit, above the pre-industrial period.

This is an assertion found in many serious documents — but it seems to me to be both uncertain and, in some ways, a diversion.

From a scientific point of view: We know that climate change is not a linear process. It can suddenly accelerate. Many dimensions of warming have feedbacks, the consequences of which are unpredictable. For example, forest fires emit huge amounts of CO₂, which contribute to warming and thus intensify forest fires. If it is therefore difficult to predict what will happen within a few years, how can we pretend to predict what will happen a century away?

From a political point of view: At the end of this century, we will all be dead, as will most of our children and grandchildren. How can we mobilize people’s attention and commitment for a future that does not concern them, directly or indirectly? Should we be worried about future generations?

It is a noble thought, argued at length for example by the philosopher Hans Jonas, who explains we have a moral duty towards those who are not yet born. While a minority might be affected by this argument, for most what will happen in 2100 does not interest them very much.

6. By 2050 we will achieve “carbon neutrality.”

This promise from the European Union and various European governments is not a half-truth, nor naïve goodwill — it is pure and simple mystification.

First, instead of committing now to the urgent changes demanded by the scientific community (the authoritative Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, IPCC) over the next three to four years, our leaders are promising wonders for 2050.

But this is obviously much too late. Moreover, as governments change every four or five years, what is the guarantee for these commitments, with no accountability for those making them, in 30 years' time? It is a grotesque way of justifying present inaction with an untestable promise.

Second, "neutrality" does not mean a drastic reduction in emissions — quite the contrary! This is a misleading calculation based on offsets. Company XY continues to emit CO₂, but plants a forest in Indonesia, supposedly to absorb the equivalent amount of CO₂ — if the forest does not catch fire.

But even these "compensation mechanisms" have already been examined by many ecological NGOs as not being equivalent. This reveals the perfect mystification contained in the promise of "carbon neutrality."

7. Our particular bank (or oil company) finances renewable energies, thus it participates in the "ecological transition."

This commonplace of greenwashing is also based on manipulating "facts." Certainly, banks and multinationals invest in renewable energies, but precise studies by the European environmental and tax justice organization ATTAC and other NGOs have shown that this is a small — sometimes tiny — part of their financial operations.

The bulk of their investment continues to move into oil, coal, gas and other fossil fuels. It is a simple question of profitability and competition for market share.

All "reasonable" governments — unlike Trump, or Bolsonaro in Brazil — also swear that they are committed to the ecological transition and renewable energies. But as soon as there is a problem with the supply of fossil energy — gas recently, because of aggressive Russian policy — they take refuge in coal by reactivating lignite power plants. They implore the (bloody) Saudi Arabian royal family to increase oil production.

Fine speeches about the "ecological transition" obscure an unpleasant truth: it is not enough to develop renewable energies. After all, these are intermittent: the sun does not always shine in northern Europe. Certainly technical advances exist in this area, but they cannot solve everything.

Above all, renewables require mining resources which risk being depleted. If the wind and the sun are unlimited goods, this is not at all the case for all the materials necessary to use them (lithium, copper, etc.).

It will therefore be necessary to consider a reduction in overall energy consumption and a selective decrease. These measures are unimaginable within the framework of capitalist production.



California wildfires: not only the Global South is burning!

8. Thanks to carbon capture and sequestration techniques, we will avoid climate catastrophe.

This is an argument used more and more by governments, and is even found in certain serious documents (e.g. from the IPCC). It is the illusion of a miracle technological solution, which would save the climate without the need to change anything in our (capitalist) mode of production and in our way of life.

Alas, the sad truth is that these miraculous techniques for capturing and sequestering atmospheric carbon are far from being a reality. Certainly a few attempts have taken place, a few projects underway here and there, but for the moment we cannot say that this technology is effective, efficient or operational.

Nor has technology resolved the difficulties of either capture or sequestration (which happen in underground regions impervious to leaks). And there is no guarantee that in the future it will be able to do so.

9. Thanks to electric cars, we will substantially reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

This is yet another example of a half-truth. Yes, electric cars are less polluting than thermal cars (gasoline or diesel), and therefore less ruinous for the health of city residents. However, from a climate change perspective, their record is much more mixed.

They emit less CO₂, but contribute to a disastrous "everything with electricity." Electricity in most countries is produced with fossil fuels (coal, gas or oil). Reduced emissions from electric cars are "offset" by the increased emissions resulting from greater electricity consumption.

In France, electricity is produced by nuclear energy, another dead end. In Brazil, megadams destroy forests and are therefore responsible for increasing the carbon footprint.

If we want to drastically reduce emissions, we cannot escape a significant reduction in the circulation of private cars. There are more efficient and alternative means of transportation: free public transport, pedestrian

zones, cycle paths. The electric car maintains the illusion that we can continue as before just by changing technology.

10. It is through "market mechanisms" such as carbon taxes, or emissions rights markets, or even increasing the price of fossil fuels, that we will be able to reduce CO₂ emissions.

Even some sincere ecologists see these market mechanisms might be a way out. But it too is a mystification. Market mechanisms have demonstrated their complete ineffectiveness in reducing greenhouse gases.

Not only are these anti-social measures that want to make the working classes pay the price of the "ecological transition," but above all they are incapable of contributing substantially to limiting emissions. The spectacular failure of "carbon markets" established by the Kyoto agreements are the best demonstration of this reality.

It is not through "indirect," "incentive" measures based on the logic of the capitalist market that can put brakes on the omnipotence of fossil fuels, which indeed have made the system work for two centuries.

To start with, it will be necessary to expropriate the capitalist energy monopolies and create a public energy service with the mission to drastically reduce the exploitation of fossil fuels.

11. Climate change is now inevitable, "we can only adapt."

We find this kind of fatalistic assertion in the media and among political "leaders."

For example, Mr. Christophe Bechu, Minister of Ecological Transition in the French Macron government, recently declared: "Since we will not be able to prevent global warming, whatever our efforts, we must manage to limit its effects while adapting to it."

This is an excellent recipe to justify abandoning "our efforts" to avoid the worst. However, IPCC scientists have clearly explained that if warming has indeed already started, it is still possible to stay below the red line of 1.5 degrees C (2.7 degrees F) above pre-industrial levels — provided that we immediately begin to very significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

What's the Conclusion?

Of course we have to try to adapt. But if climate change gets out of control and accelerates, "adaptation" is just an illusion. How do we "adapt" to temperatures of 50° C (122 degrees F)?

We could multiply the examples. All lead to the conclusion that if we want to avoid climate change, we must change the capitalist system and replace it with a more egalitarian form of production and consumption. *This necessary direction is what we call Ecosocialism.* ■

Putin Regime's New Gulag: Repression of Russian Left Activists

By Ivan Petrov

ON JUNE 5, the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation rejected the appeal of Boris Kagarlitsky, leaving this prominent sociologist behind bars for the next five years. This event once again has attracted the world's attention to the persecution of political prisoners in Russia.

The campaign in Kagarlitsky's defense has not subsided, but on the contrary is gaining momentum. His case, however, is the tip of the iceberg of the repressive system in our country, which is devouring yet more victims.

While Boris is a well-known figure whose fate is in plain sight, many who are convicted or under investigation in political and semi-political criminal cases are unknown not only to the general public, but sometimes also to civil activists.

At the end of last year, having been released for two months from a pre-trial detention center in the northern city of Syktyvkar, Kagarlitsky himself was determined to fight for the freedom of political prisoners and overcome the information blockade around their persecution. At the beginning of April, already in a pre-trial detention center in Zelenograd city, in Moscow region, he wrote in an open letter to left-wing activists:

"Political unity and political maturity are achieved through political activity. And in today's conditions, when political action and self-organization in our country are extremely difficult, helping like-minded people who find themselves in prison becomes not just a humanistic activity, but also an important political gesture, a practice of solidarity. Today, when such an initiative has finally received practical implementation, it needs to be supported, we can and should unite around it. After all, the first step will be followed by other steps. In order for the future to come, we must work now."

Who's Being Persecuted?

According to circles close to Amnesty International, there are now more than 900 political prisoners in Russia. The actual number of punishments for persecuted activists is much higher. They did not include those who were actually imprisoned for politics, but,

Ivan Petrov is a collective pseudonym of the Solidarity Action Committee (SAC). You can contribute to supporting the activities of SAC, including support to political prisoners, via <https://boosty.to/komitetsd>.



Alexander Kupriyanov on trial.

formally on trumped-up criminal cases.

Fabrication of criminal cases is a favorite method of dealing with trade union leaders. Anyone who actively opposes the current order and the current government can go to jail, and more and more leftists are among them.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, according to Vladimir Lenin, the most advanced squad of the working class in Russia were metalworkers. Nowadays, many sociologists and politicians consider healthcare workers to be the most organized and capable of defending their interests.

By virtue of their profession, they protect not only their own economic interests, but also the remnants of the public healthcare system (free for the population) that survived the neoliberal reforms of recent decades. Objectively, then, healthcare workers protect the interests of every resident of Russia.

In 2012 the trade union "Action" of healthcare workers was created. One of the most militant and capable independent trade unions in our country, present in 57 regions, Action is now part of the Confederation of Labor of Russia (CLR), the second largest trade union association in Russia.

The Action union includes workers not only of public clinics but also private ones, where the owners especially do not like any trade unions. Furthermore, there is no place for shop-level disunity of people in the healthcare system: Action brings together doctors, paramedics, nurses, orderlies and students of medical institutes and colleges on

an equal basis.

It also includes representatives of other professions working in medical organizations, for example, ambulance drivers.

The Alexander Kupriyanov Case

Among trade union activists, there are traditionally a high proportion of people with leftist views. One of these is Alexander Kupriyanov, a psychotherapist from the city of Bryansk, also known as Doctor Pravda (Truth) thanks to his YouTube channel of the same name.

He had tried to create an independent trade union at his work back in the mid-2000s, and after the emergence of Action he joined it. Then Alexander moved on to political struggle, holding street actions, participating in the activities of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), running for elected bodies at various levels.

In the Bryansk region Alexander Kupriyanov organized rallies and pickets, both on health issues (torture in the Trubchevsky psychoneurological boarding school, the death of children in the Bryansk perinatal center, labor problems of healthcare workers), and on other topics like the forced resettlement of a World War II veteran from supposedly "dilapidated" housing in the center of the city to the outskirts.

The angry regional authorities could not tolerate this for long. In 2018 Kupriyanov was arrested on charges of fraud. According to the materials of the "case," he was allegedly involved in imposing loans on patients for treatment in the interregional system of "Med-Life" clinics, where he previously worked. A total of 22 people are involved in this case.

Kupriyanov was not related to the owners, administration or accounting department of the clinic, who actually solicited clients to take out loans. As the chief attending physician of the center, he dealt only with medicine. The authorities decided to use a real fraud case to get rid of their opponent. (It is characteristic that actual investigations were carried out in "Med-Life" clinics in other cities, but not in the Bryansk clinic where Alexander worked.)

Alexander Kupriyanov spent a year in the pre-trial detention center — the maximum period of pre-trial detention under this

article of the criminal code — and due to lack of evidence, he was released. However, the criminal case was not closed. After leaving prison, Kupriyanov parted ways with the opportunist Communist Party of the Russian Federation on fundamental issues and was expelled from the party for criticizing its conciliatory policies.

He joined the Solidarity Action Committee (SAC), where he began supporting imprisoned leftists, labor and trade union activists. Alexander became one of the founders of the Public Council of Citizens of the city of Bryansk and the Bryansk region, and later began collaborating with the revealing newspaper “For Truth and Justice.”

On August 15, 2023, the newspaper and the Public Council held a round table of the Bryansk public against corruption. Already on August 16, Kupriyanov as one of the organizers of the round table was summoned to the investigative department of the police in Cheboksary, the capital of the Republic of Chuvashia. The still-open criminal case was reclassified it to the more serious criminal article of “organizing a criminal community.”

Now Alexander lives at home in Bryansk, but remains under investigation. According to the preventive measure (prohibition of certain actions), as an accused person he is prohibited from sending and receiving postal and telegraphic items, using the internet and other means of communication. He needs to get acquainted with the case materials (560 volumes), which involves long trips to the city of Cheboksary, located more than 1000 km from Bryansk.

The last major episode in the Kupriyanov case occurred in the second half of February 2024. On February 21, he was detained right on the street in Bryansk and taken to Cheboksary. The next day, a district court hearing was held there to change the preventive measure to detention. The investigators’ petition was based on the fact that, while free, Alexander continued to use the Internet.

Thanks to the conscientious work of lawyer L. Karama, the principled position of judge E. Egorov and a public campaign of the defense, the investigators’ petitions were rejected by the court, and the preventive measure for A. Kupriyanov remained the same. But the danger hanging over Kupriyanov remains. He has yet to prove his innocence when the case comes to trial.

Anton Orlov Imprisoned

Another example of repression against trade unionists is the case of Anton Orlov, coordinator of the Action trade union in the Republic of Bashkortostan. A member of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and a small interregional organization, the Union of Marxists, Orlov is currently in prison on charges of large-scale fraud.

Anton is not a doctor by education but



Members of the Ufa Marxist circle on trial.

joined with medical teams at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the Republic’s medical staff worked to the limit of their physical capabilities, often without additional salary. Seeing such injustice, Orlov as a young communist, joined the “Action” trade union and soon became its Republican coordinator on a voluntary unsalaried basis.

During the two years (2020-2022) of Orlov’s work in the trade union, membership of the Republican organization increased fourfold; the salaries of ambulance crews increased; double pay on weekends was established, and pregnant employees were released from work while maintaining their average earnings.

The most successful trade union campaign was the “Italian strike” (working to rule) of February 2022 in Ishimbay, where ambulance doctors demanded payments for working in incomplete teams.

The strike led to the intervention of the labor inspectorate and the prosecutor’s office, as well as the resignation of the head physician of the district hospital, leading to a noticeable response in the press and on television. The strikers’ basic demands were met.

The accusation against Anton was brought in the midst of the Ishimbay strike, which clearly indicates the political background of the fabricated “case,” in which he was considered a witness, involving two episodes of fuel supplies that weren’t delivered by the companies Nefte-Service and Hermes after payments had been made.

Orlov had once worked as a commercial director at “Nefte-Service,” but had no access to the company’s accounts. Relations between two commercial organizations should be settled by an arbitration court, but the Republican Prosecutor’s Office, without factual evidence, saw in this story the theft of 11 million rubles.

Representatives of trade union structures, one of whom, Chairman of the CLR, Boris Kravchenko, is a member of the Presidium of the Council for Human Rights and Civil Society Development under the President of Russia, were not allowed to appear at the trial as defense witnesses.

On September 23, 2022, Anton was sentenced to six-and-a-half years in a general regime colony and a fine of 250,000 rubles. It is curious that other defendants in the case testifying against him, whose guilt was actually proven, received shorter sentences. In February 2023, the appeal court mockingly reduced the prison term by three months.

This was not enough for the authorities, and after the official bankruptcy of Nefte-Service LLC and the payment of debt to the victims, another criminal case was opened against Anton Orlov under the article “fraud committed by an organized group on an especially large scale.”

Thanks to the efforts of lawyer Larisa Isaeva, the second case was repeatedly returned for further investigation due to numerous procedural violations. Finally, on June 26, a new trial began. Anton Orlov again found himself in the dock, as the only accused member of a supposed “organized group.”

Under the “Strong State” Cult

Among left-wing political prisoners there are even more politicians than trade union activists. For example, just for participating in a street action that is not coordinated with the authorities, you can easily end up in prison.

In Putin’s Russia, with its cult of a “strong state” and a “steady hand,” not only every branch of the military, but also every law enforcement agency received its own professional holiday, which the entire Russian people were ordered to celebrate. December

20 is a holiday for the ubiquitous Federal Security Service (FSB).

On December 20, 2021, members of the radical leftist youth association “Left Bloc” celebrated this day in their own way. They decided to congratulate the gendarmerie in a grotesque form: they stretched out a banner at the entrance to the FSB Directorate for the South-Western Administrative District of Moscow and lit smoke bombs, something that security forces are especially afraid of on the streets of large cities.

The state security officers did not appreciate the congratulations, and it was not difficult to identify those congratulating them, because a video of the action was posted on the Left Bloc channel. A few days later, the congratulators began to be detained, and a criminal case was opened against two of them, the anarchist Lev Skoryakin and the communist Ruslan Abasov.

In the interpretation of the investigation, the innocent joke of the young people was interpreted as follows: a group of people, by prior conspiracy, committed an attack on a government institution using weapons, and even motivated by political hatred, which is considered an aggravating circumstance.

Based on the testimony of an intimidated minor participant in the action and fabricated evidence, Lev and Ruslan were sent to a pre-trial detention center, where they spent nine months. Then the court replaced their preventive measure with a “prohibition of certain actions.”

After leaving prison, the defendants hastened to hide, thereby violating the order not to leave the region of permanent registration. Ruslan Abasov went to Bosnia and then to Croatia, where he currently lives. Lev Skoryakin, whose passport was confiscated during the search, went to the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, where a foreign passport was not required, and began applying for a visa to Germany.

In Bishkek, Lev was arrested several times by Kyrgyz security forces. He spent more than three months in prison, awaiting extradition to Russia. Then the General Prosecutor’s Office of Kyrgyzstan refused the Russian side’s request for his extradition; in September 2023, Lev Skoryakin was released.

However, he did not have to rejoice for long; already in October he was detained again, and this time handed over to the Russian side. Lev was transported to Moscow in handcuffs. Upon arrival at the capital’s Domodedovo airport, he was beaten and tortured.

During the many-hour interrogation, FSB officers tried to extract information from him about left-wing organizations in Russia and about human rights structures that help political activists escape persecution. However, the interrogators never received the information they needed, and the exhausted Lev was

taken to a pre-trial detention center.

For several weeks, the Left Bloc and human rights activists searched for the missing Skoryakin and eventually found him through a lawyer.

In December, a trial was held at which the prosecutor requested a sentence of five and a half years in prison for the defendant. On December 13, 2023, he was found guilty under the article “hooliganism involving violence against government officials” and sentenced to a fine of 500,000 rubles, from which he was released due to his long stay in prison.

Fearing a prosecution appeal against the relatively lenient sentence, Lev hastened to leave for the Armenian capital Yerevan, and in March 2024 he moved to Germany on a humanitarian visa.

Criminal Offense: Studying Marxism

It is quite possible to become a criminal in modern Russia without going to street protests or lighting smoke bombs, but simply by reading and discussing the classics of Marxism. And here even the mandates of regional authorities will not protect us.

In Ufa, the capital of the Republic of Bashkortostan, there was a Marxist circle, in which many have participated in the last decade. The creator of this particular circle, Alexey Dmitriev, is a young intellectual and, by the way, also a doctor (pediatrician-otolaryngologist), a person with incredibly broad interests from mathematics to political science.

No less prominent in the circle is Dmitry Chuvilin, until March 2022 an opposition deputy of the Kurultai (Parliament of Bashkortostan). The circle took upon itself the task of educating people. Priority was given to the study of philosophy, especially logic and critical thinking.

In the warm season, the circle organized gatherings in nature, with members of the Union of Marxists, the Left Front and other left-wing organizations from different regions of Russia. In addition to education and scientific discussions, many members of the circle worked in trade unions, participated in elections at various levels, wrote articles, blogged and tried to cooperate with the media.

The emerging connection between theory and practice, the ethos of self-organization of the working people, relatively wide popularity by the standards of unofficial politics, and attempts to create an interregional structure distinguished the Ufa circle from many others.

The state perceived this as a threat, especially with the start of the war against Ukraine, modestly called the “special military operation.” A month after the outbreak of hostilities, early in the morning of March 25, 2022, FSB officers broke into the homes of 15 members of the Marxist circle.

Many were beaten during arrest. Searches in apartments were carried out with partic-

ular passion, with everything turned upside down in search of the material basis for bringing charges under the monstrous article of “terrorism.”

FSB officers confiscated all media, camping equipment, philosophical, political and historical literature of the left, which appears in the case materials as “extremist.” The operatives were particularly intrigued with the camping equipment: walkie-talkies as a means of communication, entrenching tools to dig around tents, camouflage-style tourist clothing, including one for a 10-year-old boy, and even children’s binoculars.

Subsequently, these items began to appear in the case materials among the evidence of the criminal activities of the circle. During the search, two grenades were planted on one of the Marxists — he allegedly hid them in the wood stove, which was heated daily.

On that day, 14 people were detained and taken to district police departments. Five members of the circle were taken into custody, the rest were left as witnesses and released. Doctor Alexey Dmitriev, former deputy Dmitry Chuvilin, entrepreneur Pavel Matisov, odd-job worker Rinat Burkeev and pensioner Yuri Efimov have been in pre-trial detention for more than two years.

Since Dmitry Chuvilin was a parliamentary representative, the decision to initiate a case was made personally by the head of the Russian Investigative Committee for Bashkortostan, Denis Chernyatyev. Immediately after the court decision on the arrest was announced, Chuvilin declared the political nature of their persecution and went on a hunger strike.

Though a member of the Kurultai parliamentary faction in the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, he did not support Chuvilin, issuing the standard philistine formulation: “We do not know all the facts. We are not completely sure of his innocence.”

The main points of the charge were preparation for a violent seizure of power, creation of a terrorist community, calls for terrorist activities, public justification of terrorism and its propaganda on the internet, and preparation for the theft of weapons. It is curious that the indictment accused the defendants of reading the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin, which have not yet disappeared from the shelves of almost any Russian library.

Moreover, studying the articles of the famous Soviet teacher Anton Makarenko and performing songs from the most popular Soviet films about the Civil War also appear as evidence of the criminal activities of the circle. From all this it is concluded that the accused were preparing an attack on law enforcement officers and military units, the seizure of military weapons, the commission of terrorist acts and even the seizure of power.

Funny? In such a sacred matter as the



Daria Kozyreva was arrested, imprisoned and sentenced for pasting the poetry of Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko to his monument in St. Petersburg.

persecution of dissidents, the Russian government is not afraid to appear funny, because it is confident in its impunity, as well as in the passive indifference of the people, who have supposedly lost their sense of humor.

The main “evidence” of the accusation is two grenades. At the same time, the case contains an unanswered petition from defendant Pavel Matisov to conduct an investigation into the origin of the grenades and how they got into his wood stove.

The Informant, the Trial, the War

The entire basis of the indictment was taken from the testimony of one informant — Sergei Sapozhnikov, who joined the circle in the spring of 2020.

In 2014-2015, Sapozhnikov fought in the militia of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic as a squad commander. At the end of 2017, Ukraine put him on the international wanted list in a criminal case initiated in July 2014 in Dnepropetrovsk. The Security Service of Ukraine accused Sergei of robbery with injury leading to death.

Sapozhnikov was detained in Ufa in November 2017 and sent to a pre-trial detention center, from where he was released in April 2018. Why he was released remains a mystery. After the investigation began, members of the Ufa circle began to suspect that Sapozhnikov was recruited by the FSB and in 2020 specially introduced into the organization as a provocateur.

The investigation’s pressure on the remaining members of the circle was aimed at neutralizing those who could resist the official version of the prosecution. But one of the circle members was on vacation in Turkey in March 2022. After news came from Ufa about a search of his house and the arrest of

his comrades, he and his family were forced to make the difficult decision to emigrate.

Already in the USA, he wrote several articles to reveal the case from the inside, in which he gave an alternative version of what was happening and exposed the provocateur.

On January 30, 2024, hearings of the so-called “case of Ufa Marxist circle” began in the Central District Military Court in Yekaterinburg. At the very first hearing, one of the defendants, Yuri Efimov, stated that the accusation was fabricated, and the main witness was a provocateur.

It is obvious that a case of 30 volumes will take a long time to be considered. Only a few meetings took place over six months. It seems that even the court is embarrassed by the absurdity of the situation and does not yet know how to behave.

In the first days of Russia’s imperialist aggression in Ukraine, when it became clear that a “blitzkrieg” would not work and a protracted war would sooner or later cause discontent among the workers, the State Duma, obedient to Vladimir Putin, hastened to adopt additions to the Criminal Code and the Code of Administrative Offenses of the Russian Federation.

The most famous innovation was the so-called “article on discrediting the Russian army,” under which several thousand people were convicted in administrative cases (Administrative Code of the Russian Federation 20.3.3) and several dozen for repeated violations in criminal cases (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation 280.3 — up to three years in prison).

In fact, anyone who actively expresses their non-acceptance of a “special military operation” can be charged under this article. And this is not always required!

A Young Hero

On the night of February 24, 2024, on the second anniversary of the beginning of the aggression, a very young communist Daria Kozyreva was arrested in St. Petersburg for pasting a piece of paper with lines in Ukrainian from his poem “Testament” to the monument to the great Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko:

*Oh bury me, then rise ye up
And break your heavy chains
And water with the tyrants’ blood
The freedom you have gained.*

Daria became imbued with communist ideas as a teenager; she read *Capital* at the age of 12. Before her arrest, she participated in the work of two left-wing organizations and circles associated with them. As she grew up, Daria moved from Stalinism-Hoxhaism to authentic Leninism.

From the beginning of the “special operation,” Daria, assessing it as an imperialist war, did not limit herself to routine condemnation of what was happening — she acted. In January of this year, she was expelled from St. Petersburg State University for a post on social networks against new articles of the criminal code, where Daria ridiculed Russian claims to “denazify Ukraine.”

Even before reaching adulthood at 18, she came to the attention of law enforcement officers because of an anti-war inscription on Palace Square in St. Petersburg. She and her friend received the first report for discrediting the army in August 2022 for tearing down a poster in Patriot Park, calling for service in the active army under a contract.

At that time, the punishment was administrative. A secondary offense of this kind implies criminal liability, and Daria was imprisoned in a pre-trial detention center for the leaflet on the monument.

Eighteen-year-old Daria Kozyreva perceives repressions against herself as proof of a completed duty, as recognition by her enemies of the importance of her struggle. It is characterized by a sacrificial principle in the best traditions of the Russian revolutionary movement. This helps the resilient young woman endure the hardships of imprisonment.

Comrades who correspond with her and saw her at the trials note that Daria is in a great mood and is determined to fight to the end. In all the photographs from the courtroom, Daria smiles widely. In an open letter to the opposition newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, which has been published only in electronic format for more than two years, she writes:

“On the evening of the 25th, I learned about the criminal case — and was in some kind of desperate delight. I smiled and joked during the search, and continued to smile when they brought me to the temporary detention facility. And there, on the night from the 25th to the 26th, I realized: that’s it, now my conscience will

calm down. It tormented me for two damn years. I felt like I wasn't doing enough; and even though I had anti-war actions on my record, my conscience told me: if you remain free, it means you haven't done enough.

"Sometimes I didn't understand what right I had to walk free, while brave and honest Russians were locked in prison. I understood that if the 'Putin regime' lasted any longer, then my chance of getting to prison was quite high. Essentially, what was supposed to happen, happened. I didn't expect that they would decide to put me for Taras Shevchenko — oh my God, this is absurd! Well, the merrier! Shevchenko is my favorite poet and it is a special pleasure to suffer for him.

"... I'm not afraid of getting sentenced. If necessary, I would give my life for my beliefs, but here they will only take me away for a few years. I gladly accept this bitter cup and drink it to the dregs with pride."

A Regime in Fear of Solidarity

The fate of several leftwing activists we've discussed here — different in views, type of activity, and temperament — clearly indicates that in today's Russia the efforts of the state as the repressive apparatus of the ruling class are aimed at eliminating, uprooting all resistance to the established regime, at eliminating any alternative, no matter how harmless at first glance it may seem, at settling scores with those who think and live "not according to ours.

The regime sees, and rightly so, a threat in any manifestation of freedom, and dissent. Therefore, not only the radical left, but anyone who raises a voice against the established order, in defense of the oppressed, is at risk.

Democratic procedures like elections have long turned into a fiction, and this is not really hidden from anyone. An active and radically thinking citizen cannot count on the opportunity to act in the legal political field. But this is not enough.

It is not enough for the state to drive all consistent and energetic oppositionists into the "ghetto." It needs them to not even pose a potential threat.

There is still enough space in prisons and penal colonies, and it will always find a suitable law to send anyone we don't like there — and if suddenly there are not enough laws, it will adopt new ones. What does it cost, with such a parliament!

As the repressive policies of the authorities increase, opposition from the left and democratic forces increases. In addition



Members of the Uta Marxist circle arrested and imprisoned in 2022.

to campaigns to protect specific political prisoners, structures are emerging that aim to unite efforts and politically formalize the struggle for the release of those who suffered for freedom, for the ideals of equality and social justice.

One such structure is the Solidarity Action Committee. This organization already existed in the second half of the 2000s, when it sought to coordinate the activity of trade unions, strike committees and left-wing organizations, establishing information exchange and mutual assistance between them, and contributed to the development of a common position.

In less than five years of its existence, the Committee carried out dozens of actions and solidarity campaigns, the largest of which were a 28-day strike at the Ford plant in Vsevolozhsk and a two-month "Italian strike" in the Seaport of St. Petersburg. At that time there was a rise in the class struggle, weak of course but, by the standards of post-Soviet Russia, quite worthy of attention.

Now, unfortunately, the realities have changed: the labor movement is in a rut, and the problem of political persecution has come to the fore.

The committee resumed its work in the spring of 2022, with the outbreak of war and an attack on people's social and political rights. Without refusing in principle to work with centers of self-organization of workers, the new SAC in its practical activities is primarily engaged in helping repressed leftists, workers and trade union activists.

We took the cases and are directly involved in the protection and support of many of the above-mentioned activists: Boris Kagarlitsky, Alexander Kupriyanov, Anton Orlov, Lev Skoryakin, Daria Kozyreva. Members of the SAC from Bashkortostan provide assistance to the "Ufa Five," monitor the progress

of the trial, disseminate information about the views and fate of comrades in trouble, and support them with letters and parcels.

While defending specific activists, we do not forget about the political and economic struggle for the liberation of labor and humanity as a whole from the dictatorship of capital. Every action we take is aimed at making wage workers aware of their class interests and organizing to fight for these interests.

We consider it extremely important to strengthen ties of international solidarity. The current moment requires all the progressive left forces of the planet to unite and organize to fight for a future in which there is no war, exploitation, poverty and injustice.

The world should belong to those who shed their blood, sweat and tears for its benefits. We are confident that our foreign comrades will provide us with all possible support. We express the same readiness! ■

AN OCTOBER 8 online conference launched an international campaign for the defense of imprisoned Russian scholar and activist Boris Kagarlitsky. Speakers included Nancy Fraser, Patrick Bond, Greg Yudin, Alex Callinicos, Hanna Perekhoda, Robert Brenner, Ilya Matveev, Ilya Budraitskis, Bill Fletcher Jr., Trevor Ngwane, Pavel Kudyukin, Jayati Ghosh, Anna Ochkina, as well as representatives from Feminist Anti-War Resistance and Memorial. Sessions discussed Kagarlitsky's newest book, *The Long Retreat*, The Situation for the Left in Russia Today, Imperialism(s) Today, with a final panel on Repression & the Threat to Intellectual Freedom. Ksenia Kagarlitskaia accepted the Daniel Singer Prisoner of Conscience award for her father.

See <https://freeboris.info/>. ■

Political Zombies: Devouring the Chinese People

By Lok Mui Lok

IN CHINA TODAY social media reveals a variety of tragedies as the economic crisis deepens:

- From January to June 2024, more than one million food and beverage-related businesses closed.
- In May, among the 70 large and medium-sized cities of China, the sales prices of new residential properties rose in only two cities, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. Prices declined in the remaining 68 cities.
- In early July, a report published by *The Beijing News* about the tanker trucks transporting both cooking oil and industrial oil triggered public panic about food safety.
- As of mid-July, there had been 20 floods since the start of the year.
- A worker showed his payroll stub on social media: after working six days a week, 11 hours a day: he was paid 3723 yuan (about US\$521) a month. Despite his long work hours he is unable to provide his family a decent life.
- In August, a story about a 33-year-old female graduate of a prestigious university who starved to death in a rented apartment sparked public empathy.

These stories and many others reveal a low birth rate, a high youth unemployment rate, an unsustainable social security system, the withdrawal of foreign investment, local fiscal deficits, etc.

The Chinese Communist Party's Third Plenary Session, which had been significantly delayed, either turned a blind eye to all these crises or simply downplayed them in its documents. This has undoubtedly caused great disappointment to those who held expectations for this conference. Note that after the release of the conference resolution on July 21, the CSI 300 index of China's stock market fell three days in a row, with a cumulative drop of more than 3%.

The CCP has not only ignored the people's hardship, but in proposing to expand the sources of local governments' tax revenues, are intensifying its efforts to extract more from the population. According to some experts, the document produced by the Third Plenary Session may mean that the new taxes include a consumption tax and a "data asset tax" based on the digital economy.

Lok Mui Lok has collaborated with labor organizations and continues to be based in China.



A billboard celebrating Xi Jinping.

During the first half of the 2024, even before the Plenary, water, electricity and gas rates skyrocketed. In Shanghai, after 10 years of raising water prices, there was a 50% increase while in Guangzhou a water price "reform" program imposed nearly a 34% increase. Xianyang, Wuhu, Nanchong, Ganzhou and Qujing saw price increases ranging from 10% to 50%.

Gas prices increased in Shenzhen, Fuzhou, Zhenjiang and 125 other cities. Chongqing residents complained that gas meters "ran faster," which served to double their gas fees. Electricity prices rose as high as 30% in Guangdong, Hunan, Anhui, Jiangsu and other provinces.

Although the downturn in the real estate market has hampered the introduction of property taxes, over the last year a mandatory housing inspection fee has been implemented in rural areas. And on August 2, the Ministry of Housing and Construction announced that it would speed up the promotion of several housing regulations, including inspection and insurance fees as well as a housing maintenance fund.

All these proposed measures are very unpopular as people see them as nothing but extortion.

The concept of "new quality productive forces," as recently emphasized by Xi Jinping, can hardly improve the livelihood of the general public. In fact it will aggravate unemployment.

For example, the hasty introduction of unmanned AI driving in the cab industry has sparked discontent among drivers when it was introduced in Wuhan. The company, Baidu, has announced that it will expand this service to 65 cities by 2025 and 100 more cities by 2030.

This massive displacement of workers pursues the self-interest of the ruling party and its business cronies; it reminds people of the (late 1950s) "Great Leap Forward." Will the result of today's adventurist move be the same as the bitter consequences of that fiasco?

Zombies Eat People, People Eat Grass

Does the CCP really fail to realize the serious crisis that is developing? Do they believe that even if the economy collapses and social unrest grows, the regime will not be jeopardized? Can the Chinese people live for three years by only eating grass, as some high-ranking party officials predict?

If you come into contact with party members in daily life, you will find that they are not fools (at least not all of them). When they talk with close friends, they lament the difficult situation just as we do.

Therefore, I think we can describe the world's largest party with its 90 million members as losing its ability to criticize, change and renew itself. More and more they are becoming like the zombies you see in movies.

Although there are many kinds of zombie

films with different settings, moviegoers can still agree on one commonality of zombies: their original human consciousness, desires and goals in life have been lost, replaced with one obsession — biting people!

If we see the CCP as an organism, its past desires included overthrowing the Kuomintang's rule and becoming a beacon of revolution in the world. Later its goal was to reintegrate into the capitalist world, fight against the wave of democratization, make a fortune together with others in the bureaucratic clique, and build a strong military power to struggle for world hegemony.

But today these goals seem to be losing their importance. Frequent purges of the military's top brass will undoubtedly jeopardize the troop's fighting strength. The repeated suppression of private enterprises only jeopardizes the white gloves of many party bosses, but also harms the country's overall economy.

What good are these operations to the party? To discover the answer, we need to know what is left in the eyes of the CCP after its infection with the "zombie virus."

In September of last year, the government-run magazine *Half-monthly Talkings* published an article on the wastefulness of the promotion campaign on "party building:"

"In a village next to the highway off-ramp in Central China, our reporters saw a huge party building slogan billboard, about 33 meters long and 10 meters high. We asked a local cadre and were told that this billboard was completed in the second half of 2021 and its total cost was more than 440,000 yuan. The person in charge of the enterprise that undertook this project said that there are several other projects that cost millions of yuan in total this year, some of which are being negotiated and some are in the process of designing.

"In a place in North China, our reporters saw a set of 12 huge red Chinese characters in a plaza, with the words 'to approach party members if you have difficulties and to approach party branches if you need service.' Mr. Huang, who is the boss of the company that undertook the project, said: 'Each character is 6 meters long and 6 meters high, and the production and installation costed 311,800 yuan in total.'"

Later it was reported:

"A city in Central China is building a party educational theme park in an integrated urban and rural demonstration zone, covering an area of about 19,000 square meters, with an estimated cost of 15 million yuan. Another party theme park in a place in Southwest China has cost over 70 million yuan."

And still later this example was cited:

"Since 2020, a province in Central China had



The party's educational app, "Xue Xi Qiang Guo."

begun to build 'party building complexes' in villages and urban communities with considerable investment. Our reporters found the relevant information of 10 party building promotion projects in this province, of which two were completed in 2020, two in 2021, and five in 2022. Some of the larger-scale projects' investments reached 6 million to 8 million yuan; the largest investment was more than 13 million yuan."

Of course bureaucrats get big fat kickbacks from building these facilities; but even if corruption were reduced or eliminated entirely, it still costs money to build these nearly useless things. At a time when local budgets are tight, why on earth does the party do this?

The Zombie Cultist

In fact, if we take a closer look at these facilities (see the billboard on the previous page), we will find that there is a commonality — the highlighting of Xi Jinping's speeches, pictures, slogans, writings and so on. The so-called party building campaign is actually

a campaign to strengthen the personal cult of Xi.

In June this year, another party-run newspaper, *Economic Information Daily*, reported the rise of the party building app proxy services:

"Our reporters talked to a Taobao store named 'micro-power "supervision pass" registration' and was told that the majority of their customers are grassroots party cadres, who mainly buy the data of registration, CTR, forwarding, etc. 'The price of data of one registration is 1.8 yuan, the price of 1,000 clicks is 15 yuan, and the price of keeping an account active is 1.4 yuan per month.' Our reporters were told that this Taobao store has received over 200,000 orders for this kind of service, including a single order of about 5,000 yuan for buying 4,000 active accounts by a township government.

"In addition to providing 'tailored data forgery' for various types of digital government service promotion tasks, these Taobao stores can also provide 'ghostwriting service' on party educational apps. 'Some grassroots cadres look for us to complete online studying tasks, and we charge 30 yuan for 40 hours' online time. Some government departments require their employees to gain a certain number of points on "Xue Xi Qiang Guo" app, and we can also do it on behalf of the clients for 45 yuan a month.' Another Taobao store stated that, apart from a small number of more strict assessments, they can handle most of the local government's appraisals on public servants."

"Xue Xi Qiang Guo" (literally means "Learning about Strong Country") is the party's national educational app. The name is a *double entendre* because it can mean "studying to make the nation strong" and "learning from Xi to make the nation strong." Apart from this boot-licking *double entendre*, every time you open its homepage there will be carefully retouched large photographs of the big boss (as shown on this page). The fact that all public servants and party cadres throughout the country have to spend time on it every day will definitely affect the operation of the state machinery.

With so many military troopers, cops and secret police more or less spending half an hour on it daily, how will it improve catching dissidents and "traitors" which is their job? It is obvious that the priority is to see every cell of the CCP is bathed daily in the newest spirit of the great leader.

The Zombie Bites

The conclusion I draw from the above two examples is that the focus of the "zombified" CCP is to "keep the supremacy of Xi." But unlike in movies where the zombies bite everyone, the party will bite anyone Xi points to, and it will bite as hard as it is told to do so by Xi. Many other observers have come to similar conclusions. *Bloomberg*, for example, recently published an article,

“Xi Jinping Has Made Himself China’s Chief Economist.” It reports that the past practice of senior party officials was to take advice from experts, whereas nowadays bureaucrats only need listen to Xi’s lectures. As Cai Xia, a former professor at the Central Party School, remarked in a recent podcast interview about the guiding idea behind the Third Plenary Session’s resolution, it is to “carry out reforms in the style of Xi.”

Yet it seems that the CCP’s zombification is not yet complete. I draw this conclusion from the criticisms found in the party-run media’s stories I’ve just quoted.

Let’s remember that Mao Zedong, the most successful party boss in pursuing a personal cult and autocracy in the CCP’s history, could not maintain his political legacy intact. Within weeks after Mao’s death, party leaders carried out a *coup d’état* in order to suppress his cronies.

This is similar to how movies use a shotgun to blow the zombies’ brains out. Perhaps the only way that could save Xi from such a fate is by having his scientists break through nature’s upper limit for human life.

Of course, there is also a view that the “zombification” of the CCP is not a bad thing. It would supposedly fetter the party, thus reducing its threat to the outside world and eventually causing it to collapse from inside.

But this idea is too passive. It’s just like locking yourself in your house and eating canned food in order to survive the apocalypse in zombie movies. Most importantly,

according to the usual movie formula, the majority who adopt this strategy don’t live to see the credits roll.

Poker Games, Wars of Words

The recent “poker incident” is an example of passive resistance by low-ranking officials. In early August, *Beijing Youth Daily* — the official newspaper of Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Youth League — published three articles in a row criticizing a poker game called “Guan Dan.” It writes:

“...The wind of ‘Guan Dan’ has swept across the country, blowing into all levels and corners. It is a manifestation of the society’s loss of motivation and entrepreneurial spirit — a wind of evasion and decadence...”

“The so-called ‘lying flat’ is a lifestyle of not seeking progress, instead of striving oneself in the face of challenges, it tells people to act like a ‘salted fish’ without a dream. This unhealthy trend has been very harmful, and with the ‘Guan Dan’ fad in the past two years, some people just prefer to lay down in a more comfortable position.”

It is very understandable that officials are addicted to playing cards. In order to maintain his throne, Xi only appoints his cronies. Officials beyond his circle have no hope of promotion. For the average bureaucrat, by working too hard they may end up making more mistakes. Thus there is a greater chance of being sacrificed in an anti-corruption drama.

Yet reading the writings of Xi is defi-

nately not a good choice of entertainment. Therefore, if poker is banned, bureaucrats will probably choose to play video games, table tennis or sit in meditation. Just as with the symptoms of a zombie virus, the bureaucracy is becoming more dysfunctional.

Interestingly, after the criticism from *Beijing Youth Daily* was published, a number of local media, including the party committee’s official newspaper from Jiangsu Province, have attempted to refute the criticism. They accused the *Beijing Youth Daily* with fabricating accusations.

Does this war of words reflect the discord among party officials from different regions, the dissatisfaction of grassroots cadres, or both? As an outside observer, I think it is too early to draw a conclusion.

However, it reveals that the great leader’s China Dream is making bureaucrats increasingly disgusted. If lying down is not allowed, if playing cards is banned, then what is left but biting people or being bitten?

The nation was exhausted by the mess of a Great Leader’s senseless campaigns once before, in the latter stage of the Cultural Revolution. Eventually the whole nation began to passively resist Chairman Mao’s “Permanent Revolution,” which meant continuing to create Mao as a deity.

The party-arranged “political studies” and assemblies of purges and denunciation are nothing but “seriously going through the motions.” And we know what happened in the aftermath of Mao’s death. ■

“Purges, Corruption, & Servility to Putin” — Dora María Téllez on Nicaragua Today

THESE COMMENTS BY former Sandinista militant and now exiled dissident Dora María Téllez, are excerpted from an interview by Carlos F. Chamorro on the *Esta Semana* program broadcast July 21 on CONFIDENCIAL’s YouTube channel. Téllez, an historian and political activist, analyzed president Daniel Ortega’s speech and the country’s political situation on the 45th anniversary of ousting the Anastasio Somoza dictatorship.

“[The regime has] an immense fear of any activity that they cannot control. With each passing day, the obsession of the Ortega-Murillo regime is to control absolutely everything. There was total control over the very setting and the staging of July 19, where every person had to remain seated.

“In other words, they hold enormous power and an immense fear of the situation getting out of hand, which is evidence of their political fragility within Nicaragua.

The Purpose of the New Purges

“[In the recent arrests and purges of military, police and public officials] I see the hand of Rosario Murillo with the absolute complacency of Daniel Ortega. It is a political purge, that is to say, to accuse these high officials

of the Ortega-Murillo regime of corruption is very easy, they’re all full of it. There is not one of them who has a clean portfolio.

“So it is quite easy to accuse them of corruption. Ultimately, it’s a political purge, a sweep aimed at establishing in high-level public positions people who are unconditionally loyal to Rosario Murillo and owe her a favor.

“On the other hand, this purge has to do with a warning to all public employees and especially the high officials: whoever moves a little bit, will be removed from the picture and can end up in *El Chipote* [prison] or fired, in the least severe of cases. They would be mistreated with a high probability of ending up in *La Modelo* or the women’s prison.

“The situation with (former high-ranking police official and Ortega’s confidante) ‘El Cuervo’ Guerrero is a notification, a warning. It informs everyone who was in the Sandinista Front guerrilla, no matter how old they are, how long they’ve been imprisoned, or how close they are to Daniel Ortega, that none of them have immunity and that they will all face consequences if necessary.

“Everyone will be kept on their toes. That’s the reason for Jorge Guerrero’s imprisonment. He’s 81 years old, and they sent

him straight to the hospital, practically. It’s to notify that entire generation to stay in line, without challenging the Ortega-Murillo duo, especially Rosario Murillo, who this generation hardly likes.

“This is part of the succession process, with Laureano (Ortega) coming up behind, so they need to clear the path for Daniel Ortega’s successors. Daniel is fully on board with this purge, which also reflects the regime’s internal disintegration.

“They haven’t been able to eliminate the ‘external enemy.’ Daniel Ortega even said he wants the United States to disappear — his mindset is about making everything disappear. He hasn’t been able to crush the resistance, so now he’s turning to the ‘internal enemy,’ targeting high-ranking public employees.

“The accusation against the Deputy Foreign Minister (Arlette Marenco) is over a six million *córdoba* contract (around 160,000 USD), which is a trivial amount compared to the vast fortunes of the Ortega-Murillo family. So, her prosecution is evidently political. The ultimate reason?

“I believe it’s about succession, and Rosario is moving her pieces to position them more advantageously.” ■

Labour's "Loveless Landslide": The 2024 British Elections

By Kim Moody

AFTER FOURTEEN YEARS of Conservative Party austerity, scandal, incompetence and chaos, the Labour Party swept Britain's (aka United Kingdom, UK) July 4th general parliamentary election, winning 412 of the House of Commons' 650 seats.¹ In what amounted to a punishment for the wreckage that the Tories, as British Conservatives are known, left behind, they lost a staggering 251 seats, ending up with just 121 Members of Parliament (MPs).

Labour, on the other hand, gained an impressive 211 seats. Yet beneath what pundits are calling a "loveless landslide," Labour's massive parliamentary majority rests on a minority of 33.7% of the total vote. Far from a mandate and just ten percentage points more than the discredited Tory's 23.7%, this was less than the 41% of votes for a plethora of "third" parties and independent candidates.

The long-term fragility of its parliamentary majority is further underlined by the fact that at 9.7 million Labour actually drew fewer votes this year than the 10.3 million in the disastrous 2019 election that cost it seats in many of its traditional working-class constituencies.²

Besides the massive disgust with Tory rule, the secret behind this disjuncture between Labour's big majority of seats and its minority vote lay oddly enough in the first-past-the-post voting system. Building on disillusionment with the Tories and on what political scientists call "vote efficiency," with votes spread more evenly across election districts, Labour consciously sought to win back traditional Labour seats, the so-called "Red Wall," and take longstanding Conservative seats by small margins.

They focused on what they called "hero voters," i.e. the 20% or so, many of them former Labour voters, most likely to reject the Tories, according to two Labour advisers writing in *The Observer* newspaper.

These Labour advisers recently visited the Progressive Policy Institute in Washington, DC, a centrist think tank close to Democratic Party leadership, in hopes of aiding the Harris-Walz campaign. Their main advice was that "cost of living and immigration are the two biggest issues."³

Students of the U.S. Democratic Party will recognize that its problem is one of "vote inefficiency" with its concentration of voters in large urban districts and only a little more than a dozen mostly coastal deeply "blue" states that make winning

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*.

Congressional majorities and the Electoral College difficult.

Labour's "efficient" strategy was aided by the tactical voting of many who cast their ballot for either Labour or the Liberal Democrat candidates most likely to beat the Conservatives in that constituency — all of this in the context of what for Britain was a low turnout of 60%.

While this worked well for Labour, it meant scores of vulnerable seats at the next election and a further fragmentation of the British "two-party" system as smaller parties and independents made significant gains.

A Subterranean Multi-Party System

Looked at from the vantage point of parliamentary delegations where the two major parties have 82% of the MPs, Britain appears to still have a more or less stable two-party system, as one is supposed to expect from the first-past-the-post-single-member district system.

Beneath the waterline of this ship of state, however, are turbulent currents where half a dozen parties and a group of leftist independents have all made gains. The biggest winners after Labour were the Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems) who soared from eight to 72 seats with 12% of the vote — 60 at the cost of the Tories in their heartland of southern England.

The Greens with 6.7% of the vote grew from one to four seats. The Welsh nationalist Plaid Cymru won four, up from two. On the other hand, the Scottish National Party, troubled by scandal, crashed from 47 MPs to nine, mostly replaced by Labour — ending the likelihood of an independence referendum for some time to come.

Altogether, excluding Northern Ireland's unique party system, the parties and independents that are more or less to the left of Labour on most issues have 94 MPs.

The worrying gains, however, came from the far-right Reform UK Party which in its first time out won five seats with 14.3% of the vote. Resurrected from the shambles of Trump Wannabe Nigel Farage's previous but largely unsuccessful electoral efforts — the Brexit Party and United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) — Reform UK includes among its MPs open racists and Hitler fans.⁴

Perhaps even more alarming, in addition to its victories, it became the second party in 103 constituencies, in 89 of them nipping at Labour's heels.⁵ In effect the far-right anti-immigrant rioters who swept the streets of England this summer and attacked immigrant residences (more below), now have a voice in parliament.

Somewhat countering this shift toward the far right were the four independent, pro-Palestinian candidates plus Jeremy Corbyn who, having been expelled from Labour, ran as an independent and handily beat the official Labour candidate by 7000 votes.

The victory of the four other independents reflected Labour's declining share of the British Muslim vote, plunging from 65% in the last election to 36% this year due mainly to Labour's refusal to oppose Israel's brutal war on Gaza and the West Bank.⁶

Under Corbyn's leadership these five MPs have now formed an alliance and will work as a block in parliament.⁷ On top of this, Corbyn addressed a meeting to form a new left political party to be called Collective. As one of the organizers put it, "There will be a new left party that will contest the next election and hopefully be a meaningful counterweight to Reform and the right-wing drift of the Labour Party."

Among those present were former UNITE leader Len McCluskey and filmmaker Ken Loach. They hope to recruit from among the tens of thousands who voted for independent left candidates, including those that didn't win.⁸ Even in the UK's fracturing party system, this is an ambitious goal to say the least.

Northern Ireland (NI), with its 17 seats in the British parliament, has a completely different party system. In that context, the nationalist Sinn Féin held its seven MPs and is now the largest NI party in the UK parliament since the right-wing Democratic Unionists lost seats to the other unionist (i.e. British loyalist) parties.

Sinn Féin, however, in the past has not taken its seats in the UK parliament as a matter of nationalist principle. It is nonetheless, the largest party in NI local councils and in the devolved assembly at Stormont, where it now leads the regional government.

In general, this election accelerated a trend that has seen longstanding party loyalties diminish as people switched votes from one party to another: Tory to Labour, Reform UK or Lib Dem; from Scottish National Party back to Labour; from Labour to Reform UK or Lib Dem.

As *Guardian* columnist Rafael Behr put it, "The era of automatic party affiliation, handed down across generations and worn as a badge of identity, is over."⁹ Clearly, the two-party system has been shaken. Those who think the first-past-the-post system inevitably means an exclusive two-party duopoly might want to examine this more closely.

Assessing how this affected the class distribution of votes is more difficult because the British system of "social grades" lumps together working class, lower middle class, and petit-bourgeois people in its lower social grades. According to the You Gov post-election poll, however, the ABC1 grades — which include the upper middle, professional and managerial groups, and the bourgeoisie — voted for Labour by 36% (more than any other social grade), 25% Tory, 14% Lib Dem, and 11% Reform UK.

The lower, more working-class grades (C2DE) voted 33% Labour, 23% Conservative, 20% Reform UK, 11% Lib Dem, and the rest for smaller parties. The lowest grades (DE), which include the unemployed, voted 34% Labour, 23% Tory, and 19% Reform UK.

Measured by income alone, the higher the income (£50,000 and more) the more likely (40%) the vote for Labour, the lower the less likely (32-34%). The most educated voted Labour at 42%, the less educated at 28%.

Most disturbing was that the less educated voted by far more for Reform UK at 23% than any social group. This reflects

a class realignment that has hit most social democratic and center-left parties, as well as the U.S. Democratic Party, over the last few decades.

Labour's "loveless landslide" did not represent a victory for the working class. How it ran and how it plans to govern underline this all too graphically.



Keir Starmer promised "pain."

Promising & Delivering Pain — With Some Aspirin

Under the increasing authoritarian party leadership of Sir Keir Starmer — former Crown Prosecutor, and purger of Jeremy Corbyn — Labour ran a campaign based on "stability" and fiscal responsibility: i.e. austerity. Upon becoming Prime Minister (PM), Starmer promised "pain."

The rationale for the forthright embrace of what were once Tory-like economic policies was the miraculous discovery of a £22 billion "black hole" left by the defeated Conservative government. UK debt is high, to be sure, but since annual government expenditures now reach over a trillion pounds, this is not exactly a staggering amount. Nonetheless, Starmer promised to put UK accounts in order and that means policies on the cheap.

For example, while Labour has no real plan for fixing the overburdened and underfunded National Health Service (NHS), one current suggestion is that its already overworked staff should work longer hours and weekends. (The Prime Minister must have been reading Chapter 10, "The Working Day," Volume I of *Capital*.)

More likely to be successfully implemented is Starmer's proposal to reduce the long delays in diagnostics and treatments by relying even more on the already extensive involvement of the private sector.

Despite the desperate condition of the NHS revealed in the recent report by Ara Darsi commissioned by Labour, Starmer continues to insist he will not raise taxes to fund the billions needed to fix the health service. He simply says that the NHS needs to "reform or die,"¹⁰ an indication that the burden of change will fall on the staff — a plan that cannot work.

What is not in doubt is his full-force drive to fix the government's finances at the expense of the working class. This first became clear in his insistence on keeping the two-child limit on basic welfare benefits, a policy that leaves many poor families without enough income to sufficiently feed all their children.

On this issue Starmer faced his first back-bench rebellion as seven Labour MP's voted along with the Scottish National Party against this policy. They quickly saw the party whip removed, meaning they were suspended from the parliamentary party for at least six months.

This drama was repeated in early September when Starmer pushed a bill to end the £300 winter fuel allowance for all but the very poorest pensioners. This would leave millions further at the mercy of energy companies as they raise prices to the allowed maximum. (I just got our bill from British Gas informing me my gas bill would rise again this winter. We are not quite poor enough to get the fuel allowance this year.)

Fearful of being suspended, this time, with the exception of Corbyn-ally John Trickett who courageously voted to keep the

allowance for all pensioners, some 50 Labour MP's abstained or absented themselves, most with permission, when the bill (put forth hypocritically by the Tories) to preserve the fuel allowance for all, came up for a vote.¹¹ Their fate remains to be seen as of this writing.

Starmmer is an enthusiast for government-business partnerships as solutions for social problems. Outlining his technocratic vision of Britain's future under Labour, Starmmer wrote in his 2021 Fabian Society pamphlet *The Road Ahead*, "It is a future where a modern, efficient government works in partnership with a brilliant, innovative private sector to create good jobs and harness the potential of technology." This idea was repeated many times throughout the pamphlet.¹²

Partnership is apparent in his solution to Britain's housing crisis. While he has forwarded legislation to end "no fault" evictions by private landlords, his policy for taking the pressure off rising housing costs and creating more homes is to loosen planning and building regulations so developers can build more cheaply.

This has come just as the long-awaited report on the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire that killed 72 tenants due to faulty building materials revealed that developers, producers, and construction firms lied to avoid existing regulations and standards.¹³

Another example of government-business cooperation is the salvation of the Tata Steel works at Port Talbot, Wales, via a grant of £500 million in return for Tata putting up \$750 million. This will go to building new electric arc plants and closing the old blast furnaces. It will mean the loss of 2500 jobs in a town totally dependent on the steelworks.

The deal, originally made by the Conservatives, was picked up by Labour who said they would get a better deal with job guarantees. They didn't, and the Labour government simply dropped its earlier pledge to "push for job guarantees."¹⁴

Unable to dodge the outrageous failures, actions and profiteering of the nation's privatized energy companies, Labour

proposed to create a publicly-owned company, Great Britain Energy. Rather than renationalizing the entire industry, however, this public firm will compete with the likes of the French-owned energy supplier EDF in the hope that the market will solve the problem.

On the other hand, the nation's inefficient private railroad companies will be brought into public ownership gradually as their licences expire. The crisis of the country's water companies who have been dumping sewage and other toxic waste into rivers and lakes has yet to be addressed by the government.

So far at least, Starmmer and his Chancellor Rachel Reeves have resisted the idea of raising taxes on the rich and corporations. The escape from the pain the new government offers the working class is to be achieved over its five-year term by economic "growth." This in turn is to be produced by, you guessed it, "partnership" between business and an active, but not growing state.

To stimulate economic growth the state will provide a National Wealth Fund of £7.3 billion — less than a third of what Corbyn proposed. As Marxist economist Michael Roberts put it, this is "a fraction of what even the LSE (London School of Economics) economists reckon is needed."

Given that Britain has seen its anaemic "recovery" fall from a mere 0.6% growth in the second quarter of this year to nearly zero in July and August, while major European Union economies are either stagnant or in recession this is wishful thinking at best.¹⁵ So Labour's economic innovation is a kind of inadequate industrial policy to spur investment combined with market deregulation, and neoliberalism to discipline the working class.

Starmmer's authoritarian and tough-on-criminals and "illegal" immigrants proclivities from his days as Crown Prosecutor have emerged in his approach to immigration and the August anti-immigrant riots led by far-right groups and activists.¹⁶

Pledging like his Tory predecessors to "smash the gangs"

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and “stop the boats” of asylum-seekers crossing the English Channel, he plans to call in MI5, Britain’s version of the FBI, to help provide what the Home Office calls “formidable covert capability,” rather than creating viable routes to asylum for desperate people who are certain to find other dangerous paths to asylum.¹⁷

This will be coordinated by a Border Security Command to be led by someone with a military or police background. *The Guardian* reports the Labour government is considering the approach taken by near-fascist Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.¹⁸

Similarly, his method of dealing with the far-right rioters in August was purely one of law-and order, focusing almost exclusively on violence and dismissing the rioters merely as thugs, while avoiding any political response to the obvious depth of racism they were exploiting.

Over 400 have been convicted of various criminal offenses and about 200 sentenced as this is written. The left and the social movements can take no comfort in this response since it is likely to be used on them, as Starmer did against the 2010 student “rioters” when he was Crown Prosecutor.¹⁹

What stopped these attacks on immigrants, however, was not the police, whom the right wingers relished engaging, or the courts that sentenced some to long terms in prison after the fact. It was *tens of thousands of anti-racist demonstrators who flooded the streets of England*, far outnumbering the racists and preventing them from taking to the streets and attacking immigrants again in city after city. There is a clear lesson here for anti-racist, anti-fascist activists in the United States.

The Good Stuff — Maybe

Despite Labour’s increasingly declassed voter base, it still depends somewhat on the unions for both funds and election-time activists. So it had to deliver something. The first gifts were above inflation agreements for some NHS workers, though not enough to wipe out past wage erosion. But it comes with a warning of moderation in the future.

Labour also proposed to introduce a bill in its first 100 days, known as “Labour’s Plan to Make Work Pay — Delivering a New Deal For Working People.” The bill contains first instalments of a comprehensive plan drawn up in 2021.

The current bill, to be introduced later in the fall, includes limits on precarity, such as a ban on the much-hated zero-hours contracts that give the boss total flexibility and ending “Fire and Rehire,” — policies that if properly implemented would make a difference for many workers.²⁰

Not surprisingly, the bill is meant to produce “partnership” between unions and capital, which is supposed to contribute to economic growth. Some provisions already include loopholes such as demands from workers or unions for flexible hours with “employers required to accommodate this as far as is reasonable.”



Builders of Grenfell Towers cut corners on meeting regulations, and causing 72 deaths. CC BY 4.0

https://twitter.com/Natalie_Oxford/status/1874855898614820865/photo/1

A further worrying sign is that a poll of senior managers found majority support for the bill as it was described. It is expected to face long consultations with business which are likely to water things down. The rest of the “New Deal,” which concerns trade union rights, is to be introduced over Labour’s five-year term.²¹

Starmer also made an appearance at the annual Trade Union Congress conference, something sitting Prime Ministers seldom do. His message, however, was, once again about “partnership” and the hard times and pain ahead. Some union leaders expressed optimism about the “New Deal,” but Starmer received only a muted and polite standing ovation.

This would not be a balanced assessment of Labour’s first couple of months if it didn’t include the new government’s effort to further Britain’s always unfinished bour-

geois revolution by expelling the last 92 hereditary peers from the House of Lords.²²

This very partial example of what historians call “passive revolution” (no barricades or guillotines), however, leaves in place the remnants of Norman-imposed feudalism: the 69% of Britain’s land still owned by 0.6% of its population — mostly aristocrats descended from (11th century) Norman invaders.²³

Today’s Labour Party follows that path of social democracy in most of Europe. The notion that neoliberalism has run its course in the center-left has proved more a hope than a reality in the UK, as in most of Europe.

Labour is no longer the party of the working class or even the party of Jeremy Corbyn. Its membership has fallen from 564,443 in 2017 under Corbyn to 370,450 by the end of 2023, a dramatic drop of nearly 200,000. In 2021 its National Executive “proscribed,” that is, banned, four left Labour publications.

Since then its organized left wing has been depleted by expulsions, suspensions and threats, its remnants largely silenced. A spokesperson for the left organization Momentum, itself a shadow of its former self, said, “Repeated attacks on pluralism and party democracy in order to weaken the left and threaten independent-minded voices within the party has come at a cost.”²⁴

The recent back-bench rebellions are a good sign, but they have been limited in numbers and cautious in light of Starmer’s willingness to retaliate. Its major political challenges will come from parties and groups, left and right, outside the two-party matrix.

Of course, events outside the Labour Party and parliament can open new possibilities — if workers and oppressed minorities, sick and tired of being sick and tired, as one Black British activist recently said, quoting U.S. civil rights icon Fannie Lou Hamer, take to the streets again. ■

The UAW and Southern Organizing: An Historical Perspective

By Joseph van der Naald & Michael Goldfield

AS MANY INDUSTRIES, both domestic and foreign owned, have moved to the southern United States, analysts point to several factors for this shift. One suggested reason is the attractive packages southern officials have put together to lure new business including large tax incentives and the offer of lower labor costs given a mostly non-unionized workforce?

The commitment of state officials to maintaining an attractive anti-union environment includes passing restrictive labor legislation as well as crowing that this environment provides “steady job opportunities” for the community. Thus, joining unions allegedly threatens stability. But it is worth asking whether this pro-business, anti-union culture explains the alleged backwardness and anti-unionism of southern workers?

Historically, when given a chance, southern workers have faced obstacles but are as prone to organize and to strike as other workers. This has certainly been the case in Alabama, currently a choice target for expanded auto production. Coal miners, steel workers, wood workers, packinghouse workers, longshore, auto, even public-sector employees, and at times textile workers, organized in Alabama during earlier years.

This was especially the case during the 1930s and 1940s, and at times Alabama workers were among the most militant nationally. In 1945, the unionization rate in Alabama was 25%, higher than any state in the United States today.

Given that the recent period has seen a sharp growth in union organizing and winning elections, it’s clear that southern workers have a chance to challenge that anti-union atmosphere. And without southern workers, a nationwide labor upsurge cannot be successful.

Over the last few of years we have seen union elections administered by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) on the rise, surging up from their pandemic lows by 53% between 2021 and 2022, and ticking up again modestly by another three percent between 2022 and 2023 before rising again by 35% between 2023 and 2024.¹

Unions are also winning a growing proportion of these elections. The NLRB estimates that in 2024 so far, unions have been successful in around 79% of election efforts, a win rate

unseen in decades.²

Work stoppages have also been on the rise: according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly 459,000 workers struck in 2023, reaching a level not attained since the year 2000.³ The more inclusive Labor Action Tracker placed the figure even higher at 539,000 workers.⁴

The total number of union members also rose slightly in 2023, growing to 14.4 million workers, even as the union density rate remained largely unchanged (just 10% of the wage and salary labor force).⁵

More significantly, the recent period has seen a sharp growth in organizing. This includes the highly visible Starbucks Workers United campaign (now with almost 500 stores with certified unions), as well as organizing at other name brand retail outlets, including Apple, Trader Joe’s and REI.

Across U.S. college campuses, new graduate and undergraduate student unionization has taken off; the Student Researchers United-UAW collective bargaining unit at the University of California was so large that once it was certified in 2021, national union density increased by 0.1%.⁶

There is also the unionization of the large Amazon warehouse JFK8 in Staten Island, New York, where workers continue their fight to negotiate a first contract. These recent victories were preceded by several other earlier spikes that suggested to many a similar period of labor ascendancy, although their lasting influence has been less substantial than expected.

These include the large-scale protests in Madison, Wisconsin in 2011 in response to the proposal of Act 10, which crippled the rights of public sector workers, and many teachers’ strikes. Led by the Chicago Teachers Union, these strikes also involved militant displays by so-called Red State teachers, especially in West Virginia and Oklahoma in 2018.

Some of the most exciting recent developments have occurred in the U.S. South. Recently, there have been successful contract struggles in the unionized Daimler truck plants (mostly in North Carolina)⁷, as well as a large scale organizing campaign of over 20,000 teachers in Fairfax County, Virginia.

The dramatic 73% United Auto Workers (UAW) victory in the NLRB election at Volkswagen (VW) in Chattanooga, Tennessee was a blowout, followed recently by another UAW victory in Tennessee at the Ultium electric vehicle battery plant in Spring Hill.

In its immediate aftermath, many saw the UAW’s victory in Chattanooga as the labor movement’s long sought-after beachhead in the U.S. South, with the potential of realizing the promises of the CIO’s 1946-1953 failed Operation Dixie campaign.⁸ Yet shortly thereafter, the UAW lost a second election at the Mercedes plant in Vance, Alabama, where the union

Joseph van der Naald is a PhD candidate in the sociology program at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and is a member of the Professional Staff Congress. His dissertation research explores the factors that fueled the mid-century rise of public-sector trade unionism in the United States.

*Michael Goldfield is a former labor and civil rights activist, Professor Emeritus of political science and a Research Fellow at the Fraser Center for Workplace Issues at Wayne State University. He has written numerous books and articles on labor, race, and the global economy, including *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States*, *The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics*, and most recently, *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s*.*



After two previous attempts, workers at the Volkswagen plant in Tennessee won UAW representation in a blowout victory in 2024.

By-NC-SA

predicted they would win decisively given that they already had cards signed from more than 70% of the workers.

In the wake of the Vance election, we want to provide a sober analysis of what happened by placing the loss into a broader historical context. In so doing, we seek to avoid the most exaggerated claims and, in some cases, the deep misunderstandings of certain analysts about labor's recent upsurge.

Automotive Organizing in Perspective

It is important to note that the motor vehicle industry remains a central industry in the U.S. economy, employing directly more than one million workers, and contributing approximately \$156 billion to U.S. GDP.⁹ Unlike most other industries, auto has always had a huge multiplier effect. It uses parts, components and raw materials from a wide range of other industries, making a good part of the economy dependent on it, and with integral connections to supply chains around the world.¹⁰

In contrast to most other manufacturing industries, the automotive industry includes over two million workers in sales and dealership personnel and over one million repair workers. While smaller and second in size to China, automobile purchases are still arguably the most important U.S. consumer market.

Since the 1980s, foreign firms (referred to as transplants) have established their U.S. production facilities largely, although not exclusively, in the South, along with hundreds of foreign-owned parts facilities.¹¹ Given the number of workers employed, vehicles produced and other metrics, these facilities today make up more than half of U.S. motor vehicle production. With a few exceptions these southern transplants have proved difficult for unions to organize.

Unlike in auto, many of the leading U.S. industries of the 1930s and 1940s are now marginal, including coal, textile and basic steel. Yet while recent contract negotiations — in rail, on the West Coast docks and with United Parcel Service (UPS) — all went to the brink of a strike before settlement, the situation in southern auto appears decidedly different.

For example, it should be noted that longshore, railroad and logistics are heavily balkanized in ways that auto is not. West Coast longshore workers, organized by the International Longshore Workers Union, are highly separate from the East and Gulf Coast longshore workers, whose union is far less militant (with the recent strike serving as an exception) and whose leadership has historically not been left-led.¹² Despite the importance of the West Coast's trade relations with Asia, when a West Coast longshore strike appeared imminent, companies began switching some of their freight to the East Coast.

Railroad workers, overwhelmingly unionized, are in 14 different, often uncooperative unions. This allowed them to be stifled by the Biden administration in the last round of the 2022 contract negotiations. Although a majority of the railroad rank and file rejected the proposed contract, the Biden administration imposed a settlement. Once heavily unionized, truckers are now largely unorganized. Even in the package goods sector only UPS, the largest company in control of roughly one-third of the market, is unionized.

By contrast, the UAW has free reign and complete jurisdiction in the auto industry, with only some very minor exceptions, since World War II. Thus the successful unionization of southern auto would solidify a single nationwide union of autoworkers.

Such a development would be highly consequential internationally, both because for many decades the "world car" platform, which imposes global standardization of vehicle design, has depended upon components from around the world, and because several of the transplants produce largely for international markets.

Assessing Victories and Defeats

Careful analysis suggests that several of the most popular explanations for the loss at Mercedes and difficulties in the South generally, when looked at closely, carry little weight. One such explanation both on the left and in the more mainstream media is the strength of southern political opposition. In 2014, when the UAW lost a previous union certification attempt at

VW in Chattanooga, numerous observers cited the coercive rhetoric of Governor Bill Haslam and Senator Bob Corker as an important negative factor.

But political opposition, we argue, has historically rarely been decisive in the outcome of union elections. In the late 1940s, numerous southern union drives prevailed despite more vitriolic resistance from the region's political class.

For example, in 1948 in Laurel, Mississippi during a Textile Workers Union of America recognition campaign, the white supremacist Dixiecrats Senator Bilbo and Congressman Rankin came to town to oppose the union, calling its members Communists and race mixers. But when the vote came, white workers as well as African Americans voted overwhelmingly for the union. Likewise, in Memphis, Tennessee in 1948, the UAW overcame comparable political opposition to win recognition at the city's International Harvester plant by 861 to 4.

Union drives among tobacco workers in Virginia and North Carolina in 1947, and at International Harvester in Louisville in 1948 faced similar levels of resistance but prevailed nonetheless.¹³

When politicians' rhetoric did have an impact on workers' decisions, it was reinforced with violent repression. Yet calling out the National Guard to escort scabs and shoot workers, as often happened in the 1920s and 1930s, is less common today.

Other observers have cited, as evidence of effective political hostility, the hundreds of millions of dollars in tax incentives that southern states provided to auto companies on the condition they not voluntarily recognize unions without a secret ballot election. Once given, however, these abatements are frequently contractually irrevocable and remain in effect for decades — suggesting that tax incentives likely have little to do with employer hostility to unions. So in our opinion, analysts who cite this opposition tend to be unconvincing.

Furthermore, southern states are not alone in offering corporations tax incentives. The online Bridge magazine reported that Michigan has offered over \$2 billion in state aid to attract and develop electric vehicle projects. In early 2023 Michigan promised Ford Motor Company over a billion dollars in incentives toward the construction of the first in the U.S. factory to produce lithium iron phosphate batteries. This included providing 950 acres of land and infrastructure along with grants, loans and the creation of a 15-year renaissance zone that will allow Ford to run the plant essentially tax-free.¹⁴

In terms of workers themselves, there are numerous instances that counter the narrative that the southern working class is union averse. After World War II, for example, in one of the few successes of the CIO's post-World War II Operation Dixie, 40,000 workers were fully organized in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the so-called "Atomic City," site of the enormous federally-run complex, although under the aegis of private companies.¹⁵

To take another example, the United Rubber Workers, a relatively mainstream, non-left union, was completely successful at organizing foreign and domestically owned tire factories in the U.S. South through the mid-1970s.



United Tobacco Workers Local 22 on strike, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1947.

Moreover, there is considerable variation within the south in terms of its level of union density. Even today, Alabama is far more unionized than most other southern states (almost 8% compared to the 2-3% rate in the Carolinas).¹⁶

Finally, still others have made the argument that current labor laws make it more difficult to organize. While regressive laws certainly have some impact, historically they are rarely the determinative factor. Workers have organized successfully in much more difficult legal environments in the past, and it is our opinion that legal improvements tend to follow successful organizing, rather than foster it.¹⁷

Bureaucratic Degeneration and Revival

Rather than focusing on the southern political climate or the supposed attributes of southern workers, one might begin tracing the UAW's problems in the South to its degeneration from a once militant democratic union to a crass, company-oriented, rather sycophantic, authoritarian operation.

This transformation began early, and Walter Reuther and his cohort played a critical role, from his gutting of the dense steward system at GM in 1940, to the transformation of the union under his leadership (beginning with his 1946 presidency) and consolidated in the 1950, five-year contract, the "Treaty of Detroit," which some hagiologists have compared positively to the victories in the wake of Flint.

This stance became more extreme over time, beginning with the 1979 concessions to Chrysler, and eventually leading to a position that the union must cooperate with and enhance the profitability of the company, regardless of its impact on workers. This stance, seen historically from Samuel Gompers in the early AFL to Sidney Hillman in the 1930s CIO, to many unions today, has never worked. It is a recipe for failure.

UAW leaders accepted concessions, two-tier wage systems, use of long-term temporary workers, abandonment of cost-of-living adjustments (COLA), and degradation of pensions and healthcare. At VW and elsewhere, the union's attempts to make nice with the companies, and help keep them profitable, suggested to workers that the union had nothing to offer.

Recently the former UAW leadership suffered from corruption scandals that severely damaged the legitimacy of the

then-ruling Administrative Caucus. Decades of close collaboration between the Big Three auto manufacturers, General Motors, Ford and Stellantis (owner of Chrysler) and the UAW laid the groundwork for an internal culture of corruption built on the back of successive contracts characterized by union givebacks and concessions. This was sold to the membership as necessary, with the promise that these concessions would be reversed when the industry regained its footing.

Initial federal probes in 2017 led to the conviction of several top union officials on charges of embezzlement and accepting kickbacks. Former presidents Gary Jones and Dennis Williams, who reportedly stole \$1.5 million in members' dues, were eventually sentenced to prison.¹⁸

What has changed? As the recent successful UAW campaign at VW, the earlier contract gains first at the Big Three, and then at Daimler truck, suggest that the "new" UAW presented southern transplant workers with a more attractive picture.

The old, corrupt leadership was ousted in a campaign that elected Shawn Fain as president, and half of the union's new executive board, supported by the opposition group UAWD (Unite All Workers for Democracy), have presented a different image. The karma from these two contract struggles (25% wage gains at the Big Three, a substantially improved contract at Daimler), added further positive cache.

The recent UAW victory in Chattanooga's large Volkswagen plant was preceded by the rolling "Stand Up" strikes at the Big Three, which were perceived as winning immense gains for workers, presenting the UAW as a much more viable alternative for southern workers.

While the jury remains out on the new leadership, Daimler activists have suggested to us that the degree of support in their recent struggles with the company has been night and day from the old leadership.

Today's Moment

What accounts then for the difficulties and ultimate loss at Mercedes in Alabama, in contrast to the victory in VW at Chattanooga? First, we are not (yet?) in a period of upsurge, where union victories are universal and easily overwhelm capitalist resistance.

This becomes evident when we contrast our present moment with earlier periods of massive union upsurge — whether in 1918 and 1919, when union membership had more than doubled from 1914 and massive strikes were taking place in meatpacking, steel, coal and southern textiles, among other industries; or in 1933 when union membership jumped 20% from roughly 2.9 to 3.5 million members in the wake of the rapid unionization of the country's 600,000 coal miners.

The following year began a long period of militancy and union growth that included several important, often radical-led strikes in San Francisco, Toledo, and Minneapolis, and the eventual seizure of GM plants by sit-downers in Flint, Michigan in 1936-1937.

All these latter strikes electrified the entire U.S. working class and parts of the international working class as well. From 1933 to 1945, during such a period of worker upsurge, union membership increased dramatically from just under three million to almost 15 million. By contrast, the number of union

members grew by a relatively modest 139,000 over the past year.

Second, it has always been the case that the largest plants of the most powerful companies have been exceedingly difficult to organize. The largest U.S. coal mines were quite small compared to the size of the average steel mill, and the former were organized before the latter. In auto, labor's initial victories came at White Motors in Cleveland and Briggs in Detroit, long before the larger Flint plants at GM. Mercedes likewise was not low hanging fruit.

Third, unlike the noisy right-wing Republican political rhetoric, employer resistance makes a far bigger difference, as illuminated by numerous prior failed attempts at organizing the Toyota plant in Georgetown, Tennessee. Overcoming this resistance requires the most important type of outside support, what we have elsewhere called associational power, tends to be from the mobilization of fellow unionized workers in the nearby vicinity.¹⁹

The anti-union playbook, perfected over the last few decades by employers, was deployed with great effectiveness at Mercedes. Unlike VW, Mercedes initially had among the highest wages of any transplant, although recent data suggest that Alabama Mercedes workers have lost real wages over the past decade or so. Still, the company immediately raised pay after the Big Three strike, as well as mostly getting rid of the two-tier employee system.

One anti-union strategy, which Mercedes carried out, is to blame problems on a plant manager, fire them, and replace them with a seemingly more conciliatory figure who asks workers to give them a chance to address workers' grievances. The company also used many other tactics, from video monitors throughout the plant, one-on-ones with team leaders who oversee and can influence the opinion of other employees, breaks from arduous work for workers who could be turned toward an anti-union stance, as well as several special captive audience meetings.

These tactics apparently had enough of an impact. The UAW has filed unfair labor charges against Mercedes with the NLRB and demanded a new election.²⁰

An example of the importance of associational power is illuminated by prior efforts at organizing the Toyota assembly plant in Georgetown, Kentucky. In Georgetown, the hardy radical construction trades forced Toyota, who originally hired a nonunion Japanese firm to build the plant, to use only unionized labor. Toyota had planned to contract nonunion trades people to both construct the facility and work skilled jobs in the plant.

Between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s, building trades unions mobilized workers in Tennessee and in surrounding states, organizing nearby communities around threats of environmental degradation, and holding massive demonstrations throughout the state and in Washington, DC. This show of associative power finally forced Toyota to abandon its plans to go nonunion. In Vance, a more substantial and longer-running campaign of support might have helped.²¹

Finally, the union itself has already admitted to making some important errors. Rather than slowly and covertly building support for the union, the organizers went public at 30% of union

*And without southern workers,
a nationwide labor upsurge
cannot be successful.*

cards signed. Organizers also relied on digital contact through QR codes as a predominant method for obtaining the crucial 70% of authorization cards rather than confirming workers' support through face-to-face meetings.²²

It seems that the UAW believed that calling a quick election in the wake of their other successes, building on the momentum generated from the Big Three strikes, would take the company by storm, which clearly did not take place.²³

Going Forward

Our assessment is that short of a major upsurge, the building of strong, widespread inside support alongside networks of associational power is essential in the organizing stage. However, just as it takes time and careful work to organize large workplaces like Mercedes and the immense Amazon fulfillment centers, it will take time and extensive networking to organize southern industries.

To do this, unions should consider dispatching organizers to work in these plants. Although there is much talk today about "salting," there is a great deal of historical precedence for this tactic. The Wobblies early in the 20th century often sent their activists into workplaces, lumber camps, fields, mines and other venues to "fan the flames of discontent."

Even the AFL trades have historically salted industries. During WWII, both the AFL and the CIO agreed not to organize the aforementioned Oak Ridge facility until the war was over. Yet the AFL had sent over 1000 activists into the workplaces at Oak Ridge during the war, many of whom switched to production jobs in the aftermath.

None of this is to diminish what has happened. There are many examples of both slow, careful organizing work as well as major upsurges. However, union growth happens most rapidly during periods of dramatic organizing takeoff, and that is not only true of the 1930s.

For example, public school teachers were largely unorganized before 1960. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) maintained two chapters, in New York City and Chicago, both limping along each with memberships perhaps in the 100s. By contrast, the National Education Association, a professional organization which included principals, opposed strikes and eschewed collective bargaining, was dominant throughout the country at the time.

The Condon-Wadlin Act in New York state, the precursor to the current Taylor Law, was one of the most draconian pieces of public-sector labor legislation in the country. Yet by November 1960, when more than 10,000 New York City teachers struck for collective bargaining, city politicians were afraid to put the law into practice.

The teachers won in early 1961, and within months, virtually every large city in the country had a vibrant AFT chapter. Within several years, teachers overwhelmingly organized across the country, even in so-called red states like Oklahoma and Utah where no state-level collective bargaining legislation existed.²⁴

We are certainly not in the midst of a dramatic upsurge of this sort, but when it comes, we will know it. ■

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3. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "Major Work Stoppages in 2023," February 21, 2024, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkstp.nr0.htm>

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8. See Michael Goldfield, "The Failure of Operation Dixie: The Poverty of Liberalism," in *The Southern Key: Class, Race, and Radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 288-330.

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12. While West Coast longshore workers are represented by the historically radical and left-led ILWU, elsewhere longshore workers are represented by the historically conservative International Longshoremen's Association. For the origins of this history, see Howard Kimeldorf. *Reds or Rackets? The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

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20. See Chance Phillips, "UAW petitions National Labor Relations Board to rerun Mercedes election," *Alabama Political Reporter*, May 27, 2024. <https://www.alreporter.com/2024/05/27/uaw-petitions-national-labor-relations-board-to-rerun-mercedes-election/>.

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Chicano, Angeleno and Trotskyist — A Lifetime of Militancy: A Discussion with Alvaro Maldonado

By Promise Li

AGAINST THE CURRENT editor Promise Li: I met Alvaro Maldonado as a college student, at Gabe Gabrielsky's apartment in Los Angeles during a Solidarity branch meeting.¹ Years later, I encountered Alvaro again at a Palestine solidarity rally and learned more about his lifetime contributions to Latino, labor and antiwar movements. Alvaro was at the center of major LA mass movements ever since the Vietnam War, from witnessing the rise of Chicano politics as a high school student to helping to coordinate the largest-ever protests for immigrant justice in LA history.

The LA immigrant justice movement was a light in the darkness of the 1990s and 2000s, which oversaw a historic low point of the socialist left. Alvaro's perspectives provide a distinctive glimpse into this history because they give a first-hand account of how the political divisions between Latino moderates and radicals shaped crucial moments in LA politics.

Many of those who organized alongside Alvaro during the mass mobilizations against the anti-immigrant Proposition 187 in 1994 — a ballot initiative that denied social services to undocumented immigrants — have become a new generation of Latino liberals that have since taken the helm of the Democratic Party in LA.²

Alvaro represents a different path: an unyielding undercurrent of Chicano militancy that fights for political independence and self-emancipation of the working class. These perspectives draw from his commitment to revolutionary socialist and Trotskyist principles, cultivated in his time in organizations like Socialist Union, Solidarity, and the International Socialist Organization (ISO).³

Alvaro and I are now members of the LA branch of Tempest Collective, and Alvaro continues to be active in the anti-war movement, recently helping to form Anti-US and Israeli Imperialism in the Middle East (AUSIIME), a new South Pasadena-based antiwar collective.

These political nuances are under-explored in accounts of LA history in this period. Alvaro's role receives only cursory mentions in scholarly histories like Rodolfo Acuña's *Anything But Mexican* (1997) and Chris Zepeta-Millán's *Latino Mass Mobilization* (2017). But understanding these differences in politics and strategy is precisely what we need in the LA left, where immigrant Latino workers continue to be the militant backbone of LA politics, and new generations of Democratic Party politicians continue to contain the militancy of Angeleno working-class struggles.

The most extensive treatment of Alvaro's role in these move-



Students pour out of Roosevelt High School during Chicano students' walkouts in 1968. Alvaro Maldonado is third from the right, marching beneath *By All Means Necessary!* sign.

ments lies in Jesse Diaz's 2010 dissertation, *Organizing The Brown Tide*. This interview builds on the invaluable history first recorded in Diaz's work.

Promise Li: Can you tell me more about your background and how it influenced you to be involved in community work?

Alvaro Maldonado: I was born in 1952. My grandparents migrated to the United States from the northern Mexican states like Sonora and Chihuahua, part of an early wave of Mexican laborers who worked in the fields and cities. They lived and moved around the Southwest, and my parents ended up in the barrios of Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles, where I grew up.

At the time, there were a lot of social problems in East LA that affected the Chicano community, especially the youth: high dropout rates, overcrowded apartments, poverty, and not many recreational programs for the community. My high school, Roosevelt High, had the second-largest dropout rate in the city — nearly half of the students were dropping out.

Everyone shared feelings of dissatisfaction and demoralization. Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" did introduce some social programs, though I later realized it was an anti-communist response to militant organizing in our communities and something to distract us from the imperialist war in Vietnam. But even these programs were being defunded by the time I became a teenager, and Black and Brown communities were forced to compete over scarce resources in LA's poor areas.

Like many other Chicano activists of my generation, I was

first exposed to community work through the Community Service Organization (CSO), a Mexican American civic organization. I participated in CSO's teen leadership summer program where we were asked to come up with a community project, and I suggested organizing a boycott campaign against a local grocery store to pressure them to lower food prices so people in the barrios can afford fresh produce.

That was my first experience in organizing.

The Historic “Blowouts”

When I was in my sophomore year of high school in 1968, the first wave of “the Blowouts” were beginning: The second wave, in 1970, when I was a senior, was even bigger: tens of thousands of students walked out of classes to protest racism against minority communities, demanding more resources for Chicano students, like bilingual and bi-cultural education, and expanding basic facilities on campuses.

It was one of the earliest mass movements that united and mobilized the Mexican-American community. The movement quickly raised my political consciousness, and I participated in the walkouts at Roosevelt, where over a third of the students walked out. I also saw other minorities participating, from Japanese to Black students.

I joined United Mexican American Students (UMAS), one of the leading groups in the walkouts, and was elected as a representative in my school's assembly body. We demanded more Latino teachers, more affordable lunch options, and Chicano cultural programming. Our UMAS chapter joined other ones to become a Chicano nationalist organization, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), shortly after the Blowouts.

PL: *The Blowouts occurred around the same time as many major mobilizations. How did you and other Chicano youth militants in East LA connect to these broader movements?*

AM: After the Blowouts, I wanted to get more involved in organizations, and joined a grassroots Chicano activist magazine and collective called La Raza, which played a key role in documenting the walkouts.

The Vietnam War was ongoing at the time, and members of La Raza helped to form the Chicano Moratorium to organize a broad coalition of Chicano activists toward anti-war work. I led the Moratorium's outreach committee, flyering and educating our neighborhoods about the war, and spoke at local actions.

We also helped gather solidarity support for the Delano grape strike boycott in LA that had been going on for a couple of years already, and I got to support the strikers in person during a family trip up near Delano. I was fortunate to meet strike organizer Larry Itliong at his office, who directed me to participate in the pickets at Giumurra Vinyards in Arvin (the biggest picket in the strike) and other strike solidarity work during the final week of the strike, and witness the victory.

There was a lot going on at the time, and there were many overlaps between organizations and campaigns. The Chicano Moratorium's highlight was a large rally in East LA on August 29, 1970 that drew over 30,000 protestors and was the biggest action organized by any single ethnic group in the United States at the time.

That rally was also my first time witnessing this scale of police brutality. LAPD dropped tear gas from helicopters, injuring dozens of people, setting buildings on fire, and a cou-

ple of people were murdered — some Brown Berets and *LA Times* journalist Rubén Salazar. Salazar was the first Chicano journalist in a mainstream news outlet to report on Chicano community issues, and we held demonstrations following the rally to demand justice for him.

La Raza members began thinking more seriously about local politics, and we helped organize the East LA branch of La Raza Unida Party. This turn to party politics resulted from our increasing dissatisfaction with Democratic Party politicians, and the desire to have an organ for independent mass politics for Chicanos. Though I was still a nationalist and was not a socialist yet, my experience in the party was what first led me to understand the value of independent politics outside of the two-party system.

We helped run a campaign for Raul Ruíz, one of the key leaders of La Raza who helped advise students during the Blowouts, for state assembly twice. Though we did not succeed, we garnered enough support among working-class Chicanos that the Democratic Party candidate whom Ruíz ran against (who was a Chicano liberal) lost to a Republican for the first time.

Turning to Socialism

PL: *How did your experience in Chicano movements prepare you for entering revolutionary socialist politics?*

AM: Different left organizations were present in La Raza Unida Party, hoping to shape it. I was particularly impressed by some Chicano socialists I met in the party, like Jesus Mena and Alejandro Ahumado, who told me they were also members of the Socialist Union. I watched how they raised issues, how they were firm on their principles, and how to argue them.

They were often in the opposition but also helped to build the party. Though my politics were not always clear then, and I was naive still, they also noticed that I was critical too and did not go for every bit of bullshit coming from the leaders. They eventually recruited me into Socialist Union meetings, where I met my first mentors in the socialist movement, Gene Warren and Milt Zaslow.⁴

I didn't consider myself a socialist until I met people in Socialist Union like Jesus, Gene and Milt. Milt was our main mentor, an older Trotskyist who first split from the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the 1950s. He was the one who taught us basic Marxist principles, clearly explaining how different issues and movements fit together. We would go to his house for political education and have study groups on topics like the Paris Commune.

Gene knew how to get to the core of the issue and broke things down clearly for us — in layperson's terms. He was key in identifying sites of struggle across the movements. Jesus was our main link to the Chicano movement through La Raza Unida Party.

Socialist Union had members in fractions organizing in different areas of work, like solidarity with Black communities against police violence and antiwar work. I became part of the Chicano fraction with Jesus and others, active in groups like the Moratorium and La Raza Unida Party.

One key debate that emerged in La Raza collective at the time that eventually made me leave and commit my time to Socialist Union and its other fractions was whether to build closer relations with the then-president of Mexico,

Luis Echeverría. Echeverría was repressing many workers and socialists, and was responsible for the massacre of the student activists at Tlatelolco as interior minister in 1968. But he was also starting to offer financial support to many Chicanos and Chicano organizations abroad.

The Socialist Union comrades and I were the key ones in the East LA La Raza collective meetings to oppose closer ties with Echeverría's government. We believed that we should not be providing left cover for an administration that was actively oppressing the proletariat, our comrades, and the masses in Mexico.

Jesus, Alejandro and a few other dissenters were finally expelled in a collective meeting I missed. I attended the following meeting to raise the issue again and defend their positions, but I was also dismissed. As movements began to wane in the 1970s, the collective soon fell apart, as the Democrats were co-opting more and more Chicano organizations.

PL: Can you say more about why Socialist Union's politics and organization appealed to you?

AM: Socialist Union brought me to the Trotskyist tradition, which I still identify with. I found its emphasis on workers' democracy valuable, which means the working class must control the government, and that independent unions are needed — even in a workers' state. It gave me a framework to critically understand the setbacks and contradictions of the Soviet Union, and why it made the mistakes it did.

Also, we were embedded in broader movements through our fractions, maintained our principles, and did the work with others in the larger left in a non-sectarian way, even though they did not always treat us very well. Of course, their emphasis on building the Chicano movement drew me in.

I wasn't around yet when Gene and other Socialist Union members, as founding members of Friends of the Panthers, helped Geronimo Pratt and other Black Panthers defend against LAPD's hours-long assault in the Panthers' LA headquarters. Gene's advice to quickly bulletproof the headquarters with telephone books probably helped save many people's lives that day. These stories showed me that these people were not playing around. They were dedicated, brilliant, and sincere.

By the time I joined, we continued our work with Black movements with other former Panthers like Michael Zinzun, who helped organize early efforts to call out police brutality in South Central and Pasadena. A few others and I from Socialist Union drove down to South Central for meetings to help build Zinzun's Coalition Against Police Abuse (CAPA).

Socialist Union was never too big, but we had a generally healthy dynamic. On good days, there were around 40 people in the LA branch meetings. There was good discussion and analysis, just as we all organized in different fractions. We would recruit by twos and threes through this fractional work (which was how I was brought in). Mike Davis also attended our branch meetings in the 1970s, and I had the privilege of

knowing and driving him around to rallies and meetings at the time. He later joined Socialist Union as well.

Movement Decline and Revival

PL: What happened throughout the rest of the 1970s and '80s for you as movements began to ebb?

AM: Well, I enrolled in Cal State LA after I graduated from high school and enrolled in a remedial program in 1970, but by then



Mobilizing against anti-immigrant vigilantes in Campo.

I was mostly caught up in politics and found the professors rather elitist and the learning environment difficult. So I dropped out pretty early, and worked as a groundskeeper for LA County until the mid-1980s.

I was in SEIU Local 660, and a member of the bargaining committee and also a shop steward, when I witnessed the union leadership sideline us rank-and-file members during our contract negotiations. I also had my own family in the 1970s, and got increasingly burnt out balancing between family and politics, especially upon my brother's death.

I was out of politics for most of the 1980s as I tried to spend more time with my family, and returned to college at East LA Community College to finish my degree. Then I started working as a driver for the Japanese consulate starting in 1986.

Gene called to invite me to a solidarity rally with the Tiananmen students who were being repressed in 1989, and I started coming back out to more community actions after that. Socialist Union didn't exist anymore by that point, and Gene brought me to Solidarity. Solidarity was active in building a local coalition against the Gulf War, and organized general assembly meetings that had a couple hundred people.

I met Warren Montag in Solidarity meetings, and I often agreed with him politically. I motivated a stance in Solidarity that we should specify that our opposition to the war should not entail support for Saddam Hussein. Warren and John Barzman agreed. We brought that to the coalition, which also approved it, and included this caveat in our flyers.

I also did some solidarity work with Mexican workers. In the mid-70s, I joined other Socialist Union members to travel down to Tijuana upon invitation by our Mexican comrades to support striking teachers.

The climate was pretty repressive at the time, and we were warned that the police might use live rounds. I thought we were going to be killed! But we were safe and ended up participating in an impressive large march. We made other trips to support Mexican comrades, like in Baja California, and hosted some of them to speak in forums in LA.

In 1993 I helped organize a coalition with local groups like the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), the LA Peace Center, and the National Lawyers Guild to support striking workers in Ford plants in Mexico.

We picketed some Ford dealerships and were in contact with some workers' representatives in Mexico. We managed

to pressure the manager to meet with us; he tried to persuade us to stop, but we threatened to escalate the pickets into boycotts across more dealerships. The workers won a week later, and one of the workers' representatives in Mexico thanked us for our support. Internationalism with Mexican workers is a key organizing priority, especially for LA.

PL: *Around this time in the 1990s, you were also one of the key people who launched the early organizing efforts that led to mass protests against a draconian anti-immigrant bill in California, Prop 187, in 1994. These protests were among the largest in California history. Can you tell us more about the proposition and your role in these mobilizations?*

AM: In the early 1990s, there were growing anti-immigrant and anti-Latino sentiments, especially in LA. In late 1992 and early 1993, several terrible bills and proposals were coming from both parties, but especially the Democrats, that criminalized and made it harder for undocumented immigrants to live.

Prop 187 was the culmination of these racist measures: it would have required local police, school administrators, and workers in many different sectors to report suspected undocumented immigrants, while denying the right to healthcare and education to their children.

I was working at the Japanese consulate at that time, and I remember that the Japanese prime minister also publicly scapegoated Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican and other Latinos to deflect the anti-Japanese hysteria that was also happening then.

Though the widespread outrage against Prop 187 eventually turned out masses of people, there was initially little response from the liberals and all the major Latino and immigrant nonprofits. At most, a few groups were lobbying their representatives. And so the left could fill an important political vacuum.

Mobilizing for Immigrant Rights

Even before Prop 187, I began to reach out to other activists in 1993 to build a coalition to start organizing mass demonstrations to resist these attacks on immigrants. Don White from CISPES and the LA Peace Center was central in helping me gather activists for the first meeting.⁵

I was pretty dissatisfied working at the consulate after hearing the Japanese government's comments, and as the coalition began to grow, I remember putting the consulate's number down as the contact in the coalition's calling cards. At one point, the operator complained that I was getting more calls than the rest of the consulate altogether!

I called a meeting with activist friends, ranging from other Trotskyist groups to groups like CISPES, who I think helped bring out immigrant organizations like Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) and El Rescate. We initially met at CARECEN's office, though they soon pulled out, maybe under pressure since many of us opposed working with the Democratic Party. El Rescate was smaller but more militant and left-wing, and hosted our meetings.

We organized our first demonstration downtown and got hundreds to come, including the Chicano historian Rodolfo Acuña and then-president of UNITE HERE Local 11 Maria Elena Durazo. These kept growing, and our last one in MacArthur Park gathered more than a thousand — before Prop 187 was

even on the ballot.

By 1994 things were moving faster, and mainstream immigrant organizations were feeling the pressure to respond. Someone invited the United Farm Workers to attend one of our meetings, and they stacked our meeting (with the help of SWP members) to successfully win a majority to cancel our next demonstration (which we had already been promoting for weeks) to instead join a rally they organized with larger groups at East LA College. They guaranteed that members of our coalition could speak, but I believe this ultimately contained the growth of our militant coalition, which lost momentum toward becoming a mass force.



Alvaro on the bull horn, speaking at a Palestine rally in South Pasadena in 2024.

Nonetheless, we maintained our coalition, called the Pro-Immigrant Mobilization Coalition, just as our representatives affiliated while helping to build the larger one. This larger coalition now contained the city's biggest NGOs, politicians, and other mainline Latino and immigrant organizations.

This was where key Latino liberal politicians, many of whom would become the future of the Democratic Party, first rose to prominence, from Gil Cedillo to Fabian Nunez. The coalition discussed what must be done to stop Prop 187, and I emphasized that mass demonstrations on the streets are needed, not just lobbying politicians.

There were opportunist elements in this coalition from the start. I suggested at an early meeting that the coalition's points of unity must also show solidarity with Haitian immigrants, many of whom were escaping after the United States overthrew Aristide's regime and were being detained in Guantanamo. But this was rejected by the coalition leaders, headed by Juan Jose Gutierrez of One Stop Immigration, saying that Prop 187 was just about Latino issues.

More embarrassingly, a couple of delegates from Haitian immigrant organizations were present at the time; they left after that discussion and never came back. It was a missed opportunity to connect with the Black community.

Gutierrez also proposed having "celebrity" immigrants speak at our upcoming rally to boost our cause — and suggested Henry Kissinger! Don White and I immediately spoke up to condemn this, listing out Kissinger's imperialist atrocities, and they backed down, knowing that we would organize counter-protests at the meeting if this idea went through. Later in the movement, they began to exclude me, once changing the meeting location without informing me and some others.

Though some delegates were open to organizing demon-

strations, the coalition was nonetheless hesitant to agitate directly against the Democrats. But our original, more militant coalition remained active, and we went after Latino and other Democratic lawmakers who were proposing “milder” anti-immigrant policies while posing as supporters of the emergent immigrant justice movement.

These were Democrats who called themselves “pro-labor,” but proposed measures that would sanction employers employing undocumented workers. We picketed in front of then-Assemblymember Richard Polanco and then-Senator Barbara Boxer’s offices, and within days they each dropped their proposals.

As the movement grew, I joined others in this larger coalition to attend a general assembly meeting at Sacramento with other anti-187 organizations across the state to discuss state-wide strategy. In one of the breakout groups, I argued that we need mass demonstrations across Californian cities against Prop 187, that only mass movements from below can stop this proposition. People were on board in the working group, but some opposed it in the general assembly, in fear of alienating voters. Some key Latino activists, including Cedillo and Nunez, supported me when I spoke about it back in the general assembly, though some of these individuals were trying to play the left while remaining close to the Democrats.

The general assembly ended up voting on this proposal, and a majority adopted it, committing to organize mass demonstrations when we all returned home, although not a single city actually ended up doing it except for us in LA.

Our first LA rally had 30,000 people, which already exceeded our expectations. We thought maybe a few thousand would come out. The second one was even bigger, and finally, the third one brought out in excess of 100,000 people, one of the largest rallies ever in LA at the time. Many other independent pickets, including massive student walkouts, were also happening outside the coalition at the time.

Though voters did pass Prop 187, we organized massive demonstrations at the district courts to rule it unconstitutional, and eventually won, and our opponents did not escalate the fight to the Supreme Court. I am convinced that this victory was won because of these mass mobilizations, because the establishment witnessed how Latino communities were radicalized and struggled for power.

The bourgeois parties did not want immigrant workers to keep mobilizing and joining unions and mass organizations. The victory against Prop 187 demonstrates the power of immigrant workers and the Democratic Party’s efforts to contain that.

Pro-immigration and Antiwar Organizing

PL: *The momentum generated by the mass protests against Prop 187 had soon died down, and many leaders of the movement became the new generation of Democratic Party leaders that would shape LA city politics to the present day. But anti-immigrant policies and resistance against them continued, culminating in the largest single-day rally in LA history in 2006 against HR4437, the anti-immigrant bill passed by the U.S. House of Representatives but which failed in the U.S. Senate. How did the immigrant justice movement develop during this time, and what was your role?*

AM: There was a lull after Prop 187, but things started picking back up as the Iraq War started. In the early 2000s, I helped organize a local group called San Gabriel Valley Neighbors for

Peace and Justice that held weekly vigils to protest the war and spread awareness. Hundreds of these vigils spread across the country at the time, and some led to mass demonstrations. Members of the ISO joined our vigil, and I became friends with some of them.

Around this time, militant anti-immigrant groups like the Minutemen Project and Save Our States (SOS) were forming and gaining traction, beginning in Arizona. While the two parties continued to push through anti-immigrant policies through legal means, these groups organized right-wing vigilante patrols to target and harass immigrants.

The ISO comrades got word that some of these groups were planning to shut down a day laborers’ center in Laguna Beach, and invited me to join them to defend the immigrant workers. So I joined the ISO comrades, alongside anarchists and other militants, to help. We had more than a hundred people, joined by a couple dozen day laborers, and outnumbered the anti-immigrant activists, who were joined by local neo-Nazis with swastika flags.

We forced them to station across the street instead, though they continued to hurl physical threats at us. We decided to march on them — and they fled and ran away. Around this time, I joined ISO and continued to help with these militant anti-fascist mobilizations to counter the Minutemen and SOS around LA for a while. They targeted other day laborers’ centers from Baldwin Park to Glendale.

I understood that this anti-fascist work is important especially as a Trotskyist. In Socialist Union, we read Trotsky’s writings on fascism, which taught us how great a threat it was to the working class and revolutionaries. And I knew already since the Prop 187 protests that when fascism comes to the United States it will take the form of anti-immigrant hysteria against Latino immigrants and also racism against Black communities.

Many of them are concentrated here in LA, which has the most proletarian of communities among Mexican, Salvadorean, Guatemalan and other groups. I also remembered reading about how neo-Nazis in Germany firebombed a house that killed Turkish and Kurdish immigrants, and I had a gut feeling that this kind of thing might soon spread here. I knew we must keep building and mobilizing mass coalitions to combat it.

We didn’t have to start from scratch. We had an important precedent: the successful mass movement against Prop 187. The direct action against the Minutemen and SOS was also developing a new core of LA militants focused on immigrant justice. Around the same time, other emergent leaders in other immigrant justice campaigns, like the *La Economico Puro* coalition, advocated for licenses for undocumented immigrants in the Inland Empire.

I was not a part of those efforts, but activists like Jesse Diaz were, and we all began joining forces for the mobilization against armed Minutemen mobilization at Campo, near San Diego, through a new coalition called *La Tierra es de Todos*. The coalition gathered radical immigrant justice activists, including more militant elements of larger immigrant groups like Gloria Saucedo from *La Hermandad Mexicana Nacional*, who took a firm approach against the moderates in the movement, represented by the “Somos America” coalition (which worked closely with the Democratic Party and was open to compromises like agreeing to guestworker programs).

La Tierra es de Todos members set up a camp half a mile

away from the Minutemen, who would drive tri-wheelers around our camp and intimidate us with guns. Despite that, we marched into their camp to show that we were not afraid at one point. Police and media were surrounding us, so they didn't shoot us. These consistent mobilizations against the fascists helped contain the anti-immigrant movement in California, contributing to those groups' eventual demobilization and collapse.

Killing the Sensenbrenner Bill

PL: *How did these different immigrant justice efforts merge into the 2006 protests against HR4437?*

AM: The Sensenbrenner Bill drew national attention, and others in *La Tierra es de Todos* and I began discussing the need to build a larger coalition to combat it. We invited unions and other immigrant organizations like CARECEN to join us, and formed the "La Placita Olvera Pro-immigrant Working Group" (later "Coalition against the Sensenbrenner King Bill HR4437" and "March 25 Coalition"). The coalition organized a series of protests and demonstrations, from local vigils to pushing local city councils to pass resolutions opposing the bill, starting from December of 2005.

A few of us had been talking about the idea of a mass rally since the December meetings already, and later pushed for doing it on March 25. But, we were met with opposition from more conservative groups that later joined coalition meetings.

I remember the Catholic Church, United Farm Workers, Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), SEIU and CSO sent representatives to the coalition meeting to try to cancel the March 25 demo, instead calling for us to join a more moderate procession at the downtown cathedral commemorating Cesar Chavez.

I saw this as an attempt to shut down the militancy of our mobilization, and supported other members arguing against it. Ultimately, after much debate, the vote to keep the March 25 mobilization won by one vote (thanks to the vote of an immigrant high schooler whose participation the church and those groups tried to unsuccessfully delegitimize). Most of those groups dropped out of the coalition after they failed to change the rally.

About a week later, almost half a million people marched against the bill in Chicago on March 10. We were all flabbergasted. I thought we could even double that number if Chicago could turn out that many people. After the Chicago march, all the moderate groups that had left returned to coalition meetings! They didn't even bring up their previous disagreements — just came back with no shame. Everyone felt the momentum and knew our march would be huge.

We did a lot of turnout in the following weeks for March 25th. I was working as a gardener for businesses across the city at the time, so I could flyer and talk to people all over town about the rally as I worked. Our coalition members promoted it to their bases and went on talk shows, but what was most effective was gaining the support of DJs like Eddie "Piolin" Sotelo, whom many immigrant Latinos listened to.

Sotelo and other Spanish-speaking DJs were promoting the rally heavily, branding it as "historic" before it even happened. That was how *La Gran Marcha* became the largest single protest in LA history, drawing over a million protestors.

PL: *And that was not the end of the movement yet. What led to*

the mass strike on Mayday a few weeks later?

AM: March 25 surpassed our expectations, and we knew we needed to keep escalating. I advocated for a general strike of immigrants on Mayday, which was supported by other militant coalition members. We must build on the momentum, and use this opportunity to bring Mayday back into the national consciousness.

Of course the unions, many nonprofits and the Church, opposed the strike, but we won that vote. We were so happy and beside ourselves: we were going to bring back Mayday! The moderate groups that opposed the general immigrants' strike left the coalition for a second time and organized their own coalition and rally for Mayday. The Democrats didn't want us to lead this militant fight.

Some of those who had supported the protests against Prop 187 were now leaders in the more moderate camp and left with them. We had representatives who tried to join their meetings to work together, but were told they weren't allowed to come. What's worse is that throughout April, the moderate groups held multiple press conferences actively telling immigrant workers not to strike, and students not to walk out of schools on Mayday.

Even Dolores Huerta was part of these press conferences, telling people not to risk their jobs, to keep earning money, and to take care of their families — all kinds of rhetoric and tactics to dissuade immigrants from mobilizing.

The strike still went forward, and there ended up being two marches on Mayday: ours in the morning and theirs later in the afternoon. Ours exceeded their size, and over half a million people showed up. The rallies were so large we could barely move in the streets. At our rally we encouraged the workers to keep fighting so that students could continue their walkouts, and said that we needed to build economic power to challenge the ruling class. Many people, including myself, supported the later action as well, which had no talk of striking and instructed people to vote.

We won a week or so later, and the Sensenbrenner bill was dropped. If you ask anyone in the immigrant community, they would say that we defeated the bill, not any politicians. The organized power of immigrant workers defeated that, and the workers knew.

It was like what Marx said about the self-emancipation of the working class in action. The people in Washington knew that immigrant workers were being radicalized, and they had to drop the bill to contain that upsurge. ■

Notes

1. For more on Gabrielsky, see the interviewer's obituary of him published in *ATC* No. 211 (March/April 2021), <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc211/gabe-gabrielsky-a-radical-affirmation/>.
2. See *Against The Current's* coverage of the Prop 187 protests in No. 52, September/October 1994; 54, January/February 1995; and 55, March/April 1995, with articles by Angel Cervantes, Jim Lauderdale, Tim Marshall, Rachel Quinn and Gil Cedillo among others.
3. Socialist Union here refers to the grouping that existed in the 1970s, associated with Milt Zaslow, Gene Warren, etc., not the American Socialist Union led by Bert Cochran between 1953 and 1959 (although Zaslow was also part of this earlier formation).
4. Gene Warren later also became a member of Solidarity until his death. His late brother Ron Warren's (also part of Socialist Union and Solidarity) obituary of Gene was published in *ATC* No. 206, May/June 2020. The late Mike Davis wrote tributes to both Zaslow and Warren in *ATC* No. 71, November/December 1997 (see also Karin Baker and Patrick Quinn's tribute to Milt and Edith Zaslow in the same issue) and No. 206, May/June 2020 respectively. Zaslow was a key mentor to the Warrens, just as the Warrens played a similar role for the interviewer.
5. Don White was a key leader of CISPES and a convener of the LA Peace Center, a meeting location for the LA left in the 2000s. White passed away in 2008.

Joe Sacco: Comics for Palestine By Hank Kennedy

AFTER ISRAEL'S ASSAULT on Gaza began, Joe Sacco (a "moral draughtsman" in the words of Christopher Hitchens) was compelled to speak out against Israel's war. At the *Comics Journal*, Sacco contributed *The War on Gaza* from January to July.

Sacco's bravery should serve as an example for other cartoonists to follow. Introducing the series, *Comics Journal* publisher Gary Groth said "It is surely not enough, but it's what we can contribute." He included a statement "Fantagraphics Publishers Denounce Genocide, Call for Gaza Ceasefire." (I should disclose that I have written several book reviews for the *Comics Journal*.)

Joe Sacco is a Maltese-American comics journalist who grew up in Australia. His book *Safe Area Goražde*, about the war in Bosnia, won the prestigious Eagle and Eisner Awards for Best Original Graphic Novel.

Sacco's work shows an instinctive sympathy for the underdog, whether refugees, war victims, or those left behind by rapacious capitalism. The subject of Palestine is one he has often returned to.

Giving Voice to Palestine

Joe Sacco's first two books on Palestine and its people, *Palestine* and *Footnotes in Gaza* are pieces of comics journalism based on interviews he conducted in occupied Palestine. He came to the Middle East in 1991 during the first Gulf War, originally with the intent of doing a travelog.

He found that his journalist's training asserted itself and he began interviewing people to get their stories. In an interview with *Al Jazeera* he said "I felt the American media had really misportrayed the situation...I wanted to go, and, in a small way, give the Palestinians a voice — a lens through which people could see their lives."

This has been a valuable service given that prominent figures like Golda Meir claimed that Palestinians "did not exist." Recall that presidential candidate Newt Gingrich talked about "an invented Palestinian people."

Palestine is the more accessible of the

Hank Kennedy is a Detroit-area educator and writer whose work has appeared in the Comics Journal, Logos, New Politics, and The Progressive. He writes on a variety of topics but particularly focuses on the connection between comic books, culture and politics.

two. Chapters are focused around broad themes like the status of women, torture, doctors, and schools as Sacco travels to Hebron, Ramallah, Rafah, etc.

Sacco's first visit coincided with the winding down of the First Intifada and the Oslo Agreement brokered by President Clinton between Israel and the PLO.

His work shows how the hope of Oslo was a false one; that the agreement would not solve the fundamental problems of Palestinians. Since that time he has been proven all too correct by the continuation of illegal settlements, the siege on Gaza, and the construction of the apartheid wall — to say nothing of the current war.

Footnotes in Gaza, meanwhile, is a book with a mission, inspired by a short passage in Noam Chomsky's *Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel, and the Palestinians*. Sacco conducts interviews in Gaza to find out the truth behind two massacres of Palestinians that occurred during Israel's 1956 war with Egypt, one in Khan Younis and the other in Rafah. All told, nearly four hundred people were killed by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF).

Sacco trekked out to rescue the incidents from obscurity during the Second Intifada, with the Iraq War and the killing of Rachel Corrie looming in the background. He adapts his style to this work. The illustrations in *Palestine* are cartoony but the ones in *Footnotes in Gaza* are more realistic.

The War on Gaza is not a journalistic project like those two books. Instead it is an attack fueled by righteous anger. That's not to say that Sacco has no sense of humor.

In one installment Sacco pays his income tax hoping that a portion of it will go to social welfare programs in the United States. Of course, the IRS, the President, the Pentagon and the IDF conspire to see that all of Sacco's money is used to pay for a bomb headed



War on Gaza, 2nd installment

straight for Gaza.

The tone is most reminiscent of the cartoonist's sadly under-read satire *Bumf!* Yet Sacco's comedy is pitch black. He accuses the United States of having "invented Kinder, Gentler, Genocide. The patent is pending." As the saying goes, Sacco's hate is pure.

As you might expect, Sacco's comics have not won him acclaim from Zionists. Upon *Palestine*'s release, Bluma Zuckerbrot of the Anti-Defamation League (the pro-Israel advocacy group masquerading as a civil rights organization) tut-tutted in the *Jerusalem Report* "This is old school, pre-peace process anti-Israel propaganda." She continued "The author provides no context for his pictures, and the image that emerges is that Israel is solely to blame in the conflict."

In 2010 the right-wing *Jerusalem Post* termed him "a veteran Israel hater" while announcing and denouncing the release of *Footsteps in Gaza*.

Palestinians, though, have a different view. Legendary Palestinian scholar Edward Said wrote an "Homage to Joe Sacco" as an introduction to the 2001 edition of *Palestine*. Said gave Sacco high praise, writing "With the exception of one or two novelists and poets, no one has ever rendered this terrible state of affairs better than Joe Sacco."

He concludes "Sacco's art has the power to detain us, to keep us from impatiently wandering off in order to follow a catchphrase or a lamentably predictable narrative

continued on page 35

REVIEW

On the Boundary of Genocide:

A Film and Its Controversies By Frann Michel

The Zone of Interest

Written and directed by Jonathan Glazer
Produced by Film4, Access & Polish Film Institute
Distributor A24; 2023

THE ZONE OF Interest shows us some months in the life of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss (Christian Friedel) and his wife Hedwig (Sandra Hüller), who live with their family (five children, several servants) in a house with a spacious garden in the “Zone of Interest” next to the extermination camp, the interior of which is almost never seen, but always heard.

Through its style and substance, the film evokes questions about historical representation and about the boundaries of responsibility for fascist violence.

Historically, the “Zone of Interest” (*Interessengebiet*) was the area around the camp where Nazis expelled locals and took over housing for use of the SS officers, but the term more broadly evokes ideas of advantage and attention. In the present case, it points us to the interest of both characters and audience, questions of where we direct our attention and where we do not.

The fourth feature by writer-director Jonathan Glazer, nominally based on the 2014 Martin Amis novel of the same title, *The Zone of Interest* draws more on the archives of Auschwitz than on Amis’s satiric fiction of adulterous desire.

The film won this year’s Academy Awards for Best International Feature Film and Best Sound, but has been criticized as well as praised. In the interest of a popular front against fascism, I wish I could reconcile the divergent views of this film, but disjuncture is one of the things it is about.

While the film divides image (bourgeois domesticity) and sound (screams, gunshots, rumbling crematorium), and the visuals further distinguish complicity (desaturated color) and resistance (thermal imagery), the central characters compartmentalize: home and camp, us and them. Of course, these divisions also interface, coming together in material history or viewer experience.

Varying Responses

Some reviewers have praised *The Zone of Interest* as a “masterpiece” (*Rolling Stone*), “extraordinary” and “compelling” (*Jacobin*), a *Frann Michel is a writer and activist in Portland, Oregon.*

“colossal” achievement in filmmaking (*Little White Lies*), that “should be watched by as broad an audience as possible” (Socialist Party [Ireland]). Others have condemned it as “a hollow, self-aggrandizing art-film exercise” (*NY Times*), “Kitsch” (*NYRB*), or “Holokitsch” (*The New Yorker*).

Grove Art Online tells us that “Kitsch” is German for “pretentious trash” or “cheap sentiment.” The Marxist cultural critic Walter Benjamin, in his *Arcades Project*, described kitsch as “art with a 100 percent, absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption,” offering immediate emotional gratification without intellectual effort or difficulties of interpretation.

So, for instance, the red-coated child seen in an otherwise nearly black-and-white landscape of slaughter in *Schindler’s List* (1993) is kitsch. We can immediately feel the tragedy of the individual child, and we can congratulate ourselves on our appreciation of the beauty of the image and the horror of the Holocaust.

But in *The Zone of Interest*, the close-up shots of red flowers that bleed momentarily into an entirely red screen do something different and more complex.

Clearly, responses vary, and will be shaped by what one brings to the film, but the word “challenging” comes up a lot. Audience complaints that “nothing happens” would seem to emerge from expectations that it would be a conventional, mainstream film, with clear and stable points of identification, a dramatic plot, and clear exposition. Instead we have static camera, no exposition, and demands placed on our attention and emotions.

The Höss residence and garden have been carefully recreated, and multiple hidden cameras installed, with focus pullers offsite. Actions unfold in natural light, in often long takes, in which the characters seem unaware of what we hear: the meticulously recreated sounds of the death camp.

The film thus requires that viewers bring with them some knowledge of the events of the Holocaust, so as to be able to recognize the meaning of unexplained references, the sources of dissonant sounds, and the significance of characters’ lack of reactions.

Awareness of Horror

As they were working, the sound designers, led by Johnnie Burn, noticed that they themselves began to tune out the audio as

they watched, and so the volume increases slightly, gradually, as the film goes on, countering the ease with which we can shut out our awareness of horror.

Shutting out the horror next door also entails active labor by the family: Hedwig orders vines planted to cover the wall that divides and connects the garden and the camp; Rudolf removes his bloody boots before entering the house, washes his genitals after raping a prisoner, closes windows as he checks the house at night.

Signs of horror punctuate the bland domesticity: we see the family servants invited to select for themselves fine clothing taken from prisoners, the gardener using crematorium ashes as fertilizer, one of the Höss children playing with a handful of teeth.

Rudolf takes the children boating, but when he unexpectedly encounters in the water some fragments of human bone, he rushes the children home for a good scrubbing, apparently distressed not by the mass death he has administered, but by the possibility that it may have contaminated his offspring.

Those critics who have objected that we don’t learn anything new from the film (we already know Nazis are bad, evil is banal) seem to assume not only that art must be educational but also that learning is purely about intellectual acquisition of information, rather than also involving emotional engagement, deep reflection, or recursive integration of experiences.

For at least some viewers, the film raises provocative questions and makes visceral the recognition of our own complicity in leading comfortable lives while atrocities occur.

That the film provokes us to consider our own complicity does not require equating every viewer to those actively perpetrating genocide or living next door to it. As Naomi Klein has suggested in her comments on *The Zone of Interest* in *The Guardian*, there are plenty of horrors to go around.

Klein mentions the climate emergency and related refugee crisis, though one might also note conflicts elsewhere (Ukraine, Sudan, Myanmar), or the laissez-faire spreading of pandemic disease, or the ordinary social murders of capitalism.

We can all see atrocities on the internet; in the United States we know our own government is funding weapons — perhaps our own pension plan or university endowment is investing in them. If your reaction to an invi-



The Höss family's spacious garden, with the concentration camp in the background.

tation to consider your complicity in atrocity is, "But I'm not a death camp commandant," then you have set your ethical bar too low.

Speaking Up for Palestine

Reactions to Glazer's acceptance speech at the Academy Awards suggest that whatever lessons the film offers, not all viewers are receptive students. After expressing the customary thanks, Glazer continued,

"All our choices were made to reflect and confront us in the present — not to say, 'Look what they did then,' rather, 'Look what we do now.' Our film shows where dehumanization leads, at its worst. It shaped all of our past and present. Right now we stand here as men who refute their Jewishness and the Holocaust being hijacked by an occupation, which has led to conflict for so many innocent people. Whether the victims of October the 7th in Israel or the ongoing attack on Gaza, all the victims of this dehumanization, how do we resist? Aleksandra Bystron-Kolodziejczyk, the girl who glows in the film, as she did in life, chose to. I dedicate this to her memory and her resistance. Thank you."

While some others at the Oscars wore pins or clothing that silently signaled their sympathy with Palestinians or their support for a ceasefire, only Glazer spoke onstage about the current violence in Gaza.

Glazer's speech has sometimes been quoted in truncated and misleading ways, and even some of those aware of the full text have objected to its content. A number of groups have released statements denouncing Glazer's comments, including an open letter signed by over 1000 "Jewish creatives, executives and Hollywood professionals" who objected to a "moral equivalence between a Nazi regime that sought to exterminate a race of people, and an Israeli nation that seeks to avert its own extermination."

Other Jewish professionals in the film industry have signed letters in support of Glazer and his comments.

But a number of scholars have noted that many Germans of the Nazi era actually did see their mission as averting their own destruction. Peter Fritzsche points out in *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (2008), for instance, that the suffering that followed World War One in Germany left many people there susceptible to the Nazi fantasy that "repeatedly imagined the demise of Germany at the hands of Poles, Bolsheviks, Jews, and other enemies." Perhaps genocide is not always rationalized as self-defense, but it would hardly be unprecedented.

Past and Present

Some critics have faulted the film for its attention to "what we do now." They are not wrong that universalizing or transhistorical views can obscure shifting power relations and possibilities for agency. Nor are they wrong that an excessive presentism might leave us unable to see possibilities for change or lessons from the past.

Equally, however, antiquarian historicism that detaches the past from the present provides no useful insight. Finding and forging a usable past entails avoiding both of these extremes, a balance that many find *The Zone of Interest* achieves. What we do now can be shaped by how we understand what they did then.

As with the range of approaches to historical material, so, too, considerations of fascism might seek a balance: avoiding on the one hand the narrowness of studies that limit the phenomenon only to avowedly-fascist European regimes between the world wars, and on the other hand the expansiveness of accounts that flatten the category to encompass any vaguely authoritarian ideas or formations.

Those who object that *The Zone of Interest* lacks a material analysis of fascism or of the motivations of characters may have missed some details. Writers from at least

Trotsky onward have noted that fascism emerges from capitalist crisis, and although it chiefly serves the interest of big business, its supporters and agents often come from the distressed petty bourgeoisie.

Some of the capitalist underpinnings of fascism emerge in the film when Höss family members or friends refer to the new Siemens factory and other industry moving to the area, as well as when Nazi bureaucrats comment on praise from CEOs, or when local businesses are offered their "pick" of newly arrived enslaved laborers.

A characteristic class position of fascists becomes evident in allusions to the family's class resentments and desires. When Hedwig's mother Linna (Imogen Kogge) comes to

visit, she wonders about whether a woman she used to work for as housecleaner is now across the wall, and she regrets being outbid on the woman's curtains when her goods were auctioned. Linna notes that Hedwig has "landed on [her] feet," suggesting both their class insecurity and its material overcoming at the expense of other lives.

Once the daughter of a servant, Hedwig now commands servants, snapping irritably but matter-of-factly at one, "I could have my husband spread your ashes across the fields of Babice." She revels in the furs and jewels she gains from murdered Jews, and longs for another spa vacation in Italy. If fascism doesn't necessarily begin at home, it nonetheless includes it.

The film also supports the analysis presented by Aimé Césaire, that Nazism is the return to Europe of techniques developed in colonial regimes; that is, it is a mode of settler colonialism. As Hazem Fahmy notes in *Middle East Eye*, the Polish landscapes of *The Zone of Interest* evoke scenes from American Westerns like *Shane* (1953) and *Johnny Guitar* (1954). A letter we hear in the film describes Höss as "a model settler farmer and an exemplary German pioneer of the East."

Having moved from Germany to Poland, Hedwig refuses, when Rudolf is transferred back to Germany, to leave the home and garden she has had the servants cultivate: "We're living how we dreamed we would. . . Everything the Führer said about how we should live is exactly how we do. Drive East. *Lebensraum*. Here it is."

Reflections on Resistance

If some criticisms of the film might emerge from refusal of the analysis it presents, others are apt enough, though not necessarily damning — no single artwork can do everything, after all.

Certainly we might learn different things from a film or book that offered fuller histori-

continued on page 37

REVIEW

Queering China in a Chinese World By Peter Drucker

The Specter of Materialism:

Queer Theory and Marxism in the Age of the Beijing Consensus

By Petrus Liu

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2023, x + 239 pages. \$29.95 paperback.

EFFORTS TO PRODUCE a “queer Marxism,” at least by that name, date back a mere 15 years, to the publication of Kevin Floyd’s *The Reification of Desire* in 2009.¹ The great majority of queer Marxism publications in the intervening years have been by U.S. academics or academics in other English-speaking rich countries, focusing more often than not on U.S. examples.²

In keeping with the anti-imperialist tradition in Marxism and the “transnational turn” in queer studies, there have however been attempts by queer Marxists for years to challenge and correct this Eurocentrism in actually existing queer Marxism. Together with his previous book *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*, Petrus Liu’s *The Specter of Materialism* makes a major and invaluable contribution to creating a truly global queer Marxism.

Unlike other queer Marxists who have attempted this from within Western imperialist countries,³ Liu can draw in his work on wide-ranging knowledge, impressive research and personal familiarity with a large and key part of the non-Western world: the Chinese lands of the People’s Republic (including Hong Kong) and Taiwan (where he hails from himself).

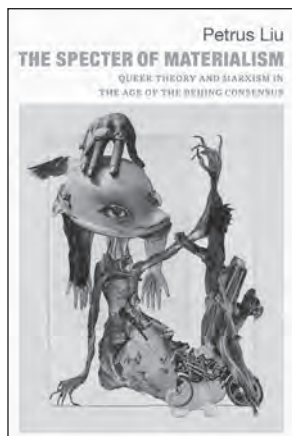
The results of Liu’s labors should occupy a central place from now on in queer Marxist studies — and in studies of geopolitics generally.

Centrality of China

As Liu points out, there is no way to make sense of the world today without seeing China as a key player. Yet repeatedly, Westerners talk and write about the world in a way that occludes China’s centrality.

For example, for 35 years now and still today, they write about the “post-Cold War” world. Yet by contrast with a view of history hinging on the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, a truly global view should reflect the reality that the People’s Republic never collapsed and that the power of the Chinese

Peter Drucker is the author of Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism (Haymarket) and an advisory editor of Against the Current.



Communist Party has never been seriously shaken.

As Russia went through its precipitous decline in the 1990s, China continued its steady, rapid rise. And while Russia acquiesced in NATO’s expansion and its own retreat, China paralleled its incorporation into the neoliberal global

order with constant resistance to Western attempts to hem it in.

So as Liu points out, the Cold War in Asia never definitively ended. He notes that relations between the People’s Republic and Taiwan for example have all along been “overdetermined by a Cold War structure of feeling” (107) — intensified today by “unprecedented hostility between China and the United States.” (161)

Similarly, Western studies of gender and sexuality ignore the Chinese-speaking one-sixth of humanity. As long as this remains the case, there can be no question of a global feminism or of global queer perspectives.

Queer studies need to move beyond a Eurocentric understanding of “homosexuality as we understand it today” — whose origin was the object of so much early queer theory — to a comprehensive vision of global queers in all their diversity. “While 1990s queer theorists cautioned us not to apply queer theory to non-Western cultures, for today’s queer theorists there is no more urgent task,” Liu writes. (33) “Geopolitics ... is constitutive of this understanding of queer.” (27)

Queer Marxists have a lot to learn from Liu about China’s central place in the spheres of geopolitics, economics, gender and sexuality. At the same time, queer Marxists will enthusiastically welcome his insistence that queer studies need to be far more materialist. As he writes, “being queer is no longer queer enough.” (21)

Queer radicalism needs to engage with resistance to racism, oppressive reproductive technologies, security regimes, austerity, ableism and homonationalism. The “starting point of a materialist analysis is the agency of the oppressed.” (8)

In particular, making the oppressed the

subjects of history requires that we “transform the material conditions that authorize certain individuals to speak, act, or write in socially legible ways.” (8) Building on his work in *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas*, Liu focuses more in this book on labor and capital.

Chinese Genders, Chinese Sexualities

Liu insightfully analyzes the ways in which China’s transition to capitalism has created “new classes of gender and sexuality — such as *dagongmei* (female migrant laborers in China’s export-oriented sunbelt), money boys (rural-to-urban sex works), and high-*suzhi* (quality) transnational queers — ... as part of the new politics of human value.” (14)

“The vulnerability of women as a group is amplified by China’s neoliberal transformations,” he notes. (44) This is the backdrop to a fascinating and illuminating presentation of debates on gender among Chinese feminists today. Ultimately, Liu concludes, despite the richness of the debates, pressure from the regime has reduced discussions of gender to a reaffirmation of the CP’s traditional claim to have granted women equality, “while more transformative and queer understandings of sex/gender remain occluded from view.” (160)

In the realm of sexuality, similarly, “[d]ispossessed, displaced, and having literally nothing to sell except their bodies ... rural sex workers perform a new form of proletarianized labor.” (45) At the same time, “Chinese gay men and lesbians [increasingly] seek higher education abroad” — another option offered by the new Chinese capitalism — “in order to escape compulsory heterosexuality and procreative familialism.” (46)

Although neoliberalism in China enlarged spaces for LGBTQ communities, Liu notes that compared with Hong Kong and Taiwan, China “appears to be significantly behind in the advancement of queer rights.” (104)⁴

On a more positive note, one of the most inspiring parts of *The Specter of Materialism* for me is Liu’s account of the gender and sexual politics of the brilliant Chinese revolutionary writer Lu Xun.⁵ While the Maoist leadership of the Chinese Communist Party celebrated Lu’s work, and particularly his depictions of cruelty and violence against women, Liu uncovers a sexually subversive side of it that came as a revelation to me.

I had no idea, for instance, that Lu’s radical commitment to gender equality led him to consistently use the honorific “elder brother” (*xiong*) in his letters in addressing his female

partner. (93) It is no wonder that contemporary Chinese queer scholars have been reclaiming Lu from Maoist orthodoxy.

... I believe that we should oppose the increasingly heteronationalist policies of the Chinese state as well as Western homonationalism, in defense of a vision of global queer liberation that transcends them both.

What Is China?

Understanding a capitalist world in which China is central requires understanding what China is. In this respect Liu provides many formulations with which I wholeheartedly concur — and others that I find dubious.

I believe that he is absolutely right to state that “capital meets, subsumes, and reconfigures preexisting temporalities — relations of production and property, gendered hierarchies, and kinship — without creating a homogeneous world.” (11) This describes what has happened in China over the past several decades, notably beginning under

Deng Xiaoping.

This is in the last analysis the explanation of the “mounting social inequality ... reckless developmentalism justifying human rights abuses, onslaughts against the environment, suppression of freedoms of speech and assembly, and belligerence toward Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang” that Liu describes. (42)

I am less convinced by Liu’s statement that China has “displace[d] the United States as the center of global capitalism,” (1) given that the U.S. with about one-quarter of China’s population still by any measure has the world’s largest capitalist economy (even though indeed dependent on Chinese investment and imports).

At one point Liu declines “to adjudicate on these claims whether China is socialist or capitalist, neocolonial or liberationist,” even after saying that this is “a question of utmost importance that is haunting the international Left.” (7) In a more recent *Historical Materialism* podcast on his book, Liu has clarified his analysis, making clear that he sees capitalism as a totality, “global in scale,” including countries like China that “claim to be socialist.”⁶

For my part, I think that the global spread of Chinese investments on every continent, and the rapid rise of Chinese military power particularly in its own region, justify defining it as one of the world’s main capitalist and imperialist powers. In the realm of sexual politics, I believe that we should oppose the increasingly heteronationalist policies of the

Chinese state as well as Western homonationalism, in defense of a vision of global queer liberation that transcends them both.

Toward a Global Queer Vision

“This book was written in dialogue with the exciting and rapidly growing body of literature on queer anticapitalism, which includes the works of Kevin Floyd, Alan Sears, Jules Gleeson, Holly Lewis, and Peter Drucker,” Liu writes. (16)

At the same time he seeks to move beyond us, by analyzing “capital as a dispossessive logic on a global scale.” (17) He has my heartfelt support in this badly needed endeavor.⁷ It is striking, however, that Liu’s book barely refers to non-Chinese-speaking Asia — South Asia, Central Asia or the Middle East, for example — not to mention Africa or Latin America.

A truly global queer vision needs to go beyond the dominant Eurocentrism of queer studies and beyond Liu’s China-centered account — indispensable as it is — to embrace in-depth analyses of the social and sexual formations of the incredible wealth and diversity of the world’s regions.

This will necessarily be a long-term, collective effort drawing on many contributions, especially from Latin America, Africa and Asia, on the road to “new ways of imagining queer futures and transformative politics.” (163). ■

Notes

1. Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
2. For a recent survey see Peter Drucker, ‘Queer Studies’, Beverley Skaggs et al. eds., *The SAGE Handbook of Marxism*, London: Sage, 2021.
3. Like my own attempt in *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism*, Leiden/Chicago: Brill/Haymarket, 2015.
4. In recent years I have analyzed this sexual divergence between Taiwan and the People’s Republic as one example of a global clash between ‘homonationalism’ (as defined by Jasbir Puar) and ‘heteronationalism’ (see e.g. Drucker ‘Revisiting Queer Anticapitalism’, *Spectre* 7 (spring 2023), 76-79, esp. 78).
5. My enthusiasm for Lu Xun’s work goes back to a Chinese history course I took from Jonathan Spence in the 1970s — though I don’t remember Spence’s mentioning Lu’s gender and sexual radicalism.
6. ‘The Specter of Materialism (with Petrus Liu)’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwXbpuKho2l>
7. In all due modesty, despite the minor place that my work has in his book, I would suggest that Liu could have read it more attentively. After a quick but accurate summary of the account in my book *Warped* of the role of capitalism in shaping European and North American sexualities, he writes, “By contrast, as capitalism failed to develop in the feudal societies of Asia — which Drucker defines as those ‘in whose sexual regimes class and status trumped gender and kinship’ — the basic historical conditions for lesbian/gay communities remained absent.” (70) This is a misreading. There is only one Asian society I describe (following Perry Anderson) as “feudal” (and therefore particularly propitious for the rise of capitalism): Japan. Among other Asian societies, I analyze precolonial India as one where gender and kinship were central to its indigenous sexual regimes, and China — together with ancient Rome, the classical Arab caliphates, and feudal societies — as ones “in whose sexual regimes class and status trumped gender and kinship.” See Drucker, *Warped*, 78 (on precolonial India), 85-86 (on feudal Japan), 84.

Joe Sacco: Comics for Palestine — continued from page 31

of triumph and fulfillment.”

Said notes perceptively that Sacco shows readers what’s happening, but doesn’t attempt to provide answers or solutions. That has continued in *The War on Gaza*.

He had told his Palestinian friends that the best way for their movement to succeed would be for Gazans to nonviolently march at the border fence. A friend tells him “Joe, they will shoot us.” Anyone who remembers the Great March of Return from 2018 knows that’s exactly what happened. “After that I had no suggestions for what the Palestinians should do,” Sacco finishes.

Raising Awareness

Joe Sacco has used his stature to raise awareness of other Palestinian cartoonists. He contributed a text introduction to *A Child in Palestine: The Cartoons of Naji al-Ali*.

In his introduction Sacco relates that he was concerned that the Palestinians he interviewed would not understand his project of comics journalism.

He was concerned that Palestinians would think he was making light of their suffering if they knew he was relating their stories through a comic. He was reassured

that Palestinians knew all about cartoons, as Naji al-Ali had championed their cause in illustrations prior to his still-unsolved 1987 assassination.

His blurb for Palestinian artist Mohammad Sabaaneh’s *Power Born of Dreams: My Story is Palestine* calls the latter cartoonist “a master.” Sabaaneh has been harassed repeatedly by Israel for his drawings. In 2013 he was held for months by the Israeli military, who charged him with collaborating with Hamas. In 2018 he was detained again by the IDF when he attempted to return to Ramallah from Europe.

Despite this, Sabaaneh has continued drawing and his cartoons are well worth seeking out.

Last December, Fantagraphics stock of *Palestine* sold out, after a burst of sales inspired by the recent war. The publisher quickly rushed the book back into print and announced a new edition out this September.

Whatever the edition, Sacco’s comics on Palestine have earned a spot in the hearts and on the bookshelves of anyone sympathetic to the cause of the Palestinians. His work is that of an artistic champion of the Palestinian people. ■

REVIEW

Abolition, Ethnic Cleansing, or Both?

Antinomies of the U.S. Founders

By Joel Wendland-Liu

The Patriots' Dilemma:

White Abolitionism and Black Banishment in the Founding of the United States of America

By Timothy Messer-Kruse

London, Pluto Press, 2024. \$26.95 paperback.

THE PATRIOTS' DILEMMA explores the contradictory attitudes of the U.S. founders toward slavery. Timothy Messer-Kruse's new book argues that although many founders opposed slavery, their vision of a "white republic" inhibited their meager attempts to abolish it.

The racist idea of a whites-only country, which existed even before independence, aimed to create a society based on the elimination of Black and Indigenous people. This goal led them to develop harsh legal, political, and military methods to control enslaved people after 1781.

Messer-Kruse's singular scholarly contribution is the exploration of what appears to be a colossal contradiction — between the founders' claimed abhorrence of slavery, and their absolute refusal to share the newly formed polity with Black people as equals. This thesis centers the problem of racism as the primary conditioning factor shaping early American political thought and action.

By the 1780s, the founders had won their war of independence from the most formidable empire in the world. They had won the power to create a new country with new laws and a new economic system. They were at the peak of their creative capability.

So why didn't they make a society without slavery? Or, following Messer-Kruse's thought, why couldn't they achieve their vision of a "white abolitionist" utopia free of both slavery and Black people?

Despite their talk of equality and independence, slavery continued. Messer-Kruse concludes that this contradiction at the heart of "white abolitionism" molded a political system that preserved racial slavery and subsequently denied full equality to emancipated

Black people.

To support his argument Messer-Kruse tracks what he believes are the origins of this conundrum, from the late 1600s through the unfolding revolutionary crisis in the late 1700s and into the early years of the new republic.

In the colonial period, some writers, mainly Quakers, began to pair the notion of slavery's moral penalties for white people with the impulse to continue the social subjugation of freed Black people. This pairing, the author argues, cultivated a white racial identity based on the urge to preserve their social dominance.

Such an obsession with white supremacy eventually conditioned the Euro-American self-conception of this country as a place exclusively for white people in its colonial and post-revolutionary iterations. The new country they envisaged would be based on white citizenship.

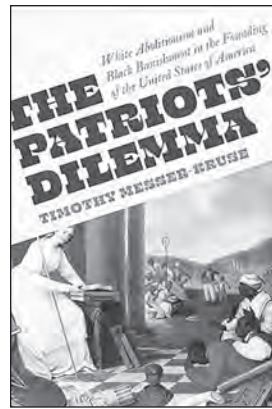
Navigating a Moral Conundrum

Messer-Kruse extensively documents how enslavers knew what they were doing was wrong, regularly bemoaning the moral degradation of those who oversaw the ownership of and trade in human beings. Along the way, anti-slavery writers and enslavers alike concocted numerous schemes to achieve their dreams of a racially pure white republic without enslaved (i.e. Black) people.

Messer-Kruse shows how colonial and early republican political elites created manumission schemes always designed with draconian measures to control the movements, labor and lives of emancipated Black people, envisioned elaborate mass deportation projects, and encouraged largely inadequate white immigration based on indenture.

In other words, "white abolitionism" emphasized the moral recovery of white people through the elimination of the slave system — and with it, all Black people.

In all the evidence Messer-Kruse assembles, he shows that the anti-slavery views that have been preserved in historical archives up to the second decade of the 1800s never countenanced abolition on terms anywhere



remotely near a recognition of the total human worth of those who had been enslaved and who might be freed.

All agreed that continued subordination and subjugation of manumitted Black people was desirable and necessary. Such policies reflected the contradiction between their anti-slavery ideas and the racist, exclusive utopia they wanted to create.

Messer-Kruse cites the often-articulated aspiration for a white indentured labor force and occasional

attempts by colonial governments to increase taxes on the importation of enslaved people as evidence for the persistence of "white abolitionism."

The author further insists that this hostility to the slave system drove their radical break with the British empire. Still, their insistence on white supremacy only deepened the contradictions that propelled the country toward its eventual civil war.

Protecting Slavery in Practice?

Messer-Kruse's extensive archival research challenges historians who downplay the founders' racism and overemphasize their creation of a consistently improving democratic society that might eventually fulfill the original ideals of freedom and equality.

His book is less successful, however, in a second stated objective: countering newer historical scholarship (e.g. Gerald Horne, *The Counterrevolution of 1776*) arguing that a substantial portion of the founders fought the Revolutionary War to protect slavery from embryonic British abolitionism.

Messer-Kruse cites colonial protests against British shipping that legally imported and regulated enslaved people, insisting that these protests primarily expressed anti-slavery politics. Despite the book's impressive compilation of archival evidence, more careful analysis and interpretation reveal critical limits on the author's conclusions.

For example, Messer-Kruse fuses most criticisms of the slave system or the slave trade with abolitionist thought, generalizing these thought patterns to the founders as a whole. In contrast, historian Kris Manjapra in his book *Black Ghost of Empire* offers more precise delineations between "abolitionism" and manumission laws and practices.

Joel Wendland-Liu is the author of *Mythologies: A Political Economy of U.S. Literature in the Long Nineteenth-Century* and *The Collectivity of Life: Spaces of Social Mobility and the Individualism Myth*. His current book project is titled "Simply to Be Americans? Literary Radicalism and Early U.S. Monopoly Capitalism." He teaches at Grand Valley State University in Michigan.

Manumission (individual granting of freedom) was categorically distinct from abolition because it was rooted in the idea of the persistence of white power (a point that converges with Messer-Kruse's reading of anti-slavery thought).

In addition to continued political and economic subordination, colonial and post-revolutionary anti-slavery writers premised manumission on the notion that freed people owed reparations to former enslavers to be paid through racialized labor schemes of super-exploitation or cash payouts.

The manumission schemes that became U.S., British, and French policies in the 19th century had been first outlined in the 17th century. Many such schemes entailed Black repayment to white enslavers. The anti-slavery Quaker (and slaveholder) George Fox, for example, in 1676 argued that emancipation should be based on enslaved people repaying masters for their "investment."

Messer-Kruse includes Fox's ideas as evidence for the "religious foundations" of "white abolitionism" and white racial identity, but makes little of the repayment scheme or the naming of enslavement as an "investment." Such approaches to manumission might be called reverse reparations — the absolute negation of the terms on which, Manjapra argues, abolition is defined as possible.

In contrast to such "manumission" policies, Manjapra argues that *abolition* distinctly refers to the immediate freeing of enslaved people and recognizing their rights to self-determination, compensation, and reparative justice for what had been stolen. The difference is critical because it deliberately acknowledges how racial slavery, after formal emancipation, had been materially extended intentionally through manumission practices.

Without immediate reparative justice, the injustice linked to the racist dehumanization of Black people persisted. Anti-slavery and anti-slave trade ideas cultivated and debated by the most powerful plantation-owning and incipient capitalist Euro-Americans, as Messer-Kruse shows, never encompassed Manjapra's definition of abolition. Thus, what appears to Messer-Kruse as "the patriots' dilemma" may have been more logically consistent than at first glance.

A Closer Look

Here a more careful reading of Messer-Kruse's evidence is necessary. Many of the archival documents he explores provide direct proof of another aspect of the problem he has failed to explore.

For example, additional scrutiny of one of a few Black-authored statements included in the book elicits a richer explanation. A 1773 statement by enslaved people in Massachusetts made the case for a limited form of abolition (using Manjapra's definition). The

petition sought immediate legal freedom and the right to return to Africa, setting aside what they saw as their rightful claim to what "belongs to us for past services."

Instead of paying white masters for their freedom, enshrined in the manumission schemes before and after the Revolution, these petitioners imply they were due compensation for "past services." Instead of payment, however, they agreed to surrender that just claim in exchange for immediate freedom and the right to leave the country.

Further, Messer-Kruse focuses on the "patriots' dilemma" exclusively in terms of race and politics, but overlooks the economic aspects which are equally important. Racial slavery, after all, was a system of labor in a plantation economy that was appended to developing capitalism within a world imperialist system.

Ownership of human bodies, which had become identified exclusively with Black people by the latter half of the seventeenth century, was also a form of capital upon which planters' wealth was based. Dispensing with this seemingly obvious cause of the "dilemma" obstructs acquiring more complete answers to the book's questions.

Historians have shown that the plantation-colonial system, based on enslaved labor and racialized capital, functioned to support capitalist development — through its division of labor, myriad consumer market needs, and capacity to produce the means of production on a self-regulating and autonomous basis — within the home country, not in the colony.

In Europe's American colonies, this

division was the source of most conflicts between plantation owners and the metropole. It typically was expressed as disagreements about control of economic policy, according to Eric Williams in *Capitalism and Slavery*. British plantation owners, for example, frequently fought over taxes and pricing schemes controlled by London.

London wanted low prices on plantation goods; planters wanted high prices. This included the slave trade itself: Higher prices on enslaved people meant a more substantial capital base (a higher asset value) and higher prices on the goods they made — anathema to most London capitalists, who wanted the lowest possible price on imported plantation goods.

Along with the established notion of emancipation based on compensation for the enslaver's "investment," an urge for favorable pricing schemes was a critical determinant of how American founders framed and understood their problem with racist slavery.

Thus, the "evils of the slave trade," a point where anti-slavery and pro-slavery discourses pragmatically merged, often centered primarily on autonomous management of the supply of enslaved people into the plantation regime.

Major conflicts that spurred the 1770s revolutionary crisis focused on the slave trade's regulation. Confrontations with British trade and military officials in various harbors occurred due to American resistance against British attempts to stop American slave-smuggling.

Landmark events that pushed the conflict to a no-turning-back, revolutionary con-

A Film and Its Controversies — *continued from page 33*

cal detail, or more focus on the resistance.

The "girl who glows in the film," Aleksandra Bystron-Kolodziejczyk (Julia Polaczek), appears in nighttime scenes filmed with a thermal camera, the use of night vision making these the visual inverse of other scenes.

We see her bicycling through the town and fields, hiding fruit for prisoners to find when they return to work, and finding a container with a song written by Joseph Wulf, a prisoner who survived Auschwitz.

We do not learn from the film that members of the resistance also included Polish maids and a gardener employed by the Höss family, though the screenplay is based in part on their testimony about events in the household. As Amy Herzog notes in *Film Quarterly*, this may be a "missed opportunity" in an otherwise provocative and praiseworthy film.

In Herzog's view, the voiceover of Rudolf reading "Hansel and Gretel" to his children while we see Bystron-Kolodziejczyk glowing on screen veers toward sentimentality about the resistance. But the Grimm fairy tale about starving children shoving an old woman

into an oven seems to me more complex and ambiguous here.

The children, remember, have been abandoned to starvation by their parents; the protagonists of the tale are the ones who incinerate their enemy. (The Brothers Grimm collected their "Household Tales" in part to support a developing German national identity.)

Likewise, the all-red screen that appears during Linna's visit may signal overwhelming emotion and horror; but how to respond to that horror is not so clear. Less accustomed than her daughter's family to the sounds and smells of the neighboring camp, Linna covers her nose and mouth in reaction to the smoke, reacts to sounds they ignore, and departs in the middle of the night, leaving a note we never see.

She is, perhaps, like the title characters of Ursula Le Guin's famous short story, among "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas": those who respond to a pleasant life based on the suffering of others by refusing to participate, distancing themselves. But can such distancing ever be enough? ■

dition, as Gerald Horne has shown in *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*, involved not just protests against the slave trade. Many such violent incidents rejected British repression of illegal smuggling, including, in some of the most inflammatory instances, British attempts to monopolize the thriving illegal American slave trade.

Contrary to Messer-Kruse's emphasis on anti-slavery political action, supporters of American *control* of the slave trade were prominent drivers of violent conflict with British officials, after which independence seemed a logical next step.

Resolving the "Dilemma"

Thus, apart from the minority anti-slavery position, the primary objection to British rule in the 1770s was not slavery or the slave trade itself. Instead, it was a conflict over who would control the slave trade, the prices of enslaved labor, and the prices of the exported goods produced by enslaved labor in the plantation regime.

Consequently, when the revolutionary government gained control over its territory and laws, it imposed a slave trade ban that was delayed by two decades (until 1809), ensuring the creation of a well-supplied (and notoriously brutal) internal market that freed U.S. traders from being forced to contend with the dominant British navy.

A second significant conflict impacting the plantation-colonial system was the disagreement over who would determine the internal colonial development of capitalist relations of production. Finance capital quickly attached itself to the slave trade, and various debt

and currency schemes ballooned, related to financing the purchase of racialized humans.

London's regulations on exports and imports severely limited the autonomous ability of the colonies to make their own goods and to make the means of producing those goods, a determining feature of capitalism's self-reproducing capacity. Colonial-sited merchants, finance capitalists, and industrialists sought opportunities for growth and expansion.

Messer-Kruse remarks little on these political-economic issues and their influence on the slavery debates.

One final point deserves attention. In marshaling the evidence that enslavers disliked slavery and sought an exclusively white domain, Messer-Kruse refers to repeated calls to encourage white migration to North America from Ireland, England and Scotland. Enslavers and anti-slavery writers contended that slavery's brutal conditions discouraged such migration because potential European laborers did not want to be treated like slaves.

Messer-Kruse cites tax increases on the importation of enslaved people to show the depth of "white abolitionism." He does not mention that colonists occasionally increased taxes on indentured servants. Also absent is a necessary discussion of the enthusiastic transition from white indenture to racialized slavery in the mid- and late-17th century in the plantation system. Both of these major trends complicate his assessment of the strength of anti-slavery sentiment.

Futile subsequent attempts to encourage white migration as a source of replacing en-

slaved labor were always designed as indentured servitude, contractually obligating labor service under conditions of super-exploitation. Consequently, despite their desires for an imaginary, racially pure colony or republic, planters took only those tangible actions that would fulfill the most urgent demand for the largest numbers of highly exploited laborers.

Despite their claims to desire a white work force, early republican founders found no satisfactory alternative to racial slavery. Accordingly, combined with their anti-Black racism, American enslavers clearly understood they had no substitute for the underlying capital value or labor value of enslaved humans. Thus, they caused slavery to persist.

Messer-Kruse's most important contribution is that he shows how racism shaped the political choices of the founders.

They created a republic based on white power, property and citizenship, an idea they and their ancestors had cultivated for at least a century. This outcome rested on a logic of European racial supremacy that emerged sometime in the 17th century, and became entangled with even the most liberal or progressive of white-authored political theory.

His framing of the "dilemma" they faced over slavery, however, is partial at best. More fundamentally, the founders' dilemma centered on how to create a racially pure white society that also preserved the relations of labor exploitation and capital accumulation that had given them so much wealth and power, in a world in which the non-white human majority was increasingly mingling with them as capitalist circuits of production globalized. ■

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REVIEW

Emancipation from Racism By Giselle Gerolami

Quitting the Master Race:

A Daughter's Journey to Break the Bonds of Hate

By Barbara Leimsner

Friesen Press, 2024, 240 pages. \$12 paperback.

QUITTING THE MASTER RACE is a memoir in which the author grapples with the legacy of her father's Nazi past. I knew the author in the 1990s, when we worked together on several campaigns including one to get an abortion clinic set up in Ottawa. I was only vaguely aware of her parents' story so I was very interested to hear her account when the book came out.

Barbara Leimsner's family came to Canada from Germany in 1957 when she was almost four years old. They settled first in Oshawa, Ontario and later in Whitby, Ontario, drawn by jobs in the auto industry. Unlike many German immigrants, her father was unrepentant about his affinity for the Nazi regime and tried to instill his racist, antisemitic views in his two daughters.

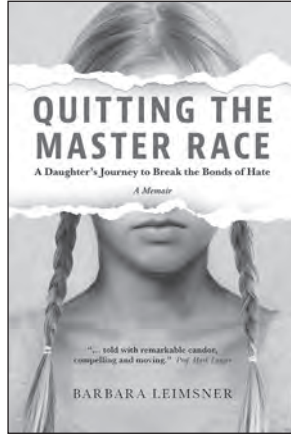
The book is divided into two parts. The first covers the author's life with her father from her childhood memories up to his death. The second is her journey, starting in 2014, to visit and study the places where he lived in order to understand how he could have become so thoroughly indoctrinated in Nazi ideology.

As a child, the author accepted what her father said without question. Neighbors and other members of their community were categorized according to a hierarchy in which Aryans like their family were at the top and everyone else was somewhere below. Certain facial characteristics and dark hair or skin were signs of low intelligence and inferiority.

Although prone to flashes of anger, her father was a good-natured, loving and attentive parent and she loved and looked up to her "papa." Their household was a traditional one where German was spoken and Canadian junk food eschewed.

Her father raised pigeons and occasionally other livestock in their yard and believed in living off the land. Her parents were frugal and hard-working but struggled to get ahead with their limited English skills.

As she grew older and started to understand that not everyone thought like her father, she struggled with the disconnect. She watched "The Sound of Music," began hearing



about how six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, and was confused about why everyone was mourning the assassination of John F. Kennedy while her father celebrated.

He burned her comics and later destroyed her sister's Jim Morrison

records, acts that were reminiscent of Hitler's book burnings.

She began to reject her father's ideas as she was swept up in the radicalism of the movements of the late 1960s and early '70s. After two summers working and traveling in Germany, she was accepted in the journalism program at Carleton University in Ottawa where she encountered a diverse study body, was exposed to new ideas by Marxist professors, and became involved in student activism.

After she and her sister had moved out and established their own lives, her father began treating her mother with cruelty. The cruelty intensified after her mother developed acromegaly that enlarged her hands and feet and distorted her facial features, and this continued until her death from cancer in 1993.

Late in life, her father appeared to have mellowed or changed. He joined the New Democratic Party — Canada's left of center, labor party — even though he couldn't vote. He began dating a Haitian woman and she remained his companion until his death from cancer in the spring of 2003.

Seeking Understanding

For over a decade after her father died, Barbara buried her complicated emotions about him. In 2014, after she and her partner retired, she decided to visit her father's birthplace to try to gain an understanding of what had made him the man that he was.

In 2018, she began her trip to Germany and Czechia with a visit to her Aunt Jutta, her father's youngest sister. Her aunt recounted how three million Germans were expelled from the Sudetenland in 1946, in retaliation for German atrocities under the Nazis.

The family had been living in their ancestral home, Freidland, which became Bridlicna. They were given 24 hours to leave and were allowed to bring very little. When they arrived in Germany, they were treated poorly. Interestingly enough, her aunt seemed to harbor little bitterness over the expulsion.

The author is very clear that as traumatic as this must have been, expelled Germans for the most part went on to live full and meaningful lives — unlike Jews and others who suffered horrible deaths in concentration camps.

The author visited Prague before making her way to Bridlicna where she got to see the house where her father was born, the house the family lived in when they were expelled, and the church where her father was baptized. She saw the area where her father gathered mushrooms, fished for trout and spent countless hours birdwatching.

After the defeat of Germany in 1918, the Czechification of the Sudetenland caused resentment among the German population. Economic hard times after 1929 increased that resentment. The author's father along with other young men from Freidland left to join the German army in 1938 rather than being conscripted by the Czech army.

The Munich Agreement gave Hitler control of the Sudetenland. In the December 1938 elections, 97% supported the Nazi Party, making it the most pro-Nazi region.

Her father served seven years in the German army, first in the Balkans but later in Crete, which was occupied by the Germans from May 1941 until October 1944. Her father revealed very little about his time in the army. She has 21 black-and-white photos of his time in Crete, most of which do not show the war.

The author is left to guess, based on the history of this time, what her father's work may have been. It is known that guerilla resistance was met with extreme force that turned into an "orgy of violence" against the citizens of Crete by August 1944.

There was a mythology in Germany after the war that the ordinary German soldier played no part in atrocities. According to Leimsner the reality was quite different. "Though originally separate from the Nazi movement, the German army became a vital arm of its terror regime and was deeply implicated in its criminal and genocidal policies." (190)

Giselle Gerolami is a long-time member of Solidarity and serves on its National Committee.

continued on page 44

REVIEW

In Pristine or Troubled Waters? By Steve Wattenmaker

Troubled Waters

A Sea Story

By Syd Stapleton

288 pages, \$18.99 from Amazon

SAY YOU HAPPENED to sit down next to Frank Tomasini in a waterfront bar somewhere in the Pacific Northwest. You nod and exchange pleasantries. Three hours later you would be in deep, delightful, and consequential conversation with this new friend. Tomasini, the protagonist in Syd Stapleton's new mystery novel *Troubled Waters — a Sea Story*, is a 47-year-old marine surveyor in Washington State's San Juan Islands.

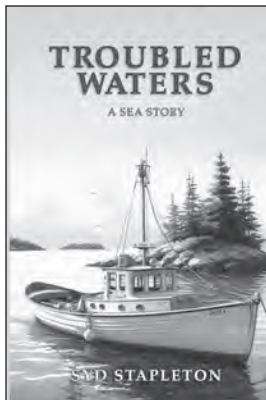
On a dreary evening, Tomasini receives an urgent radio distress call as he sits down to supper on his boat, the Molly B. That call launches a murder mystery wrapped up in a scheme to pillage the San Juan's pristine environment.

Stapleton's command of language, dialogue, and character suggests a wider experience leading up to this first novel. Stapleton grew up in Gilroy, California on farms and ranches, and fished with his father off Monterrey's Cannery Row. He became a leader of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement in 1964 and anti-Vietnam War activist. He ran for Congress as a socialist in 1970. During the 1980s he worked as a machinist and became a tool and die maker.

But Stapleton's experience of working in and around the sea lends a particularly expansive and atmospheric underpinning to *Troubled Waters*. For years Stapleton lived in and sailed the San Juans. The islands are his backyard.

In the 1990s Stapleton, his wife and daughter sailed from Washington State to Cuba and back. He worked as a passenger ferry captain in the San Juans and wrote the

Steve Wattenmaker was a socialist organizer and antiwar GI during the Vietnam War. In the 1970s and '80s he worked as an industrial pipe-fitter and political organizer in an East Coast shipyard. He went on to help organize union workers in a series of high-profile battles — among them the Hormel meatpackers' strike, Eastern Airlines flight attendants' job actions, and the 1996 campaign to reelect progressive leadership in the historically mob-ridden International Brotherhood of Teamsters. In the early 1990s he became Planned Parenthood's national media director and public campaign organizer. He lives in Washington, D.C.



first draft of *Troubled Waters* while working on an ocean-going tugboat in the Pacific.

Tomasini describes the effect of the sea and Pacific Northwest weather on his moods:

"It was a Thursday night in the middle of November. I didn't expect to get many more chances to get out of the boatyard where I moor my boat. The weather gets nasty this time of year and it was a treat to be out on a quiet night, silence all

around me. I could have been with Carol, my friend, companion, and lover, at her place on Decatur Island, but a heavy work day made the trip too much — and we both enjoyed (or needed) some time alone.

"It's different when the wind blows, it jangles my nerves. Whistling wind makes me think about breaking rigging and overstressed planks, sailors choking on wind-driven spray as they cling to a life-ring in icy water. But a calm sea is an antidote to my usual anxieties, especially the most morbid ones."

The Seafarer

Working-class protagonists are rare in the mystery and thriller genre. Police and private investigators, of course, predominate. Some exhibit a degree of class consciousness or have working-class roots. V.I. Warshawski, the P.I. in Sara Paretsky's mysteries, for example.

Tomasini, by contrast, spends his life alternating as a working-class seafarer and a freelance marine surveyor. Murder investigation is not his business.

Carol Bogdanich, Tomasini's lover, gets pulled into the mystery as well. She and Tomasini have deep respect for each other's work and privacy. Stapleton portrays them as closely attuned and yet comfortable creating space for each other — sometimes for extended periods.

We also meet Harlan Brown and Alan Edmunds who become Tomasini's comrades investigating the mystery. Brown and Edmunds are characters drawn as fully as Stapleton draws Bogdanich and Tomasini.

Pulled away from his supper by the radio call, Tomasini runs the Molly B to inspect a boat that had been found abandoned and taking on water. The derelict boat, Sound Avenger, belonged to a wealthy, "self-appoint-

ed eco-crusader," Arthur Middleton.

Middleton, Tomasini tells us, had a reputation among locals as an irritating gadfly with a mission to single-handedly save the waters around the San Juans. Had Middleton fallen overboard, had he been targeted, or had his boat just broken its mooring lines and drifted out to sea?

Concern for Middleton drags Tomasini deeper into the mystery. Middleton's current crusade had centered on a polluting salmon fish farm located on remote Baker Island, near to where the Sound Avenger is found adrift.

Step by step, Tomasini's investigation nudges his interest toward the remote fish farm — and what deeper secret it may be hiding on Baker Island.

Tomasini discovers that whatever the secret is can be dangerous. Looking around Middleton's house for clues, Tomasini is knocked out by an intruder and finds Middleton's files missing when he comes to.

Middleton's rich Seattle brother, Edgar, enters the picture with ties to whatever is happening on Baker Island and to the insurance company that gives Tomasini half of his work.

Through contact with Edmunds, Tomasini learns that Edgar Middleton and other big-money investors developed a furtive hazardous-waste disposal site on Baker Island. Middleton's activist brother, first interested in whether the fish farm was polluting, had discovered hazardous waste leaking out of the site into the seawater surrounding Baker Island. Arthur Middleton was preparing to confront his rich brother and blow the whistle.

Stapleton's conclusion — and the solution to Arthur Middleton's disappearance — reads a bit like a Tom Clancy thriller: The daring raid on Baker Island by Tomasini, Carole, Harlan, and Alan that concludes the mystery is heart-pounding. No spoiler alert but let's just say that the San Juans remain pristine — at least for the moment. ■

THE EDITORS EXPRESS our thanks to Purnima Bose for her important contributions during her service on the *Against the Current* editorial board. Purnima will continue to serve as an active advisory editor of the magazine, as she assumes greater academic and administrative duties at Indiana University. You can find her articles for ATC at <https://againstthe-current.org/purnima-bose/>.

REVIEW

The Labor of Health Care By Ted McTaggart

The Next Shift:

The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America

By Gabriel Winant

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021, 368 pages. \$19.95 paperback.

IN THE SPRING of 2007, I accepted a temporary clerical position at a large, not-for-profit teaching hospital in Michigan. Over the past 17 years, through transitions from temp to permanent employee and from clerk to registered nurse, I have observed firsthand the ways that lean management techniques have degraded working conditions as well as patient care.

While the principles of lean management, originally developed at Toyota, moved from manufacturing to penetrate the health care industry only in the early 21st century (see e.g. MIT business professor Steven J. Spear's 2005 *New York Times* op-ed piece, "The Health Factory," advocating for the application of Toyota principles to the health care industry), the corporatization of health care can be traced back many decades further.

In *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America*, Gabriel Winant makes an important contribution to the history of corporate health care in America.

Taking Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as its backdrop, he shows how organized labor, and in particular the United Steel Workers of America (USWA), helped to build a private welfare state including a health system in which private health insurance companies increasingly set the terms for health care.

While also exploring the interplay of race, gender and class over the decades-long decline of the steel industry in Pittsburgh, Winant's work ends in the 1980s with a bleak vision of an already heavily corporatized health system.

The Steel Mill — An Elemental Force

The steel industry grew in 19th century Pittsburgh due largely to the city's proximity both to Appalachian coalfields and major waterways for transportation. The early 20th century saw a major increase in demand for steel, bringing with it the growth of Pittsburgh's working class.

Due in large part to the USWA's

Ted McTaggart is a registered nurse and trade union activist in Michigan.



demonstrated strike readiness, many of Pittsburgh's workers had by the 1950s attained an unprecedented standard of living. At the same time, working class life was rife with contradictions.

In the first chapter, "Down in the Hole," Winant illustrates the horrors experienced within the steel mills

through a number of worker narratives, from rats stealing workers' sack lunches (it was for this reason that many workers would opt for a metal pail) to death and disfigurement.

"The mill was an elemental force, like a Greek god. . . the mill might take command of your entire life and could cast you aside again easily. It demanded awe and sacrifice and instilled terror and resentment. But in return it yielded a living, and indeed a world, for its people and their city." (26)

But the world the mill offered to Black workers was a much more restricted one, with practically none in skilled trades and, to the extent they were able to find employment in unskilled or semi-skilled roles within the plant, Black men were particularly vulnerable to layoffs when the steel industry experienced an economic downturn in the 1960s.

Writes Winant, "Seniority in the mill accrued within a worker's department rather than plant-wide, meaning that the confinement of African Americans to undesirable departments institutionalized the pattern of who was likely to be hired last and laid off first, as well as who would be exposed to the most dangerous and difficult work." (103)

This marginalization mirrored the conditions faced by the Black community more broadly in the city of Pittsburgh. In the third chapter, "You Are Only Poor if You Have No One to Turn To," Winant makes an in-depth study of the ways in which segregation and institutional racism shaped the working class of Pittsburgh.

Of particular interest in this chapter is the account of the organizing efforts of the Black working class. These forces included the United Negro Protest Committee (UNPC), Welfare Rights Organization of Allegheny

County (WROAC) and Citizens Against Slum Housing (CASH), which fought for equity in housing, social services and employment.

The Black Construction Coalition (BCC), which included members of some of the aforementioned organizations, picketed numerous building sites in 1969 to protest segregation in the building trades, facing police attacks and garnering court injunctions to limit pickets to 20 people.

Black workers' fight for equity and justice stoked a politics of resentment among many U.S.-born and immigrant white workers, many of whom were co-opted into fights to shut down anti-poverty programs that would benefit their own families as well as those of Black workers.

Commodification of Reproductive Labor

Winant uses narratives of working-class life in Pittsburgh to good effect throughout the book, particularly in the second chapter, "Dirty Laundry." The stories of Black and white working-class women illustrate not only the domestic realities of families, but the ways in which the steel industry impacted race and gender and how these, in turn, influenced the post-industrial evolution of Pittsburgh's economy.

The relatively high wages offered by employment in the steel mill led to decreased rates of participation by women in the formal labor market, which in turn bolstered the patriarchal norms of the nuclear family.

Due in large part to the more precarious role of Black men in the steel industry, Black women's rates of participation in wage labor was relatively higher than white women, but still lagged significantly behind the national average. In 1960 the percentage of married African-American women participating in the labor market was 26% compared to 40.7% nationwide; by way of comparison, percentages for married white women was 19.5% in Pittsburgh compared to 29.7% nationwide. (65)

The relatively high wages earned by men allowed women to focus on uncompensated labor in the domestic sphere, including childrearing and care for elderly and sick family members. As employment in the steel industry dried up and the service industry expanded over the course of the 1960s, this reproductive labor was increasingly commodified.

Writes Winant: "This waged care work was related in very concrete, practical terms

to what women did in their own homes: cooking, cleaning, and various forms of care work . . . Black women felt the problem first and had to figure out how to solve it first. Writ large, this meant the increasingly rapid formalization and quantification of reproductive labor, gradually redistributing the responsibility for sustaining life at the collective level.” (74)

The health industry was one of the areas of growth for this commodified reproductive labor. From 1947 until 1974, health care workers had been excluded from the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and were thus barred from union organizing. When, in 1969, the workforce at Pittsburgh’s Mercy Hospital attempted to march on the hospital administrator’s office, they were met with locked doors and a police presence.

Bishop Vincent Leonard of the Pittsburgh Diocese, while paying lip service to workers’ right to organize, “insisted that the ‘over-riding’ concern was the Catholic hospital’s ‘obligation’ of community service. Again and again, hospital administrators warned that workers’ self-assertion posed a threat to their altruistic mission . . . As Chancellor Wesley Posvar of the University of Pittsburgh observed, ‘[Workers’] labors, in effect, have been made a part of the charitable services by hospitals.’” (136)

The labor power of the largely Black, largely woman hospital workforce was framed as a charitable donation to the hospital’s patients and administrators. Despite the commodification of reproductive labor, Black women remained in a status akin to domestic servitude; their efforts to assert their rights on the job and demand fair wages were seen as threats to administrators’ efforts to contain health care costs.

The hospital as an institution “mirrored and extended the racial and gendered patterns of household labor, with its employees locked outside the social citizenship that secured their patients.” (136)

Organized Labor & Private Welfare State

While many labor activists and unions of the 1930s and 1940s had advocated for health care as a nationally guaranteed entitlement, union leaderships began to give up hope for achieving this goal soon after the Second World War.

In the chapter “Doctor New Deal,” Winant illustrates the construction by the USWA of a private welfare state for its members. In compensating for the lack of a national health plan, they charted the growth of Blue Cross/Blue Shield and the modern, private insurance driven health industry as a joint project of labor and capital.

Most of the city’s unionized workforce and burgeoning middle class looked upon this new joint project favorably: “The health care system formed an ongoing workable site

of compromise, a mechanism for channeling income into the metropolitan economy, filling the coffers of well-positioned corporate actors, shoring up the positions of local officeholders, and reproducing the social arrangements of decaying industrial Pittsburgh.”

Nevertheless, Winant notes, “This generally cozy arrangement did not include everyone. Black working-class Pittsburgh . . . could not participate freely in the hospital boom. Many African Americans lacked the health security that their white neighbors enjoyed, and they frequently experienced discrimination and neglect at the hands of the hospitals.” (138)

Uneven access to newly expanded health care resources in turn prompted the advent of Medicare in the 1960s:

“When Congress moved toward Medicare in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was not only a product of direct lobbying by liberals and organized labor but also an indirect result of organized labor’s economic power in the health care market as a whole.

“While it was true that the deepening commitment of organized labor to health security through privately negotiated industrial relations worked to depoliticize unions, labor’s gains still had an enormous, albeit inadvertent, knock-on effect in the growth of public provision. It drove up prices and politicized those who were now priced out — some of whom, the elderly, enjoyed significant moral standing.

“In a context of rising expectations in access, their exclusion constituted a serious political problem. Thus a rough consensus developed by the late 1950s that some form of federal intervention was necessary, even if the actual development of legislation was much more contentious.” (147)

This chapter contains important information and insight into the evolution of the modern health care industry. It is a complex and convoluted history, rife with contradictory realities. While Winant does an admirable job presenting this material, it makes for a far more challenging read than the rest of the book.

Subsequent chapters explore the transformation of Pittsburgh’s labor landscape in the 1970s and 1980s. With the decline of the steel industry in the 1980s, the private welfare state it created fostered a boom in the health industry.

Politicians promoted building of new facilities such as Pittsburgh Children’s Hospital, and prestigious expansions to Presbyterian-University Hospital (PUH) as boons to the local economy, promising well paying jobs in construction and health care.

This expansion increased the participation of women workers in the formal labor market, though access to high paying jobs remained elusive for most. And while some prestigious institutions were able to reap handsome reimbursements for highly

specialized care such as transplants, “marginal institutions dispensed care only to their impoverished local communities” and “now had to ration care for those who needed it and enjoyed only residual welfare state entitlement.” (230)

Rise, Fall & Replacement of Industry

Winant’s work provides an important analysis of the class, race and gender dynamics underlying the rise and decline of two industries — first steel, then health care. His focus on Pittsburgh makes sense in a number of ways, affording a level of detail that a nationwide survey would not have allowed and lending a certain texture to the narratives that make for a much more compelling read.

At the same time, the reader is left to wonder to what extent the particularities of Pittsburgh obscure a broader understanding of this history on a national scale.

Despite any geographical considerations, and the fact that the changes ushered into the health care industry in the 21st century are addressed only in passing in the introduction and epilogue, it is easy to recognize in Winant’s history the beginnings of where we as health care workers and patients find ourselves today. ■

Genocide within “Genocide”

ISRAEL’S DEMAND TO evacuate the remaining hospitals in northern Gaza, and blockade of food and fuel supplies to the population, marks the Netanyahu government’s opening of its “final solution” for the territory.

This is occurring at the same time as Israel’s drive to depopulate southern Lebanon, which includes open attacks on UN peacekeeper bases.

“What is happening in northern Gaza now is a genocide within the genocide,” Palestinian Ambassador Majed Banya, the deputy permanent observer to the UN, wrote on X.

A group of retired Israeli military officers have formulated a “surrender or starve” plan to demand that civilians leave northern Gaza within a week, leaving anyone who remains to be regarded as Hamas militants and subject to starvation.

In an October 14 interview with “Democracy Now,” +972 reporter Meron Rapoport suggests that this very plan is being implemented in practice.

Where Gazans are sheltering on schools and hospital grounds, repeated air strikes are killing dozens every day. As it appears that the population is refusing to evacuate, knowing that they would likely never be able to return, the potential extermination of several hundred thousand people in northern Gaza is a real possibility, with the full complicity of the United States. ■

Ellen Spence Poteet, 1960-2024 By Alan Wald

ELLEN SPENCE POTEET, a former editor of *Against the Current* (ATC) and member of Solidarity, died at age 64 of an unknown illness in early April 2023 in the town of Batouri in the East Region of Cameroon. At the time, Ellen was on leave from her position as Lecturer in the History Department of the University of Michigan (U-M), planning to return to Ann Arbor in August.

That month she had planned, with editor Dianne Feeley, to complete a commissioned ATC article about the South African revolutionary Neville Alexander (1936-2012), whom she had long admired.

For much of the previous year Ellen had been teaching English and French four hours a day in a prison holding 400 men, without indoor plumbing or electricity. Her death occurred while she slept at the Jesuit Relief Service house in the Muslim quarter. According to her wishes, she was buried in Batouri.

From the time I met Ellen around 1990, she was a daunting role model for socialist activists and Marxist intellectuals. For starters, she was a natural polymath on many topics — including ancient history, the Greek and Latin Classics, Soviet Communism, racism, Eurocentrism, African politics, and pastoral culture, and she knew both ancient and modern languages.

But I was especially taken by her coolly thoughtful analytical prowess, a kind of compulsive brilliance of a rare sort.

All this was a product of an unusual background. She was raised in New Orleans, an only child especially close to her father. Ewing McLaughlin Poteet, a violinist and music critic, had been a teenage prodigy who toured the country in the 1920s and then studied at the Julliard School in New York.

From 1949 until 1957 he was the music critic and theatrical reviewer for the *New Orleans Item*. Subsequently he served as concertmaster in many cities — Cleveland, St. Louis, Chicago — and taught at Newcomb College and Loyola University. Ewing Poteet was also an anti-racist radical and friendly with several activists in and around the Communist Party.

Among those who continued to remain close to Ellen after Ewing's death in 1984, were Herman and Betty Liveright, best-

known for founding the radical Berkshire Forum in Stephentown, New York. Herman was the son of the avant-garde publisher Horace B. Liveright, and a former Communist indicted for Contempt of Congress when he refused to answer questions from Senator Eastland's subcommittee on internal security.

Another close friend was the radical novelist and civil rights militant Alfred Maund, who was married to a Communist and collaborated with Trotskyists and others. Ellen arranged for me to interview the Liverights about their experiences, and to work with Maund in republishing one of his books in a University of Illinois Press series that I was editing.¹

Education and Activism

Ellen studied ballet as a teenager and attended both the Ursuline Academy and Isidore Newman School in New Orleans. She then graduated with a BA in History from Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania.

After that she lived in New York City for several years where she was employed by the New York Public Research Group, an environmental organization, and had a connection with the Labor Research Association, a long-time labor statistics bureau associated with the Communist movement.

She came to U-M in the late 1980s and completed a History Department dissertation in Ancient Mediterranean History in 1998 called "The Apostolic Tracks of Christian Controversy in the Lives of Athanasius, Jerome, and Rufinus, 325 to 411 A.D." The topic was the lives of the holy men and women of the ancient Christian Church.

For some years Ellen taught at Muhlenberg

College in Pennsylvania, but in 2006 she returned to the U-M as a lecturer, well-known for riding her red bicycle all over town.

During her time at U-M she taught an astonishingly wide range of courses, including ancient and medieval Africa (History 246), nomads in the modern world (History 230), and African revolutionaries in the 20th century (History 496).

Between 2006 and 2013 she provided no less than 20 different classes for the department. Her dedication as a teacher was deeply appreciated by her students, and in 2018 the Department's majors presented her with the Undergraduate Teaching Award, a prize that is entirely overseen by students.

Since her appointment at U-M, Ellen — on six occasions — had taken a year away from teaching and traveled to Cameroon, where she volunteered as a teacher of English and French at three different prisons for men



After teaching in the men's prison in Batouri, Ellen Poteet enjoying relaxing with the neighborhood children.

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

and children. This work was done without compensation and without recognition from the U-M. She told Dianne Feeley that she had found “a strange sense of belonging in the prison.”²

I recall that her political activities as a graduate student embraced every radical cause on campus: labor support, Latin America solidarity, divestment from South Africa, anti-racism, nuclear disarmament, protests against the Gulf War, graduate student union organizing, academic freedom, socialist education, and much more.

At one point she was meeting weekly with a graduate student in English to go carefully through each chapter of *Das Kapital* using the writings of Hal Draper as a guide.

As an active editor for ATC she planned many issues and contributed a series of brilliant essays on difficult topics: a review of Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena*, a critique of

Samir Amir’s *Eurocentrism*, a commentary on the collapse of the Soviet Union, and an analysis of *White on Black: Blacks in Western Popular Culture* are all online at the ATC website.

In regard to her projected work on Neville Alexander, she wrote that “Alexander is for me one of the most trenchant intellectuals and true revolutionaries of the last several decades....If he had not died when he did, I would have done everything in my power to meet him.”³

In another message she explained an added part of her attraction to certain South African revolutionaries:

“Chris Hani, for whom I have the profoundest admiration, was a fine Latinist, and said in an interview, not so long before he was assassinated, that he hoped to have the time to return to Tacitus — who helped him think about revolution. And Neville Alexander... (a friend of

[Ernest] Mandel), said in an interview that if he had not begun with Latin or Greek instead of German, he would probably have gone the route of classics — without forgoing his dedication to revolutionary socialism.”⁴

Ellen was not an electrifying speaker, but she was always engaging and articulate, brainy with a sweet laugh and a memorably sly smile. In fact, she had a very dry sense of humor, serious in an impish way as she contemplated ethical quandaries with great nuance.

If the word “socialist commitment” has any meaning in the confusing world of the present, it can surely be found in Ellen’s far too short but morally incandescent life. ■

Notes

1. See Jessica Printz Kimball’s review of *The Big Boxcar*: <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc085/p1684/>
2. Ellen Poteet email to Dianne Feeley, 13 January 2024.
3. Ellen Poteet email to Wald, 15 May 2021.
4. Ellen Poteet email to Wald, 22 April 2021.

Emancipation from Racism — continued from page 36

Her father spent time in a Russian prisoner of war camp before leaving Crete, possibly escaping, and returning to his hometown shortly before the expulsion. Rather than confront the truth about Nazism after the war, he wrapped himself tightly in its ideology. The author wondered if it might have been different had her father stayed in Germany, where his generation underwent a process of reckoning with this ugly period of history.

Finding Compassion

When the author visited her sister Marianne a year after her trip, the two sorted through bins of old papers and family memorabilia. They discovered that their mother had worked for Organisation Todt, a construction company that administered the concentration camps from 1943-1945. She wondered if her mother even thought about the people behind the cataloging as she worked away at her typewriter. But their mother had never glorified the Nazis in the way her father had.

After years of feeling horror, anger and shame about her father’s past and through her journey to know and understand him better, the author was able to recover “what was good in my father” and to view him with compassion.

While not absolving him, she draws an important lesson for today: *In times of economic crisis, ordinary people much like her father are being drawn in by the same simplistic answers, scapegoating and hatred as he was.*

“Although conditions are not the same today as they were in the 1920’s and 1930’s, the multilayered, unpredictable economic, political and ecological crises that we face are creating ideal conditions for the far right to grow again — to an even greater extent than in my father’s day.” (205).

We are seeing the rise of the far right in Italy, France, Germany and India. In the United States, Trump has blamed immigrants and people of color for the hardships faced by the supposedly “hardworking” Americans.

But a replay of Nazi Germany is not inevitable. The author believes that it is important not to remain silent when faced with racist hatred. She sees hope in the movements like Black Lives Matter, youth movements to address the climate crisis, and the recognition in Canada of the brutal legacy of residential schools for Indigenous children.

Unfortunately Barbara Leimsner was not able to discover more specifics about her father’s experience and had to rely fairly heavily on the historical record. It is unclear to what extent that was a disappointment to the author, but one can imagine that it must have been. Certainly Barbara Leimsner’s account opens a window onto the broader issue of white supremacy and how it can be overcome.

Learning About White Supremacists

From people who have been drawn in and subsequently rejected white supremacy and from those who have studied this phenomenon, there are characteristics of those who embrace hate as an answer to society’s problems. They are looking for belonging or acceptance. They are angry over an injustice, real or perceived. They are experiencing personal or financial struggles.

Extremists target people that fall into these categories because they can more easily be manipulated into believing that another group is at fault for their problems.

Life After Hate is a project that works with former white supremacists to help them disengage from hate groups. Arguing with white supremacists is counterproductive and

simply furthers their sense that the world is against them. Only once shown compassion and understanding are they able to see humanity in others. Mentoring from other former white supremacists and various forms of counseling have proven effective.

Christian Picciolini, a former racist skinhead and member of Life After Hate and other disengagement projects, says the following in response to what parents can do to prevent their children from being drawn to extremist hate groups:

“And certainly because I am a former extremist, I have a certain credibility talking with people who are still extremists, but I think all parents, all psychologists, all teachers, can do what I do. It really is just identifying vulnerable young people and then amplifying their passions [and] trying to fill those voids in their life, because I’ve never met a happy white supremacist. I’ve never met one with positive self-esteem. Everybody in these movements are there because they are broken to a certain degree and they’re looking to project their pain onto somebody else. And I just see my job as kind of a bridge builder to the services that they need, and that’s not making excuses for them. I still hold people accountable in many of the same ways I’ve held myself accountable for 23 years.” (NPR, “Here and Now,” August 9, 2019)

The extent to which the author’s father might fit into the profile described above remains opaque. Is it different when an entire society is swept up in a hateful ideology?

Without the author’s inability to locate the exact turning points in her father’s life, nevertheless Leimsner has woven a fascinating and accessible story. *Quitting the Master Race* is a book with a powerful message, particularly at this moment in time. It’s no surprise that it is being read in book clubs all over the United States and Canada. ■

hole in the strategic capacity and fearsome image of what's called the "axis of resistance." This "axis" included Hezbollah and the Houthi movement in Yemen, as well as forces allied to Iran inside Iraq.

Contrary to rightwing and Israeli propaganda, these forces are not puppets responding to Iran's orders. They are actors with their local interests and initiative — and despite their rhetoric and the illusions of some activists, Palestinian freedom is not the top of their respective agendas. But they — especially Hezbollah — are or at least had been a kind of insurance policy for Iran against the threat of a direct Israeli-U.S. attack.

As that shield is severely weakened if it still exists, the Iranian rulers, already facing a very weak economy and openly at war with their own population, may be forced to pursue closer protective relations with Russia and China.

Attacking Iran has potential implications for other conflicts, including Russia's annexationist invasion of Ukraine which the Iranian regime has supported, that are difficult to predict. U.S. imperialism is inextricably front and center in these events, whatever the verbal postures of the Biden team to "prevent a wider war" may have been.

The transition period between the November 5 election and the January 20 presidential inauguration could be even more ominous globally as well as at home. In the end, "Genocide Joe" Biden's presidential legacy is the destruction of Gaza and the new Middle East catastrophe. Whether it also includes the return of Donald Trump is to be determined.

Political System in Decay...

3) *On the home front, whatever the ultimate result, the U.S. electoral cycle has revealed the stench of decay in the country's supposedly sacred institutions.* It's not just that the system of elections is vulnerable to voter suppression and manipulation, in ways we sketched at the outset and more.

What were supposed to be safeguards of "stability," if not democracy — the absurdly unrepresentative Senate, the autonomous powers assigned to the states, the supposedly above-partisanship of a Supreme Court whose nearly uncontrollable majority is now both white-supremacist and semi-monarchist — are now enablers of instability and potential chaos.

More than that, the elimination of any meaningful campaign finance regulation in our politics has turned the twin Republican and Democratic parties into money-vacuuming apparatuses. There is no accountability to anyone but the corporate powers and megadonors (let alone the parties' nonexistent "memberships"). That domination in turn makes the capitalist parties, and the political system, largely impervious to the popular will or the massive crises that affect the society.

A partial counterweight is available in the form of ballot initiatives in some states, notably right now as a vehicle for defending reproductive and abortion rights against the vicious attacks from the right wing. Women's right to abortion of course is a central and critical issue on which the Democrats hope to cling to the presidency.

But fundamental issues that should be at the core of political discussion are ignored: We've repeatedly emphasized that the obscene inequalities of wealth and opportunity in the United States are at the heart of the stresses afflicting

millions of Americans from inflation, poor access to medical care, miserable housing and working conditions.

Because neither capitalist party addresses the core issues and consequences of inequality, their quarrels about economic policy are mainly empty noise, or in Donald Trump's case about the health care crisis, "concepts."

Within the next few years, the United States along with the whole world will confront climate-change disasters of magnitudes we can barely imagine now. The incredible devastation in southern states wrought by Hurricane Helene, hundreds of miles inland from landfall and estimated at \$100 billion or more even before Milton hit Florida, is just a foretaste. The Amazon rainforest is drying and burning throughout South America, from Brazil to Ecuador to Colombia.

...While Struggle Continues

4) *The left in the United States does not meaningfully affect electoral outcomes, but more importantly social movements and working-class struggles have not taken a break for the long election season.* Although the east coast longshore strike won a huge wage increase, it is suspended until mid-January with talks continuing over automation. After a five-week strike Boeing mechanics voted down a contract with a 34% wage increase over four years because it failed to restore pensions. Meanwhile the United Auto Workers threaten to strike Stellantis over the company's failure to implement provisions of the historic contract that the union won last year.

No matter how the election turns out, campus and community movements in support of Palestine will persist with renewed energy, especially with Israel's escalating invasion of Lebanon. University administrations, pressured by donors and congressional committees, have embarked on punitive and repressive campaigns against pro-Palestinian students and faculty that threaten the very foundations of campus speech and academic freedom.

At the same time, there are initiatives within unions and city councils for Palestinian rights. These call for divestment from Israeli-linked corporations and arms suppliers, demand a U.S. arms embargo, and support the resolution initiated by Bernie Sanders in the Senate to block the Biden administration's new \$20 billion weapons transfer to Israel. Here is where leftwing activism can play a significant role.

An open question is whether a significant opening for independent politics — the Green Party in particular — can emerge from progressive revulsion over "Genocide Joe" Biden's role in the Middle East slaughter and broader disaffection from the capitalist parties' destructive duopoly. It's important to note that the Green Party runs campaigns not only in top-level national elections but also in local races, with some significant impact.

Right now, none of the left forces in the electoral field have anything like a mass base, but each speaks to different sectors looking for political alternatives. One urgent task is to continue finding common grounds among movements toward building a serious, genuine political alternative that can reach out to broader popular sectors in the electoral sphere. That prospect is by no means quick or easy, but beyond November 5 and in the period to come will be part of urgent ongoing discussions. As always, building the movements of resistance — whether under Trump or Harris — remains central. ■

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