

Shui-yin Sharon Yam on Fighting for Reproductive Justice

#220 • SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2022 • \$5

A SOCIALIST JOURNAL

# AGAINST THE CURRENT



## Money, Power and Popular Struggles

◆ DANIEL JOHNSON

## Inflation Today

◆ SUZI WEISSMAN INTERVIEWS ROBERT BRENNER

## Bill Gates' Nuclear Delusions

◆ M.V. RAMANA AND CASSANDRA JEFFERY

## It's All Out in the Open

◆ THE ATC EDITORS



8 96930 0000 1

# A Letter from the Editors

## It's All Out in the Open

EVERYONE KNEW IT was coming: the unhinged Alito Supreme Court ruling that trashed a half-century of Constitutional abortion rights was leaked on May 2, seven weeks ahead of time. The grassroots reproductive rights movement began mobilizing immediately to confront the crisis — from outraged street protests, to expanding clinics to meet the desperate needs of interstate traveling patients, to mobilizing for a sweeping reproductive rights state constitutional amendment in Michigan.

On August 2, to be sure, voters in Kansas delivered their own verdict — not just affirming abortion rights in their state constitution, but possibly transforming the political calculus of the coming midterms. Women's right to abortion, critically important in its own right, has taken center stage in the fight for democracy in the United States.

Yet during those critical weeks the Biden administration sat on its hands, nearly paralyzed and apparently uncomprehending that such a thing could even happen. Very late — finally responding to swelling outrage over the administration's inertia — Biden announced the federal government's verbal support for women's right to travel for abortion and access to pills through the mail, and for medically essential procedures to proceed in hospitals receiving federal funds. What these promises might mean remains unclear in the chaos erupting within and between states, in the wake of the Court's obscenity.

The right wing for its part was already preparing whole packages of bans against abortion procedures, medication prescriptions, telemedicine and travel in states they control, to go into force immediately. The Democratic-majority House of Representatives legislation to protect abortion rights has no chance of passing a filibuster-clogged Senate.

It is difficult to overstate the scope of the looming political crisis that the Roe overturn throws into sharp relief, but extends much further. Strikingly, *none of this is obscure anymore.*

The decentralization of governmental authority in the United States, with so much vested in state legislatures, along with the political monopoly of the two capitalist parties, all of which contributed to systemic political stability, are now factors of destabilization and potential chaos. This is especially acute with the mutation of the Republican Party from elite-driven conservatism to a far-right Christian-nationalist-dominated cult, determined to seize levels of power to create one-party minority rule.

The crisis, with its distinct made-in-America flavor — notably the peculiar dysfunction of institutions like the unrepresentative Senate and the bizarre Electoral College, to say nothing of the power of the uniquely barbaric U.S. assault-weapons-worshipping cult — is also part of a global authoritarian phenomenon. That's illustrated by the right wing's open embrace of Hungary's Viktor Orban, Israel's ethno-supremacist state doctrine, and even Vladimir Putin.

While mainstream, liberal and elite media are consumed with coverage of the Republican Party run amok and the "assault on our democracy," one critical point remains severely under-covered: Overstuffed with its record-shattering profits and indifferent to the obscene inequalities choking the society, the corporate U.S. ruling class appears unwilling or unable to confront the potential collapse of constitutional "stability" that served it so well for so long.

It will be up to popular movements on the ground in defense of reproductive, voting and basic human rights, along with the common sense of the majority of the population, to turn back a slide toward the abyss. In the forefront, as already noted, are the abortion and reproductive rights

movement's multi-level mobilizations.

Examples include the Michigan state constitutional amendment for expanded reproductive justice to be on the November ballot; fundraising for travel expenses and protection for pregnant people needing to cross state lines for abortion care; placement of clinics where abortion is legal near the borders of states where it's not; making sure that abortion pills are available; county prosecutors proclaiming they will not prosecute patients or abortion providers; even visionary planning for a reproductive health ship in the Gulf of Mexico to serve the needs of patients from abortion-banning states.

These responses demonstrate a movement that's prepared to delegitimize, discredit, disrespect and where necessary defy the disgusting dictates from the Supreme Court or state governments. *At the very minimum, the federal government must fully guarantee the availability of postal services and the right to travel, over which it has jurisdiction.*

### Apocalypse Foretold

Our main topic in what follows is the broader systemic multi-pronged assault on democracy, on workers' as well as women's and LGBT rights, on the separation of religion and government, on racial justice and basic human decency.

One notable blind spot in the 24-hour media coverage: *near-total blackout of the Biden administration's pressure to extradite Julian Assange from Britain for "espionage" over Wikileaks' exposure of monstrous U.S. war crimes in bombing Iraqi civilians.*

This blatant assault on journalism, inherited and continued by the present administration from the Trump gang, makes a mockery of Biden's pretence of defending the First Amendment — yet ordinary consumers of network news of any political stripe would barely know it.

Still, when it comes to Republican and especially Trump-driven actions and the threats they pose, the coverage in liberal and mainstream media is lavish and thorough. Some leading examples:

- The House Select Committee investigation of the January 6, 2021 riot and invasion of the Capitol, with details of the depth and breadth of Trump's criminal conspiracy to overturn the election, including the plot's months-long active engagement with violent white-supremacist networks.

- Intimidation and terrorist threats against county election officials. Along with far-right power grabs at state and county levels to capture the levers of vote-counting and certification authority, these tactics could throw the routine certification of election results into chaos.

- State voter-suppression restrictions on early voting,  
continued on the inside back cover

### Editors

Purnima Bose  
 Robert Brenner  
 Dianne Feeley  
 David Finkel  
 Adam Hefty  
 Ursula McTaggart  
 Alan Wald  
 Susan Weissman  
 Charles Williams

### Advisory Editors

Sara Abraham  
 Gilbert Achcar  
 Delia D. Aguilar  
 Manuel Aguilar-Mora  
 Perry Anderson  
 Rafael Bernabe  
 Melba Joyce Boyd  
 Johanna Brenner  
 Noam Chomsky  
 Mike Davis  
 Peter Drucker  
 Terry Eagleton  
 Sam Farber  
 Ansar Fayyazuddin  
 Ann Ferguson  
 Milton Fisk  
 Cecilia Green  
 Adolfo Gilly  
 Nancy Holmstrom  
 Kim D. Hunter  
 Alison Jaggard  
 James Kavanagh  
 Robin D.G. Kelley  
 Michael Löwy  
 Stephanie Luce  
 Malik Miah  
 Valentine M. Moghadam  
 Bayla Ostrach  
 Paul Prescott  
 Nomi Prins  
 Joanne Rappaport  
 Allen Ruff  
 Marsha Rummel  
 Abra Quinn  
 David Roediger  
 Anwar Shaikh  
 Jane Slaughter  
 Tony Smith  
 Tim Schermerhorn  
 Hillel Ticktin  
 Heather Ann Thompson  
 Julia Wrigley

# AGAINST THE CURRENT

September / October 2022 — Volume XXXVII, Number 4



Locked out Mexican journalist, Adriana Urrea, discusses her case at 2022 Labor Notes conference. [jimwestphoto.com](http://jimwestphoto.com).

## 2 Fighting for Reproductive Justice

Shui-yin Sharon Yam

## 4 California Reparations

Malik Miah

## 7 2022 Labor Notes Conference

Dianne Feeley

## 9 On Techno-fix Delusions

M.V. Ramana and Cassandra Jeffery

## 13 The Fight Over Inflation

Suzi Weissman interviews  
 Robert Brenner

## 14 UAW: Change in the Wind

Dianne Feeley

## 16 "Guilty of Genocide"

Steve Bloom

## 17 Philippines: Continuity of Violence

Alex de Jong

## 20 "Can I at Least Have My Scarf?"

Anan Ameri

## 22 Echos of Money in Times Past

Daniel Johnson

## Reviews

### 27 The War Upon Us

Jerry Harris

### 29 Texas: Darkness Before Dawn

Joshua DeVries

### 31 New Veterans, New & Old Problem

Ron Citkowski

### 33 Anan Ameri, Life & Community

Dalia Gomaa

### 34 Joe Burns' Class Struggle Unionism

Marian Swerdlow

### 38 Radical Memories

Paul Buhle

## In Memoriam

### 40 Alain Krivine, 1941-2022

John Barzman

### 42 A Tribute to Xiang Qing

Au Loong-yu

### 44 Leo Frumkin, 1928-2022

Sherry Frumkin

*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.

Copyright © 2022 by *Against the Current* (ISSN 0739-4853) Published bimonthly by the Center for Changes, 7012 Michigan Avenue, Detroit, MI 48210. Phone (313) 841-0160. Email: [cfc@igc.org](mailto:cfc@igc.org); web page address: <https://againstthecurrent.org>. Periodicals postage paid at Detroit, MI. Postmaster: Send address changes to *ATC*, 7012 Michigan Avenue, Detroit, MI 48210. Subscriptions \$30 a year; \$50 for two years; \$35 a year supporting subscription, \$35 a year institutional. *Against the Current* is indexed by the Alternative Press Index. Manuscripts are welcome; please send articles in text format to our email address. To become a distributor of *ATC*, tell us how many copies to send you. We give a 40% discount on standing orders of 3 or more copies.

## Beyond Choice: Fighting for Reproductive Justice

By Shui-yin Sharon Yam

SINCE THE DRAFT Supreme Court judgment to overturn *Roe v. Wade* was leaked, reproductive rights activists have been rallying around legal access to safe abortion. The official release on June 24, of course, unleashed explosive struggles now erupting between, as well as within, states and cities.

In mainstream public discourse, the controversy surrounding abortion care is often simplified into binaries: “pro-choice” or “pro-life.” Both those terms, however, are misnomers that obscure the fight towards a more expansive and intersectional vision of reproductive justice. The official overturn of *Roe v. Wade* creates a rupture — one that reproductive justice activists can and must harness to shape the future of bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom for all.

As debates and advocacy around abortion access and reproductive care more broadly intensifies, it is important for us, now more than ever, to sharpen the language we use to describe the ideological contour of reproductive politics, and the vision we are fighting for.

### Limitations of Choice

While *Roe v. Wade* has allowed many people to access legal abortion, the ruling has always been based on the concept of *individual choice*, rather than *rights* or *justice*. To put differently, *Roe* legalized abortion on the basis that as a reproductive decision, it belongs to the individual’s “zone of privacy,” where the government cannot intrude upon.

The choice paradigm has been widely criticized by feminist scholars and reproductive justice activists as sorely insufficient.

Predicated on an individualist, consumerist and capitalist framework, only those who already have access to resources can engage in free choice. In other words, the pro-choice framework and language fails to

consider the hardships that marginalized people — such as poor women of color — experience as they seek abortion care.

It is important to remember that the choice paradigm has not always been the defining framework for abortion rights advocates.

Historian Rickie Solinger points out that in the late 1960s to early 1970s, advocates for legal abortion largely used the term *rights* to describe access to safe abortion. But in order to make the movement more palatable to the mainstream public, advocates began deploying the language of *choice* that was more aligned with the dominant capitalist discourse on individual consumption and decision.

Furthermore, some pro-choice strategists chose to focus on abortion as a negative, rather than positive right: in other words, as an act that should be free from government interference, but not as one that warrants active support and resources from the state.

This strategy created situations in which marginalized individuals have difficulties finding abortion providers and clinics that are easily accessible.

While an argument that focuses on freedom from government interference was useful in garnering the support of libertarian voters who sought to protect their privacy from “big government,” it significantly limited the scope of the abortion rights movement.

First, the same libertarian argument can be used to justify anti-abortion policies, such as the Hyde Amendment that denies federal funding for abortion services. Second, freedom from interference in a capitalist market does not guarantee equal access to safe abortion for all.

As Solinger argues in *Beggars and Choosers*, only middle-class white women, who are deemed legitimate by the state and the public, have the right to choose. In a *New York Times* opinion column Monica Simpson,



“To be pro-choice, you must have the privilege of having choices.” — Monica Simpson, executive director, SisterSong

the executive director of SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, penned, “To be pro-choice, you must have the privilege of having choices.”

Indeed, many reproductive justice activists and scholars have pointed out that poor women of color and trans people are not granted the same reproductive choices, because many of them lack access to appropriate healthcare. Even while *Roe* was in place, increased legal restrictions on abortion and the Hyde Amendment made it

extremely difficult for marginalized people to afford and access legal abortion.

The pro-choice framework, in other words, fails to consider the lives of marginalized people who do not have resources to exercise choice the same way middle-upper class cis white women do.

By individualizing abortion access as a consumerist choice that should be free from government interference, the pro-choice framework and language obscures intersecting patterns of injustices. As reproductive justice activists, such as Loretta Ross, have repeatedly observed, one’s reproductive decision to have or not have children is always embedded within a complex web of political and social power dynamics.

While a choice discourse focuses only on whether one has the *choice* to access abortion to discontinue a pregnancy, a reproductive justice framework is concerned with a more expansive set of questions:

Can the pregnant person afford and access abortion care that is affirming? Is the pregnant person seeking abortion because they otherwise would not have the resources to raise the child?

If so, what social services and resources does this person need in order to have the child and parent in a safe environment? Does the pregnant person and their community have access to non-coercive contraceptives and comprehensive sex education?

If the person cannot access abortion, what health risks will they experience during

---

*Shui-yin Sharon Yam is an Associate Professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies at the University of Kentucky. She is the author of Inconvenient Strangers: Transnational Subjects and the Politics of Citizenship. An earlier version of this article, written before the June 24 official Supreme Court ruling, was posted online at <https://againstthecurrent.org>. Hyperlinks are provided in the online posting of this article.*

pregnancy and birth, especially given the horrendous racial disparities in maternal health outcome in the United States? Put simply, the choice paradigm is sorely insufficient in addressing the sociopolitical webs that lead to systemic reproductive injustice.

### Whose Life is Protected?

Despite *Roe v. Wade*'s insufficiency in protecting people's right to abortion, its overturn only compounds existing injustices and marginalization.

Reproductive justice scholars and activists warned in advance that with *Roe* struck down, poor people of color would be hit the hardest as they are most likely to face criminalization, financial barriers, and negative health outcomes under the current system.

Hence, at this critical juncture we can no longer be satisfied by the limiting pro-choice narrative. Rather, we must organize through a reproductive justice framework that sees reproductive oppression as "the result of the intersection of multiple oppressions" (Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 69).

Even before *Roe* was overturned, many states already passed restrictive laws on abortion — most notoriously S.B. 8 in Texas, which bans abortions in almost all circumstances, and criminalizes anyone who "aids or abets" in the performance of a prohibited abortion.

In addition to abortion bans, some states have also criminalized pregnancy outcomes through feticide laws: pregnant people, most of them women of color, have been charged for mental illness, addiction, and accidents (including accidentally falling down the stairs, and being shot in the stomach) which resulted in a miscarriage.

While proponents of these policies often claim to be pro-life, this label eclipses the lives of many marginalized people who are harmed by the criminalization of abortion.

Attuned to the intersectionality of oppressions, identities and power relations, *reproductive justice* is a coalitional framework that demands activists to organize with different social justice movements to achieve bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom for all.

Seen through the expansive lens of reproductive justice, issues such as mass incarceration, criminalization and systemic racism are all key contributing factors of reproductive injustice.

In addition to the right not to have children, reproductive justice activists also fight for people's right to have children, and the right to parent in a safe environment.

In addition to abortion access, hence, the criminalization and incarceration of people of color under abortion bans is also an urgent matter of reproductive justice.

Due to social injustices — such as poverty, lack of access to reproductive healthcare

and education, and sexual violence — the abortion rate for Black women is about five times that for white women, and 60% of people obtaining abortions are people of color.

Rather than providing needed resources and support to prevent unwanted pregnancies among communities of color, abortion bans criminalize individuals who are often already deemed delinquent or sexually deviant. Past studies have already shown that increased criminalization tends to disproportionately affect people of color.

With *Roe* overturned, abortion becomes illegal in many states that have a high proportion of people of color who seek abortions. In other words, it will inevitably lead to the criminalization and incarceration of poor women and people of color.

Reproductive justice scholars have argued that incarceration and criminalization is a key driver of reproductive oppression, because incarcerated people do not possess bodily autonomy and cannot exercise their right to have children. The U.S. criminal justice system has had a long history of deploying coercive contraception and sterilization on incarcerated people.

Since poor Black and brown people are disproportionately incarcerated, this sordid practice perpetuates racist eugenic logics. Forced sterilization has also been perpetrated on marginalized groups such as low-income Black and brown women, detained immigrants, and disabled people — people who are considered "unfit" or "undesirable" for reproducing.

Criminalization and the prison industrial complex, hence, cannot be separated from reproductive injustice. The connection between reproductive injustice and the criminal justice system does not fit into the pro-choice framework, as it reveals that reproductive decisions are not the matter of individual choice, but rather of systemic and political injustice.

Only through the more expansive and intersectional lens of reproductive justice can we see the need to build coalitions across the prison abolition movement and the movement for abortion rights.

Abolitionists have argued that the prison industrial complex and criminalization lead to social death as incarcerated people — particularly people of color — lose their civil liberties, political rights, and bodily autonomy.

Ironically, under the "pro-life" banner are many marginalized people and communities who are facing imminent persecution and social death. By demanding criminal justice interventions in reproductive issues, "pro-life" advocates make clear that they do not see the lives of marginalized people of color as worthy of protection.

As Andrea Smith points out, the "pro-life"

position does not so much express a commitment to life, "but rather a commitment to criminal justice interventions in reproductive justice issues." ("Beyond Pro-Choice versus Pro-Life: Women of Color and Reproductive Justice," *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Spring, 2005, 123). Through the intersectional lens of the reproductive justice framework, we can more clearly articulate the incongruence and contradictions in the "pro-life" position. Beyond the criminalization of abortions and miscarriages, "pro-life" arguments also omit the fact that carrying a pregnancy to term and birthing a child is statistically much riskier than terminating a pregnancy.

Due to obstetric racism, Black women, even after controlling for social class and education level, are still three to five times more likely to die in childbirth than white women. By forcing people to give birth, abortion bans and the overturning of *Roe* renders the life of Black women disposable.

### Towards Reproductive Freedom for All

The leaked Supreme Court judgment on *Roe* galvanized the public to protect the right to legal abortion. As reproductive justice activists, however, we should not stop short of organizing a more expansive, inclusive, and intersectional movement. The "pro-choice" vs. "pro-life" framework and language is not only reductive, but actively harmful to marginalized people of color, whose experiences are often not considered by either side.

The reproductive justice framework allows for a more cogent analysis and articulation of how different sociopolitical issues contribute to reproductive injustice. Now more than ever, we need an organizing framework that promotes coalition building because abortion access — and reproductive freedom more broadly — cannot be separated from other political forces that render lives unlivable for so many. ■

### A Few Resources

The majority of abortions are now medical procedures that can be safely self-administered in the first 10-12 weeks of pregnancy. Legislatures in 14 states have so far criminalized these self-abortions but the information is out there.

#### 1. Using Pills for self-induced abortion/telemedicine

Aid Access website:

<https://aidaccess.org/en/>

Plan C website:

<https://www.plancpills.org>

#### 2. Funding for abortion:

National Network of Abortion Funds:

<https://abortionfunds.org>  
800-772-9100

#### 3. Information on abortion:

Reproductive Health Access Project:

<https://www.reproductiveaccess.org/>

# Historic Report on a Racist Legacy: California's Reparations Task Force

By Malik Miah

*"AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AT all levels, including in California, has historically criminalized African Americans for the purposes of social control, and to maintain an economy based on exploited Black labor.*

*"This criminalization is an enduring badge of slavery and has contributed to the over-policing of Black neighborhoods, the school to prison pipeline, the mass incarceration of African Americans, a refusal to accept African Americans as victims, and other inequities in nearly every corner of the American and California legal systems.*

*"As a result, the American and California criminal justice system physically harms, imprisons, and kills African Americans more than other racial groups relative to their percentage of the population."*

(From a succinct conclusion under the section "Key Findings" of California's Task Force to Study and Develop Reparations Proposals for African Americans.)

REPARATIONS HAS BECOME a topic of debate in the most populous state. It reveals how the national oppression of Black people was widespread (legally and in practice) throughout California from north to south.

The issue of reparations is important for the entire country. The slave trade and slavery was the most powerful economic driver not only in the slaveholding states, but in the development of capitalism in the United States. Those laborers — African enslaved people and their descendants — who were the backbone have never been compensated for it.

## Task Force Created

A task force on whether reparations should be paid was created by the California State Assembly in September 2020 (Assembly Bill 3121). It turns out that this was no academic study to discuss past history.

Instead, the report explains how ongoing institutional and structural racism penetrated California, even though it was not a slave-owning state.

Across California, including major cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles, segregation and institutional racism exist — not just towards Black people but also Chinese, oth-

*Malik Miah is an ATC columnist and advisory editor.*



California Reparations Task Force: Lisa Holder, Rev. Amos Brown, Don Tamaki, Dr. Cheryl Grills, Dr. Jovan Scott Lewis. California Black Media

er Asians, Mexican and other Latinos, Native tribes, and other discriminated against and oppressed people of color.

The task force, however, by Assembly decision did not discuss the historic racism directed at the full range of oppressed minorities in the state. Its focus was the African American community and why reparations must be considered.

## Powerful Accusation, Call for Action

The 492-page interim report is a powerful document. The final report is due be published before July 2023 with its recommendations for action.

The depth of the report is reflected in its subsections: Enslavement, Racial Terror, Political Disenfranchisement, Housing Segregation, Separate and Unequal Education, Racism in Environment and Infrastructure, Pathologizing the Black Family, Control Over Creative Cultural and Intellectual Life, Stolen Labor and Hindered Opportunity, An Unjust Legal System, Mental and Physical Harm and Neglect, and The Wealth Gap.

Each section details the national practices of racial discrimination and then follows with what California did. Thus an analysis of the U.S. wealth gap shows white families nationwide owning nine times what Black families do — while in a 2014 study, the average Black household in California owned \$200 in assets compared to white households owning \$110,000.

The Executive Summary explains objec-

tives of the task force:

*"This interim report is a general survey of these harms, as part of the broader efforts of California's Task Force... The law charges the Reparations Task Force with studying the institution of slavery and its lingering negative effects on society and living African Americans.*

*"The law requires the Reparations Task Force to recommend appropriate remedies of compensation, rehabilitation, and restitution for African Americans with a special consideration for descendants of persons enslaved in the United States." (Read the full interim report at <https://oag.ca.gov/ab3121/reports>.)*

## Long History of Discrimination

The interim report does not list what compensation should be made to descendants of slaves. It does list obvious ways to do so, options that the public and legislature must debate and decide.

Yet the very fact that reparations is on the agenda indicates the reality of deep racism and the question of how to raise up the Black population. As Martin Luther King, Jr. often said about starting a race already way behind the white majority, to paraphrase, "You never catch up."

King was not just speaking in support of affirmative action programs or catch-up quotas. In King's speeches and writings, he often criticized liberal whites for not understanding the history of systemic racism.

The reactionaries, of course, slander and smear those advocating reparations and justice. Their target is so-called "woke culture" and Critical Race Theory (CRT). It is a pure defense of institutional racism.

The task force interim report gives many examples of California's long racist history that only began to seriously change after the civil rights revolution in the 1960s. For example, California did not pass the post-Civil War 14th and 15th "Freedom Amendments" until 1959 and 1962 respectively.

## Then and Now

One lesson of history not discussed in the report is highly relevant now in light of the hard-right takeover of the Supreme Court. The 14th Amendment that enshrined "equal protection," and the 15th prohibiting states from voting rights discrimination based on race, are being shredded.

An article in the July 15 *Los Angeles Times* explains that the Supreme Court's ruling taking away a basic right for women was not the first time it did so. It involved Black peoples' basic human rights:

*"After the Dobbs decision ended federal protections for abortion, some high-profile responses suggested the ruling marked the first time the Supreme Court rescinded an established fundamental right.*

*"But that is not true for Black Americans. They did gain, then lose, basic rights at the hands of the Supreme Court. It would take decades to get even some of those rights back.*

*"Understanding that history may well be key to helping America face another daunting chapter of rights granted then denied. After the Civil War ended in 1865, during Reconstruction, the United States enacted a series of laws to uplift the close to 4 million formerly enslaved people.*

*"The 14th Amendment provided for equal protection under the law and the 15th Amendment granted Black men the right to vote. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1875 that prohibited race discrimination in public accommodations. Black and some white elected officials worked together to secure equality through state and local laws across the South.*

*"Just as these coalitions began to foster change, white Americans in the South began a violent campaign in the late 1860s that overthrew biracial governments, seized power for white Democrats and flouted federal laws related to protecting the rights of Black people.*

*"During the early days of Reconstruction, many of the wealthy white Southerners who were able to seize power adopted what was known as a 'cooperationist' approach. They claimed that their violence was intended to end alleged corruption among Black politicians and promised that any restrictions they imposed on Black rights would be limited. But that supposedly moderate view gave way to extreme measures seeking to end all Black participation in political and social life equal to that of white people.*

*"Ultimately, that extremism was empowered by the Supreme Court."*

### **San Francisco's Legal Racism**

An article on the truth about legal racism in San Francisco based on the report was published on June 7 issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

*"Woven through its pages of exhaustive research are dozens of examples of stomach-turning racist episodes in the Bay Area, some of which have been documented before. But when viewed as a whole, they expose the region for what it really was — and pretended not to be."*

*"This report pulls back the curtain on San Francisco," said Rev. Amos Brown, the vice chair of the Task Force and president of the San Francisco chapter of the NAACP. "It also tells the truth about the nation because San Francisco is a reflection of America."*

California joined the United States as a

"free" state with an anti-slavery Constitution in 1850. But when the Gold Rush attracted slave-owning whites from the South, the state did little to interfere with their human trafficking. If anything, lawmakers strengthened the rights of migrating slaveowners.

That's an important reality of the pre-Civil War era. While slavery was banned in "free" states, slaveholders from the South could bring their "property" to these states.

In 1850 Congress adopted The Fugitive Slave Act. The new law required that slaves be returned to their owners even if they were in a free state. The Act made the federal government responsible for finding, returning, and trying escaped slaves.

What did Californian politicians do? In 1852, the Legislature expanded the fugitive slave law to include "any enslaved person who arrived before California officially became a U.S. state ... but refused to return to the enslaving states with their enslavers," the task force report states.

According to the report, conservative estimates show anywhere from 500 to 1500 enslaved Africans Americans living in California that year. Around three-quarters "of the enslaved people trafficked to California were younger men or teenaged boys who ended up working as gold miners."

The violence these enslaved residents faced was often brutal and sometimes public. The report shares an 1850 story from the *Daily Alta California*, a San Francisco newspaper, which illustrates one such scene.

A slaveowner beat a slave "for disobeying him" in "the town square of San Jose." Both the slave and the slave owner were arrested, but because the slave was considered property, the owner wasn't found guilty of assault.

### **The Peter Lester Story**

How were Black families treated in San Francisco? A typical case was of Peter Lester who moved to the city from Philadelphia with his wife and five children in 1850, the same year California achieved statehood.

A bootmaker by trade, Lester and a partner opened a shoe store the next year, and quickly found success during the early days of the Gold Rush.

*"But Lester was Black and recoiled at the loopholes in the state's 'anti-slavery' Constitution. He also slammed up against other ways the state actively disenfranchised its Black residents.*

*"When two men entered his store, throttled him with a cane and stole some shoes, Lester had no recourse. Because he was Black, the state law did not allow him to testify in court, preventing him from pressing charges."*

As summarized and analyzed by the *Chronicle* reporters:

*"In 1858, Lester's 15-year-old daughter became the focus of a local controversy. A pro-slavery local newspaper printed an anonymous letter demanding her removal from an otherwise all-white school, which Lester acceded to after*

*weeks of racist backlash.*

*"Lester ultimately gathered up his family and moved to British Columbia [Canada]."*

Much of the above account comes from the BC Black Awareness History Society. Lester's family joined the roughly 200 Black families who left California "in a mass exodus to British colonies in what is now Canada" during the 1850s.

At the time, the large outflow of families represented a considerable proportion of the 4000 Black people who had settled in California between 1850 and 1860. (California had 92,000 people in 1850 that grew to 250,000 by 1860.)

Black families were frustrated and appalled by the state's legalized protections for slave owners and legalized hostility toward them in laws that stated, "No Black, or Mulatto person, or Indian shall be allowed to give evidence for or against a White person."

The story came full circle for Lester, the BC Black History Awareness Society noted. In 1860, he became the first Black person to sit as a juror in British Columbia, serving a civic duty that California forbade him.

I was unfamiliar with this story. It is worth reading the full history in the *British Columbia, Canada* report ([bcblackhistory.ca](http://bcblackhistory.ca)).

### **Real Estate Covenants**

Another example is real estate discrimination that persists in the 21st Century. A report by CNN about Beverly Hills notes:

*"Buried deep in the small print of deeds to a home that sold recently in this ritzy city lurks this stunning caveat: 'Said premises shall not be rented, leased, or conveyed to, or occupied by, any person other than of the white or Caucasian race.'*

*"That is known as a racial covenant. And though now illegal, language like it still exists in the deeds to homes all across the United States."*

The practice began in the 1920s. And for nearly 50 years, developers and realtors wrote racial covenants into the deeds of millions of new homes.

Federal law eventually banned the practice, but changes to laws in every state would be required to expunge the exclusionary language. It will take years to do so. So it remains in property records, including in California.

Some academic experts warn that hiding the mistakes of the past could stymie efforts to make amends and somehow compensate communities of color that still feel the economic hit of being denied access to lucrative property ladders.

"We don't need to maintain that language in a document to understand the history of where we've come from," said Nikole Hannah-Jones, founder of *The 1619 Project*, which aims to reframe American history by including the contributions of Black Americans.

Said Hector De La Torre, a former state

lawmaker in California, keeping racial covenant language would be “akin to leaving up in the South, where you had Jim Crow laws, keeping up the ‘no coloreds’ or the ‘white only’ signs at water fountains, bathrooms, other facilities and saying, ‘Oh, just ignore the sign. You can drink out of either one. Just ignore it.’”

De La Torre, whose parents moved to the United States from Mexico in the 1960s, now lives in a house in South Gate, California, that still has a racial covenant clause that at one time would have barred him from living there. “I paid very good money for this house,” he said. “And this has to come along with it? It’s ridiculous.”

De La Torre’s deeds do include one notable exception to the “Caucasians only” clause: “If persons not of the Caucasian race be kept thereon by a Caucasian occupant strictly in the capacity of servants or employees of such occupant such circumstances shall not constitute a violation.”

### Official Racist Language

Racist language was meant to sound official. While Black Americans were almost always excluded by these racial covenants, in many places people of other ethnicities were barred as well.

“In Seattle and other West Coast cities, the racial mix of populations was pretty different,” history professor James Gregory of the University of Washington said. In Seattle’s Broadmoor neighborhood, for example, some deeds state that homes shall not be lived in by any Hebrew or by any person of the Ethiopian, Malay or any Asiatic Race.”

One deed found by the Mapping Prejudice project in Minneapolis states, “No person of any race other than the Aryan race shall use or occupy any building or any lot.”

Language found in deeds bars any person of the “Semitic Race,” spelling that out as “Armenians, Jews, Hebrews, Persians and Syrians.” That deed was written in 1958.

Other deeds across the country bar “Mongolians,” “Hindus,” “Chinese,” “Mexicans” and “Ethiopians,” which was used as a catchall for anyone with any ancestry from sub-Saharan Africa, Gregory said.

“They were trying to be legalistic about it,” said Gregory, who has mapped racial covenants in Seattle. “And so, instead of using what the jargon terms for different racial groups were, they tried to employ language from anthropology and race science.”

The federal government in 1934 endorsed such segregation by refusing to underwrite mortgages for homes unless a racial covenant was in place. Then in 1948, following activism from Black Americans, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled these covenants unenforceable.

Still racial covenants continued to be written, enforced with threats of civil legal action. Two decades later — in 1968 — the

federal Fair Housing Act finally outlawed these covenants altogether. Yet the old language remained in most deeds and contracts — just not enforced (like state abortion bans when *Roe v. Wade* was in place).

The danger comes from the Supreme Court’s reactionary majority. It could overturn the fair housing laws established in 1968 and since.

### Why Reparations?

The truth about the aim of the American Revolution was not freedom for “all men,” who Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence said were “created as equals.” It was about the white colonialists breaking from the ruling English ruling king.

The colonial system entailed a clash between two systems — capitalist manufacturing versus the slave-based system in the Southern slave states. The two ruling groups set aside their own differences about the slave system. That clash was to occur decades later.

In reality the system of slavery impacted all states since it was rooted in the concept of white superiority — which also was followed in the Northern and Western stars — and because the slave system was deeply embedded in the country’s financial institutions.

Before and after it became a “free” state in 1850, as the task force report shows white supremacy was evident in every city and town of California, including San Francisco. The many Black and brown Americans whose ancestors were denied the right to live in affluent neighborhoods still feel the economic impact.

“That is the main way that Americans acquire wealth and save money,” said historian Kirsten Delegard, a founder of the Mapping Prejudice project in Minneapolis. “It’s the main way that they pass on assets to the next generation.”

### The Central Conclusion

The interim report’s key conclusions: “In order to maintain slavery, American government officials used the belief system of white supremacy to restrict the freedom and prosperity of African Americans. These beliefs were enshrined into the laws, court decisions, and policies and practices of the United States and of the state of California.”

And it states:

“The legacy of slavery continues to reach into the lives of African Americans today. For hundreds of years, the American government at the federal, state, and local levels has systematically prevented African American communities from building, maintaining, and passing on wealth due to the racial hierarchy established to maintain enslavement.

“Segregation, racial terror, harmful racist

neglect, and other atrocities in nearly every sector of civil society have inflicted harms, which cascade over a lifetime and compound over generations.

“As a result, African Americans today experience a large and persistent wealth gap when compared to white Americans. Addressing this persistent racial wealth gap means undoing long-standing institutional arrangements that have kept African American households from building and growing wealth at the same rate as white households to the present day.”

As of July 1, 2022, California has a new law requiring all counties to remove racist language from their property records. These restrictive covenants have not been enforceable in decades but are still written into the deeds of thousands of properties across the state.

It’s one small step forward in a state falsely seen as historically friendly to African Americans and other people color. It was never the case as the Interim Report on reparations details. ■



LOS ANGELES COUNTY officials have presented the deed to prime Manhattan Beach oceanfront property to the heirs of a Black couple who built a “Bruce’s Beach” resort for African Americans, but were stripped of the land nearly a century ago. The Associated Press reported that the handover “marked the final step in a complex effort to address the long-ago wrong suffered by Charles and Willa Bruce.”

The couple purchased the land in 1912 but “suffered racist harassment from white neighbors, and in the 1920s, the Manhattan Beach City Council condemned the property and took the land through eminent domain. The city, however, did nothing with the property, and it was transferred to the state of California in 1948.”

“Against the backdrop of waves washing onto the sunny Manhattan Beach shoreline, county Registrar-Recorder Dean Logan handed a certified copy of the land transfer to Anthony Bruce, a great-great-grandson of the Bruces.”

A state bill was needed for the county to transfer the land to the heirs. State Sen. Steven Bradford, who authored the bill, “said it will not reverse the injustice. ‘But it represents a bold step in the right direction,’ he said. ‘It represents a template for other states to follow.’”

The property is to be leased back to the county for 24 months, with an annual rent of \$413,000 plus all operation and maintenance costs, and the county’s right to purchase the land for up to \$20 million. ■



## Bigger and Bolder: 2022 Labor Notes Conference

By Dianne Feeley

THE JUNE 17-19 *Labor Notes* conference in Chicago confirmed a new spirit of confrontation at the workplace. Will this develop into a broad challenge to the last 40 years of concessions? Will it be able to launch a successful attack against the corporations and the politicians who back them?

It's too early to tell but certainly the level of enthusiasm, militancy and youth exhibited at this 4000-strong conference gives a sign that the pandemic taught many workers how they are in fact "essential" to a healthy economy, then piled work on them while generally refusing to provide essential safety protocols.

Founded in 1979 as a monthly newsletter to "put the movement back in the labor movement," *Labor Notes* has been holding biennial conferences since 1980. Because of the pandemic, however, it had been four years since the last in-person gathering.

Between conferences *Labor Notes* has reported on union campaigns, strikes and organizing drives on their web page (<https://labornotes.org/>), in their weekly newsletter and monthly magazine, held workshops and meetings online and hosted some day-long, in-person "Troublemaker Schools."

Unlike conferences organized by many unions, participants not only meet those in their particular industry or union, but also mix and learn from the spectrum of workers who have built union caucuses and workers centers. *Labor Notes* conferences also host workshops around themes to provide participants with new skills and examples to follow. This year there were 250 over the three days.

Some tracks concentrate on skill building: bargaining campaigns and contracts, education and steward issues, health and safety on the job, new organizing and worker centers. Another track focused on democracy as a key element to building power at the workplace and in the union. Still other tracks discussed political issues that affect both union members and the community, from climate to LGBTQ+ workshops.

The conference ended on Juneteenth with a featured track was a series of workshops that explored the history of labor

struggles and the Black liberation movement. Black workers are more likely today to be union members than any other group, and have often pushed forward workplace militancy.

There has also been a tradition that interest groups or organizations might host their meeting before the *Labor Notes* conference officially opened. This year Latino labor activists organized sessions while the Great Labor Arts Exchange convened. For the first time, the exchange spilled over to the conference itself, building its own track, organizing a song, poem and hip-hop contest as well as a concert. Railroad Workers United, an inter-union, cross-craft caucus of rail workers and supporters, held their convention leading into the conference.

Unlike many other labor conferences, there aren't decision-making plenary sessions but rather a cornucopia of militant ideas on how to strengthen the labor movement emerge from various sessions.

As someone who has attended these conferences since the early 1980s, I saw conference attendees this time as younger, bolder and more eager to learn new skills that they could put to use when they went back to their cities.

Another difference was a much wider lean toward socialism in hearing words like "comrade" and "class struggle" frequently. To be more non-binary there were stickers to take for one's preferred pronouns and a call to "siblings" rather than "brothers and sisters."

One thing I did miss was the usual picket *Labor Notes* attendees go to during a quick break. There is always some strike going on in the city! Once, long ago, I even helped organize a car pool and bus to my plant when we were on strike; when some of the international guests introduced themselves to strikers, the strikers were overwhelmed that workers from other countries would join them.

But I realized transporting even a portion of the conference was beyond the capacity of the few *Labor Notes* organizers. What they could manage was to pull off the program and trust to the innovation of attendees.

For some at the conference that unique experience was the Juneteenth celebration when storyteller Helen Sims from the

Mississippi Freedom Day Society wove a tapestry of moments in U.S. history when Black people fought for their liberation.

### Setting the Tone

The opening plenary, with five of the speakers having led recent strikes, set the tone for the weekend: Stacy Davis Gates, newly elected president of the Chicago Teachers Union; Michelle Eisen, Starbucks Workers United; Dilson Hernandez, musician and hip hop artist; Sean O'Brien, newly elected president of the Teamsters; Marie Ritacco, St. Vincent striker and vice president of the Massachusetts Nurses; U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders; Chris Smalls, president of Amazon Labor Union; and Nolan Tabb, John Deere striker representing Unite All Workers for Democracy, which won the referendum to institute one member, one vote for electing top UAW officers.

The speakers, representing a spectrum of the U.S. working class, were willing to challenge the lean production model that has brought corporations increased profitability and an even a more precarious, debt-ridden world for the working class.

By spending the weekend analyzing and strategizing on the basis of concrete experiences, participants seemed committed to building an effective team in the workplace. This would give them the power to take on the corporations. Those from Amazon Labor Union advocated building an independent, worker-run union, but given the daunting task of organizing at Amazon, indicated that they would be supported by larger, more traditional unions like the Teamsters.

Starbucks workers have a different model for a worker-run union — Starbucks' Workers United is affiliated to SEIU, which supports their work financially and provides legal backup.

Most unions, however, were formed in an earlier era — with industrial unions coming out of the 1930s, and most public sector unions developing during the 1960s and '70s. In many of these unions, caucuses have sprung up to contest entrenched, undemocratic and sometimes corrupt leaderships.

The example of Teamsters for a Democratic Union, a caucus that has existed since the 1970s, demonstrates how it is possible to wage successful campaigns and even replace

---

Dianne Feeley is a retired autoworker and editor of ATC.

top Teamster officers.

A second aspect of a member-run union is an understanding of diversity within the membership. This necessitates an understanding of a democratic culture. It also requires awareness of internal and external attacks on any member for their race, sex, gender or immigrant status — not only is such an attack harmful to the targeted individual, but it undermines group solidarity.

### Internationalism and Moving Forward

A distinctive feature of *Labor Notes* conferences has always been a wide variety of workshops and meetings that provide the space for workers to compare experiences. In a globalized world, participants also seek to hear from international guests who often work for the same company.

A highlight for roughly six dozen U.S. Starbucks workers was meeting up with Antonio Paez from Sindicato Starbucks Chile and hearing about the decade-long struggle to win their rights. Today one-third of Chilean Starbucks baristas are unionized.

U.S. Amazon workers were also able to meet and strategize with their counterparts from Canada, Ireland, France, Germany and Poland. The same was true for autoworkers, who heard updates from Brazilian metalworkers facing the repression unleashed by the Bolsonaro government and supported Israel Cervantes, a fired worker, who recounted the successful drive at Mexico's GM-Silao plant to build an independent union. He still is fighting to win his job back.

After ousting the employer-friendly CTM union, the National Independent Union for Workers in the Automobile Industry (SINT-TIA) ratified its first contract. It now plans to challenge the *charro* union (corrupt & tied to the bosses) by expanding the independent unions at other auto plants. These stories were celebrated by conference participants who saw that these victories can build on one another, launching what must be a much larger, more sustained upsurge.

Other international workshops included reports on the Chinese regime's suppression of the Hong Kong union movement that sprang up during their democratic upsurge and updates about attacks on workers' rights in Brazil and Palestine under Israeli occupation.

This brief summary only scratches the surface of the conference sessions and workshops' diversity and depth.

In discussions about moving forward, no one underestimates the power of the corpo-



Starbucks panel (from left): Bill Whitmire, Phoenix; Will Westlake, Buffalo; Jaz Brisack, Buffalo; Michelle Hejduk, Mesa; Laila Dalton, Phoenix; Alydia Claypool, Kansas City; Kyla Clay, Boston; and Mason Boykin, Jacksonville. jimwestphoto.com

rations, many of which have made enormous profits during the pandemic. Outwitting the corporations' brutal regime of understaffing and surveillance means creating a culture of solidarity and a willingness to take risks.

Workshops outlined how to turn an issue into a campaign, how to use social media to organize, how to carry out collective action by slowing down the flow of production, marching with group grievances to management's office and walkouts over safety issues. Conference goers flocked to workshops advocating class struggle unionism, strike action (even when technically illegal) and other creative actions.

One session was set aside for meet ups for workers in the same industry, union or caucus: the building trades, federal workers, health care workers, teamsters, teachers, librarians, postal and longshore workers, telecom, media, transit, and telecom workers. Sprinkled throughout the weekend were workshops featuring workers centers and discussions on climate change.

A new project represented at the conference was the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC), a joint campaign of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the United Electrical Workers (UE). It responds to non-union workers' requests, matching those requesting help with mentors.

### Starbucks, Amazon, Teamsters

In the face of a unionization drive, Starbucks has retaliated by firing a couple dozen baristas, often on phony charges, and shut down almost 20 stores. In the case of Amazon, Apple, Starbucks and many other workplaces hostile to unions, even when the union has won an election, no contracts have been signed.

People like Chris Smalls trained new hires as they came to Amazon. As he taught them how to do their jobs safely, the mutual

trust and respect that developed could be tapped when they decided they needed a union. The same thing is true of the Starbucks baristas who have learned their skills (generally underappreciated by casual customers!) from the same people who are now organizing the union. Workers are organizing themselves in situations where the nature of their work and the chronic understaffing forces them to rely on each other in order to get through the day.

How long will this opportunity to spread workers self-organization last? That of course is unknowable.

In less than eight months, Starbucks Workers United has successfully won union elections in 220 stores over 32 states (see <https://perfectunion.us/map-where-are-starbucks-workers-unionizing/>). They announced a million-dollar strike fund and project organizing 1000 stores by Labor Day. That projection may have hit a bump now that management is offering higher wages only to workers at their non-unionized stores.

Meanwhile TDU, the rank-and-file caucus in the Teamsters, is outlining a year-long strategy to mobilize UPS workers around their 2023 contract (<https://www.tdu.org/>). A section of their website, UPS Teamsters United, contains a wealth of resources including comments from members on the issues they find most important: ending two-tier wages, more full-time jobs, eliminating surveillance and forced overtime.

An independent formation, UPS Teamsters United, is prepared to work with the new and more militant Teamster officials.

In early July, TDU publicized the International Union's August 1-5 kickoff of the UPS contract campaign. Unleashing an aggressive campaign involving members and leadership to win a strong contract — the largest private sector contract in the country — would have a huge impact on working-class organizing in the coming year. Stay tuned! ■

## Dangerous Nuclear Fantasies of Bill Gates: On Techno-fix Delusions

By M.V. Ramana and Cassandra Jeffery

BILL GATES, THE businessman, made one of the world's biggest fortunes by designing, selling and marketing computer technology. It shouldn't come as a surprise that when it comes to climate change, he's pushing more technology.

When wealthy people push something, the world pays attention. Practically all major media outlets covered his recent book, *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster*, and Gates has been interviewed dozens of times. All this pushing came with the pre-emptive caveat expressed in his book that the "world is not exactly lacking in rich men with big ideas about what other people should do, or who think technology can fix any problem."<sup>1</sup>

In his account of how elites try to "change the world," journalist Anand Giridharadas explained: "All around us, the winners in our highly inequitable status quo declare themselves partisans of change. They know the problem, and they want to be part of the solution. Actually, they want to lead the search for solutions...the attempts naturally reflect their biases."<sup>2</sup>

Gates is no exception to the rule; his bias favors maintaining the current economic and political system that has made him into one of the richest people in the world. The same bias also underpinned his stance on preserving intellectual property rights over Covid-19 vaccines, even at the cost of impeding access to these vaccines in much of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Just as the pandemic was accentuated by

---

*M.V. Ramana is the Simons Chair in Disarmament, Global and Human Security and Professor at the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, and the author of The Power Of Promise: Examining Nuclear Energy In India. Ramana is a member of the International Panel on Fissile Materials, the Canadian Pugwash Group, the International Nuclear Risk Assessment Group, and the team that produces the annual World Nuclear Industry Status Report. He is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Leo Szilard Award from the American Physical Society.*

*Cassandra Jeffery holds a Master's degree in Public Policy and Global Affairs from the University of British Columbia and is the recipient of a Simons Award in Nuclear Disarmament and Global Security for research into the political economy of nuclear energy.*

insisting on the rights to continued profits for pharmaceutical companies, climate change is exacerbated by the current economic system that is predicated on unending growth.<sup>4</sup>

A focus on technical solutions without fixing the underlying driver of climate change will not help. What is worse, some of the proposed technologies are positively dangerous.

*Exhibit A:* untested nuclear reactors like the ones that Gates is developing and endorsing.

### Puzzling Choices

In an interview with CNBC following the publication of his book, Bill Gates announced: "There's a new generation of nuclear power that solves the economics, which has been the big, big problem."<sup>5</sup>

To understand the economic problem, consider the only two nuclear reactors being built in the United States. These are in the state of Georgia, and the cost of constructing these has ballooned from an initial estimate of \$14 billion to over \$30 billion.<sup>6</sup>

Even worse was the case of the V. C. Summer project in South Carolina, where over \$9 billion was spent, only for the project to be abandoned because cost overruns led to Westinghouse, one of the leading nuclear reactor companies in the world, filing for bankruptcy protection.<sup>7</sup>

These high construction costs naturally result in high electricity costs. In 2021, Lazard, the Wall Street firm, estimated the average cost of electricity from new nuclear plants to be between \$131 and \$204 per megawatt hour, whereas it estimated that newly constructed utility-scale solar and wind plants produce electricity at somewhere between \$26 and \$50 per megawatt-hour.<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, in June 2022 NextEra, a large electricity utility, estimated that wind and solar energy, with four hours of electricity storage to allow for generation even when the sun is not shining or the wind is not blowing, ranged between \$25 and \$37 per megawatt-hour.<sup>9</sup> Electricity from renewables is thus far cheaper than nuclear power, a difference only growing as solar and wind continue to become cheaper.

Many reactors have been shut down

because they are unprofitable.<sup>10</sup> In 2018, Bloomberg New Energy Finance concluded that more than a quarter of U.S. nuclear plants don't make enough money to cover their operating costs.<sup>11</sup>

That year, NextEra decided to shut down the Duane Arnold nuclear reactor in Iowa, because it was cheaper to take advantage of the lower costs of renewables, primarily wind power. The decision, NextEra estimated, will "save customers nearly \$300 million in energy costs, on a net present value basis."<sup>12</sup>

It is this economic conundrum that Gates is claiming to address through new nuclear reactor designs. He is not alone. A number of other investors have backed "new" nuclear technology, and dozens of companies have received funding to design "advanced" or "small modular" reactors.

But these nuclear reactors of the future are no less problematic than traditional reactors. Besides unfavourable economics, there are at least three other well-known "unresolved problems" with nuclear power.<sup>13</sup>

First, the acquisition of nuclear power technology increases the capacity of a country to make nuclear weapons, and thus increases the risk of nuclear weapons proliferation. Second, despite assurances about safety, all nuclear reactors can undergo major accidents, albeit infrequently. Chernobyl and Fukushima are the best-known examples, but not the only ones.

Third, the multiple forms of radioactive waste produced during the nuclear energy generation process pose a seemingly intractable management problem.<sup>14</sup> Exposure to these wastes will be harmful to people and other living organisms for hundreds of thousands of years.

Wastes must therefore be isolated for millennia from human contact. The storage and disposal of these wastes often take place in poor, disadvantaged communities,<sup>15</sup> typically far away from the gated homes of people like Gates.

It is not possible to simultaneously address all of these four challenges — cost, safety, waste, and proliferation — facing nuclear power.<sup>16</sup> To a greater or lesser extent, all these problems will afflict the reactors being developed by TerraPower, the nuclear power company backed by Gates.

## Bill Gates and TerraPower

TerraPower was founded in 2006 and Gates continues to serve as Chairman of the Board.<sup>17</sup> The company has funded the development of three different nuclear reactor designs through a mix of venture capitalist investments from fellow billionaires, engineering and manufacturing corporations in the energy and defense sector, and government.<sup>18</sup>

The company has research and development partnerships with several major institutions, including the Los Alamos National Laboratory and Y-12 National Security Complex, both of which design and test nuclear weapons.<sup>19</sup>

TerraPower is well-funded. In 2010, the company received \$35 million in seed money from venture capital firms to develop the first of its nuclear power plant designs, the “traveling wave” reactor.<sup>20</sup> It has also received an undisclosed amount of funding from Breakthrough Energy Ventures, an investment firm co-founded and co-chaired by Gates.<sup>21</sup>

According to a 2015 TerraPower promotional video, Gates pledged to invest \$2 billion into emerging energy technologies, including nuclear technologies produced by TerraPower.<sup>22</sup> And a few years back, Gates promised to invest \$1 billion from his personal coffers and raise another \$1 billion in private capital to fund TerraPower directly.<sup>23</sup>

Despite these announcements, the exact financial figure Gates has personally invested into TerraPower is not known. In 2019, he declined interview requests by the *Washington Post* about his investment in the company. TerraPower’s financial records are not publicly available.

But investments by Gates and his friends<sup>24</sup> are not the only source of funding for TerraPower. In 2016, TerraPower received a \$40 million grant from the Department of Energy (DOE), followed by another \$80 million in 2020, and \$8.5 million in 2022.<sup>25</sup>

In 2021, under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act, the U.S. Department of Energy’s Office of Clean Energy Demonstrations has set aside \$2.5 billion for nuclear projects and some of this funding will subsidize the TerraPower nuclear project slated for development in Wyoming.<sup>26</sup>

As far as we can tell from publicly available data, government support adds up to nearly as much as private investments and almost certainly more than Gates has personally invested. In other words, taxpayers have already paid tens of millions of dollars, and could pay far more in the future, for this technology.

The U.S. taxpayer isn’t the only source of public funding that Bill Gates has tried to leverage. The 1.4 billion people of China came close to ponying up their tax dollars (or *renminbis*). After a series of visits by



Looking for a technological fix?

Greenbiz

Gates to the Middle Kingdom, TerraPower reached an agreement with state-owned China National Nuclear Corporation in 2017 to build an experimental nuclear reactor south of Beijing.<sup>27</sup>

That project would have likely gone forward but was stopped by America’s waning diplomatic and trade relationship with China.<sup>28</sup>

### Technical Problems

TerraPower has three different nuclear reactor designs on the books: the Natrium reactor; the molten chloride fast reactor; and the traveling wave reactor.

Given his emphasis on novelty and innovation, one would expect Gates to put his money on reactor designs that are new and likely to succeed. None of these designs have that merit. All of these reactors are based on two old reactor designs vexed with major problems.

Let us start with the problems with the molten chloride fast reactor. As its name suggests, the reactor uses nuclear materials dissolved in molten chemical salts.<sup>29</sup>

Salt is corrosive — just ask anyone who lives on the coast. So the inside of the reactor will be a chemically corrosive and highly radioactive environment.

No material can perform satisfactorily in such an environment. After reviewing the available studies, all that the U.S. Idaho National Laboratory — a nuclear power booster — could recommend was that “a systematic development program be initiated.”<sup>30</sup>

Other leading research laboratories like France’s *Institut de radioprotection et de sûreté nucléaire* (IRSN) and the U.K.’s Nuclear Innovation and Research Office, have concluded that molten salt reactors are problematic.<sup>31</sup> As IRSN put it, “numerous technological challenges remain to be overcome before the construction of an MSR can be consid-

ered.”

The historical experience with molten salt reactors has been pretty bleak, to put it mildly.<sup>32</sup> The last one to be built was the Molten Salt Reactor Experiment in Oakridge, Tennessee. It operated intermittently from 1965 to 1969, and operations were interrupted 225 times in those four years; of these interruptions, only 58 were planned.<sup>33</sup>

But it’s not just a matter of molten salt reactors being unreliable or technologically challenged. As Edwin Lyman from the Union of Concerned Scientists has documented at length, the “use of liquid fuel instead of a solid fuel” in molten salt reactors “has significant safety implications for both normal operation and accidents.”<sup>34</sup>

Specifically, the molten nature of the fuel makes it easier for radioactive materials to escape into the atmosphere and be dispersed.

Terrapower’s other two reactor designs are not much better. Both the Travelling Wave Reactor and the Natrium use molten sodium. Another problematic material, molten sodium is used to transport the intense heat produced by the nuclear fission reactions. Again, such reactors have been constructed since the dawn of the nuclear age and with similarly dismal results.<sup>35</sup>

To start with, such reactors have had numerous accidents. The record starts on November 29, 1955 when the Experimental Breeder Reactor (EBR-1) in Idaho had a partial core meltdown.

A decade later, in October 1966, the Fermi-1 demonstration fast reactor in Michigan suffered a partial core meltdown. The shock made its way into the cultural mainstream in the form of a book called *We Almost Lost Detroit* and a song with the same name by Gil Scott Heron.<sup>36</sup>

In Japan, the Monju reactor suffered a series of accidents and produced almost no

electricity, after an expenditure of at least \$8.5 billion.<sup>37</sup>

The use of molten sodium makes such reactors susceptible to serious fires, because the material burns if exposed to air. Almost all sodium-cooled reactors constructed around the world have experienced sodium leaks, likely because of chemical interactions between sodium and the stainless steel used in various components of the reactor.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, the use of sodium also makes it difficult to maintain and carry out repairs on fast reactors, which then become susceptible to long shutdowns. Having to deal with all these volatile properties and safety concerns naturally drives up the construction costs of fast reactors, rendering them substantially more expensive than common thermal reactors.

Sodium-cooled reactors are also unreliable, operating at dismally low rates compared to standard reactors. The load factor (the ratio of the amount of electrical energy a power plant has produced to the amount of energy it would have produced had it operated at full capacity) for the Prototype Fast Reactor in the United Kingdom was 27%; France's Superphenix reactor managed a mere 7.9%.<sup>39</sup>

The typical U.S. reactor operates with a load factor of more than 90%.<sup>40</sup> Sodium-cooled reactors would have to sell their power at higher prices to compensate for the fewer units of electrical energy generated.

"Without innovation, we will not solve climate change," chanted Gates.<sup>41</sup> But no amount of innovation will change the laws of chemistry or physics. How sodium behaves when it interacts with air or water won't be affected, even if the sodium is inside a nuclear reactor backed by one of America's oligarchs.

Innovation will not change the fact that the radioactive wastes produced by the Natrium reactor will remain hazardous for tens of thousands of years.

### Systemic Problems

*Why is Bill Gates investing in nuclear power?* This question comes up a lot, although frequently as a rhetorical excuse to wax eloquently about the virtues of nuclear technology.<sup>42</sup> The answer is by no means straightforward.

Nuclear energy is only one lottery ticket among many for Bill Gates. He's invested into dozens of companies, especially through Breakthrough Energy Ventures. Breakthrough's investments range from companies that focus on energy storage — examples are Form Energy and Malta — to ones making new kinds of concrete, developing geothermal energy, and producing steel.

Gates has also secured a stake in the future of agriculture; in 2021, he was dubbed America's largest private farmland owner.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, Gates' strategy is to diversify his investments. If the Natrium reactor — TerraPower's leading offering at this point — turns out to be a nuclear lemon,<sup>44</sup> which is quite likely for the reasons discussed above, Gates will have a suite of investments to fall back on.

This tactic — diversifying assets and investments to increase the probability that at least one stake will pay off big time — is standard practice among venture capitalists. Other fellow billionaires investing in nuclear power have similarly diversified strategies.

Gates and fellow oligarchs have other strategies to maintain their wealth. They devote enormous financial resources and time to nurture their economic positions by political campaign financing and lobbying for favorable policies and regulations.

Such tactics are legal but amount to a form of corruption and facilitate the extraction of what economists call rents (for example, through the imposition of intellectual property protections),<sup>45</sup> which are going to come in the way of climate mitigation as well.

Such forms of corruption are also widespread in the nuclear industry, with groups like the Nuclear Energy Institute (NEI), devising marketing campaigns that benefit nuclear power plant owning companies, including influencing the appointment of officials to oversight bodies such as the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC).<sup>46</sup>

Among the recent pieces of legislation that NEI lobbied for was the Nuclear Energy Innovation and Modernisation Act.<sup>47</sup> Publicly endorsed by Gates,<sup>48</sup> the law makes it easier for "next-generation advanced reactors," the kind that TerraPower is developing, to be licensed for construction by the NRC.

Such behaviors, unfortunately, are standard for the large organizations that dominate today's economy.

People like Bill Gates are billionaires because they hit the jackpot on a lottery ticket and then lobbied rule-makers to extract as much money as possible from that lottery ticket. These gains allow them to reinvest into a diversified portfolio to increase the odds of another windfall prize.

In this pursuit, the public also gets to foot the bill; in the case of TerraPower, taxpayers have put up tens of millions of dollars into this venture without ever being given an opportunity to provide or deny their informed consent for this technology.

The public — especially those who live near one of the sites targeted for new reactor deployment, the areas where uranium will be mined and processed, and wherever the long-lived nuclear waste will go — will be subject to environmental contamination, paying far more than just a financial cost.

Given the experimental technologies involved in these new nuclear reactor designs,

the risks to such communities are considerable. Many of these risks will only become greater with climate change as extreme weather events become more frequent and challenge operations at nuclear plants.<sup>49</sup>

The risks and wasted investments are mounting. Further, this obsession with nuclear power and other untested technologies diverts the public's attention from the larger systemic drivers of the climate crisis: unabated capitalism and its need for never-ending economic growth.

Pushing the nuclear agenda furthers the falsehood that growth can continue indefinitely with no limits, and the pretense that climate change can be solved using one more technology from the same toolbox that caused the problem in the first place.

"Those most responsible for creating the problem [of climate change] will see to it that they profit from the solution that they propose," observed Indian writer Arundhati Roy in 2019.<sup>50</sup> People like Gates exemplify that observation. Not only do they create the conditions for accelerating global warming but they also see to it that they are amply rewarded when they claim to know how to solve climate change.

Bill Gates might well be interested in finding a solution to climate change but he seems far more devoted to maintaining the current system for as long as it is feasible. Protecting this system requires, among other things, selling people the idea that the system is capable of solving climate change. Selling nuclear power is part of that larger sales job.

### Notes

1. Bill Gates, *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster: The Solutions We Have and the Breakthroughs We Need* (New York: Diversified Publishing, 2021), 18-19.
2. Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2018), 5.
3. Alexander Zaitchik, "How Bill Gates Impeded Global Access to Covid Vaccines," *The New Republic*, April 12, 2021, <https://newrepublic.com/article/162000/bill-gates-impeded-global-access-covid-vaccines>.
4. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014); Giorgos Kallis, *Degrowth* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Agenda Publishing, 2018); Chirag Dhara and Vandana Singh, "The Delusion of Infinite Economic Growth," *Scientific American*, June 23, 2021, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-delusion-of-infinite-economic-growth/>.
5. Catherine Clifford, "Bill Gates: Nuclear Power Will 'absolutely' Be Politically Acceptable Again — It's Safer than Oil, Coal, Natural Gas," *CNBC*, February 25, 2021, sec. Make It — Power Players, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/25/bill-gates-nuclear-power-will-absolutely-be-politically-acceptable.html>.
6. Steve Hargreaves, "First New Nuclear Reactors OK'd in over 30 Years," *CNNMoney*, February 9, 2012, [http://money.cnn.com/2012/02/09/news/economy/nuclear\\_reactors/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2012/02/09/news/economy/nuclear_reactors/index.htm); David Schlissel, "Southern Company's Troubled Vogtle Nuclear Project" (Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis, January 2022), [https://ieefa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Southern-Company-s-Troubled-Vogtle-Nuclear-Project\\_January-2022.pdf](https://ieefa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Southern-Company-s-Troubled-Vogtle-Nuclear-Project_January-2022.pdf).
7. Akela Lacy, "South Carolina Spent \$9 Billion to Dig a Hole in the Ground and Then Fill It Back In," *The Intercept*, February 6, 2019, <https://theintercept.com/2019/02/06/south-carolina-green-new-deal-south-carolina-nuclear-energy/>; Tom Hals and

- Emily Flitter, "How Two Cutting Edge U.S. Nuclear Projects Bankrupted Westinghouse," *Reuters*, May 2, 2017, [The New York Times, March 29, 2017.](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-toshiba-accounting-westinghouse-nucle-idUSKBN17Y0CQ; Diane Cardwell and Jonathan Soble, )
8. Lazard, "Lazard's Levelized Cost of Energy-Version 15.0" (New York: Lazard, October 2021), <https://www.lazard.com/perspective/levelized-cost-of-energy-levelized-cost-of-storage-and-levelized-cost-of-hydrogen/>.
9. Rebecca Kujawa, "NextEra Energy Resources," [https://www.investor.nexteraenergy.com/~media/Files/N/NEE-IR/news-and-events/events-and-presentations/2022/06-14-2022/June%202022%20Investor%20Presentation\\_Website\\_vFpdf](https://www.investor.nexteraenergy.com/~media/Files/N/NEE-IR/news-and-events/events-and-presentations/2022/06-14-2022/June%202022%20Investor%20Presentation_Website_vFpdf).
10. Marie Weidmayer, "Palisades Nuclear Power Plant Shuts down 11 Days Early," *Mlive*, May 20, 2022, sec. Kalamazoo, <https://www.mlive.com/news/kalamazoo/2022/05/palisades-nuclear-power-plant-shuts-down-11-days-early.html>; Entergy, "Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station Shut Down Permanently," *PR Newswire*, June 3, 2019, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/pilgrim-nuclear-power-station-shut-down-permanently-300860436.html>; Matthew L. Wald, "Vermont Yankee Plant to Close Next Year as the Nuclear Industry Retrenches," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/28/science/entergy-announces-closing-of-vermont-nuclear-plant.html>.
11. Editors, "Report: More Than One Quarter of U.S. Nuclear Power Plants Are Closing or Unprofitable," *Power Engineering*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.power-eng.com/nuclear/report-more-than-one-quarter-of-u-s-nuclear-power-plants-are-closing-or-unprofitable/>.
12. Aaron Larson, "Duane Arnold Nuclear Plant Will Close in 2020," *Power Magazine*, July 29, 2018, <https://www.powermag.com/duane-arnold-nuclear-plant-will-close-in-2020/>.
13. Stephen Ansolabehere et al., "The Future of Nuclear Power" (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003), <http://web.mit.edu/nuclearpower/>.
14. M.V. Ramana, "Technical and Social Problems of Nuclear Waste," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Energy and Environment* 7, no. 4 (August 2018): e289, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wene.289>.
15. *Public Citizen*, "Radioactive Racism: The History of Targeting Native American Communities with High-Level Atomic Waste Dumps" (Nuclear Information and Resource Service, June 14, 2022), <https://www.nirs.org/wp-content/uploads/radwaste/scullvalley/historynativecommunitiesnuclearwaste06142005.pdf>.
16. M.V. Ramana and Zia Mian, "One Size Doesn't Fit All: Social Priorities and Technical Conflicts for Small Modular Reactors," *Energy Research & Social Science* 2 (June 2014): 115–24, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2014.04.015>.
17. TerraPower, "Our People," TerraPower A Nuclear Innovation Company, 2021, <https://www.terrapower.com/our-people/>.
18. TerraPower, "Our Work," TerraPower A Nuclear Innovation Company, 2021, <https://www.terrapower.com/our-work/>.
19. TerraPower, "About Us," TerraPower A Nuclear Innovation Company, 2021, <https://www.terrapower.com/about/>.
20. Matthew L. Wald, "Developer of Novel Reactor Wins \$35 Million Infusion," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/15/business/energy-environment/15nuke.html>.
21. Jonathan Tirono, "Billionaires Chase 'SpaceX Moment' for the Holy Grail of Energy," *BQ Prime* (blog), October 30, 2018,
22. "The Company Determined to Fix Nuclear Energy: TerraPower Is One of Bill Gates's Biggest Bets" (*The Atlantic*, 2015), <https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/410029/the-company-determined-to-fix-nuclear-energy/>.
23. Steven Mufson, "Bill Gates Comes to Washington — Selling the Promise of Nuclear Energy," *Washington Post*, January 25, 2019, sec. Health & Science, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/bill-gates-comes-to-washington-selling-the-promise-of-nuclear-energy/2019/01/25/4bd9c030-1445-11e9-b6ad-9cfd62dbb0a8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/bill-gates-comes-to-washington-selling-the-promise-of-nuclear-energy/2019/01/25/4bd9c030-1445-11e9-b6ad-9cfd62dbb0a8_story.html).
24. Libby Maccarthy, "Bill Gates & Friends Launch \$1B Clean Energy Investment Fund to Fight Climate Change," *Sustainable Brands* (blog), December 13, 2016, <https://sustainablebrands.com/read/product-service-design-innovation/bill-gates-friends-launch-clean-energy-investment-fund-to-fight-climate-change>.
25. Alan Boyle, "Bill Gates' TerraPower Wins \$8.5M in Federal Funding for Conversion of Used Nuclear Fuel," *GeekWire*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.geekwire.com/2022/bill-gates-terrapower-wins-8-5m-in-federal-funding-for-conversion-of-used-nuclear-fuel/>; Joniel Cha and William Freebairn, "US DOE Awards TerraPower, X-Energy \$80 Million Each for Advanced Nuclear Reactors," *S&P Global Platts*, October 13, 2020,
26. Catherine Clifford, "Bill Gates' TerraPower Aims to Build Its First Advanced Nuclear Reactor in a Coal Town in Wyoming," *CNBC*, November 17, 2021, <https://www.cncb.com/2021/11/17/bill-gates-terrapower-builds-its-first-nuclear-reactor-in-a-coal-town.html>.
27. Carl O'Donnell, "Bill Gates' Nuclear Venture Hits Snag amid U.S. Restrictions on China Deals: WSJ," *Reuters*, January 1, 2019, [Nuclear Newswire \(blog\), December 15, 2011, https://www.ans.org/news/article-881/terrapower-seeks-wisdom-in-china/](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-terrapower-china-idUSKCN1OV155; Dan Yurman, ).
28. Jay Greene, "Trump's Tech Battle With China Roils Bill Gates Nuclear Venture," *Wall Street Journal*, January 1, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trumps-tech-battle-with-china-roils-bill-gates-nuclear-venture-11546360589>.
29. "Benefits of the Molten Chloride Fast Reactor Technology: Low-Cost, Carbon-Free Energy," *TerraPower* (blog), December 10, 2020, <https://www.terrapower.com/benefits-molten-chloride-fast-reactor-technology/>.
30. R. N. Wright and T.L. Sham, "Status of Metallic Structural Materials for Molten Salt Reactors" (Idaho National Lab. (INL), Idaho Falls, ID (United States); Argonne National Lab. (ANL), Argonne, IL (United States), May 1, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.2172/1467482>.
31. IRSN, "Review of Generation IV Nuclear Energy Systems" (Paris: Institut de Radioprotection et de Sûreté Nucléaire, April 27, 2015),
32. M.V. Ramana, "Nuclear Power: Why Molten Salt Reactors Are Problematic and Canada Investing in Them Is a Waste," *The Conversation*, September 14, 2021, <http://theconversation.com/nuclear-power-why-molten-salt-reactors-are-problematic-and-canada-investing-in-them-is-a-waste-167019>; M.V. Ramana, "Molten Salt Reactors Were Trouble in the 1960s—and They Remain Trouble Today," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, June 20, 2022, <https://thebulletin.org/2022/06/molten-salt-reactors-were-trouble-in-the-1960s-and-they-remain-trouble-today/>.
33. R. H. Guymon, "MSRE Systems and Components Performance" (Oakridge, TN: Oak Ridge National Lab., June 1973), <https://www.osti.gov/biblio/4462915-msre-systems-components-performance>.
34. Edwin Lyman, "'Advanced' Isn't Always Better: Assessing the Safety, Security, and Environmental Impacts of Non-Light-Water Nuclear Reactors" (Cambridge, USA: Union of Concerned Scientists, March 2021), <https://ucusa.org/resources/advanced-isnt-always-better>.
35. PFM, "Fast Breeder Reactor Programs: History and Status" (Princeton: International Panel on Fissile Materials, 2010), [https://fissilematerials.org/blog/2010/02/history\\_and\\_status\\_of\\_fas.html](https://fissilematerials.org/blog/2010/02/history_and_status_of_fas.html).
36. John G. Fuller, *We Almost Lost Detroit* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1975).
37. Osamu Tsukimori and Aaron Sheldrick, "Japan Pulls Plug on Monju, Ending \$8.5 Billion Nuclear Self-Sufficiency Push," *Reuters*, December 21, 2016, [.](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-nuclear-monju-idUSKBN14A0UX; IAEA, )
38. S. Rajendran Pillai and M.V. Ramana, "Breeder Reactors: A Possible Connection between Metal Corrosion and Sodium Leaks," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 70, no. 3 (2014): 49–55, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340214531178>.
39. IAEA, "Power Reactor Information System (PRIS) Database."
40. NEI, "U.S. Nuclear Industry Capacity Factors," Nuclear Energy Institute, March 2021, <https://www.nei.org/resources/statistics/us-nuclear-industry-capacity-factors>.
41. Anderson Cooper, "Bill Gates: How the World Can Avoid a Climate Disaster," *CBS: 60 Minutes*, February 15, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bill-gates-climate-change-disaster-60-minutes-2021-02-14/>.
42. For example, Ken Silverstein, "Why Bill Gates Is Banking On Small Modular Nuclear Reactors," *Forbes*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kensilverstein/2021/07/15/why-bill-gates-is-banking-on-small-modular-nuclear-reactors/>.
43. Nick Estes, "Bill Gates Is the Biggest Private Owner of Farmland in the United States. Why?," *The Guardian*, April 5, 2021, sec. Opinion, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/apr/05/bill-gates-climate-crisis-farmland/>.
44. M.V. Ramana and Arjun Makhijani, "Look before You Leap on Nuclear," *Casper Star-Tribune*, October 16, 2021, [https://trib.com/opinion/columns/ramana-makhijani-look-before-you-leap-on-nuclear/article\\_4508639b-d7e6-50df-b305-07c929de40ed.html](https://trib.com/opinion/columns/ramana-makhijani-look-before-you-leap-on-nuclear/article_4508639b-d7e6-50df-b305-07c929de40ed.html).
45. Dean Baker, *Rigged: How Globalization and the Rules of the Modern Economy Were Structured to Make the Rich Richer* (Washington, D. C.: Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2016).
46. Cassandra Jeffery and M.V. Ramana, "Big Money, Nuclear Subsidies, and Systemic Corruption," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, February 12, 2021, <https://thebulletin.org/2021/02/big-money-nuclear-subsidies-and-systemic-corruption/>.
47. Maria Korsnick, "Testimony for the Record," Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, United States Senate, April 30, 2019, <https://www.energy.senate.gov/services/files/7E93F4BC-044C-46E7-85BE-B3F9E605DA22>.
48. WNN, "Bill Gates 'thrilled' by Legislative Boost for Nuclear," *World Nuclear News*, March 29, 2019, <https://world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/Bill-Gates-thrilled-by-legislative-boost-for-nucle>.
49. Ali Ahmad, "Increase in Frequency of Nuclear Power Outages Due to Changing Climate," *Nature Energy* 6, no. 7 (July 2021): 755–62, [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists 71, no. 2 \(January 1, 2015\): 29–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/0096340215571905.](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-021-00849-y; Natalie Kopytko, )
50. Arundhati Roy, "Capitalism Is 'a Form of Religion' Stopping Solutions to Climate Change & Inequality," *Democracy Now!*, May 13, 2019, [https://www.democracynow.org/2019/5/13/arundhati\\_roy\\_capitalism\\_is\\_a\\_form](https://www.democracynow.org/2019/5/13/arundhati_roy_capitalism_is_a_form).



## Causes, Consequences and False Solutions: The Fight Over Inflation

Suzi Weissman interviews Robert Brenner

**SUZI WEISSMAN INTERVIEWED** Robert Brenner for the August 7, 2022 edition of her “Beneath the Surface” program on Jacobin Radio, KPFF in Los Angeles. Both are editorial board members of Against the Current.

Robert Brenner is a professor of history emeritus at UCLA and author of *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, *The Boom and the Bubble*, *The Brenner Debate* and *Merchants and Revolution*. The interview transcript has been edited and adapted for publication. The broadcast can be accessed at <https://apple.co/3po8gMt>.

**Suzi Weissman:** We spend the hour with economic historian Robert Brenner, to get his understanding of this strange economic moment. What makes it strange is the combination of strong job growth and inflation, which is hitting working people’s already tight budgets hard. Despite significant nominal wage increases in terms of money, workers’ wages in real terms are lagging behind prices, but CEO pay is skyrocketing. Company profits, especially in the energy sector, are soaring.

In response, on 27 July 2022, the Federal Reserve enacted its second consecutive three-quarter percentage point interest rate increase, taking the federal funds rates to 2.25-2.50%. This is the central bank’s most aggressive push in three decades to dampen demand and slow down the economy. Are they trying to induce a mild recession? Or avoid one?

What is behind the sudden new wave of inflation? What’s causing it and what is the Fed’s response?

**Robert Brenner:** During the past decade we had a very long expansion, one of the longest cyclical upturns on record. But it was not a very strong one. The growth of demand was met by the growth of supply, and prices rose moderately.

Between 2009 and 2019 the consumer price index (CPI) increased at an average rate of just 1.7% per year, and with the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, it fell back to 1.4%. There was no inflationary problem whatsoever.

But over the last two years prices have suddenly accelerated dramatically. In 2021 inflation rose by 7%, and in the first half of 2022 it hit 9%. This was a real explosion, and it represents the sudden break that we have to explain.

**SW:** We all know that the pandemic created severe dislocations in the economy worldwide, with a number of strange features. There’s significant pent-up demand because the economy was essentially stopped and then slowly restarted. You have shortages of goods and services with respect to demand, making for a serious imbalance. Then, of course, there’s Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Republicans argue that the reason there is a shortage of goods and supplies is that workers no longer had an incentive to work because they were getting government subsidies with rent and the CARES package. That’s now ended, and workers have gone back to work but there are still shortages.

Of course we should never forget that more than a million died here in the United States, many of them essential workers.

**RB:** In 2020, in response to the pandemic, the government initially imposed a deep slowdown in the economy. The result was a record fall in GDP in the first quarter. But then, to re-start the economy the government implemented a massive stimulus, and you get something like an equal and opposite acceleration of the economy, a major economic expansion.

The recovery was consolidated by the distribution of the vaccine, which brought the pandemic somewhat under control. So the economy does take off, if only hesitantly. Yet the growth of supply to meet the increase of demand is quite restrained. The question is why?

The answer is that, in one after another line of the economy, specific problems emerge to prevent supply from growing to meet demand.

In the first place, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted production up and down the supply chain. One local example is that in the Port of Los Angeles ships could not get the crews needed to unload and transport containers.

Worldwide nearly six and a half million people have died, and this has meant fewer workers and reduced production, interrupting just in time delivery.

Second, many in the labor force, seeing the death of fellow essential workers, quit or are hesitant about returning to work.

Despite the increase in demand in one

after another area, supply proves to be inadequate. So we need to understand inflation generally as the other side of the economy’s failure to raise supply to meet demand. Because output cannot rise, prices do, thus the inflationary surge.

The point is that the economy should be turning over more vigorously, but there are particular issues, in one line after another, that prevent increases in output.

The Federal Reserve Board (Fed) could, in theory, intervene to enable supply to rise more rapidly in more industries, and in that way to bring down inflation. But that is not the way the Fed has reacted to the problem.

Instead of attempting to raise supply to meet demand and thus moderate prices, the Fed has sought to reduce demand, creating upward pressure on prices by raising interest rates. It is weakening the economy in order to return it to health.

### Policy Off the Rails

**SW:** The Fed justifies its approach here by positing an underlying problem of costs — assuming that price increases are being driven by wage increases. In other words the Fed acts as if we are experiencing a so-called cost-push, or wage-price inflation. Is this really the case?

**RB:** This is where, in my opinion, the Fed goes off the rails. If the inflation is the result of insufficient production, then to make the economy work, we need more output and more employment. The Fed and other institutions of government should be seeking to make the economy more productive, more efficient.

But the Fed is taking a very different tack. By dramatically hiking interest rates the Fed is slowing the economy down, which will raise unemployment, reduce wage growth, and therefore put some goods and services beyond the reach of working people.

That is, slowing output will result in a lower standard of living and, in the process, a slowdown of price increase. There are two ways to deal with inflation. The Fed is embarking on one path, I’m suggesting the opposite.

**SW:** If you are correct about this analysis, does the rise in interest rates push the economy into dangerous territory? Can they walk the tight-rope to try to curb inflation without causing a

recession? Some mainstream economists point to gas prices already coming down. What's your analysis?

**RB:** My first thought is that the so-called "smooth landing" has never been accomplished. To solve inflation, the Feds are starving the economy. They are "solving" the problem by cutting demand for the goods that we need, starving the economy in order to save it.

Of course, if we don't need those goods, if we don't need those outputs, then inflation is no problem.

Unfortunately, working people depend on output for their employment. That is the opposite of the Fed's method here, which you can see has a further kick — by intentionally reducing costs by putting people out of work or reducing their wages, the economy is being rebuilt on a weaker foundation.

**SW:** Essentially you are saying that by raising interest rates the Fed can set up the conditions for a coming recession, which will create

unemployment that will be especially harmful to those most vulnerable to the downturn in the economy, the same people who are struggling the most from rising prices.

You also question whether this method takes on what drives inflation. Price rises are outpacing real wages, completely undercutting the fight for the \$15 an hour minimum wage. Little attention is paid to how CEO pay is skyrocketing. How can you explain it?

**RB:** The Fed's view is that rising prices are the result of rising costs of production. The implication is that these are coming from workers' wages. Therefore, the key to solving this problem is getting that cost under control. Mainstream economists are telling us costs are too high, we have to cut back.

But what we have quite clearly is a situation where real wages are falling under the pressure of inflation. The Fed is solving the wrong problem, and that will result in human suffering.

**SW:** It seems like an incorrect analysis is lead-

ing the Fed to use tools that aren't helpful. Are you suggesting then the traditional Keynesian method of job creation, and to spend, spend, spend? That method would spur growth and perhaps overcome the supply chain shortages.

**RB:** This is where a little history might be of use. The Keynesian revolution in the 1930s and '40s was a theoretical breakthrough in macroeconomic management to guide demand relative to supply.

The idea was that the economy needed to create more demand by creating more supply. The budget deficits resulting from government spending will add to output by creating social demand.

However, we have lost the political will to use expansionary policy because it leads to increasing both the demand for labor and its cost — a problem for capitalists who aren't interested in increasing even potential worker power. So we're now thrown back to having just this very narrow path of manipulating interest rates.

## UAW Convention: Change in the Wind By Dianne Feeley

THE 38TH CONSTITUTIONAL Convention of the United Auto Workers (UAW), held July 25-28, 2022 in Detroit, saw the most organized opposition to the rule of the Administration Caucus (AC) since the days of the New Directions caucus 30 years ago.

It was also the first convention since the two most recent UAW presidents — Gary Jones and Dennis Williams — were convicted of embezzling union funds. Just a couple of days before the convention they were released from prison to serve the rest of their sentences from home.

Twelve union officials have been charged with and subsequently pled guilty to stealing from the union or taking bribes from a corporation. A total of \$1.5 million has been traced to union dues, with another \$3.5 million from training centers partially financed by union dues.

Following a consent agreement with the federal government, agreeing to a six-year federal oversight, a membership referendum adopted a method of one member, one vote elections for top union officials, the International Executive Board. Nominations to the IEB were held during the convention. The election will take place in November.

### Convention Dynamics

Delegates elected on the Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) slate represented no more than 8-10 percent of the 900 delegates, yet they were able to have a big impact. UAWD was deeply involved in the successful referendum for

membership votes on top officers.

For UAWD convention delegates, the two most critical issues were to begin strike pay from day one, rather than day eight, and to write into the UAW Constitution a prohibition against bargaining contracts with tiers.

On the convention floor and in its daily newsletter, UAWD pointed out that at least three UAW locals struck last year but did not receive strike pay, because they were out less than a week.

With delegates like Nolan Tabb from John Deere and Jessie Kelly, a skilled mold-maker from GM, talking about how they struck their plants for more than a week without strike pay backing them up from day one, the motion easily passed.

Later Yasin Madia, a delegate who had been out on a three-month strike against CNH Industries, made a motion to increase the weekly strike wage from the \$400 to \$500. (Just weeks before the convention the IEB had raised strike pay from \$275 to \$400. Raising the pay to \$400 had been a UAWD goal, but the IEB beat them to the punch.)

When the raise to \$500 was proposed, UAWD delegates enthusiastically supported the motion. It passed 416 yes to 231 no. The press quoted President Ray Curry as saying the motion showed delegates were prepared to use the strike weapon, if necessary, to get a good contract.

But in its final day the convention was consumed by an AC candidate for trustee receiving 63 nominating speeches rather than the two allowed under the rules.

As delegates were forced to leave, an AC delegate made a motion to reconsider the boost in strike pay, claiming the \$100 raise would disastrously reduce the strike fund — as if the money wouldn't aid striking UAW workers and their families.

This brazen trick meant that the AC caucus went on record opposing the increase after voting to increase IEB salaries. Nevertheless the motion to reduce strike pay to \$400 carried: 434 yes; 163 no.

UAWD delegates knew that everything would be an uphill battle in a convention where most delegates were either pledged to the AC or intimidated by their control.

This year the delegates' packet contained a booklet of resolutions passed by locals and an omnibus resolution that the Resolutions Committee had put together and could not be amended, only voted up or down. But the amendment against two-tiers, submitted by a couple of dozen locals, was missing.

Bill Parker, a delegate from Local 1700, motivated discussing the amendment, even if it was missing from the booklet. The tier system, he and other delegates stated, was hated by the membership, as it pitted workers against each other in negotiations. They wanted tiers removed as a bargaining issue. But the AC caucus opposed the amendment on the grounds that it "tied the hands" of the bargaining committee.

After discussion, the amendment was defeated. UAWD delegates had been pretty certain they would not win the vote, but they prioritized the discussion in preparation for the 2023 contracts. ■





Amazon workers discussing strategy at the Labor Notes conference.

jimwestphoto.com

### What Kind of Recovery?

**SW:** Given the unique circumstances because the whole world economy stopped and then restarted, and at the same time there are mounting demands from workers, can raising interest rates somehow engineer a soft landing from an inflationary surge?

If you were a mainstream economist, you might point to the new jobs report that shows an increase in both job growth and profits. Chevron, Amazon and other corporations are making record profits. Can't the economy continue to grow?

**RB:** There has been an "expansion" of capitalist recovery, even capitalist expansion. Parts of the economy, such as Amazon, have been understandably successful. But Amazon is not exactly your typical company today, although it's a very profitable one.

But most of the economy is not taking off. In any sort of expansion, raw materials such as oil and gas will be among the first commodities needed. The increased demand for these raw resources will increase prices and profitability. But this does not seem to be happening.

In this context it is really kind of criminal — I don't think that word is too strong — for the Fed to respond with a slowdown when the problem is insufficient supply.

The Fed's response to rising prices is to see the economy as overheating and moving to cool it off. This adds to the economy's inability to meet demand.

Instead, policy should be moving to underwrite public spending, such as increasing the supply of affordable housing, and cancelling student debt.

**SW:** Given the precarious situation not just in the U.S. economy but in the world economy, what are the monetary policies that might

work?

**RB:** The phrase "wage price spiral" has crept back into the economic discourse, so to speak, because it presents the story that the problem is an overheating economy.

But there is no wage price spiral — as if labor costs are interfering with capital accumulation. That's the last thing we've seen in the current period.

**SW:** What might have been done politically in contrast to the Fed's money-tightening? Biden's Build Back Better plan was a spending bill that was squashed. Now we have the Inflation Reduction Act, a smaller package to be sure, but is this the kind of policy that could rein in inflation?

**RB:** Again, you have two ways of dealing with inflation that comes with insufficient supply relative to demand. Cutting back can occur through tax increases and raising interest rates, therefore reducing the demand. That is preferred by the establishment because by slowing down output, you're slowing down the need for employment and an upward pressure on wages.

The alternative would be to do whatever it takes to raise supply. One obvious way would be to have the government directly enter into various forms of production, making things that are needed and hiring people who otherwise don't get hired.

A Green New Deal would be a way of addressing the real economic situation, as well as the climate catastrophe that we now see every day.

In this second scenario, the government would effectively be adding to output, creating both demand and a responding supply through what we call the state sector.

There are many parts of the state sector that we still rely on, such as education. So

despite rightwing propaganda, there's nothing inherent in the state sector that makes it problematic. Just the opposite, as studies have revealed. It is a problem only if you're a capitalist propagandist.

In that case, as you know, there is a pressure to privatize — even in education. We know how much of the economy has been privatized over the last 40-50 years, and what hasn't is now funded through "public-private partnerships."

### A Small Step Forward

**SW:** We're also seeing in the Inflation Reduction Act that finally Medicare will be able to negotiate drug prices, beginning with 10 drugs, in 2026, and cap out-of-pocket expenses. What impact will this have?

**RB:** I think that to give the devil his due, the Biden administration have done probably as well as you could expect in fashioning an economic recovery package. It's an interesting phenomenon, I think, that in this long neoliberal period within which we're still deeply operating, this package offers a small step forward.

The precedent of allowing government programs to negotiate prices is very important, but, as you say, it is just 10 drugs starting in 2026, and another 10 drugs each three years thereafter, so it is a very small portion of the thousands of prescription drugs used in the United States.

The scale of the impact will depend on whether more drugs can be added to the negotiable list, including the biggest money-makers that are now excluded.

**Suzi Weissman:** Because of the international situation — starting with the war in Ukraine and a shortage of wheat as well as reduced flows of gas to Europe, but also considering how the climate crisis is affecting production and immigration issues — will there be a change in the global supply chain and even in just-in-time production?

**RB:** Insofar as there could be a moderation — not an end, but a slight reduction in depending on the supply chain — it would involve at least an initial subsidy for certain things that are not being produced.

To get them produced, probably the easiest route would be through the state and through taxation of the rich and expenditure on public goods.

That term "public goods" is a vague one. But what we need is as big as possible a public sector to meet people's needs — starting with an efficient public health care system.

Even under capitalism, social democratic attempts in Scandinavia or Austria or a handful of other places, with some political commitment — although hardly nirvana — reveal a stark disparity between their quality of life and what is available in the United States. ■

## Verdict of the 2021 International Tribunal: “Guilty of Genocide”

By Steve Bloom

“GUILTY ON ALL counts” was the verdict issued in May by a panel of international jurists who heard testimony at the “Tribunal on US Human Rights Abuses Against Black, Brown, and Indigenous Peoples” held from October 23-25, 2021 at The Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Center in Washington Heights, New York City.

A preliminary “guilty” verdict was rendered the day after the close of the tribunal. The more detailed findings, which had been anxiously awaited, include a 40-plus page explanation of the “guilty” verdict which begins with the following words: “The fact that the United States of America . . . has committed an array of human rights abuses against Black, Brown, and Indigenous Peoples should be as uncontroversial as it is incontrovertible.”

The principal theme of the Tribunal, “We Still Charge Genocide,” echoes an historic 1951 petition to the United Nations — “We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government Against the Negro People” — presented by William Patterson and Paul Robeson and signed by Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, Claudia Jones, Harry Haywood and dozens of other important figures.

The entire text of the findings against the United States of America and its authorities, federal and state policing agencies and other government institutions is available on the tribunal website (<https://www.tribunal2021.com/full-final-verdict>).

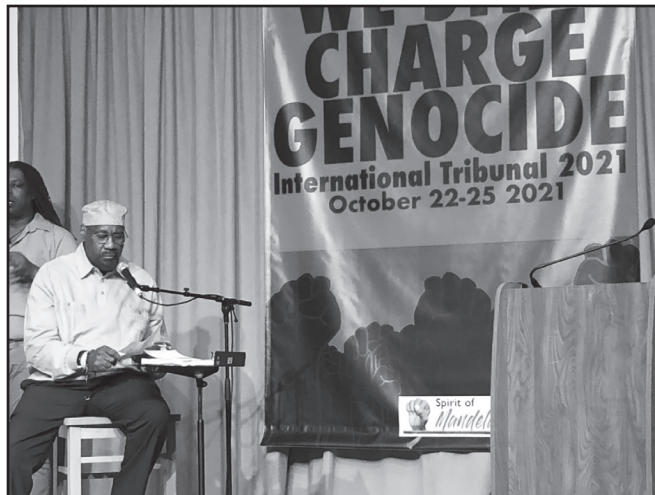
Also included are the names and backgrounds of the nine jurists and special advisory committee members. A list of witnesses and a link to the YouTube for the testimony is provided.

The text notes the widespread acceptance by scholars of “a total, relentless and pervasive genocide in the Americas” against Indigenous peoples since 1492, as well as “the consistency of broken treaties between the U.S. government and Native peoples.”

In reference to the Black population, the verdict quotes the citations by Tribunal Chief Prosecutor, prominent human-rights

---

*Steve Bloom is a New York City activist, poet and composer. He is a member of the NY Green Party State Committee.*



*Jalil Muntaqim speaking about political prisoners.*

Abbas Muntaqim

attorney Nkechi Taifa, of “racially biased executions and extrajudicial killings . . . whether by lynch mobs or officers of the law,” as well as “discriminatory treatment . . . embedded in police departments, prosecutors’ offices, and courtrooms.”

Taifa summarized: “The cumulative impact of destructive treatment against Blacks in the criminal justice system, combined with challenging conditions of life negatively impacting generations, constitutes institutionalized genocide — the human rights crisis facing 21st Century Black America.”

The verdict likewise concludes: “The colonial treatment of peoples of Puerto Rican and Mexican descent has also crossed the line beyond simple neocolonial norms, to acts of genocide.”

The findings of the jurists are based on a definition of “genocide” codified in the 1948 “United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide,” ratified by 152 nations.

In addition to forbidding mass murders, the convention also outlaws “causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” and “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.”

The Tribunal verdict draws this conclusion: “After having heard the testimony of numerous victims of Police Racism, Hyper-Mass Incarceration, Environmental

Racism, Public Health Inequities, and of Political Prisoners/ Prisoners of War, together with the expert testimonies and graphic presentations, as well as the copious documentation submitted and admitted in the record, the Panel of Jurists find the U.S. and its subdivisions GUILTY of all five counts. We find that Acts of Genocide have been committed.”

### In the Spirit of Mandela

The 2021 International Tribunal was organized by a coalition of human rights advocates in the United States, working under an umbrella organization which

called itself “In the Spirit of Mandela,” later shortened to, simply, “Spirit of Mandela.” The Spirit of Mandela indictment contained five counts: Police racism and violence; mass incarceration; political prisoners and prisoners of war; environmental racism; and public health inequities.

The accused parties were informed of the indictment and invited to present a defense to the Tribunal, but failed to appear or respond. The *San Francisco Bay View* sent a reporter to cover the event. In-person attendance was limited due to COVID restrictions, but there was an extensive on-line audience for the live stream.

“This is another historic — and now fully updated — finding that the U.S. is continuing to engage in institutional genocide on multiple fronts against Black, Brown and Indigenous peoples,” said one Coordinating Committee member of the Spirit of Mandela coalition, which has continued to meet monthly since the end of the tribunal itself, pledging that its efforts to combat genocide can and will continue.

The tribunal was not the culmination of that effort, but just the beginning. Spirit of Mandela is urging community, religious and political groups to organize talks and publish articles on the Jurists’ findings, and to join in efforts to hold the U.S. government legally accountable for these crimes. The coalition website is [www.spiritofmandela.org](http://www.spiritofmandela.org). ■

## From Duterte to Marcos: Philippines: Continuity of Violence

By Alex de Jong

IN 1986, MASS protest overthrew Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Thirty-six years later, his son was elected president. The 2022 elections have crowned a decades-long project aimed at returning the Marcos dynasty to power and shown the support for Rodrigo Duterte's authoritarianism.

A late surge in the campaign of Marcos' main rival, the liberal candidate Leni Robredo, was not enough to turn the tide. Over 31 million people cast their vote for Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., twice as many as for Robredo. It is true that fraud influenced the results of the general elections, which also saw members of Congress and Senate elected, but such irregularities cannot explain the gap between Marcos and Robredo.

The mass support for Bongbong is real — what needs explaining is how the son of the dictator became so popular. Since the overthrow of Marcos Sr. almost all Philippine presidents came to power as opponents of the incumbent. But Bongbong represents an unusual level of continuity. Those who wanted a continuation of the incumbent regime cast their vote for Bongbong and his running mate, Sara Duterte, Rodrigo's daughter.

### Duterte's Lethal Presidency

During his six-year term, Duterte maintained a high level of popularity. The bloody mayhem of his "war on drugs," the president's seemingly unpredictable behavior, violent misogyny and contempt for bourgeois respectability were not expressions of political incompetence, as some liberal critics thought. Rather the opposite: Duterte styled himself as an outsider to the establishment, coming to power by riding the dissatisfaction over thirty years of nominal liberal democracy in the Philippines and its inability to address concerns ranging from mass poverty to poor infrastructure.

Duterte successfully marginalized his opponents by branding them as representatives of a failed and hypocritical system that for decades failed to live up to its promises. In the words of three Philippine socialists, decades of neoliberal policies left millions "economically struggling and politically disillusioned," prompting disenchantment with

---

*Alex de Jong is co-director of the International Institute for Research in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.*

the 1986 "People Power Revolution:"

"From the mid-1990s onward, a tide of resentment slowly emerged among the lower classes. Many became more sceptical of the version of events promoted by liberals, before eventually turning their back on them."<sup>1</sup>

After coming to power in 2016, Duterte was described by some as a "Bonapartist" figure — a political leader during, in the words of Friedrich Engels, an "exceptional period," "when the warring classes are so nearly equal in strength that the state apparatus, as apparent mediator, acquires for the moment a certain independence from the immediate (or, indeed, indirect) control of these classes."<sup>2</sup> Early on, it could seem as if Duterte, who engaged in populist rhetoric about the rights of working people and support for "the masses," did not represent established capitalist circles.

Duterte was even allied with the main current of the Philippine Left, the National-Democratic (ND) movement. This movement includes the underground, Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) as well as above-ground, legal social organisations and political groups.

Long before 2016, the ND movement already cooperated with Duterte when he was mayor of Davao City. In mid-2016, Renato Reyes, the general secretary of Bayan (a coalition of ND mass organizations) referred to the newly elected Duterte as an "ally," based on "his track record and long-standing relationship with the revolutionary forces."

"It is the first time that we have this kind of an alliance with a sitting president," Reyes added.<sup>3</sup> The CPP used similar terms, referring to Duterte as a "friend" of the National-Democratic movement, with whom it was "forging an alliance" with great potential.<sup>4</sup> According to Luis Jalandoni, chief negotiator of the movement's diplomatic wing, "the relationship between the revolutionary movement and President Duterte" was "excellent."<sup>5</sup>

In a moment that seemed charged with symbolism, Duterte invited leaders of the ND bloc to the presidential palace where, their fists raised, they together posed for pictures. On Duterte's invitation, several prominent leaders of the movement served as members of his cabinet.

But this was not a situation in which the "warring classes" were "nearly equal in strength." Labor did not threaten capital. Since the crisis in the early 2000s, the number of Philippine workers covered by collective bargaining agreements has decreased by over 50 percent. Unionization rates have gone through a similar decline.

### False Promises

Duterte capitalized on dissatisfaction over increasing precarization by (falsely) promising to take measures against short-term contracts. Of the employed population, almost 40 percent work in the vulnerable, difficult to organize "informal" economy.

The most popular leftist candidate for Senate in 2016, National-Democrat Neri Colmenares, won almost 6.5 million votes — to win a seat, he would have needed over twice that number.

The Maoist guerilla movement in the meantime is far from threatening state power. After half a century, it is in its own words, still in the first, "defensive" phase.

It did not take long before Duterte's alliance with the ND-left started to fray. Previously, Duterte had profited from the alliance. But once in power, he dropped his erstwhile allies, preferring to establish good relations with a stronger force: the notoriously anti-communist military.

Duterte's populist rhetoric, such as his promise to end short-term contractual labor and his support for peace talks with the Maoist guerilla forces, disappeared.

As a relatively unknown figure on the national level, Duterte could seem to be a "mediator" in a more limited sense — not between capital and labor, but between different capitalist factions. However, it became clear that the supposed "outsider" in fact had strong relations with powerful representatives of the political establishment such as former president (and current member of Congress) Gloria Macapagal Arroyo as well as with the Marcos dynasty.

A few weeks after Duterte's election, charges of fraud against Arroyo were dismissed, and a few months later Ferdinand Marcos was buried at the national cemetery, fulfilling a long-standing wish of his family.

Duterte's regime was in many ways similar to that of previous presidents, rather

than a “Bonapartist” regime or a dictatorship in the mould of that of Ferdinand Marcos Sr.

Not only do Philippine presidents already have extensive powers, Duterte’s continuing high approval ratings meant he had no use to institutionalize a dictatorship or raise the autonomy of the executive branch to unprecedented new levels, a Philippine socialist remarked.

One thing that distinguished the dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. from Duterte, historian Vicent L. Rafael writes, “was the former’s penchant for imprisoning his political enemies.”<sup>6</sup> There were about 70,000 recorded incarcerations under Marcos Sr. The number of political prisoners under Duterte was much lower.

Rather than mass arrests, Duterte used intimidation. The arrest of a high level critic, as Senator Leila de Lima, was an exception that was successful in intimidating others. And rather than closing down news-outlets like Marcos Sr. had one, Duterte used targeted legal harassment against a prominent journalist, like Maria Ressa. Walden Bello’s arrest in early August shows that the new Marcos regime will use similar methods.

Many of the techniques that Duterte used to strengthen his hold on power were similar to those of previous presidents. The left, the ND movement prominent among them, was targeted for repression. Duterte denounced legal activists as members of the underground CPP and hundreds of progressive activists have been killed.

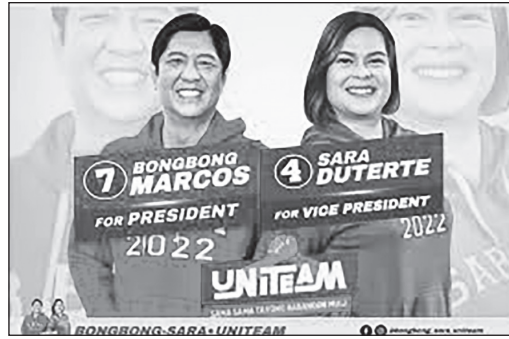
Supporters of the Philippine section of the Fourth International also became targets, and several comrades were killed.<sup>7</sup>

The use of “red tagging” was not unique to Duterte nor was his use of death squads. During her presidency in the early 2010s, Gloria Arroyo used such tools when her position seemed to be threatened.

To maintain power, law expert Tony La Viña remarked, Duterte “weaponized the law and Congress, using legal instruments to justify moves to stifle critics. Duterte has also succeeded in packing both the House of Representatives and the traditionally independent Senate with his allies, who voted on bills and resolutions based on his wishes.” His predecessors used similar techniques; “Duterte, obviously, did it better by being more ruthless. That’s really the difference.”<sup>8</sup>

Of the promises he made, Duterte only really held to one; to organize large-scale killings. This is the essential difference between Duterte and his predecessors. There were some 3,257 extrajudicial killings during the Marcos dictatorship. The number of such killings under Duterte is much higher — the victims of the “war on drugs” number in the tens of thousands.

The first victims were supposedly drug-users and dealers, but it did not take long for activists and government critics to



The old dynasty hitches its star to the new one.

also become targets. The threat of being included on one of the public lists of so-called “drug personalities” became an effective tool of intimidation.

It is a sign of the state of bourgeois democracy in the Philippines that these levels of state-sanctioned violence did not require Duterte to make radical institutional changes, let alone declare a dictatorship.

### Transferring Power

In an article published shortly after the elections, Philippine scholar and activist Walden Bello also pointed to disappointment with liberal democracy as a driving force behind the elections of Duterte and Marcos.

*“Though probably inchoate and diffuse at the level of conscious motivation, the vote for Duterte and the even larger vote for Marcos were propelled by widespread resentment at the persistence of gross inequality in a country where less than 5 percent of the population corners over 50 percent of the wealth.*

*“It was a protest against the extreme poverty that engulfs 25 percent of the people and the poverty, broadly defined, that has about 40 percent of them in its clutches”*

This resentment is an important part of the explanation, but also raises especially the question why many of the poor, who have little to gain from the continuation of neoliberal policies, voted for Duterte and Marcos specifically.

Structural, constant poverty and the lack of a credible progressive alternative can lead to widespread feelings of resignation, and the search for an outside force, such as a benevolent leader, that can provide help to people whose back is against the wall. Hopes for such aid are often coupled with fear of instability that would upset an already precarious balance.

For an under- and unemployed sub-proletariat, which lacks reserves or means to defend to itself, and without experiences of collective power, any kind of instability first of all appears as a threat. Duterte and Marcos played on such feelings of despair and lowered expectations by promising a paternalistic, caring leadership.

The election of Marcos Jr. was hardly his

own, personal achievement. It was not the election of a person “but a clan that has regained power,” as Pierre Rousset writes.<sup>10</sup> The election was the outcome of a project that lasted for decades.

The first steps of the Marcos dynasty back towards the presidential palace were taken in the nineties when the widow of the former dictator, Imelda Marcos, ran for president. Imelda, a skilled political operator, lost but her campaigns ensured that the Marcos name remained visible.

Respectable bourgeois politicians joined Imelda’s well-financed campaigns, helping the Marcos dynasty to rid itself of the stigma associated with the dictatorship.

With the help of billions looted during the dictatorship, the Marcos dynasty rebuilt its powers as members of the family were elected to regional and national seats.

Even the ND left played a small part in enabling the political career of Marcos Jr. In 2010, Marcos Jr. successfully ran for Senate as part of a coalition that also included the ND movement.<sup>11</sup> The campaign provided the picture of Marcos Jr. sharing a platform with people who had been political prisoners under his father.

On Facebook and Twitter, bots, influencers and trolls harass critics of Marcos & Duterte, spread incredible stories about their accomplishments, and present the dictatorship as a golden age of the Philippines. The scale and reach of this disinformation machine shows there is considerable money and organization behind it.

Related to the role of the wealth of the Marcos dynasty is also the role of patronage. A practice rooted in the colonial past, patronage “provides an idiom for articulating demands from below” with “clients of whatever social class having traditionally called upon those in power to live up to their obligations.”

These “patron-client ties, bound by reciprocal obligations but also prone to disruption, reinforce social hierarchy and ongoing inequality between the two parties, narrowing the chances for popular democracy.”<sup>12</sup>

As the highest ranking patrons in the country, Philippine presidents use such ties to maintain the support of politicians by doling out jobs, positions, money.

Usually, these ties fray as a president’s near the end of their terms and clients look for new patrons. Duterte did not escape this dynamic, but much of his network was transferred to the new top-patron.

As Philippine socialists pointed out, “local leaders would not have risked their own positions had they not sensed that the ground was already shifting beneath their feet and that Bongbong was on course for a landslide.”<sup>13</sup> Duterte opened the door

for Marcos Jr. His violence and intimidation helped further marginalize the opposition. Patronage, disinformation, widespread social despair and his association with Duterte brought Bongbong to power.

### The Left and its Options

A majority of the left-wing forces, from progressive liberals to socialists (including the ND-bloc), supported the campaign of Robredo. Robredo, who has a background as a human rights lawyer and whose personal integrity is recognized by many, was seen by some as someone who could not just be a “lesser evil” but be pushed towards some progressive reforms. For other left-wing activists, supporting the liberal candidate was a necessary emergency response to the prospect of a Marcos returning to power.

For yet others, most prominently the ND-movement, supporting one bourgeois candidate against another is their standard approach. The NDs and their activist networks are useful for candidates looking to mobilize people in the streets, and the mass-meetings of Robredo’s campaign would probably not have been so successful without them.

Still, it seems that the liberal camp had not forgiven them for their earlier support for Duterte and the ND candidates were treated rather coldly. In the 2022 elections, the ND bloc lost over half of its seats.

Only one opposition candidate was elected to the senate: Risa Hontiveros of Akbayan, a social-democratic group that has become closely associated with Robredo’s Liberal Party.

A part of the radical left took a different approach. The 2022 elections saw the first openly socialist presidential campaign in the Philippines, that of trade-union leader Leody de Guzman, with Walden Bello as his running mate.<sup>14</sup> Their campaign also endorsed a number of senatorial candidates, including Neri Colmenares and Risa Hontiveros.

The goal of the campaign was to bring “a revolutionary perspective to public attention” and build “the political and organizational infrastructure that will be needed to make such initiatives sustainable.”

Considering the difficulties facing such an initiative, there were some positive signs. In 2016, running for Senate, Walden Bello gained a little over one million votes (2.41 percent). This year, socialist Senatorial candidate Luke Espiritu won almost 3.5 million votes (6.21 percent), while Neri Colmenares retained most of his support. It should be taken into account, however, that voters can choose 12 different senatorial candidates.

The campaign did bring socialist ideas and proposals for structural change to a national platform. But the results of 0.17 of the vote for De Guzman, and a similar result for Bello’s vice-presidential candidacy must have come as disappointments for many of their

supporters.

To move forward, there needs to be an open debate on what strategic orientation socialists should take. In any case, many of the forces that came forward to support Robredo will be essential to building a credible left-wing opposition.

### What to Expect?

It is too early to predict what a Marcos presidency will look like in detail but we can expect a “Dutertismo without Duterte.” Going by recent statements, the “war on drugs,” having fulfilled its function, will at least for now be dialled back. Any hope for justice for the victims or punishment of the perpetrators will be in vain, and the “war” can be re-started whenever the president deems it necessary. We can expect the repression of progressive activists to continue.

The economic re-orientation towards China of Philippine capitalism, started before Duterte but gathering speed during his term, will also continue. During Duterte’s term, Chinese investments were encouraged, and China’s importance as a foreign market as well as foreign investor in the Philippines is rapidly growing.<sup>15</sup>

The Philippines remains a peripheral capitalist economy, exporting raw resources, agricultural products and some low-value-added goods, while much foreign investment goes to land speculation and low-wage sectors.

The growing economic ties with China will for the foreseeable future be combined with military and political links with the United States. Maintaining such links is a priority for Washington, which will ignore human rights violations by Philippine presidents in return for their allegiance. Inside the Philippines, U.S. support is also still seen as the only credible counter-weight to China’s deeply unpopular encroachments on Philippine rights in the South-China Sea.

In the article cited, Bello looks forward to “millions realizing they have not been led to the promised land of milk and honey” when they see that Marcos is unable to meet their expectations. But that Duterte similarly broke his promises was not held against him. Duterte successfully blamed his failures on bureaucratic obstacles and especially on obstruction by his political rivals.

Will Marcos, like Duterte before him, be able to turn disappointment into his advantage by directing it against his rival? Marcos has the advantage that compared to Duterte he made few concrete promises to begin with.

Will he succeed in keeping his capitalist allies united and rule through control of the existing institutions, or do away with the institutions of bourgeois democracy?

With such widespread support, a weakened opposition, and much of the capitalist class united behind him, the latter option

does not seem necessary for Marcos Jr.

With a discredited political center, a left that is not seen as a credible alternative by many of the poor and oppressed, and widespread support for authoritarian politics, the Philippines offers a political landscape that is hardly unique in either the Global North or South. More peculiar for the Philippines is a tradition of widespread social resistance and extensive activist networks.

The position of Marcos Jr. seems secure — just as that of his father in the late seventies. And yet, some years later, he and his father needed to be evacuated from the country by the U.S. Air Force.

The same structural problems that brought Duterte and Marcos to power could be their undoing. But for these problems to stop producing monsters like the Marcoses and Duterte, much work in political organizing and building a socialist alternative will be needed. ■

### Notes

1. Herbert Docena, Maria Khristine Alvarez, Joshua Makalintal, “By Failing to Transform the Philippines, Liberals Paved the Way for the Reactionary Right,” *Jacobinmag*, online [jacobin.com/2022/08/philippines-reactionary-right-ferdinand-marcos-jr-liberals-reform].
2. Frederick Engels, *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, online [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/ch09.htm].
3. Renato Reyes Jr, “Left won’t fold flags despite alliance with Duterte,” *Rappler*, online [https://www.rappler.com/voices/imho/138512-philippines-left-duterte-alliance].
4. *Ang Bayan*, July 7, 2016, 1 and *Ang Bayan*, June 7, 2016, 1.
5. Quoted in *Ang Bayan*, August 21, 2016, 3.
6. Vicente L. Rafael, *The Sovereign Trickster. Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022, 98.
7. RPM-M, “Statement of Condemnation on the Murder of Comrade Ruben” (March 5, 2017), online: [shorturat/djFY], “Statement regarding the killing of Comrade Zandro/Tripón” (December 27, 2021), online: [shorturl.at/l.op023].
8. Mara Cepeda, “Duterte crushes opposition, serves Marcos power on a silver platter,” *Rappler*, online: [rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/duterte-crushes-opposition-serves-marcos-power-on-silver-platter].
9. Walden Bello, “Why the son of a hated dictator won the Philippine elections,” *FPIF*, online: [fpif.org/why-the-son-of-a-hated-dictator-won-the-philippine-elections].
10. Pierre Rousset, “Philippines: Ferdinand Marcos Jr. succeeds Rodrigo Duterte and his clan completes the reconquest of power,” *IVP*, online: [internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7752].
11. “Philippine left backs Villar, Legarda,” online: [https://news.abs-cbn.com/nation/12/14/09/philippine-left-backs-villar-legarda?page=1].
12. Vicente L. Rafael, “The Return of the Marcoses,” *NYRB*, online: [https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2022/07/21/the-return-of-the-marcoses].
13. Herbert Docena, Maria Khristine Alvarez, “Pariah to President,” *NLR Sidecar*, online: [https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/pariah-to-president].
14. Maria Khristine Alvarez, Joshua Makalintal, Herbert Docena, “The Philippine Left Has an Opportunity to Break the Country’s Political Mold,” *Jacobinmag*, online: [https://jacobin.com/2022/03/philippines-social-democrats-communists-election-marcos-duterte-robredo].
15. Alvin Camba and Rongchen Jiang, “Beyond Infrastructure: Chinese Capital in the Philippines Under Duterte,” *The Diplomat*, online: [thediplomat.com/2022/04/beyond-infrastructure-chinese-capital-in-the-philippines-under-duterte].

# “Can I at Least Have My Scarf?”

By Anan Ameri

IF YOU HAVE never been to Jerusalem, you might not know what I am talking about.

Jerusalem is not like any other city; I do not think there is any place like it in the whole world. Jerusalem has its own colors, its own noise and its own smell — and I love it all.

I love the walled city of Jerusalem, or the old city as we the Palestinians call it. I love the Palestinian peasants and the way they guard their own niche.

The women with their tanned faces (even in February) fill the entrance to the city. They have been coming here, day in and day out, for generations.

They bring their fruits, vegetables and other produce; they bring their children too. They sit on the sidewalks with their colorful embroidered dresses, their large, bright, pink and blue wool scarves, protecting them from the wind and the cold.

I love the noise of the crowded city, the vendors, the men with their headdresses, the playing boys and girls. I love the smell of freshly baked bread, the spices, the olives and the *zaater*.

And I love the blend of all these colors, noises and smells: They make me experience my senses in a unique fashion. They give me a sense of security, of belonging; they reaffirm the identity of the city. They reassure me that Jerusalem is still an Arab city, a Palestinian city.

Whenever I go to Palestine I can't wait to go to Jerusalem. I go there almost every day. My sister who lives in Ramallah, the only connection our family still has to our land, does not understand my lack of creativity. She keeps telling me about other beautiful places in Palestine.

“Maybe tomorrow I will go there,” I say. Tomorrow comes, and I go back to Jerusalem. I hurry there as if I am going to my first love date, which I do not want to miss.

*Anan Ameri is a long-time leading activist in the Palestinian American community and served as the first president of Palestine Aid Society. She is the founding director of the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn. This article is reprinted from ATC 89, November-December 2000. A review of the second volume of her memoir, The Wandering Palestinian, is on page 33 of this issue.*

## Childhood

In Jerusalem I walk the streets of Sheikh Jarrah, my childhood neighborhood. I try to locate our home, where I lived between the ages of three and six.

I remember the house very well, but I cannot locate it. I know that I come very close, but never quite there.

In that home I had my earliest memories: beautiful memories and sad ones too. There I had my first lesson about life and birth. From the balcony of my bedroom I watched the birth of a baby goat on a warm spring morning.

There, I remember the joy on my father's face when he got me a baby lamb that I had been asking for. I was frightened by it but would not admit it. Instead I would say, “Take the lamb away, it is scared of me, God will punish me if I scare it any more.” That was my father's favorite story about my childhood.

In that house I explored with the neighbor's son the differences in our bodies as we played doctors. I felt very embarrassed when my mother caught us. Somehow I knew that was not the right thing to do.

And in that house, when not quite five, I learned more about gender differences: Boys are more valuable than girls. I learned that when my brother was born. I do not remember how I learned that, but I did.

In that house I learned my first lesson about love and violence, when my sister and I suffocated our pet chicken. We had left it in a bag, afraid it would fly away if it were free.

I often wonder if I really want to find my childhood home. If I did, I would ask my mother. I would ask a relative or a family friend. But to find my childhood home is also to find my childhood memories. Happy ones and sad ones.

I do not ask, I do not find the house, but I come very close by walking the streets of Sheikh Jarrah.

## Adulthood

I leave Sheikh Jarrah and my memories, heading to the walled section of the city. I always enter, as in a ritual, through the Damascus Gate. There is something majestic about this gate.

I keep entering the city this way, though I

was almost shot right here not so long ago. That was in 1989, when I came to participate in the International Peace March.

Peace — or do I mean the peace march? — was shattered as the Israeli bullets filled the place. I got very scared. An Italian woman lost her eye. I felt bad for her. She came all the way from Italy chanting peace; she left with one eye.

My routine first stop in the city of Jerusalem is the falafel stand. If I manage to get to the city early enough I would instead go to Zalatemo, the ancient restaurant. There I get the *mutaba* (cheese turnover).

My father used to bring us to Zalatemo for breakfast on Friday mornings before 1967. It was a one-hour drive from Amman, Jordan, where we lived then. As a child I was fascinated by the place rather than the food. The people who worked there looked as ancient as their place.

My father must have loved Jerusalem too — he kept coming here on Friday mornings. Then came 1967; we could not visit Jerusalem any more.

I became an American citizen. Now I can go to Jerusalem, my childhood city. They have occupied it, annexed it, suffocated it with their ugly high-rise settlements, but the color, the noise and the smell of the city are Palestinian.

In the old city of Jerusalem I buy gifts. Here I buy Palestinian pottery. I carry it by hand across the Atlantic Ocean. I bring part of Jerusalem and its beautiful colors to my home. Also the smell: I bring *zaater*.

In the old city of Jerusalem, too, I bought my Palestinian dress. In America, I wear my Palestinian embroidered dress. I wear it to the big parties, to the special celebrations.

I get lots of compliments. I proudly respond: “I bought it on Jerusalem. It is a traditional Palestinian dress. Peasant women in my country still wear it.”

## The Scarf

On my last trip to Jerusalem, I bought myself a Palestinian wool scarf. It is bright pink and I love it. I get as many compliments on it as on my dress, although I do not wear them together, like the peasant women in my country.

continued on page 32

## Echoes of Money in Times Past By Daniel Johnson

THE PHILOSOPHER FRANCIS Bacon once wrote that “money is like muck, not good except it be spread.” Known today primarily as Renaissance England’s foremost advocate of modern scientific methods, Bacon was also not averse to dispensing folksy medieval proverbs.

Indeed, for most people in the later Middle Ages and early modern Europe it was common knowledge that money, like shit, served little purpose (and stank) when hoarded. When spread widely, however, it acted as a fertilizer that promoted growth. Written in the wake of a popular rebellion in the English Midlands in 1607, Bacon’s “Of Seditious and Troubles” was a cautionary tale that warned rulers of the dangers of extreme inequality.<sup>1</sup>

Since the Great Recession of 2008, the fundamentally political nature of money has reentered public consciousness. Journalists and academics have noted that until the creation of central banking systems (the U.S. Federal Reserve was established in 1913) monetary policy was a frequent subject of popular political debate.<sup>2</sup>

Post-Great Recession policies of quantitative easing, the emergence of Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) on the progressive left and cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin on the libertarian right, and fiscal measures to mitigate the economic fallout from COVID-19 have revealed money to be subject to social and political action.<sup>3</sup>

If analysts have rediscovered money’s political roots, few have noted that it was in Bacon’s time, roughly the era between the 16th and 18th centuries, that modern ideas about money were forged. The development of agrarian capitalism in England engendered social relations dependent on markets, cash, and new forms of credit. Financial innovations were central to economic development, and by the late 17th century England and its American colonies began novel experiments with paper monies.

While understanding modern developments like the gold standard and central banking is important, awareness of the historical relationship between money and capitalism — and opposition to it — also requires a longer view.<sup>4</sup>

Money is not what comes to mind when most people think of Francis Bacon. The same is true of later Enlightenment figures like John Locke, Isaac Newton, and Benjamin Franklin. Yet these men were all deeply engaged in the politics of currency



*Francis Bacon warned rulers of the dangers of inequality.*

during a formative period of monetary development.

Importantly, working people in the age of agrarian and merchant capitalism also felt entitled to engage in debates and direct actions over monetary policy and credit relations.

They knew that money was not simply a natural consequence of market exchange and the emergence of the modern state but was fundamentally about relations of power. And if it was about

power, it was also political, and could therefore be put in the service of the common good.

### England’s Culture of Money

In 1578, seven years after Parliament legalized an interest rate of 8%, the clergyman Philipp Caesar attacked England’s “damnable sect of usurers.” His blistering 75-page polemic cited authorities from Aristotle to Aquinas to argue that the “breeding of money” was unnatural, unlawful, and immoral.

Caesar also referenced unrepayable levels of debt when he noted that in ancient Rome debtors were often “compelled to give their bodies into slavery.” Debt bondage led to popular insurrections and the abolition of forced debt slavery — a popular victory in Rome that, Caesar implied, could be repeated should the English state not rethink its policy.<sup>5</sup>

The usury law and Caesar’s diatribe were symptoms of a society undergoing major change. The enclosure movement, which privatized common lands for commercial agricultural production, removed many people’s traditional sources of subsistence. The consolidation of farms and the transition from arable to less labor-intensive pasture lands for wool production threw multitudes off the land and out of work. Common people responded to enclosures by pulling down fences and destroying hedges.<sup>6</sup>

Intellectuals also took note of profound changes then underway. Thomas More attacked enclosures and the raising of sheep in *Utopia*, first published in 1516. Raphael Hythloday, More’s fictional world traveler who visited the South Pacific Commonwealth of Utopia, was scandalized by English society, noting that previously “sheep used to be so meek and eat so little.” Now, however, “they are becoming so greedy and wild that they devour human beings themselves.”

In communist Utopia, by contrast, not only was private property abolished, so too was money. For More (or rather Hythloday), contemporaries’ fascination with rare metals like silver and gold was an unfortunate product of human folly. Things of real value — air, water, soil — were freely given by

*Daniel Johnson teaches in the Department of American Culture and Literature at Bilkent University. He is the author of Making the Early Modern Metropolis: Culture and Power in Pre-Revolutionary Philadelphia (University of Virginia, 2022).*

Nature. Utopia's value system represented a rejection of a growing obsession with monetary accumulation.<sup>7</sup>

More was executed in 1535 — not for being a communist (which he wasn't), but for refusing to acknowledge the supremacy of King Henry VIII and his new Church of England. Henry's break with the papacy and the creation of a national church was followed by the dissolution of the monasteries, institutions of social welfare whose lands were quickly purchased by the gentry.<sup>8</sup>

While his destruction of the monasteries is well-known, in 1544 Henry also initiated the debasement of English coin to pay for war with France and his lavish lifestyle. Though the disastrous inflationary policy was abandoned in 1551, in subsequent decades prices continued to rise while wages stagnated.

New forms of credit substituted for a lack of cash, transforming traditional social relationships and producing an explosion of lawsuits, defaults, and incarceration in debtor's prison.<sup>9</sup> Critics lamented the profiteering and corruption of merchants and landlords, while popular hostility to debtors' prison and exploitative jailers became a feature of English society that lasted well into the 19th century.

**T**he growing importance of money, credit, and debt in Renaissance England's "golden age" was evident in popular culture. Thomas Lupton's *All for Money*, first performed in London in 1577, examined the threat to traditional morality posed by a profit-oriented society.

So, too, in different ways did the plays of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare. If commerce corroded traditional bonds and unrepayable debt portended unfreedom, currency also offered pleasures of consumption unimaginable to previous generations.<sup>10</sup>

Money's ability to reduce customary relations to a universal cash equivalent was satirized by John Taylor in *A Shilling; Or, the Travailes of Twelve-Pence* (1621). The poem's narrator, a personified shilling, recounts its adventures from the mines of Potosi (site of fabulous silver wealth for the Spanish Empire in Bolivia) to contemporary England. Born from the labor of an enslaved Indigenous miner, the shilling voyages across the Atlantic and passes through the hands of hundreds of people from every imaginable walk of life.

Taylor suggests the otherworldly power of money when noting that the life of the twelve-pence "is like a perpetual motion in continual travel, to whose journey there can be no end, until the world come to a final dissolution and period."<sup>11</sup>

Money was also prominent in a burgeoning literature of crime. In an environment of monetary scarcity some localities resorted to the use of unofficial tokens for trade; according to historian Deborah Valenze there were more than 3,000 "tokeners" in mid-17th century London.<sup>12</sup>

Even more common was the distribution of counterfeit and "clipped" coin. Clipping involved shaving the edges off silver coins, with the shavings melted down into bullion and then sold abroad or used to manufacture more coin.

Importantly, most of the English population did not see coin clipping and counterfeiting as particularly nefarious acts. Though counterfeiting was made a capital offense under Queen Elizabeth I, many people saw money-makers as skilled craftsmen who made currency more plentiful when the state failed to provide an adequate medium of exchange. The representation of some of these figures in crime stories reinforced

an image of the counterfeiting outlaw as a popular hero.<sup>13</sup>

## From Common Good to Public Interest

Social critics in Tudor England used a language of the "commonweal" to attack the greed and antisocial hoarding of money and resources that characterized the new economic order. By the early 17th century, however, some theorists suggested that since the desire for private gain was part of human nature, perhaps this desire could be harnessed for the general betterment of the nation.

Economic writers increasingly promoted improved business practices, the rationalization of agriculture, and domestic industrial production to enhance national economic growth. Justifications of the pursuit of private interest substituted an individualized and abstract "public interest" for the collective commonweal.<sup>14</sup>

New concepts and forms of measurement lent scientific support to supporters of individual accumulation. William Petty, a founding theorist of political economy (or "political arithmetic"), pioneered the use of statistics to measure time, space, and population — the latter now monetized in terms of labor productivity. Classifying working people in relation to their economic value quantified the potential wealth of the nation; it also instrumentalized and objectified the laboring population.<sup>15</sup>

The most notorious proponent of the pursuit of private gain in the alleged public interest was Bernard Mandeville, a physician originally from Rotterdam in the Netherlands. In *Fable of the Bees; or, Private Vices, Public Benefits*, Mandeville turned conventional wisdom on its head by arguing that what made man sociable was not his desire for company, good nature, friendliness, or other virtues.

Rather, it was his "vilest and most hateful qualities" of self-love that were "the most necessary accomplishments to fit him for the largest and, according to the world, the happiest and most flourishing societies."<sup>16</sup> Mandeville also supported an emerging "utility of poverty" social theory. According to this idea, keeping wages low and money scarce encouraged the poor to labor industriously while creating a favorable balance of trade by increasing exports.

Working people's ignorance of the world beyond work was also essential to "public" happiness. For Mandeville the



Portrait commemorating the defeat of the Spanish symbolizing her international power. One of three





Armada, depicted in the background. Queen Elizabeth I's hand rests on the globe, known versions of the "Armada Portrait."

movement for free charity schools was a serious error, for the more workers knew of the world, the less willingly would they endure the "hardships and fatigues" of their labor.<sup>17</sup>

Mandeville's belief in the public virtues of private vice was too extreme for mainstream English society. The thought of John Locke, the father of modern liberalism, was by contrast enormously influential.

In Locke's view the historical introduction of money to exchange removed any natural limitations to appropriation, thereby invalidating the idea that everyone should have access to what is required for the satisfaction of needs. According to the political theorist C.B. Macpherson, Locke's most important philosophical achievement was "to base the property right on natural right and natural law, and then to remove all the natural law limits from the property right."<sup>18</sup> Locke's famed views of property were unthinkable without the technology of money.

Locke was also a founding shareholder in the Bank of England, established in 1694 to fund war with France. The bank was the first to make loans to the government in paper notes rather than coins, while those who bought interest-bearing shares in the bank could sell them on a developing stock market. The bank's union of private and public interests was a pivotal moment in the history of modern money; it was a political project that tied a nascent capitalist class to the

national state.<sup>19</sup>

The creation of the Bank of England was also a response to a severe monetary and political crisis. England's coin was severely debased by the late 17th century, and the outbreak of war with France in 1689 threatened to further diminish the nation's money supply.

Authorities were in general agreement on the need to call in and remint the nation's coin, though a lack of consensus over how this should be done produced a vigorous debate in London. Secretary of the Treasury William Lowndes held a modern view of money as simply a unit of account and argued for a recoinage with twenty percent less silver in each coin. Creditors would be repaid with coins containing less silver than was originally contracted, but this was a small price to pay to avoid a drastic fall in the amount of money in circulation.<sup>20</sup>

Locke maintained a traditional belief in rare metals' "intrinsic value," and felt that to maintain public trust in the nation's money and the new bank the state should recoin silver at its original value. His opponents pointed out that returning reminted coins at their face value would drastically reduce the total number in circulation.

Locke's faction was ultimately victorious, and in early 1696 Parliament passed the Recoinage Act. As the deadline for getting coins to the bank drew near, rumors of insurrection circulated throughout the country. Townspeople rioted in Kendal and Halifax, as did the miners of Derbyshire.

Though fear of generalized upheaval delayed the government's implementation of the law, the summer recoinage nearly halved the value of England's coins, with those able to buy up and send silver to the government — landlords, merchants, bankers, tax collectors — benefiting while interest rates skyrocketed and common people unable to sell or send their silver to the mint were left with worthless coins.<sup>21</sup>

Locke also suggested that counterfeiters and coin clippers might be a greater threat to England's safety than the military might of absolutist France. Another new law, the Coin Act of 1697, made it a capital offense to clip, adulterate, or pass counterfeited money.

To help enforce a law many would view as unduly severe, in 1699 Sir Isaac Newton was named Master of the Mint, a post he held for close to 30 years. The famed scientist was at the time equally famous for his ruthless pursuit of counterfeiters, having established a nationwide network of spies (in which Newton himself reportedly traveled in disguise) to catch those who violated the state's monetary monopoly. Newton defended his pitiless opposition to mercy for offenders by asserting counterfeiters were incorrigible: "like dogs," they were "ever ready to return to their vomit."<sup>22</sup>

By the time of Newton's retirement Great Britain had become a major global power and England was the richest country in the world. Some scholars have written of a "consumer revolution" in England and British America in the 18th century, as colonial agricultural goods and English manufactures enriched free people on both sides of the Atlantic.

Colonists expressed their identity as Britons largely through the purchase of commodities produced in the metropole.<sup>23</sup> Yet as in England, money scarcity meant that colonial consumption required credit, resulting in unfavorable balances of trade with the home country and widespread debt

within the colonies. If anything, money was even more divisive in the Americas.

## Making Money in the Americas

Francis Bacon was an investor in the Virginia Company, the joint-stock organization that funded England's first permanent colony in America in 1607 — the same year, in fact, of the Midlands rebellion that inspired “Of Seditious and Troubles.”

By this time Spain had been plundering the Americas for over a century, killing millions of Native Americans in the process. A century before 1619, when English colonists in Virginia purchased “20 and odd” captive Africans from a passing privateer, Spain and Portugal began forcing enslaved people to their American colonies to labor in silver mines and, increasingly, on plantations.<sup>24</sup>

Since there was no gold or silver in the northern parts of America free of Spanish rule, the English had to look for other sources of profit. They found their cash crop when John Rolfe (husband of the famed Powhatan princess Pocahontas) planted a Trinidadian strain of tobacco in Virginia.

Cultivating tobacco was labor intensive, and the indentured servants from England who constituted the primary workforce in the Chesapeake Bay until the late 17th century were themselves a product of England's commercial revolution. Indentured servants were required to work in exchange for passage across the Atlantic; the credit relation thus stood at the center of labor in early English America.

In 1623, the indentured servant Richard Frethorne wrote to his parents in London that “there is nothing to be gotten” in Virginia but “sickness and death, except that one had money to lay out in some things for profit.” But Frethorne had “not a penny, nor a penny worth, to help me to either spice or sugar or strong waters, without the which one cannot live here.”

Though he prayed to be “redeemed out of Egypt” — an indication of his slave-like status — the teenaged Frethorne did not survive his American journey.<sup>25</sup> By the second half of the 17th century relatively few English working people were willing to endure bondage in the colonies, a key factor in planters' turn to captive Africans as a source of labor.

Money remained scarce in English America despite the production of profitable exports like tobacco and sugar, as Parliament prohibited the exportation of silver from England during the economic reforms of the 1690s. Tobacco itself functioned as a form of currency in Virginia and Maryland well into the 18th century, while colonists in New England and New Netherland (New York after 1664) used beaver skins and Native American beads known as wampum for exchange.

However, in 1652 the Boston silversmith John Hull began making local shillings to facilitate trade in clear violation of English law. Counterfeiting rings throughout the Americas were soon manufacturing Hull's “Boston shillings” as well as Spanish-American pieces of eight — most often from bullion brought to colonial ports by pirates.<sup>26</sup> The use of unofficial money was a foundational, and widely accepted, practice in English America.

**W**hile we rightly associate the commodification of labor in this period with the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, the monetization of life was all-encompassing. In the same years that Barbados and Virginia made enslavement a legal status that was permanent and hereditary,

a number of colonies instituted forced labor as a form of debt repayment.

In his swashbuckling bestseller *The Buccaneers of America* (1684), the French pirate Alexander Exquemelin wrote that for debts above 25 shillings the English in Jamaica “do easily sell one another” for a period of forced labor. By the turn of the 18th century, many colonists believed that powerful merchants intentionally kept money scarce in order to dispossess borrowers of their land and labor.<sup>27</sup>

One solution to monetary dearth was simply to create a local medium of exchange. Massachusetts took the major step of issuing public bills of credit in the early 1690s — ostensibly, like the Bank of England, to fund war against the French. A decade later South Carolina printed its own paper money, and soon New York and Rhode Island issued their own currencies.

By the 1710s a number of paper currencies circulated in the colonies; popular almanacs from the era testify to a complex system of intercolonial exchange rates. Both the English crown and wealthy colonists opposed American currencies, however, since “imaginary” paper money challenged imperial authority and reduced the wealth and power of creditors.

## Money and Popular Politics

Although tensions between debtors and creditors had shaped social relations in the colonies from their founding, the expansion of print in the 18th century helped make currency a prominent subject of public discussion.

While in the early 1700s a number of northern colonies created paper monies, the Pennsylvania government remained reluctant to issue bills of credit. A major economic slump beginning in 1720 facilitated a decade-long pamphlet war that, in addition to forcing legislators to create a local money supply, uniquely demonstrated popular attitudes to currency.

While learned elites debated issues of sovereignty and economic theory, populist pamphleteers gave literary expression to a widespread belief in local grandees' self-interested control of the money supply. According to “Roger Plowman,” an allegorical character from an anonymous 1725 pamphlet, city merchants kept currency scarce so they could appropriate debtors' properties when they were unable to repay loans.

Creditors demanded repayment in money, but when money was not to be found “what must the poor People do?” According to Plowman, merchants like “Robert Rich,” who argued that imaginary paper money would ruin the colony, were worse than ancient Egyptian slave drivers.<sup>28</sup>

One satirical tract had loan bank trustees and local politicians fretting over a new “Democracy in the People” that threatened to eradicate Pennsylvania's “absolute Aristocracy.” Notably, paper money not only allowed borrowers to repay debts, it also led ordinary people to question the authority of economic and political elites. It was a democratic “Monster” that placed all on a level and therefore needed to be crushed.<sup>29</sup>

The politics of money were not confined to the world of print. In late 1740, Philadelphia merchants decided to devalue the British copper halfpence — a coin crucial for small purchases throughout the colonies. After the extralegal decision was put into force on a frigid January morning, Philadelphians marched through town breaking the windows of traders who refused to accept the pennies at their customary rate. Demonstrators threatened to march again the following night,

but authorities managed to suppress the crowd action.<sup>30</sup>

Some months later copies of an anonymously authored broadside (a large single-sided poster) appeared on city trees and buildings. According to “Dick Farmer,” merchants had themselves imported the copper coins to pay farmers, millers and artisans in wages. Yet when people attempted to use the halfpence to purchase goods or repay small debts, the same traders refused to accept them except at the reduced rate.

Farmer implored elected representatives to “rescue the People out of the Merchants’ Power.”<sup>31</sup> Popular discontent continued to simmer after the government failed to act, eventually forcing the Philadelphia municipality to pass an ordinance raising the coin’s value.



Cartoon protesting against the introduction of paper money, by James Gillray, 1797. The “Old Lady of Threadneedle St” (the Bank personified) is ravished by William Pitt the Younger.

A remarkably similar protest occurred in New York City more than a decade later. Meeting at a local coffee-house in 1753, city merchants agreed that the British copper halfpence was overvalued in New York and should therefore be devalued.

According to “A Citizen” writing in the *New-York Weekly Mercury*, since money was a matter of public interest, and “any idiot might know” that most New Yorkers were opposed to devaluation, the secret meeting of self-appointed policymakers was “absurd, inconsistent and ridiculous.”

Like Dick Farmer in Philadelphia, Citizen claimed that it was the same merchants who imported the halfpennies that now refused to accept them. “Is it not strange, that Men who have been the Instruments of importing them, should fall on such Methods to oppress the Public?” Such schemes were, in Citizen’s view, “monstrous, illegal, cruel and inhumane.”<sup>32</sup>

New York nevertheless put the devaluation into effect, sparking coordinated riots throughout the city. Armed with clubs and staves, demonstrators marched through city streets to the beat of a drum, as was customary in popular crowd actions. Authorities were well prepared for the protests, however, as city officials from mayor and aldermen down to sheriffs and constables were mobilized to put down the rising.

A grand jury investigation that placed blame for the protests on impoverished outsiders — “Strangers of the World” — received considerable attention in the press to reinforce an image of law-abiding and respectable New Yorkers.<sup>33</sup> As

the Citizen might have noted, however, “any idiot” would have known that there was widespread support for the protestors in the city.

## A Liberal Way to Wealth

Max Weber claimed in his classic *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that the American printer Benjamin Franklin embodied the new 18th-century capitalist ethos. For Weber, Franklin’s value system was characterized not simply by a desire to obtain riches. It was, rather, his association of virtue with proficiency in a specific calling that distinguished capitalism’s “peculiar ethic.” Wealth accumulation was secondary to the individual’s voluntary commitment to professional activity; work was the end, not the means, of the spirit of capitalism.<sup>34</sup>

While Franklin did consistently argue for the virtues of hard work, he also benefited greatly from the era’s financial innovations. In 1729, aged just 23, Franklin published *A Modest Inquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper Currency*. The essay, strongly influenced by the economic writings of William Petty, argued that an abundant money supply encouraged laboring people to come to Pennsylvania and stimulated economic development.

The following year, the young printer obtained a contract for printing new bills of credit for the colony. Over the course of his career Franklin earned substantial profits from issuing Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey paper money; by the time of his retirement in 1764 he had printed approximately 2,500,000 bills.<sup>35</sup>

Yet Franklin was no monetary populist. Though he carefully cultivated his workingman persona Franklin was, as Weber noted, the embodiment of bourgeois values. Nowhere is this more evident than in the essay *The Way to Wealth*, which contains classic Franklinian self-help proverbs like “God helps them that help themselves,” and “early to bed, and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.” While full of calls to work hard and use time efficiently, the essay’s overarching emphasis on thrift and frugality primarily concerned the perils of indebtedness.

Set at a merchant’s auction (where many of the goods on offer would have been seized from defaulting debtors), *Way to Wealth* begins with a popular complaint over heavy taxes. According to the wise old Father Abraham, however, it was idleness, sloth, and a lust for “fineries and knickknacks” that led people into economic trouble, and when you run into debt “you give to another power over your liberty.”

Quoting *Proverbs 22:7*, Abraham reminded listeners that “the borrower is a slave to the lender, and the debtor to the creditor.”<sup>36</sup> Yet while the biblical verse is a warning to lenders and a plea for the poor, Franklin’s text says nothing about creditors and suggests that borrowers have only themselves to blame for their hardship. Nowhere does *Way to Wealth* mention debt laws or money supply — subjects that had long animated colonial politics and social conflict.

Franklin took the title of his essay from a sermon by Robert Crowley, a 16th-century printer, clergyman, and social critic. Much as he reversed the meaning of *Proverbs 22:7*, Franklin inverted Crowley’s *Way to Wealth*, which was a warning to the powerful not to oppress the poor.

Evoking the voice of a plebeian participant in the massive anti-enclosure rising of 1548 known as Kett’s Rebellion,

Crowley claimed that the revolt was caused by “greedy cormorants” who “take our houses” and “buy our grounds out of our hands,” who “raise our rents,” “levy great (yea unreasonable) fines,” and “enclose our commons!” Since the rich had reduced common people to a state of slavery by monopolizing resources, working people had no choice but to resist with force.<sup>37</sup>

For Franklin, by contrast, the cause of people’s loss of freedom was their imprudent desire for luxuries. The power of the creditor over the debtor need not be regulated by social norms; it was a contractual affair in which the lender’s denial of liberty to the borrower was right and just.

Despite the efforts of classical liberals like Franklin to depoliticize debt and money, currency would remain a source of contestation in the age of the American Revolution. James Madison argued in *Federalist No. 10* that republics were preferable to democracies mainly because in democracies the people could more easily demand economic equality.

In the context of the 1780s, popular demands included a “rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts,” and even “for an equal division of property.” The U.S. Constitution, authored primarily by Madison, attempted to eradicate the possibility of such “wicked projects” in the future.<sup>38</sup>

## Towards a Monetary Movement Culture?

In his classic book on the American Populists, Lawrence Goodwyn claimed that successful mass democratic movements require the creation of a “movement culture” — a bottom-up movement of activism, education, and solidarity.<sup>39</sup>

Money figured prominently in the demands of the Populists’ movement culture, which culminated in the creation of the People’s Party in the early 1890s. The party’s Omaha Platform of 1892 attacked bondholders who had appropriated the national power to create money, and called for — in addition to the unification of the country’s labor forces and the nationalization of the railroads — a “just, equitable, and efficient” monetary system. This involved an expanded money supply, a graduated income tax, postal savings banks, and keeping the nation’s money “in the hands of the people.”<sup>40</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a social movement today making similar demands. Modern Monetary Theory has provided an important counter to neoliberal monetary orthodoxy. MMT economists have had relatively little to say about democracy, however, and the theory admittedly does not apply to countries that do not issue their own money (for example those in the eurozone) or who remain under U.S. dollar hegemony.

Moreover, a key danger today, in the midst of inflation and the Fed’s raising interest rates and facilitating a recession, is that money will again be depoliticized in the interests of “fiscal discipline.” Monetary policy remains, as Samir Sonti has concisely put it, “a blunt weapon of class warfare.”<sup>41</sup>

Advocates of heterodox economic theories and progressive policies like participatory budgeting and public banking, as well as supporters of the abolition of student and other kinds of debt, would do well to explore the rich history of monetary politics.

In much the same way that the study of preindustrial social relations helps to denaturalize wage labor, knowledge of money’s long history helps us think beyond our current limited horizons of the economically possible. Money, as the

early moderns knew, was a social construct that could serve disparate interests. A similar awareness might help us demand that the muck be spread more equitably today. ■

## Notes

- Francis Bacon, “Of Seditious and Troubles,” in Bacon, *The Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 369.
- See, for example, Dave Denison, “The Money Printers,” *The Baffler* no. 52 (July 2020).
- A recent MMT bestseller is Stephanie Kelton, *The Deficit Myth: Modern Monetary Theory and How to Build a Better Economy* (London: John Murray, 2020). For a critique of MMT from the left see Michael Roberts, “Modern Monetary Theory: A Marxist Critique,” *Class, Race, and Corporate Power* 7, no. 1 (2019), Article 1.
- A useful recent work that neglects how working people historically used money to their advantage is David McNally’s *Blood and Money: War, Slavery, Finance, and Empire* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020).
- Philipp Caesar, *A General Discourse Against the Damnable Sect of Usurers* (London, 1578), 6-7, 13-15.
- Andy Wood, *Riot, Rebellion, and Popular Politics in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
- Thomas More, *Utopia*, in Stephen Greenblatt et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume 1 (New York: Norton, 2006), 531, 557-58.
- For popular risings in Tudor England see Anthony Fletcher and Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions*, 5th ed. (New York: Pearson Education, 2008).
- Tim Stretton, “Written Obligations, Litigation and Neighbourliness, 1580-1680,” in Steve Hindle, Alexandra Shepard, and John Walter, eds., *Remaking English Society: Social Relations and Social Change in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2013), 189-209.
- Craig Muldrew, “‘Hard Food for Midas’: Cash and Its Social Value in Early Modern England,” *Past and Present* No. 170 (February 2001): 113-17.
- John Taylor, *A Shilling; Or, the Travailles of Twelve-Pence* (London, 1621).
- Deborah Valenze, *The Social Life of Money in the English Past* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 38.
- Malcolm Gaskill, *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 126-34.
- Craig Muldrew, “From Commonwealth to Public Opulence: The Redefinition of Wealth and Government in Early Modern Britain,” *Remaking English Society*, 317-39.
- William Petty, *Several Essay in Political Arithmetick* (London, 1690).
- Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees and Other Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 19.
- Mandeville, *Fable of the Bees*, 70-71, 122.
- C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 203-9.
- McNally, *Blood and Money*, 131; Christine Desan, *Making Money: Coin, Currency, and the Coming of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), Chapter 8.
- Carl Wennerlind, *Casualties of Credit: The English Financial Revolution, 1620-1720* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 129-30.
- Muldrew, “‘Hard Food for Midas,’” 107-8.
- Wennerlind, *Casualties of Credit*, 146-49.
- Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).
- Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern* (New York: Verso Books, 1997).
- “Richard Frethorne, to His Parents (Virginia 1623),” in Paul Lauter et al., eds., *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, 5th ed. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company), Volume A, 270-71.
- Mark G. Hanna, *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570-1740* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 96.
- Alexander O. Exquemelin, *Bucaniers of America: Or, a True Account of the Most Remarkable Assaults Committed of late Years upon the Coasts of the West-Indies*, 2nd ed. (London, 1684), 38; Daniel Johnson, “‘Nothing will satisfy you but money’: Debt, Freedom, and the Mid-Atlantic Culture of Money, 1670-1764,” *Early American Studies* 19, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 103-4, 110-11.
- A Dialogue Between Mr. Robert Rich and Roger Plowman* (Philadelphia, 1725).
- The Triumvirate of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1725).
- Johnson, “‘Nothing will satisfy you but money,’” 131.
- Ibid.*, 132.
- New-York Weekly Mercury*, January 7, 1754.
- Johnson, “‘Nothing will satisfy you but money,’” 132-34.
- Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Dover, 2003), Chapter 2.
- Eric P. Newman, “Franklin Making Money More Plentiful,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 115, no. 5 (October 1971): 341.
- Benjamin Franklin, *The Way to Wealth*, reprinted in *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Volume A, 809-11.
- “Selections from the writings of Robert Crowley,” in C.H. Williams, ed., *English Historical Documents: 1485-1558* (New York: Routledge, 1967), 303-4.
- James Madison, *Federalist No. 10, The Federalist Papers*, available online at <https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/full-text>.
- Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- The “Omaha Platform” of the People’s Party (1892), in *The American Yawp Reader: A Documentary Companion to the American Yawp*, Volume 2 (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 2019), 18-22.
- Samir Sonti, “Inflation and Your Next Union Contract,” *Labor Notes*, July 8, 2022.

# REVIEW

## The War Upon Us By Jerry Harris

### Global Civil War:

Capitalism Post-Pandemic

By William I. Robinson

Oakland, CA: PM Press/Kairos, 2022,  
224 pages. \$17.95 paperback.

WILLIAM I. ROBINSON'S *Global Civil War* is a call to the left to get ready for battle. This book follows Robinson's *Police State*, diving more deeply into the post-pandemic world, the fourth industrial revolution, and what the left needs to do to meet the challenges ahead.

More than in any of his previous works, Robinson devotes space to the types of political organization, theory and practice needed to win against authoritarian capitalism, a discussion that takes up most of Chapter Three.

Robinson wants this work to be an intellectual weapon in the effort to construct counter-hegemony, an analysis that can be understood and used by activists to develop a systemic critique of global capitalism.

For Robinson, this is the role of "organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense, intellectuals who attach themselves to and serve the emancipatory struggles of the popular classes..." (148)

A professor of sociology, global and Latin American studies at the University of California-Santa Barbara, the author begins with a description of the economic fundamentals at the foundation of the world's social and economic crisis. This is covered in the first chapter "Global Capitalism Post-Pandemic."

But where Robinson expands his previous work is in detailing how advanced digitalization is transforming the world, presenting the dangers of a technological dictatorship. This is the centerpiece of the book, encompassing Chapter Two, "Digitalization and the Transformation of Global Capitalism."

Chapter Three is "Whither the Global Revolt," which Robinson notes "may be the most urgent for readers," whereas the first two chapters "lay the indispensable groundwork for this strategizing." (7)

### Global Capital and Contradictions

Robinson and others have covered this economic and social analysis before, but

*Jerry Harris is national secretary of the Global Studies Association, and on the international board of the Network for the Critical Studies of Global Capitalism. His latest book was Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Democracy.*



it's a concise and necessary framing for the book. To this is added the impact of COVID-19. As Robinson says, "The pandemic left in its wake more inequality, more political tension, more militarism, and more authoritarianism — or rather, there were more of these things through the pandemic." (33)

The first chapter starts with the crisis of overaccumulation and stagnation. The fact that capitalism must always seek to increase profits by lowering the cost of production, particularly labor costs. The result is the working class can never buy all that it produces, leading to stagnation and the need to find new markets.

Consequently, capitalism needs to ceaselessly expand, moving beyond nationally bound economies. While this impulse was always part of capitalism, the 1980s stagnation led to a much deeper, wider, and connected system of global production and finance, a global system constructed by the emergence of a transnational capitalist class (TCC).

But this spatial expansion offered only temporary relief, as global polarization and inequality reached levels without precedent. A new structural crisis exploded in 2008, with all its contradictions accentuated a few years later by the pandemic.

As joblessness and poverty rapidly increased, authoritarian capitalist states heightened their repressive control and pushed forward the global police state.

Robinson concludes that the global nature of the crisis results in an "acute political contradiction." (51) National states must retain political legitimacy for the capitalist system. But the accumulation process is largely out of their control.

The transnational capitalist class demands downward pressure on wages, the deconstruction of the social contract, cuts in taxes, privatization of state assets such as health and education, and budgetary austerity.

That's exactly what creates anger and alienation among broad sections of the working and middle classes. Nationalist political movements then direct this anger against other countries as well as racial, religious, or ethnic minorities. Writing before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Robinson notes that "The drive by the capitalist state to externalize the political fallout of the crisis increases

the danger that the international tensions will lead to war." (53)

The following chapter is devoted to an examination of the powerful growth of tech companies, and their ties to finance and also repressive accumulation.

Throughout the past 20 years Robinson has written on the importance of computer and information technologies, and the power of digitalization to synchronize, coordinate, transfer and integrate global production and finance. But here, Chapter Two offers an extended investigation, particularly the most recent developments concerned with artificial intelligence, biotechnology and big data.

### Tech and Capital's New Bloc

Typical of Robinson's methodology, he offers an abundant amount of data and statistical evidence as to the growth and economic importance of intellectual capital and its tools of production, and the giant tech companies who dominate the field.

One interesting aspect is the separation of direct human labor from the actual work process through robotization. Robinson notes how human pilots can operate production robots, or military drones, from anywhere on the planet. But we can take that example even further: Consider the robots roaming the surface of Mars doing scientific research directed and controlled from workers on Earth.

The transformation of the work process has been truly remarkable. Robinson pursues the effects on labor in diverse areas including gig workers, precariousness, working from home, and the diminished role of living labor in the creation of wealth.

As he explains, the pandemic has increased the fragmentation of the entire labor process, which in turn increases the physical isolation of workers, undercutting solidarity and the ability to organize.

The fourth industrial revolution has brought capital closer than ever to reducing labor costs, and the number of workers from direct labor. But as pointed out in Chapter One, this only increases the crisis of capitalism and all of its social contradictions.

Robinson uses his examination of tech to argue a new capitalist bloc has been established. He writes, "The rise of the digital economy involves a fusion of Silicon Valley with transnational finance capital...and military-industrial-security complex giving rise to a new bloc of capital that appears to be at

the very core of the emerging post-pandemic paradigm.” (87)

One important area that doesn't gain Robinson's attention is the green ecomodernization of the means of production with its ties to the tech industry, a development that has attracted significant investments.

This field also offers expanding new opportunities for over accumulated capital, and it would be interesting to see how Robinson fits this sector into his analysis of the new capitalist bloc.

### Social Explosions and Quandaries

Chapter Three turns attention to the social explosions breaking out in numerous counties as the result of neoliberal policy, the pandemic, and the structural crisis of capitalism. Robinson examines mass upsurges in Sudan, Chile, Bolivia, France, China, India and the United States as well as other countries. Unfortunately, the environmental mass movement, particularly among youth, doesn't find its way into this list. But the author's main focus here is to identify “four quandaries” as to why these mass global rebellions have not led to revolutionary alternatives to capitalism.

Robinson has little belief in any renewed capitalist stability requiring large-scale state intervention, finding neither neoliberal nor social-democratic elites up to the task.

The first quandary is the disconnect between popular uprisings and an organized socialist left. Robinson sees the need for a revolutionary political organization with a program of action and strategy that can bring together social movements into an emancipatory anti-capitalist project. One of the main barriers is the “stubborn identitarian paradigm...resistant to political organization and to identifying broader class interests beyond identity.” (118).

Without a socialist party with revolutionary conscious leadership, he contends, building a sustained challenge to capitalism out of the spontaneous upsurges becomes nearly impossible.

Quandary two is the failure of the left to respond to the nature of transnational capitalism. As the author argues, national states are unable to exercise real political power over a global system of accumulation when the transnational capitalist class has tremendous structural power when facing over 200 individually divided countries. Since working classes can only seize power at the nation-state level, they can be isolated and defeated.

For Robinson the answer lies in building “transnational counter-hegemony...coordinated across borders and across regions.” (120) He doesn't articulate what the political program will be, although in the book's conclusion he briefly notes that the Green New Deal as a sweeping reform movement can generate “favorable conditions to struggle

for a post-capitalist social order.” (148)

But under quandary two, Robinson's real focus is the relationship of the political to the economic, and the role of the state.

Describing liberal ideology, he illustrates how the capitalist viewpoint separates the public political sphere, which encompasses the state, from the private corporate sphere of economic expropriation. Consequently, the widespread popular belief is that each has “its own innate laws and dynamics, the first pursuing power and the second wealth.” (122)

Since the state is the condensation of social and economic grievances, social movements often turn their attention to political demands of inclusion, without demanding democratizing economic relations using a revolutionary class perspective.

Turning to Gramsci, the author explains that while the state has autonomy from individual capitalists, it remains the guardian of capitalist relations of production. Therefore, Robinson criticizes “popular struggles that target the state (and) run the risk of dissolving class-based demands of the proletariat and other exploited classes into more abstract demands for democratization (which) can strengthen the hegemony of dominant groups as these groups accommodate liberal demands for equality or representation and inclusion in the capitalist state.” (124)

Thus, his critic of identitarian politics ties into Gramsci's “passive revolution” in which the ruling class can encompass and defuse mass movements. This is Robinson's third quandary, the “influence, even hegemony, over mass struggle of identitarian paradigms that...eclipsed the language of class and the critique of capital and political economy.” (127)

Here the author blames academics and intellectuals who have led the assault on Marxian class analysis with postmodernism, replacing collective action by the oppressed with demands for equitable inclusion into global capitalism.

Bringing the point to the largest movement in recent U.S. history, Robinson maintains that Black Lives Matter and the Defund Police movements focused on reforming law enforcement, rather than speaking to the “big picture,” the structural fact that the role of police is to defend capitalist property rights and criminalize the poor — an economic violence responsible for more Black deaths than police brutality.

### The Far Right's Appeal

The final quandary is the far-right's appeal to the same social base that the left is attempting to organize.

Robinson makes the point that social decay, downward mobility, xenophobia, and racial supremacy all add to the power of the far-right's appeal. But in describing the majority of those who stormed the Capitol

on January 6, 2021 he ascribes their anger to various economic troubles, blaming identitarians for writing them off as racists.

Nevertheless, an important study done at the University of Chicago led by Robert Pape found sixty-three percent of the would-be January 6 insurrectionists believe in the “Great Replacement” theory that whites are being replaced culturally and economically by minorities.

Furthermore, Pape's original hypothesis was that insurgents would come from white households whose income was dropping. Instead, he found the most meaningful correlation was that insurgents came from counties in which the white population was in decline.

Indeed, for every one-point drop in the percent of whites, insurgents coming from that county increased by 25 percent. This link held up in every state, and attests to the powerful role that racism actually plays in the neofascist threat, and the widespread effect of Replacement Theory propaganda.

The task then for Robinson, and indeed the entire left, is how to understand and organize around the core relationships among U.S. capitalism, race, and class.

Robinson himself notes: “The problem here...is not a struggle against racism, for that must be front and center of any emancipatory project, rather, it is the separation of race from class, the substitution of politics based on essentialized identities for politics based on the working class.” (139).

The last point in Chapter Three turns to the relationship of the transnational capitalist class and the authoritarian state and fascist mobilization. Robinson argues that full-blown fascism requires three elements: reactionary state power, fascist mobilization in civil society, and support for the project by the majority fraction of the Transnational Capitalist Class. But he observes, “It appears that the major portion of the TCC is not prepared to support fascist projects,” because reactionary nationalism calls for a withdrawal from globalization. (140)

Instead, we see a TCC engaged in fierce competition, splits, and infighting. This may help explain the war in Ukraine and efforts to contain China.

In a future work we can hope that Robinson expands on this analysis. What are the different strategic differences splitting the TCC, are there different blocs contending for hegemony, and just how does nationalist politics impinge on transnational economics?

Robinson's latest book raises vitally important questions for creating a viable and dynamic counter-hegemony. Robinson, as one of our best revolutionary intellectuals, needs to be closely read, his analysis followed, and we should all look to his further works as he explores the path toward a socialist future. ■

# REVIEW

## Texas: Darkness Before Dawn

### Civil Rights in Black and Brown: Histories of Resistance and Struggle in Texas

Edited by Max Krochmal and J. Todd Moya  
Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021,  
488 pages, \$35.

DOWN HERE IN Texas, there is a new law restricting the teaching of race, slavery and history in public or charter schools. In an apoplectic response to the notion that Black Lives Matter, the Texas legislature passed and the governor signed a law prohibiting districts from requiring teachers to cover “a widely debated and currently controversial issue.”

Claiming that more needed to be done to abolish critical race theory in Texas schools, the state overrode its previous attempt which was apparently too weak.

A teacher may no longer teach that “the advent of slavery in the territory that is now the United States constituted the true founding of the United States.” They may not suggest that “slavery and racism are anything other than deviations from, betrayals of, or failures to live up to the authentic founding principles of the United States, which include liberty and equality.” Even the *New York Times 1619 Project* is explicitly forbidden.

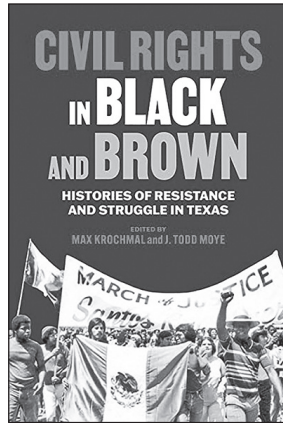
Though reprehensible, it is not surprising. At the state convention ten years ago, the ruling Republican Party adopted a platform opposing “the teaching of Higher Order Thinking Skills . . . , critical thinking skills and similar programs.”

This makes for an excellent moment for the publication of *Civil Rights in Black and Brown: Histories of Resistance and Struggle in Texas*, born from a large-scale, statewide oral history research project.

In addition to addressing oft-overlooked battles in Texas, the authors of the essays also address another oversight in many histories of the era, putting the focus on the base rather than leadership.

While the book certainly covers seminal figures in Texas like Hector Garcia, founder of The American GI Forum, the Hispanic (its term) rights organization, the focus is largely

*Joshua DeVries has been a rank-and-file activist as a bus driver with ATU locals in Austin, TX and the Twin Cities, MN as well as a flight attendant with AFA in Philadelphia. He was president of ATU Local 1549 in Austin and interim secretary with AFA Council 70. He edits copy for ATC and is on the policy committee for Red Fault, the publication of Austin DSA.*



on grassroots struggles. People in these communities were inspired by the growing national movement and the systematic racism in a state that fought for independence from Mexico in order to legalize slavery.

Everything, as the cliché goes, is bigger in Texas. The sheer size makes it hard to generalize, so the editors divide the book into three main sections: African Americans in East Texas; Chicano/a Struggles in South and West Texas; and Black and Brown Liberation Struggles in Metropolitan Texas. An example from each demonstrates the high value of this project.

#### African-Americans in East Texas

Sandra Bland died in the hands of Waller County, Texas police in 2015 after they arrested her during a traffic stop. Northwest of Houston, Waller County is the home of Prairie View A&M University.

PVAMU was founded at the end of the reconstruction era with legislation drafted by two former slaves. While racial segregation was mandated in the state constitution, PVAMU was the first state-supported institution of higher learning for African-Americans. It was Sandra Bland's alma mater.

Much of the U.S. media was aghast at Bland's death, but as author Moisés Acuña Gurrola notes, “what the articles overlooked was that when most of the Anglos in Waller were not murdering, lynching, and assaulting Black Americans, they elected anti-Black compatriots to office and promoted . . . a white-supremacist political culture daily through segregation and the strengthening of Jim Crow rule during the twentieth century. . . . From 1890 to the 1930s, Waller County reported eight public lynchings (the second-highest total in the state) and twelve victims (the highest total).”

Historically, the university administration “adopted avoidance as the preferred method of dealing with white violence. . . . [U]niversity officials barred [Black students] from socializing off campus after dark.” The

By Joshua DeVries

administration “feared economic reprisals as employees of the openly racist Texas A&M University system.”

Students were discouraged from applying to white graduate schools, and “University officials even prevented students from applying to white-owned businesses for work or internships” as ordered by powerful county figures.

However, both on the campus and in the community, resistance grew. After an escalating series of actions including boycotts of segregated businesses, half the student body organized a wildly successful boycott of the crowning game of the season for PVAMU's football team. In a state where football is only arguably the second-most important religion, this was a tremendous blow.

In fairly short order, the college administration reluctantly began to support the students and the movements. Eventually, the campaigns were able to force local businesses to comply with the 1964 Civil Rights Act and desegregate their facilities. If they had waited for the federal government to step in, they would probably still be waiting today.

#### Mexican American Struggles

For a segment of the Mexican American community in Texas, Hector P. Gonzales was seen as “our Martin Luther King.” His mother and father, who fled the Mexican revolution, had been school teachers but their education was not recognized in the United States.

The downwardly mobile father went into the grocery business with his brothers in Mercedes, Texas where “Anglos controlled the town and rigidly enforced ‘Juan Crow’ segregation.”

The parents pushed their children to become doctors, and most of the seven did. Hector graduated from UT Austin where he had an GPA impressive enough to earn him the only spot reserved for Mexican Americans in the incoming class at the medical school. But he was forced to go out of state for his residency and then, in 1942, joined the army.

Instead of accepting him as a medical officer, they sent him to basic training for infantry. Eventually his talents were recognized by “skeptical white officers.” He returned to the States with an impressive service record and settled in Corpus Christi, Texas, a blue-collar port city with a vibrant Mexican American community.

Corpus Christi was home to the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), a group of Hispanic WWI veterans who had become the leading voice for Mexican American rights. LULAC's founders pushed full assimilation: "only American citizens could become members; the official language of the group was English."

Gonzalez arrived to find a segregated city with concentrated poverty and disease. "Mexican Americans lived in poor barrios, in shotgun houses without indoor plumbing or running water, crisscrossed by unpaved streets without sidewalks. ... Corpus Christi had more tuberculosis cases than anywhere else in Texas and Mexican Americans made up the majority of those infected."

Gonzalez launched a public health campaign. He went door-to-door and joined forces with Gilbert Cásares, an army recruiter and local radio host, but soon had his own radio show "which he used to publicize the sorry state of affairs in his adopted hometown."

One focus was the state of Mexican American army veterans. The closest hospital for veterans was over a hundred miles away; "requests to open up more beds at the local navy hospital fell on deaf ears."

He set up his practice next door to the Veterans Administration building, where he "treated returning servicemen for three dollars a visit" though he would not turn anyone away for lack of funds.

By 1948, when he called for a meeting of veterans, 700 showed up and they chartered the American GI Forum. The wife of a returned slain serviceman got word that her husband's body was coming home from the Philippines. But the local funeral home would not allow the use of the facilities because "Latin people get drunk and lay around all the time. We just can't control them."

Gonzalez shot off a round of telegrams to "the governor, attorney general, State Board of Embalming, a state senator, two congressmen, the secretary of defense and President Harry S. Truman" and "Lyndon Baines Johnson, a shavetail US senator looking for any chance to scrub away the tarnish from his questionable eighty-seven-vote win ... in the Democratic primary the previous fall."

Johnson wrote back, "I have today made arrangements to have Felix Longoria buried with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery." This launched the Forum and Hector P. Gonzalez into the national spotlight.

Over the years, Gonzales and Forum achieved much, but each had substantial flaws. He resisted sharing power within the Forum and would not cooperate with other organizations in the rising Chicano movement.



Texas anti-abortion and voter suppression laws along with police brutality bring resistance onto the streets. This activism foretells the coming dawn. Facebook

His self-importance, unwillingness to recognize new leadership, and his loyalty to the Democratic Party did great damage to his legacy. His story is a lesson for movement activists that the movement cannot be based in one person or even one organization.

### Struggles in Metropolitan Texas

Much of this book covers towns and small cities, but it also includes civil rights movements in the major urban areas. Dubbed "City of Hate" after Kennedy's assassination, Dallas deserved the name far before and long after 1963.

In 1920, the KKK kidnapped a Black bellhop named Alexander Johnson, beating him and burning "KKK" into his forehead with acid because he might have been involved with a white woman. "Despite a Dallas *Times-Herald* reporter witnessing the entire scene, law enforcement made no arrests—un-surprisingly, since the Dallas County sheriff, deputy sheriff, chief of police, and nearly all of Dallas's police officers were Klansmen."

After an unbroken chain of brutality, in 1973, an officer shot a 12-year-old Mexican boy in the head during an interrogation, suspecting him of robbing a gas station. With consistently high rates of violence by the police force, the Associated Press declared Dallas the number one city for police shootings in the nation in 1987.

Dallas local electoral politics from the 1930s were dominated by the Citizens Charter Association (CCA), a "civic-business organization run by Dallas's elite" and the "Dallas Citizens Council (DCC), an organization formed in 1937 by a former Klan member."

Also founded in the 1930s though was the Progressive Voters League (PVL), a Black

voting organization created to challenge the CCA. The PVL influenced elections, but its success was short-lived.

By the 1950s, though, the NAACP in the city (and the state) had recovered and been key in several victories including desegregating the flagship law school at UT Austin, raising local Black teachers' salaries to that of whites, and direct action campaigns to desegregate local establishments. After *Brown vs. Board*, they filed suit against the Dallas school district to make it follow the ruling.

In the midst of this, there was a campaign of white bombings of Black homeowners, and with the Montgomery bus boycott fresh in the news the NAACP threatened one in Dallas, frightening the mayor into immediately desegregating the transit system.

Alarmed at the NAACP's statewide successes, the Texas Attorney General issued a "temporary restraining order prohibiting the NAACP from 'doing business in the state.'" This was made permanent by a district court judge.

Not only did this not stop the NAACP, but local grassroots organizations and branches of national ones like SNCC, the Black Panthers and the Brown Berets grew and struggled together, particularly in fights against police brutality.

Around this time the Brown Berets, Black Panthers and a white group founded around tenants' rights called Boid d'Arc Patriots began working together in what local newspapers called the "Triumvirate Alliance." They staged large-scale demonstrations in the streets of downtown Dallas throughout the 1970s.

In late 1972 the activists stormed the streets after Dallas police officers shot and

continued on page 32



# REVIEW

## New Veterans, New & Old Problems By Ronald Citkowski

### Our Veterans:

Winners, Losers, Friends, and Enemies on the New Terrain of Veterans Affairs

By Suzanne Gordon, Steve Early and Jasper Craven

Duke University Press, 2022. 352 pages, \$24.95 paperback.

SUZANNE GORDON'S EARLIER book *Wounds of War* (Cornell University Press, 2018) gave an eye-opening picture of the Veterans' Administration, detailing its success as a single-payer system providing efficient, high-quality health care services to veterans. (See our review at <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc201/review-of-val/>.)

Now, in *Our Veterans: Winners, Losers, Friends, and Enemies on the New Terrain of Veterans Affairs* (Duke University Press, 2022), Gordon and co-authors Steve Early and Jasper Craven consider the unique problems and challenges facing a new generation of veterans returning to the civilian world, and the shortcomings of the system in addressing them.

As they state in their foreword: "Our mission in this book is to assess the resulting loss and damage many suffer in their work and personal lives and the political harm caused by some institutions and individuals who advocate for veterans or purport to be on their side."

We find that our recent wars have generated a new group of veterans who, for a number of reasons, are pretty much invisible to our society. When we say to them "thank you for your service," we still remain unaware of their needs, concerns and problems.

While centers of power give lip service to the need to address veterans' issues, no action is ever taken to stop the escalating privatization and subsequent erosion of our veterans' support system by the corporate world.

Unlike the draftees who made up a large number of the veterans of prior wars, our "New Vets" are all volunteers. But in reality, the majority more accurately should be deemed the subjects of an economic draft.

They entered the service as young people, usually from lower-income communities, who, when faced with poor job and

---

*Ronald Citkowski is a veteran of the Vietnam War and the antiwar movement. He is retired and splits his time between the Arizona borderlands and Northern Michigan.*



military culture.

As detailed in *Our Veterans*, these longer terms of service have brought about a change in the demographics of the veteran community. As the authors describe:

"(T)he percentage of veterans in the adult population has shrunk by half since 1990, to eight percent or less. Four out of ten young people say they have never personally considered joining the military. In 1974 about half of all Americans who did so came from the South or Southwest. Today that figure is closer to 70 percent."

As a result of all this, the new veterans end up politically and socially isolated from much of our mainstream society, and it in turn ignores or is even openly hostile to them.

### Employment, Illness and PTSD Issues

This situation causes multiple challenges for many returning vets. With regard to employment, their military service generally does not prepare them for the civilian workplace, creating financial problems. Additionally, issues such as PTSD can further complicate employment.

One result is that a disproportionate number of veterans end up in police work. Counselors encourage them to apply to police departments, and the federal government has been urging local police departments to give preference to veterans.

Creating what is called the "vet to cop" pipeline, this brings a battlefield mentality to policing, which accelerates the ever-growing problem of militarization of our police forces. The very nature of police work can also trigger PTSD events for some vets.

As Gordon showed in *Wounds of War* and as she and her co-authors elaborate in *Our Veterans*, health care is a major issue for all

educational prospects, opted to enlist. Their terms of service are much longer than those of previous draftees, meaning they have spent a large portion of their formative years living, and effectively isolated, in the

vets, those who were deployed in combat zones as well as those who never served abroad.

We know from news reports that Gulf War Illness was caused by exposure to toxic wastes emitted from burn pits, which especially affects many of the vets who were in the Middle East — but most of us don't know that vets who served stateside have similar problems.

Military bases in the United States are exempt from oversight by OSHA and the EPA, so stateside troops can be exposed to toxic chemicals (e.g. PFBs) and can be injured by dangerous equipment and hazardous workplace conditions.

Harassment, bullying and sexual assault have long been problems in the military, causing mental and physical harm. This is a rapidly growing concern now that women comprise about 20% of troops on active duty.

### Threat of Privatization

The federal government has a framework in place intended to address veterans' financial and medical issues and provide them with health care, career counseling and education through the Veterans' Administration.

This system in fact has worked very well. But as we learn from *Our Veterans*, it is being weakened by a movement, fueled by business and capital forces, to privatize the delivery of these services. This trend started in the Reagan era and has grown steadily through to the present time.

The Mission Act passed by Congress in 2021 directs 20% of the VA's clinical budget to outsourced private providers. The authors detail how this outsourcing is neither efficient nor economically sound. Patients now experience longer delays for scheduling private appointments than they did in the VA system, particularly when it comes to mental-health related conditions.

Quality of services is also declining, as most private suppliers are not specifically trained or prepared to handle the range of military-related conditions presented. And even though such medical services are outsourced, the VA still must bear the administrative burden and cost of providing docketing and correspondence to the private providers, which is draining revenue and resources from the VA system.

A significant and powerful organization pushing for privatization and the demise of

the VA system is the Concerned Veterans for America (CVA). As the authors state:

*“The Kochs and other right-wing funders launched CVA so their ideological challenge to public provision of healthcare would have more veteran cover. CVA was then, and is now, a case study in corporate backed astroturfing. Unlike the old Veterans service organizations (VSOs), it has no grassroots infrastructure in the form of veterans’ posts or chapters.*

*“Its national leadership and staff have no accountability, via internal elections or conventions, to decisions made or resolutions passed by any dues-paying members — which the old VSOs, for all their flaws, still have. But with a big startup budget, CVA easily recruited a small cadre of conservative veterans who were personally*

*ambitious, energetic, articulate, and, most of all, media savvy.”*

Long-standing VSOs such as the American Legion, VFW, AMVETS, DAV and Vietnam Veterans of America have traditionally been advocates for the VA healthcare system, and generally oppose privatization. However, as the authors have shown, there is a cultural age gap which keeps these traditional VSOs from recognizing or having adequate concern for problems of the new vets, such as those arising from racism and sexism in the current military culture.

As a consequence, a number of new VSOs, specifically oriented toward new vets, have come into being. These new VSOs advocate for veterans and do not hesitate

to challenge the old-school VSOs when appropriate. Two of the largest are the Student Veterans of America (SVA) and the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). Both have memberships well into the six-figure range.

While traditional VSOs resist the privatization of the VA health system, a number of the new veterans’ organizations, including IAVA and SVA, are willing to accept privatization. They have aligned with corporate interests from which they eagerly accept foundation grants and funding.

*Our Veterans* reports on a very large swag-distributing, promise-making corporate presence at the SVA’s 2020 convention, which included Koch Industries, the creator of Concerned Veterans for America.

Yet we come to learn from *Our Veterans* that there is a growing movement of VA defenders fighting privatization. It is supported by some of the new VSOs such as Veterans for Peace, Iraq Veterans Against the War, and Common Defense.

Labor unions such as National Nurses United and the American Federation of Government Employees are also very actively opposing privatization, and the Communication Workers of America is sponsoring a network called “Veterans For Social Change” which is working on this cause.

The civilian community is largely unaware of the harm to all caused by the specialized problems facing our current veterans, and the growing drive to privatize the VA. Nor is it aware of the rising movement against this trend.

Anyone having concerns about these issues will find *Our Veterans* to be an essential source of information. It provides a thorough, well-written analysis of the situation, and the direction we need to take in response. ■

## Scarf? — continued from page 20

It was a cold day in Washington, D.C., as cold as it was in Jerusalem. I put on my Palestinian wool scarf.

“I wonder how many compliments I will get today,” I think to myself. I can always use some, especially on a cold day when I am heading to my accountant to figure out how much I owe Uncle Sam.

In the accountant’s office a young woman approaches me, smiling. “I have a scarf just like yours, and I just love it.”

“Where did you get it?” I ask.

“From Israel. A relative bought it for me as a gift.”

I am furious, but do not say a thing. I just walk away. Even the scarf! What have you left for me? What have you left for my people?

The land is yours, the country, the falafel, the hummus, my father’s house in Jaffa, and Jerusalem. Can’t you at least leave me the scarf? ■

## Texas: Darkness Before Dawn — continued from page 30

killed three unarmed Black men within the span of two weeks. They marched after Santos Rodriguez was murdered in 1973. In 1979, “the three groups helped organize a counterdemonstration to a Ku Klux Klan march celebrating the group’s revitalization from the 1920s.”

Activists from these and other groups recognized, though, that demonstrations alone could not achieve the changes they needed in the city government or the police, and they pushed other levers of power as well. The city council was all white until 1967 when the Mayor, cognizant of Dallas’s poor image, appointed a Black businessman to the last three months of another’s unfinished term.

Al Lipscomb, a community activist close to SNCC, Pancho Medrano, a community and labor activist, and others took the city to court and won, arguing that “at-large elections and the persistence of segregation prevented people of color from getting elected to city positions.” The plan created eight single-member districts with residency requirements, but was flawed by the inclusion of three other positions without residency requirements making it harder for Mexican Americans to be elected.

However, some activists did manage to get onto the council. After another upsurge of shootings and killings by police, in 1980 they put forward a proposal for “a police review board with investigative and subpoena powers.” But the motion failed when the eight white councilors all opposed it.

Next, Diane Ragsdale, a seasoned activist, and two former Panthers formed Citizens United for a Review Board and began gathering signatures for a city charter amendment to accomplish this goal. However, the police department and the police union ran a campaign painting Blacks and Mexicans, particularly those organizing the petition, as criminals, killing the drive.

The city council did approve a “compromise,” but the nine-member board could only make recommendations to the police chief, could not “interfere” with police investigations of cases and could not conduct its own. Mexican and Black activists called it a “joke.”

After several widely publicized, unjustifiable killings by the police, activists invited US Representative John Conyers from Detroit to hold congressional hearings in the city.

When the police then killed an 81-year-old man protecting cars in a parking lot according to witnesses, several hundred people rallied in the “March for Human Dignity,” and finally the dam broke to create the Review Board:

*“The majority-white council voted against granting it unlimited investigative and subpoena powers. Instead, the board could request subpoena power through a majority vote, and a two-thirds majority was needed to initiate an investigation. Despite those limitations, after more than a decade of protests, picketing, and political activism, Black and Brown residents finally had a review board with the potential of holding officers accountable for police brutality.”*

**Texas Today: Wrong Direction**

Despite the tremendous gains of the civil rights movements in Texas, the current far-right leadership of the state is not only reversing those gains, it is rewriting history to deny today’s students the opportunity to learn about them.

While activists in Chicago forced the city government to implement a “Reparations Won” curriculum in schools (ATC 217, “In the Classroom: Reparations Won”), the state of Texas is demanding that libraries remove any book and deny classroom instruction that demonstrates the brutality and monstrosity of white supremacists’ record in Texas.

Texas has some beautiful history to be proud of and this book presents many of its fighters. We will turn this around, but it’s going to get darker before the dawn. ■

# REVIEW

An Organizer's Journey:

## Anan Ameri, Life and Community

By Dalia Goma

**The Wandering Palestinian**  
a memoir

by Anan Ameri

BHC Press, 2020, 242 pages, \$15.95 paper.

*THE WANDERING PALESTINIAN* by Dr. Anan Ameri is the second volume in the author's autobiography covering her life journey from Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria to relocating in the United States. The first, *The Scent of Jasmine: Coming of Age in Jerusalem and Damascus* (Interlink Publishing, 2017) is her account of growing up in the Arab world, her close family relationships and the devastating impact of the dispossession of the Palestinian people.

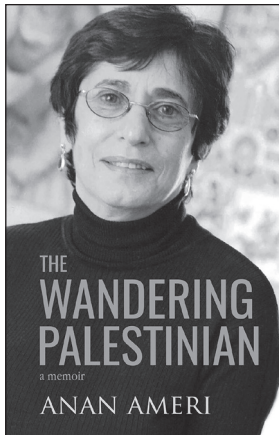
*The Wandering Palestinian* is the U.S. part of Ameri's story, beginning in 1974, with a complex adjustment to a new life and her development as an accomplished political activist, organizer and acclaimed mentor to a new generation, particularly young Arab-American women. [Anan Ameri has contributed several articles and interviews to *Against the Current*. These can be accessed at <https://againstthecurrent.org/an-an-ameri/> — ed.]

While telling her personal story, Ameri interweaves her own tale with a searching journey culminating in founding the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, which was launched in 2005 as the first of its kind devoted to Arab-American history and culture.

As we delve into the many challenges of creating this pioneering institution, Ameri's book additionally highlights multiple issues

---

*Dalia Goma is the author of The Non-National in Contemporary American Literature: Ethnic Women Writers and Problematic Belongings, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2016. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English in the University of Cairo, Egypt. Dr. Goma has taught in the Department of English, and the Department of Women's and Gender Studies in the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, as well as in the Women and Gender Studies program in Denison University. Her research interests are multi-ethnic American literature, U.S. and Arab feminisms, transnational American Studies, Arab-American Studies, and North Africa and Middle East literatures.*



including the diversity of Arab Americans, representations of Arabs and Muslims in American media, and issues around gender roles for Arab and Arab American women.

Before undertaking the Museum project, Ameri previously served as the founding director of the Palestine Aid Society of America, an educational and

fund-raising organization with a concentration on providing material aid and vocational training for Palestinian women in Lebanese refugee camps.

The book's first chapter opens with the classical Arabic folk tales' phrase "Can Ya Ma Kan: Once Upon a Time." Immediately we are hooked to know more about the love story that has brought the author to the United States. As readers follow the challenges this love story and difficult marriage encounters, they also follow the problems Ameri goes through as a newcomer to the U.S. city of Detroit.

The daughter of a Palestinian father and a Syrian mother, Ameri has been a wanderer, growing up in Jerusalem, Damascus, Amman, Cairo and Beirut. Arriving in Detroit, Ameri's feeling of unsettlement has increased as she comes face to face with the harsh reality of poverty and segregation that has prevailed in the city (including the lack of personal security in the street, something she hadn't experienced in earlier life).

Contrary to the conventional coming to America and the American Dream migrant story, Ameri describes her first years in Detroit in terms of loneliness, isolation, lack of independence, and depression.

Eventually, Ameri manages living in the new country, pursues her doctoral degree, and ultimately works on conceiving, organizing and funding the Arab American National Museum.

### Complexity and Diversity

Readers follow Ameri's journey on these multiple trajectories. What is outstanding about *The Wandering Palestinian* is its portrayal

of the complexity and diversity of Arab Americans.

A sensitive as well as professional sociological observer, Ameri shares her experiences with various Arab American communities, and how different Arab American families may have different cultural traditions, what Ameri describes as "a cultural gap."

Part and parcel of different cultural traditions among Arab American are gender, and more specifically women's, roles. Ameri highlights the tension she encounters in her own marriage, between being an independent woman and adhering to a traditional wife role.

Inspired by the Asian American Wing Luke Museum, the Japanese American National Museum, the Tenement Museum, the Women's Museum, and the Civil Rights Museum, Ameri's conception of the Arab American Museum manifests the intersectionality of the Arab American identity along the lines of ethnic identity, migration, civil status, and gender roles.

Reading through her explorations of these museums, one can infer that the intricacies of Arab American identities perse manifest their Americanness — read as multiple identity categories making up the large tapestry of an American identity.

As Ameri puts it:

*"Arab Americans are as diverse as the Arab world they come from... For example, some came to the U.S. as early as the 1800s and their offspring assimilated to the point of not thinking of themselves as Arab Americans. Others are recent immigrants and have a much stronger Arab identity.*

*"Some came from rural backgrounds with little formal education and ended up joining the American working class, while others came from cosmopolitan cities like Cairo and Baghdad, and are highly educated professionals. Some live in their own ethnic enclaves, others live in the rich suburbs."* (261-2)

In telling her story, Ameri contributes and expands the continuously growing Arab American female voices telling their stories from their own perspectives, such as Diana Abu-Jaber (*Fencing with the King*, 2022), Mohja Kahf (*Hagar Poems*, 2017) Randa Jarrar (*Him, Me, Muhammad Ali: Stories*, 2016), and Joanna Kadi (*Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker*, 1999) to name only a few authors and recent works. ■

# REVIEW

## Joe Burns' Class Struggle Unionism By Marian Swerdlow

### Class Struggle Unionism

By Joe Burns

Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2022,  
180 pages, \$17.95 paperback.

MORIBUND, DECREPIT, SCLEROTIC — all describe the current state of the U.S. labor movement. Labor activists have been seeing “green shoots” for decades. Today, they are pointing to the growing number of Starbucks shops that are unionizing and an independent union’s victory in a certification election in one Amazon facility.

In the past, admittedly, somehow these “shoots” have never grown into a healthy forest, and, although one hopes this time is different, it is possible that these victories will get bogged down in the much more difficult struggle to wrest a contract from recalcitrant and powerful employers.

Joe Burns believes the cure is class struggle unionism. He sets out to explain what it is, and the forces — sometimes not the usual suspects — that stymie its development. Finally, he attempts the far more difficult task of discussing how it may be advanced.

The author, a veteran labor negotiator and attorney, is director of collective bargaining for the Association of Flight Attendants, Communication Workers of America. *Class Struggle Unionism* is well worth reading, despite its shortcomings, for any activist in the labor movement.

### What is Class Struggle Unionism?

“Rather than for a ‘fair wage,’ [class struggle unionists] are fighting for control of our workplaces, of the wealth we create, for our class in general,” writes Burns. This means “an anti-racist, anti-sexist, pro-immigrant stance must be at the core of the class struggle union, along with issues that benefit the entire class.” Further, “class struggle unionists are true internationalists.” (14. Page references in this review are to Burns’ *Class Struggle Unionism* except where noted.)

At the same time, class struggle unionism is rooted in worker leadership of workplace

*Marian Swerdlow is a retired New York City high school teacher. She is the author of Underground Woman: My Four Years as a New York City Subway Conductor, Temple University Press (1998). She wishes to thank Steve Downs, Marc Kagan and Kit Wainer for their very helpful comments on this review. Anything the reader disagrees with or dislikes is strictly the author’s responsibility.*



*Organizing at Amazon: Green shoots of labor’s revival?*

*New York Focus*

struggles and in the “refusal to cede control of shop floor conditions to management”: “unionism should flow upward, from the shop floor.”

This eschews the logic of the United Auto Workers’ “Treaty of Detroit,” which gave up shop floor control in exchange for rising productivity (i.e., speedup) to fund higher pay, effectively linking the fortunes of the union and its members to the profitability of the employer.

Rather, class struggle unionism is based on the idea that “the working class and the employing class have nothing in common,” as the preamble to the Constitution of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) puts it. Therefore either class can only gain as much as the other class loses.

Burns also joins other critics of most labor leaderships: “Full-time staffers have different material interests than those of the members,” as well as being constrained by “legitimate concerns about the institutions they represent.” Notice Burns’ formulation that labor leaders represent “institutions,” not members. (28)

The labor movement faces a state that, Burns emphasizes, is always on the side of the employer class. Yet labor leaders have pinned their hopes for the advancement, or at least survival, of the labor movement on the Democratic Party. Burns scorns this.

“The Democratic Party is not a labor party or a socialist party and it does not

challenge the [existing] system of exploitation ...” Class struggle unionists believe that the labor movement “needs politics which is [sic] completely free from the influence of the employer class.” (76)

Yet Burns wavers on what this implies for support of the Democratic Party, accepting that there are “differences” among the people he considers class struggle unionists: “Some believe we need our own labor party, while others believe we should not focus on politics at all but build a powerful labor movement at the point of production.”

He concludes, however, “all agree . . . we must break free from the stranglehold the Democratic Party has over the labor movement.” They simply don’t agree on what that means in practice.

### Critique of Labor Liberalism

Perhaps the most important and original part of Burns’ book is his critique of what he terms “labor liberalism.” While he follows many others in excoriating business unionism, he goes after a relatively new form of unionism that “focuses on organizing techniques and ties to community.”

The prime example he gives is the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

While labor liberalism may improve conditions for workers and increase union density, it does not allow shop floor militancy, or space for worker self-organization, or recognize the need for worker control in

the workplace, and is not in “overall opposition to the system of capitalism.” (2)

Instead, “workers are merely props for union staffers, trotted out to give scripted remarks” as part of tactics planned and directed from above, such as strikes called for one day — “carefully controlled affairs” — or corporate campaigns.

“Labor liberals look outward, not to workers’ own power” for solutions to workers’ problems, including raising the minimum wage and protective legislation. Relying on politicians, “unions become a mixture of social advocacy group and pressure group on the Democratic Party.”

The party, Burns notes, has been an unreliable ally, failing workers more often than not. But labor liberals are “operators on the left fringes of the Democratic Party, who believe they are smart enough to play around the edges” of a rigged system. (58)

Labor liberalism is “centered in non-profits ... in academia, and among the staff of unions, particularly those without much rank and file control,” not in the workplace. It “has more in common with non-profits rooted in the middle class than ... with worker-led unionism.” When it comes to “struggle with employers, it is often more conservative” than business unionism.

Labor liberals not only abandon sharp class conflict, they “propose partnership with the employers.”

*“It puts no demands upon the leadership of the national unions and turns attention away from the key problem of the labor movement, its timidity and class collaboration.”* (137)

But because labor liberalism *does* unionize workers, improve pay and working conditions, and take progressive positions on political and social issues, Burns is concerned that it has co-opted the progressive activists who once were, or who should be now, attracted to class struggle unionism.

### **Social Justice Unionism**

Although it advocates that unions work with community groups and embrace broad social demands, Burns does not consider social justice unionism an adequate alternative either to business unionism or labor liberalism: “U.S. social justice unionism deviates significantly from its roots in militant third world unionism.”

He also finds it problematic to use the term “social justice unionism” to describe any U.S. union: “Within the big tent of social justice unionism are staff-driven projects that form alliances with non-profits and foundation-funded workers’ centers close to the Democratic Party,” alongside unions Burns considers to be class struggle unions, such as the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

It becomes too complicated to distinguish between the types of social justice unionism. Furthermore, the term “misses

sharp class-on-class struggle, connection to the workplace, union reform ...” Its use should be abandoned. Each union that uses it to describe itself is better viewed as one of the three types of unions Burns describes. (68-69)

Burns points out that another new form of organizing, workers’ centers, are generally “not funded by workers, but in large part by billionaire-created foundations” that provide the funding for the staff.

“They are set up as non-profits with legal control ... residing in a board of directors that selects itself. Some think nothing of calling for strikes or boycotts of entire industries” without any consultation with the workers affected.

He gives the Restaurant Opportunities Center as an example. He allows that there may be some that are worker-led. But in Burns’ view, like labor liberalism, workers’ centers and social justice unionism have proven attractive to progressives, diverting them from class struggle unionism.

### **Class Struggle Unionism Strategy**

What would class struggle unions actually do differently from business unions or labor liberalism? According to Burns, they would use different tactics.

Since labor “cannot win within the framework of existing labor laws” or rely on the Democratic Party to change laws in labor’s favor, class struggle unions must be “capable of violating labor law” and must instill in their members “a wholesale repudiation of employer property rights” as well as “a commitment to organizing the key sectors of the economy through militant tactics.”

As in his 2011 book *Reviving the Strike*,<sup>1</sup> Burns outlines what it takes for a private sector strike to succeed: basically to prevent the production or distribution of goods or services in order to impede the owners’ profits. Militancy is needed — to the point of coercion when necessary — solidarity that extends beyond national borders, and many tactics that violate labor law. “We have had to confront repression from the government ... violence ...” (*Reviving the Strike*, 90)

But this is perfunctory. History shows that the costs of violating laws and injunctions, especially in the private sector, have gone far beyond fines and jailing of union leaders: rank and file workers have faced firing, blacklisting, physical attacks by police, paramilitary organizations, the National Guard and even the U.S. Army.

Strikers, their friends and supporters, are risking life and limb when they violate labor laws and injunctions. Even victorious strikes have had martyrs.

His chapter “Class Struggle Strategy” has three sections, “Building Class Struggle Tactics,” “Building a Class Struggle Trend,” and “Put No Demands, Expect Nothing.”

Regarding the first, *tactics* are not *strategy*.

The second section, whose limits will be explored later, discusses how to develop a class struggle unionism trend. The final one addresses what tasks are appropriate while that trend is still relatively small and isolated.

None of this tells us what strategy a class struggle union would pursue. Burns implies it bargains for contracts, like existing unions do, and uses contractual language to maintain worker control of the workplace, not direct action, as the IWW attempted to do.

Beyond using militant and even illegal tactics, how would one go about organizing the unorganized? Certification elections? Recognition strikes? Minority unions? Neutrality agreements with employers? Would it engage in collective bargaining based on absolute gains or on relative gains?

Burns argues for building a class struggle trend by publicizing the ideas among people already the most receptive to it, “pulling together like-minded people ...” to establish and build “an ideological pole.” (133, 137) These people will be found, he believes, in such venues as *Labor Notes* conferences and trainings, and in conferences organized by social unionists.

Since the numbers of class struggle unionists are small, “one of our tasks is to influence the course of the labor movement overall,” for example, by publishing, as Burns himself has done.

They should put demands on the labor leadership, such as organizing what Burns describes as “key industries” that are currently largely or entirely non-union: manufacturing, logistics, trucking, meat packing, and construction. But is there value in simply adding more workers to top-down, bureaucratized, staff driven unions, even those that already have an “organizing approach?” Burns’ own discussion of labor liberalism would seem to cast doubt on this.

Besides building a class struggle unionism ideological pole, and putting demands on labor leaders, class struggle unionists “seek to integrate with the working class ... and help spur action ... [they] are agitators and oppositionists and strategists [who] believe in the capacity of workers to organize themselves ... Folks are actually quite creative about organizing themselves, if given space ...” (111)

Burns makes clear he means integrate as rank and file workers, not as union staff. However, it is a weakness in Burns’ vision that he does not mention class struggle unionists as *rank and file organizers of shopfloor fights* against speed-up, abusive bosses, or arbitrary discipline. By organizing in the workplace, they could both raise the level of struggle, and win more workers to class struggle unionism. As per Burns, less conscious workers will organize themselves, and class struggle unionists will be the most dedicated and militant activists.

Burns warns that in the absence of a broader movement, “rank and file work can end up narrowly focused on workplace issues . . . this can be depoliticizing.” (124)

On the other hand, he claims that the self-defined class struggle unionists who took rank and file jobs during the 1970s were overly political and neglected workplace issues. This seems like a great over-generalization.<sup>2</sup> There is no discussion of how workplace and political issues can be thoughtfully and carefully knitted together.

What is the relationship between the class struggle unionism of Burns, of 1970s radicals, the rank and file strategy, and the idea of a “militant minority?” These terms have more history than Burns explores.

Burns starts from the present problem of the decline of the U.S. labor movement and class struggle unionism is his solution. The left class struggle unionism of the 1970s was developed to address problems for socialists: the gulf between the working class and the socialist movement, the related lack of a working class movement and the small size of U.S. socialism.

The 1970s left unionists called upon socialists to take working-class jobs, organize workers there, and to recruit the most advanced workers to socialist ideas and a revolutionary party. The 1975 International Socialist (IS) pamphlet *Class Struggle Unionism*<sup>3</sup> says, “It is vital . . . that we go about building a self-conscious left-wing in the working class and a revolutionary party . . .” (4)

It lays out seven “Principles of Class Struggle Unionism,” which it describes as “a bridge from today’s consciousness . . . to Marxist ideas,” and which have similarities to Burns’ concept.

It asserts that “an individual who in a serious way internalizes these concepts will rapidly move [emphasis added] in the direction of our total politics” and “we want politically serious workers, who are clear on the questions of class struggle unionism and have drawn revolutionary conclusions, to join the IS and learn the rest of their politics inside the organization.” (*Ibid*, 18)

The rank and file strategy was developed by the groups descended from the IS, based on the recognition, over the quarter century after *Class Struggle Unionism* was published, that the level of working-class consciousness and struggle had declined.

The newer strategy still attempts to address the same problems. Similarly, it calls upon socialists to take working-class jobs, to organize workers there, includes propagandizing for class unity, that is, against racism, sexism and nativism, and organizing struggles against the boss.

But unlike the strategy laid out in *Class Struggle Unionism* in 1975, acknowledging the changes in the conjuncture, it does not include recruiting workers to socialism, let

alone to a specific left group.

In Solidarity’s 2000 pamphlet, *The Rank and File Strategy*,<sup>4</sup> six tasks of socialists in the labor movement are laid out, and then the pamphlet notes that “each of these points begins with ‘building’ because the kind of socialist politics we are talking about involves building movements, struggles, and organizations that can make a difference.” (*The Rank and File Strategy*, 31)

That implies the acceptance that the level of working-class and socialist organization have declined since the 1970s. And the goal of winning workers to socialism is much more long-term and conditional than the 1970s class struggle unionism:

“If we carry out this rank and file strategy intelligently, if we can win large numbers of leftists and union activists to this strategy, and if socialism becomes the outlook of more and more of these activists, we can put socialism back on the political agenda in the United States.” (*Ibid*, 32)

### The Militant Minority

Burns’ description of the militant minority both as a strategy and a layer is confusing. For one, he quotes William Z. Foster from *The Principles and Program of the Trade Union Education League* (1922):

“The fate of all labor organization in every country depends primarily upon the activity of a minute minority of clear-sighted, enthusiastic militants scattered throughout the great organized masses of sluggish workers. These live spirits are the natural head of the working class, the driving force of the labor movement, who really understand what the labor struggle means and who have practical plans for its prosecution.”

On the other hand, on the very next page, Burns quotes Rick Fantasia:

“Who constitutes the militant minority may very well depend upon what the issue or the struggle is . . . In general, the militant minority is the section of a workplace, a union, or the broader labor movement who want to fight . . .”

Clearly, Foster’s militant minority has much more than simply the desire to fight. It’s a problem that Burns has more than one concept of who is part of the militant minority.

But Burns also writes, “the key point to the militant minority strategy [emphasis added] . . . is putting the labor movement on a class struggle basis . . . It is fundamentally an oppositional strategy geared to transforming the labor movement;” it “developed as a way of dealing with the weak and ineffective AFL [American Federation of Labor] craft unions last century; and it “is seen by many in today’s labor movement as key to labor’s revival . . .” (106)

He goes on to discuss the “militant minority strategy [as] originally developed by French syndicalists as a way of transforming their conservative union,” which “was imported to the US by William Z. Foster;” and how Foster helped to establish the Trade

Union Education League (TUEL).

A problem with describing the militant minority as a strategy for “dealing with the weak and ineffective AFL craft unions last century” is the fact that the IWW, which described itself as a militant minority on the one hand, and Foster’s TUEL, which Burns and other contemporary writers consider a militant minority, on the other hand, had two very different strategies.

The IWW believed, basically, in dual unionism, in creating “one big union” completely outside of the AFL structure. The TUEL rejected dual unionism. Its strategy was amalgamation of existing AFL craft unions into industrial unions.

What both had in common, however, was the idea of creating an organization (the IWW, and the TUEL, respectively) that would unite all workers across lines of occupation, race, gender, or nationality. This challenges the idea of the militant minority as “a strategy” and suggests it is one element of different possible strategies.

However, Burns also writes, “the core of building the militant minority strategy [emphasis added] in a local or industry involve[s] putting out a program [emphasis added] for revitalization.” This is propaganda work, not active organizing.

Does Burns mean building a militant minority as a layer of workers? Or carrying out a militant minority strategy? Burns’ description of militant minority as both a strategy and a layer is confusing. And what would be the content of this program?

Burns claims that “some people talk about the militant minority . . . as if it pre-exists in the workplace. But it is something that is built through struggle.”

One problem with this formulation is that at different moments in history, a militant minority may or may not pre-exist in the workplace. While the IWW described itself as a militant minority, the term seems to have fallen out of usage after World War I, Foster and others use the idea, but not the term, during the 1920s, and the upsurges of the 1930s and 1940s.

The term reappears only in the late 2010s, during which left labor writers<sup>5</sup> begin to use it again, and apply it, *ex post facto*, to TUEL and to leftists — both organized and unaffiliated — who led the labor rebellions from the Great Depression to the passage of the Taft Hartley Act in 1947. However, it is generally agreed that this layer was gone by the beginning of the “long seventies.”

Even — or especially — when a militant minority already exists in the workplace, struggle develops it, that is, allows it to grow. Both Foster and Farrell Dobbs are very clear about this. Foster writes:

“The campaign can succeed only if thousands of workers can be organized directly in the enrollment of members . . . (T)heir main

task is to organize the most active workers among the masses in great numbers to do the recruiting.”<sup>6</sup>

Dobbs writes:

“Ray [Dunne] and Carl [Skoglund] ... both ... knew how to teach younger leaders by precept and example. Under their guidance ... militant young workers ... began to develop as leaders during the struggle.”<sup>7</sup>

Although it is clearly not, in and of itself, a specific strategy, the development and coalescence of a militant minority layer in the working class and in the labor movement seem to be a precondition for both the revitalization of the labor movement<sup>8</sup> and for the development of a working class-led socialist movement<sup>9</sup>, and so form part of both a class struggle unionism strategy and a rank and file strategy.

### What Kind of Program?

Burns’ clarity on the problem of the labor bureaucracy is a valuable part of his book. It leads him to question “how much effort to place into running union reform efforts.” Still, he believes class struggle unionists should “build left wing caucuses ... we do too little of that: but in doing so, we need a big-tent approach, along with a bit of humility ... you work with people where they’re at to help move the struggle.” (113) This seems blurry: should a caucus be “left-wing?” or should it “work with people where they’re at?”

Many workers who are ready to fight the boss and the labor bureaucracy are far from left wing. Furthermore, as we can see from the experience of the New Directions caucus in New York City’s Transport Workers Union Local 100, the “big tent,” and even the leftists in it, can move toward electoralism and top-down unionism.

Burns is also quick to point out that “in the absence of a class struggle program and movement, any new leadership will face exactly the same problems as those they replaced.” The pressures that create labor bureaucracies and the reformers’ responses will replicate those of the bureaucrats they replaced. “[It] will not resolve the ... divide between union staff ... [and] front line workers.” (114)

His call for a “big tent” is difficult to reconcile with the necessity of “a class struggle program.” Furthermore, even if the “big tent” can agree on a class struggle unionism program, a set of ideas alone seems scarcely adequate to counteract the pressures to bureaucratize that new leaders will be subjected to, regardless of the best intentions and political consciousness.

Ironically, although Burns begins with an analysis of the labor bureaucracy as a layer based on social position, his solution rests on an unexamined switch to assuming it can be a political layer based on a shared ideology.

Burns has been emphatic that class struggle unions will be anti-racist, anti-sexist, pro-immigrant, and fight for issues that benefit the entire working class. How would class struggle unions leaders convince members not only to overcome these divisions among themselves, but to actively fight on these issues in the wider society?

Burns acknowledges the difficulties of achieving this, but writes that this can be accomplished by “developing a theory of labor rights that justifies militancy.” But theory alone does not seem adequate for this task. And since Burns insists that class struggle unions be controlled by the rank and file, a class struggle leadership is not possible without a class struggle rank and file.

Another issue that comes into play when considering whether class struggle unions are possible is the degree of repression, discussed above, that class struggle tactics faced in the past, and are likely to in the future.

Many unions with these tactics, such as the IWW, succumbed completely to repression. Others, like the Electrical Workers Union, shrank yet survived, in part by moderating their tactics and positions at critical junctures. My own conclusion is that *class struggle unionists* and *class struggle unionism* are both more realizable and more important than “class struggle unions” as institutions, which are unlikely to be either long-term or widespread.

Building a class struggle unionism tendency within the labor movement is a step towards changing the movement. Unions, as institutions, may not be capable of having all the characteristics of a class struggle union.

However, unions are more than institutions: they are organizations of workers, and they don’t only have official leaders, they have informal rank and file leaders. A union where there is a significant class struggle tendency striving for bottom up control will be different from one where top down control is uncontested.

Crucially, elements of a new class struggle unionism will need to rise from struggles as they develop, not from a conceptual model. This is why Burns’ overlooking class struggle unionists as rank and file organizers presents a big weakness in his discussion.

Struggle itself produces changes in union organization and practice. Class struggle unionists can lead initiatives from the shop floor that turn discontent into fights that win gains, change consciousness, and have an effect on the culture of unions. This, in turn, can develop moments of upsurge into periods of transformative struggles.

### Class Struggle Unionism and Socialism

Burns starts out by defining the goal of class struggle unionism as “abolition of the billionaire class.” However, in later chapters, he acknowledges that “trade unionism, in and

of itself, can never eliminate the billionaire class or exploitation.” He is not a syndicalist: “The point of unions is not to try to overthrow capitalism.”

So the goal of class struggle unionism is something that class struggle unions cannot achieve. Burns tries to square this circle, however sketchily, by saying “class struggle unionists see class struggle unionism as part and parcel of a larger struggle against exploitation.” But “broader theories” of the connection “are beyond the scope of this book,” and “class struggle unionists do not have to agree on these larger political questions.” (125)

“But even if unions don’t bring about socialist revolution, they pay an important role in furthering solidarity and class consciousness,” Burns asserts. The trouble is that unions, especially craft and business unions, do not always further solidarity, even within their own ranks, and class consciousness cannot develop without solidarity.

Joe Burns’ penetrating analysis of labor liberalism is essential for understanding today’s labor movement, and for the failure of a “class struggle unionism” pole of any sort to develop within it. Burns is also clearer about the destructive and obstructionist role labor leadership plays than adherents of 1970s class struggle unionism or almost all present proponents of the rank and file strategy.

The corollary of this view — his questioning of the efficacy of reform caucuses and electoral strategies for changing union leadership — poses important and urgent questions of how to create bottom-up, fighting unions. Finally, although Burns himself has no clear answers, he challenges us with the questions he leaves open — what role can unions play in eliminating the billionaire class, and ending exploitation? What steps can we take toward getting them to play that role?

### Notes

1. Burns, Joe, *Reviving the Strike: How Working People Can Regain Power and Transform America* (IG Press: New York, N.Y., 2011).
2. See for example Warren Mar, “Organizing in HERE,” *Against the Current* #215; Rob Bartlett, “My Life as a Union Activist,” and Wendy Thompson, “Working 33 Years in an Auto Plant,” *Against the Current* #216; Mike Ely, “Young Reds and the 1970s Right to Strike Committee,” *Against the Current* #217; Elly Leary, “On the Line in Auto,” and Jon Melrod, “Organizing in ’70s Wisconsin,” *Against the Current* #218.
3. International Socialists, *Class Struggle Unionism* (Sun Press: Highland Park, Michigan, 1975).
4. Moody, Kim, *The Rank and File Strategy: Building a Socialist Movement in the U.S.A.* Solidarity Working Paper, 2000.
5. See Post, Charlie, “The Forgotten Militants,” *Jacobin*, 8/8/16; Moody, Kim, *On New Terrain* (Haymarket Books: Chicago, Illinois, 2017); and Utrecht, Micah and Barry Eidlin, “U.S. Union Revitalization and the Missing ‘Militant Minority,’” *Labor Studies Journal*, 3/19/19.
6. Foster, William Z., *Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry*, (Workers Library Publishers: New York City, 1936), 13-14.
7. Dobbs, Farrell, *Teamster Rebellion* (Pathfinder Press: New York City, 2004), 60.
8. For example, Burns 2022; Utrecht and Eidlin, *op. cit.*
9. For example, Post, *op. cit.*; Moody: 2017.

# REVIEW

It's a Blast!

## Radical Memories of Two Generations By Paul Buhle

### The Blast

A Novel

By Joseph Matthews.

Oakland: PM Press, 2022, 416 pages,

\$20 paperback.

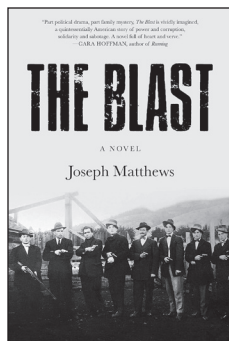
### Summer on Fire

A Detroit Novel

By Peter Werbe

Detroit: Black and Red Books, 2021,

262 pages, \$15.95 paperback.



leadership or misleadership joined the IWW or the more conservative wing of the AFL leadership, or yet the newer unions emerging during wartime, especially the Amalgamated Clothing Workers in its most radical phase.

*The Blast* finds us in San Francisco, with radical Bohemians of both sexes,

the famed zone of sexual activity around the maritime trade, and the sharpening class struggle. It is a very hefty novel, sometimes almost too hefty, with so many details that the reader wonders if he/she has lost the narrative thread somewhere.

Most impressively, we get a real look at the anarchists in daily life, how the groups' newspapers (*Volante*, in Italian, is the most important here) symbolized a way of looking at the world as ripe or over-ripe for direct action — that is, the direct action that Socialists understandably abhorred: bombing adventures.

### Cast of Characters

The novel's key protagonist Kate Jameson has come West from Boston after her genteel husband dies, on the budget of the new Bureau of Investigation eager to quash anti-war voices and activities of any kind. She has lost all contact with her rebellious, bohemian daughter Maggie, who lands in San Francisco, sometimes working as an exotic dancer and generally experiencing a wild time, while being drawn ever closer to Leftwing activities.

Maggie's opposite number, known as "Blue," a native of San Francisco and a sometime boxer, is definitely a revolutionary and at the moment on the run from the Irish revolution.

These two are going to go through a lot, together and apart. But in the background, the author effectively sketches the intensity of the class struggle at a moment when the shortage of workers (thanks largely to war orders) has made them bold, in the Bay Area even bolder.

Into this mix we find two characters not yet world-famous as they will become in a decade: Tom Mooney and Warren Billings, craft workers with anarchist leanings.

Incidental descriptions of characters and their behavior is often so interesting across this large novel that we can stop for a moment and think, for instance, about a devoted Kropotkin follower, the Japanese anarchist roommate of a fourth principal, Dr. Lily Bratz, a people's doctor and reluctant abortionist.

Sadly, that moment passes too fast, as do so many others. The narrative goes on to women's organizing proper, and to the IWW. Details are well explored here, if perhaps too many for easy reading, and the dialogue, historically the hardest part of writing a novel, is altogether credible.

Warren Billings, dedicated anarchist, seems too radical for even the IWW, or perhaps just uncontrollable. He prefers working with AFL craftsmen who have the tactical option to beat back scabs and even practice a little sabotage on the wheels of production.

Billings and the rest are, as history fans know, headed for the bombing of the Preparedness parade of 1916. Bringing intense repression, although not really ending anarchist propaganda and publications (thanks largely to the cover of "foreign" languages that most government agencies could not comprehend), this event nevertheless ends a period of political optimism and the hopes for a near-time transition to socialism that may have been, after all, an illusion.

### Living on the Edge of Doom

Interviewed about the novel, the author notes that the anti-organizational mentality of the anarchists ran up against the internal logic of the IWW. Since the 1890s, some anarchist groups on the East Coast had actually felt more comfortable within the AFL mainstream, resistant to Socialist pressures and the "dual unionism" of the IWW. The future Communist leader William Z Foster created a small syndicalist propaganda campaign or movement to urge joining the AFL.

In the West, anarchism found its home more likely among Asian immigrants and those Spanish speakers from a variety of places, all rigidly excluded from good jobs, let alone existing unions. The characters of the "Latin" branch of the IWW, in San Francisco's North Beach, thus play a major part in the book.

So do the women agitating around the IWW for still-illegal birth control informa-

IN A BYGONE age when the eldest radicals could remember the pre-1920 era, some of them would write to me at *Radical America* saying that, for at least a moment, they could vividly recall the cheerfulness and humor of the optimistic time when socialism seemed inevitable.

The 1960s felt like that, if only for a little while.

*The Blast* gives us a rich sense that the history of the Left has moved on from a history of the Socialist Party and its electoral successes or failures — the traditional field of research — into a broader field of diverse activities and actors. Although not a great novel, it is memorable as part of a literature that seems to recall the radicalism that bloomed in the first decades of the 20th century.

A certain memory gap remains, and probably will remain: activities carried on outside the English language. Nevertheless, we are getting a better glimpse of socialists and anarchists, politics and culture, the astonishing upsurges and the dilemmas presented by the Great War (World War I), the Russian Revolution, the Red Scare and the complications of early Communist infighting.

Recent scholars have tackled anarchism, which had a wide influence not only among Italians, Spanish-Cubans and Mexican-Americans, but also within and around the pro-IWW sectors of Russians, Ukrainians among others. Sometimes this history intersects with the Socialist Party, rather more often it intersects with the labor movement, often in the most unusual ways.

Anarchists who were enraged at Socialist

---

*Paul Buhle, the author or editor of more than three-dozen books, founded the SDS journal Radical America and the archive Oral History of the American Left and, with Mari Jo Buhle, is coeditor of the Encyclopedia of the American Left.*



tion and, more quietly, doing dangerous work like abortions. No historic documentation is going to be equal to the task of uncovering this activity, but fiction can capture the spirit, and *The Blast* certainly does.

We have a feeling in various parts of the novel that the world it depicts, including the relative freedom of movement of its characters, teeters on the edge of doom.

The Bay Area and the heavily-Italian North Beach would remain a center of bohemianism and anarchist inclinations until overtaken by gentrification, and perhaps even now. But the political or anti-political spirit of anarchist possibility faded with the Red Scare.

Communists, often enough Bohemians personally, led the great strikes and unions from the 1920s to the 1950s. The author properly argues that the anarchists have themselves partly to blame, because of their infighting. But in truth, the open-ended era ended around 1920, and no amount of good will could alter that reality.

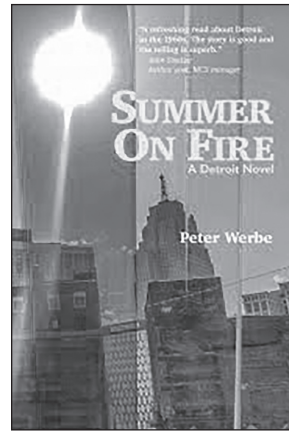
Anarchism did not die, of course. It became essentially a cultural movement, linked in some places with educational experiments, in others with communal activities, especially summer camps and such, and even more, a literary trend.

## Revival and the Underground

Anarcho-pacifism emerged at the end of World War II, launched radio WBAL in New York, and inspired City Lights Books in San Francisco. Anarchism inflected heavily during the 1960s without much calling itself anarchism (when it did, it signaled one more version of sectarianism.) But it did inspire some remarkable experiments.

*The Fifth Estate*, Detroit's venerable alternative paper launched in 1965, a shade before the skyrocketing rise of the underground press across the United States, could be described as a manifestation of that anarchist spirit — not because it declared itself so, but because in its particular manifestations of rebellion, all other definitions would have faded by the middle 1970s at least.

The '60s Movement died, by 1980 even underground comix had faded, but *The Fifth Estate* and a cousin in Austin, Texas, *The Rag*, stayed and stayed. *The Rag* had Thorne Dreyer, *The Fifth Estate* had Peter Werbe,



present from its launch until today, and the power of publicity alone seemed to sustain these publications.

*Summer On Fire: a Detroit Novel* is about the years of highest excitement. It begins with Werbe's adolescence, narrowly fictionalized like so much else in the novel. He spans enthusiasm with the Beat Generation's last phase with the rise of Youth Culture (so do I, and so do thousands of others nearing 80) and the moiling political, workplace and community revolts of 1968-72.

It's not the greatest novel about the 1960s, but Detroiters in particular will find lots to interest them, bring back memories, and argue about over dinner.

Easily the most exciting page (139) brings *The Fifth Estate* into existence. It is wildly eclectic, interesting to look at, the relentless in its attack upon the Detroit Establishment.

For me, the editor-publisher of *Radical America* in Madison and a collaborator on a couple of u.g. newspapers, the chapters that capture the inner group, the work process and community response will always be the most intriguing. ■

## A Life of Internationalism: Alain Krivine — continued from page 41



Alain Krivine and Oliver Besancenot, two generations of militant activism.

In some countries with a weak, purely intellectual or non-existent Trotskyist tradition, imitation or adaptation of the Ligue model became the norm. In countries like the United States with a stronger Trotskyist tradition, the lessons of the French experience raised discussions.

Alain Krivine, then using the pen name Delfin, was intricately involved in these debates around political issues such as the nature of the new youth radicalization, the role of universities in revolutionary upsurges, the need for a gradual turn of student-based

organizations towards the labor movement and working class. But they also involved organizational differences about party democracy and tendency representation.

Here my path again crossed Alain Krivine's. I was involved in two debates in the U.S. SWP, the first in 1971 around a document calling "For a Proletarian Orientation," the second in 1973 around critical support for a European Perspectives resolution that included a turn to the working class.

In my opinion, the 1973 debate over a guerilla warfare strategy, allegedly adopted by the FI in 1969, was a diversion from the main issues and practical options which centered on advanced capitalist

countries. In both cases, the minority point of view was not represented as such on the National Committee of the SWP.

In 1974, the minority supporters (Internationalist Tendency) were expelled without a trial. Krivine as a leader of the largest organization of the FI which took pride in its democratic internal regime and respect for minority rights, supported the official FI disapproval of the expulsion. I was elected to the International Executive Committee of the FI and saw Krivine regularly at meetings.

From 1981 to 1989, I worked part-time at the international center of the FI as a translator and editor, and continued to witness Krivine's involvement in attempts to build the FI. There were visits or exchanges with Brazil and Mexico, two countries where the FI had large sections.

He was an international observer of the 1984 and 1990 elections in Nicaragua. In 1999, Krivine was elected to the European Parliament (EP), which enabled him to play an international role with more authority, such as during his trip to Caracas, Venezuela in 2003 to celebrate the defeat of the attempted coup against Hugo Chavez. And when the United States lifted its longtime refusal to deliver a visa in March 2003, for a visit to Kofi Annan, of the UN, along with a delegation of the EP protesting the U.S. occupation of Iraq.

He continued to help the FI build revolutionary organizations to the very end: in Moscow in 2006, to discuss with activists of the new socialist group *Vperiod*; in Madrid in 2010 to honor Daniel Bensaid, in Athens to help organize resistance to the *diktats* of the *troika* (European institutions that imposed crippling austerity on Greece — ed.), and in Kiev in 2015 at the invitation of the *Sotsyalni Rukh* movement.

Alain Krivine's legacy: Over 60 years of activism for socialism on a global scale. ■



## A Life of Internationalism: Alain Krivine, 1941-2022

By John Barzman

March 21 march of 2,000 to the Père Lachaise cemetery, honoring Alain Krivine.

Photothèque Rouge /Martin Noda / Hans Lucas

WHEN ALAIN KRIVINE died on March 12, 2022, official tributes and personal remembrances started pouring in from the many people and organizations with whom he had worked during his 60 years of activism.

I was among the 2,000 people who marched on March 21, from the Place de la Nation to his funeral at the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, behind a banner “*Merci Alain.*” Tributes from a wide variety of figures, many of whom had parted ways with him but wanted to salute his memory, were collected at a memorial meeting organized by the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) on April 30. (See a broad selection through the on-line website ESSF).

Among them, British socialist Tariq Ali explained how he identified Krivine and the “Ligue”: “It was for us, those of us in smaller organizations of the Fourth International, the best organization of the Fourth International.”

*John Barzman was born in Los Angeles and lives in France. A university professor, he is active in the SNESup union, Ensemble! and Ukraine solidarity. His U.S. experience includes serving on the National Committee of the SWP and United Secretariat of the Fourth International between 1974 and 1979. He is the author of Dockers, métallos, ménagères : mouvements sociaux et cultures militantes en France 1912-1923 and the forthcoming Les dockers du Havre, de la révolution à nos jours.*

al.” The International Socialist Tendency (IST) wrote: “above all we are in debt to Alain and his comrades in the JCR — the starting point of the LCR and now the NPA — for leading the way in reviving revolutionary socialism as a living force in Europe. They blazed a trail that we must continue to follow.”

Alex Calinicos (British SWP) stated: “For me he always represented the indomitable spirit of the great revolt by French workers and students in May 1968.”

### Early Years

Krivine and his twin brother Hubert were born in Paris on July 10, 1941. Three of their four grandparents had immigrated from Ukraine and Romania to escape antisemitic pogroms at the end of the 19th century. The twins had three older brothers and a sister.

By the end of the year his father, a dentist, arranged for his wife and youngest children to move to a small town in the north of France; with the liberation of Paris the family was reunited.

Interested in politics from childhood — and growing up in a household that valued education — he, by 1960, was enrolled at Sorbonne University, studying history. Two years later he married his wife Michèle, who became a professor of history, geography and social sciences. They had two daughters,

Nathalie (b. 1968) and Florence (b. 1974).

Alain Krivine joined the Communist Youth of France in 1957. His activity in support of Algerian independence led him to oppose the line of the French Communist Party (PCF), then the dominant force in the French left and labor movement (about twice the size and influence of the Socialist Party). This put him in contact with members of the French section of the Fourth International, the PCI (*Parti communiste internationaliste*), which he joined but without announcing it publicly to avoid expulsion.

He became a leader of the Union of Communist Students, his current known as “Guevarist” for their solidarity with the Cuban revolution. Finally, in 1965, entire local groups of the Union were expelled wholesale, including Krivine. He then turned to solidarity with Vietnam against the U.S. imperialist aggression, helping to found the National Vietnam Committee.

### May 1968 and Beyond

Krivine’s celebrity comes mainly from his role in the May ’68 events.

A rising but relatively contained tide of workers’ struggles had been developing since 1963. In 1968 a massive student protest against police repression forced the unions and left parties to call a national demonstration and one-day general strike. But in one

factory after the other, workers voted to continue the strike indefinitely, leading to the most massive labor strike in French history.

Because of its role in triggering the event, the student movement played a far more important role than its size would suggest (300,000 compared to 10 million workers on strike). And within this student movement Krivine's JCR (*Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire*), played a key role because of its previous work on Vietnam and its attempts to bring about a worker-student alliance, despite PCF attempts to separate the two movements.

French society and De Gaulle's conservative government were shaken. For about 15 years thereafter, strikes multiplied, membership in unions and left parties grew, citizens voted increasingly to the left, and new social movements emerged.

The JCR became the LC (*Ligue communiste*), renamed LCR (*Ligue communiste révolutionnaire*) after being banned: It grew from 300 to over 3000, acquiring influence in the trade unions (CGT, CFDT, FEN) and new social movements as well as in public debate where it was seen as the alternative to social democracy and Stalinism.

After François Mitterand, a social democrat, became president of France in 1981, the Lige grew more slowly, while deepening its roots in the labor movement. Krivine remained among its leadership, attentive to any opening that might announce a new revolutionary upsurge, or a possible regroupment of revolutionary, or anticapitalist or simply class-struggle or neo-Keynesian forces.

But a capitalist counter offensive had begun under the guise of neoliberalism. Retrospectively we know that no social revolutions were successful even temporarily after Nicaragua (1979). In these tougher times for revolutionaries, Krivine became widely known for remaining true to the ideals of his youth.

Of course, many of his generation did likewise and quietly spawned the new social movements of the 1990s and beyond, but he was in the limelight and counterposed by the media to obvious turncoats like Daniel Cohn Bendit and Bernard-Henri Lévy. He described himself as a popularizer not a theoretician ("je suis un vulgarisateur").

In the tributes many describe him also as a party builder, attentive to organizational detail, close to the rank-and-file, present at demonstrations, factory gate events, small local meetings and welcoming visitors at the national headquarters in Montreuil.

## New Struggles

The 1995 strike wave, the emergence of the global social justice movement ("altermondialisme") and the "No" vote on the 2005 referendum amending the European Union constitution, seemed to herald a new

cycle of rising struggles. LCR presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot received 4% of the vote in 2007, beating the PCF and *Lutte Ouvrière* (another Trotskyist group — ed.) candidates.

Krivine then supported the launching of a broad NPA (*Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste*) rather than pursuing unity with the anti-neo-liberal left (*Collectifs unitaires anti-libéraux*). The latter was later augmented by left-wing splits from the SP, became the *Front de Gauche* (PCF/far left/*Parti de Gauche*) and has reemerged today as the *Nouvelle Union Populaire Ecologiste et Sociale* (NUPES).

For a while, the NPA was broader than the LCR, incorporating anarchist and social justice collectives. But these currents soon were attracted by the broader *Front de Gauche* and its successors, or left the NPA for other reasons. Krivine followed politics until the very end, but did not live to see the foundation of the NUPES, in April 2022.

## Builder and Organizer

These are the broad outlines of Krivine's role on the French left. But his role on the world scene, as spreader of socialist ideas, organizer of solidarity networks and builder of revolutionary groups in many countries beyond France must also be addressed.

Krivine's trajectory is profoundly embedded in international events. His first militant activity, at age 16, was as a French Communist Youth delegate to the World Festival of Democratic Youth held in Moscow in 1957 to promote Peace and Friendship.

This is where he met Algerian delegates who convinced him that the French PCF was not doing as much as it should to support their struggle for independence. The encounter was fundamental: Krivine saw himself as part of the historical Communist movement, articulating the interests of the world proletariat, and committed to act against his own imperialist homeland, France.

His refusal to see France, despite its Gaullist dissidence from U.S.-led Western imperialism, as non-aligned or attached to the universal republican values of the French revolution on the world scene, remained with him throughout his life.

This was of course the basis for his support to Algerian self-determination in general, his specific solidarity with the movement actually leading the struggle, the FLN (*Front de Libération nationale*), whatever differences he might have with its leadership, and his creation of the *Front Universitaire Antifasciste* to combat the far-right forces defending the French colonial empire (the OAS, *Organisation de l'Armée Secrète*).

Solidarity with Cuba and Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s could also be seen as support for self-determination of nations struggling to free themselves from the dom-

ination of an imperialist master, although in these cases their enemy was not French but U.S. imperialism.

Unlike in Algeria, the movements actually leading these struggles seemed to promise clearly anticapitalist measures, in defiance of Moscow's desire to preserve the status quo and avoid uncontrolled challenges to capitalism. The reputation of Krivine's French movement as "Guevarist" was based on this perception of Vietnam and Cuba as relatively independent of the Soviet peaceful coexistence line.

Krivine's activism on Vietnam brought him to street demonstrations in Berlin, Brussels and London and encouraged contacts in the United States and many other countries.

In the United States, the Socialist Workers Party and Young Socialist Alliance were playing an important role in organizing the antiwar movement. This registered with the U.S. (SWP) and French organizations of the Fourth International, who saw the possibility of escalating formal fraternal relations established by the FI's reunification of 1963 into a more active collaboration on common initiatives around Vietnam and student and youth work.

## Personal Recollections

Just then, I happened to have joined the JCR in France and was preparing to go to college in the United States in fall 1965. Krivine and others quickly told me that I was not simply a revolutionary Marxist and a critical Communist but a Trotskyist (a discovery recounted by others), and sent me to see Pierre Frank, the leader of the PCI at the time, who gave me a letter to carry to New York and introduce myself to Mary-Alice Waters and Jack Barnes of the YSA and SWP.

May '68 had a big impact on the U.S. antiwar and student movement. The events demonstrated the potential of the working class of advanced capitalist countries to awaken and mobilize. Mary Alice Waters and Joseph Hansen, an older leader of the SWP, were in Paris, meeting occasionally with Krivine and covering events.

Out of these encounters came the widely distributed *Revolt in France May-June 1968. A Contemporary Record Compiled from Intercontinental Press and the Militant*. The YSA issued a badge of solidarity with the JCR and, one of its leaders, Peter Camejo engaged in "the battle of Telegraph Avenue" in Berkeley (June-July 1968).

As Tariq Ali's tribute above emphasized, Krivine's Lige became the model for groups and individuals around the world drawn to revolutionary socialism. Krivine and other leaders of the French section spent time in other countries to develop closer links (Belgium, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Britain, Sweden, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, Holland).

continued on page 39

## A Tribute to Xiang Qing Living with Political Clarity

By Au Loong-yu

*EDITOR'S NOTE: ON July 6th, 2022, Trotskyist social movement activist and co-founder of Pioneer Group (formerly Sun Miu), Xiang Qing, passed away in Macau at age 100. Xiang was born in 1922, studied at National Southwest Association University, encountering Marxist thought and embracing Trotskyism beginning in 1937. After 1949, following the Communist Party's mass repression of Trotskyists, Xiang and some other Trotskyists fled mainland China and arrived in Hong Kong and Macau to participate in radical youth movements there.*

*At the same time, Xiang continued to strongly criticize Maoist and Stalinist brands of communism. Hong Kong socialist and activist Au Loong-yu was deeply influenced by Xiang, and wrote the following tribute reviewing and commemorating the life of this late "movement mentor." The article, written on July 19, 2022, was originally in Chinese and was published by the online media Linking Vision.*

MY MENTOR, XIANG Qing, passed away at age 100 this year on July 9th. I first traveled from Hong Kong to visit him in Macau in 1977. I was 21 and had first joined the Young Socialist Group, a youth left-wing organization that shared rental space with the editorial office of *October Review*, which ran a small bookstore in the unit.

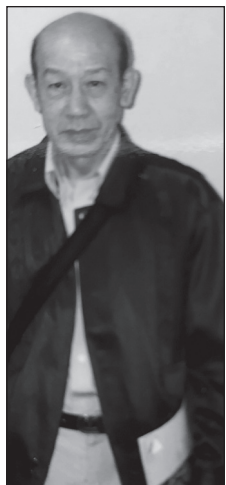
I only understood that they were Trotskyists after reading more upon joining the Young Socialist Group. At the time, the Chinese language and Protect Diaoyutai ("Baodiao") movements had died down and social movements were ebbing overall, and I felt troubled about not knowing what to do.

One day, I discovered an internal document analyzing the political situation in China and Hong Kong by someone named "Xiang Qing" that impressed me, so I tracked him down and brought a friend to meet him in person.

Mao Zedong had just passed away a year before, and the elders of *October Review* and the young Trotskyists were all optimistic about the democratic struggles on the mainland. But I realized that Xiang's political

---

*Au Loong-yu is the author of Hong Kong in Revolt. The Protest Movement and the Future of China (Pluto Press, 2020). This article is translated by Promise Li for ATC.*



Xiang Qing

analysis was able to address many aspects that others neglected — and since then I saw him as my movement mentor.

### The Poverty of Leadership

Under the restrictions of colonial rule, it was extremely difficult for left-wing youth to develop enough analytical tools to adequately assess the political situation of Hong Kong and China. Social movements in Hong Kong, especially left-wing ones, faced many pressures and differed from some other countries where there was more continuity between movements across generations.

One time I was in the U.K., and a friend took me to a church in Oxford, where some community members and other sympathizers every year would commemorate some soldiers executed by Oliver Cromwell during the English Civil War.

These soldiers were part of a radical group called the Levellers, who were executed by Cromwell for refusing to obey his orders to invade Ireland.

This is a history made alive by living movements. But in Hong Kong, let alone in China, there are barely any movement histories that are independently preserved. New generations of activists are forced to discover tools anew, and stumble on many errors.

A key reason for this lack of historical memory and continuity is state repression. At the time, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) sympathizers in Hong Kong also faced pressure, but they had a mountain to lean on, so the British did not dare to overstep certain lines. But other movement activists were not so fortunate, and it was worse if one was a leftist.

It was not until the early 1970s when the colonial regime loosened its grip a bit, but at first, the new wave of student activists then

was completely oblivious to the fact that there were a group of elder leftists around, who were labelled as "Trotskyists."

In 1952, all remaining Trotskyists in China were rounded up and sent to prison — leaving only the ones in Hong Kong. But if the Trotskyists in Hong Kong were to be discovered, they would be deported by the British. It was at this time when Xiang was deported to Macau.

Those who were not deported would have to remain underground for the long term. In this condition, it was hard for the *October Review* comrades not to become disconnected with the youth, and it would be difficult for the youth to learn about them.

It would take quite a few years for left-leaning youth to connect to old leftists, like Peng Shuzhi from overseas, and Wang Fanxi and Xiang in Macau. But by 1975, Wang already moved abroad to England (it would take me another five years to get a chance to write him), so I could only mainly learn from Xiang.

### Rule of Law and People's Self-governance

Although the colonial regime then loosened some of its authoritarian control, it would still harass leftist youth demonstrating or flyering on the streets by giving them a hard time or prosecuting them — only at least then they did not charge them with severe crimes. There was no consensus about whether a leftist should plead guilty, appeal for a lesser sentence, defend oneself in court, appeal, or hire a lawyer, and more broadly, how to even relate to the very institution of the colonial rule of law.

Someone at the time wrote an article titled, "The rule of law is already dead, the rise of people's self-governance," which denied the former. Xiang gave me some old publications and some of his articles that addressed my questions on these topics. He explained as such in a 1973 article titled "the rule of law and the people's self-governance":

*"A rule of law that does not take the people's self-governance as a foundation would only be a dictatorship of the few ruling over the masses. Since only the people's self-governance can safeguard the rights and interests of the broader masses, some think the masses only need to struggle for the people's self-governance,*

without needing any rule of law; but opposing the rule of law and the people's self-governance in a binary would also be incorrect.

*Contemporary anti-authoritarian movements for democracy are at the same time also a movement to demand a more sufficient rule of law. The early democratic movements in the 17th century first demanded the limitation of the monarch's administrative powers ... with the rise of the workers' movement and the right to universal suffrage ... these all helped strengthen the true spirit of a genuinely democratic rule of law. And so, the rule of law and the people's self-governance should progress together...*

He stressed that for young leftists who want to develop a socialist stance on the rule of law, they must advocate for the freedom and liberation of the working-class as a key principle to replace the traditional aims of the rule of law under bourgeois democracy.

The rule of law is impoverished under capitalism, but we must not deny the basic essence of a rule of law, but work to introduce a newer, more sufficient rule of law that safeguards the power and interests of the workers. His article inspired me to rigorously study the historical development of different forms of democracy, and laid the groundwork for my later intervention in approaching the fight for universal suffrage.

### **On Hong Kong Self-determination**

In 1982, Hong Kong became a key bargaining chip in the rivalry between China and Britain. Beijing declared that Hong Kong's sovereignty belongs to China, and Britain was reluctant to let go. So some in Hong Kong civil society advocated for a plan for Britain to return the city's sovereignty to China in exchange for retaining Britain's right to govern.

Xiang, on the other hand, thought that genuine democrats should not request the British to extend colonial rule, while also not completely accepting the CCP's conditions of return. Around that time, he wrote a pamphlet titled "Hongkongers' Path Forward: Struggle for Democracy, Demand Sovereignty" reminding readers that calling for the return of the city's sovereignty should only be one aspect of our demand.

The other aspect lies in the principle of "sovereignty lies with the people": a country's sovereignty does not lie in within the party or state bureaucracy, but its people.

The missing link between these two aspects lies in the framework of Hongkongers' right to democratic self-determination, because "without the masses holding power, a nation's so-called sovereignty would be nothing but a dead weight on the body of the masses ... the question of when and in what manner should Hongkongers' return to China should be wholly determined by the Hong Kong masses."

The long period of colonial rule has

weakened Hongkongers' democratic awareness, such that Xiang's principles still only have minimal influence even 20 years later — even during and after the mobilizations against the Tiananmen Square massacre. Many Hongkongers still thought that they were the "geese that laid the golden egg," and so Beijing would handle us liberally. It was only until a new generation of activists in the year or two before the Handover when there were similar demands.

It was not until a year before the Handover that the idea of Hong Kong's sovereignty belonging not to any political party but rather to the people became more popularized, and a small circle of young activists began to act. On the night before the Handover on July 1, 1997, hundreds of protesters marched (illegally) in the street to insist that the sovereignty belongs to the people, while many of the mainstream pro-democracy liberal parties refrained from hosting any street protest.

In 2003, Beijing attempted to introduce national security legislation, only retracting it to avert a political crisis after 500,000 Hongkongers took to the streets. But people later came under the impression that Beijing seemed to respect Hong Kong's autonomy, and so that generation of youth did not give much serious thought to how Hong Kong's road to democracy should continue.

But the seeds of dissent were planted then, and next time, the youth acted differently: 11 years later, they led the Umbrella Movement. Even though it failed, it triggered a serious discussion among civil society about the political direction of Hong Kong's future: from the left, right and center, to advocates for self-determination, independence, pro-democracy, etc.

Though later the main voices for Hong Kong's self-determination may not be directly related to Xiang or our political materials, and few people knew of Xiang's writings, it proved that his thinking on democracy and sovereignty symbolized a bridge between democratic movements in China and elsewhere and the struggles of what I call the "1997 generation," who sparked the Umbrella movement and the 2019 resistance movement.

Xiang had long been isolated in his small flat in Macau, but was never one of those intellectuals who would, in isolation, become cynical and wallow in despair. The generation born around the Handover did not succeed in 2019, but neither did the early pro-democracy activists' demand to accept the limitations of the Basic Law and advocate for a gradualist path toward universal suffrage.

Hong Kong is too small, and there is already little chance for success if Hongkongers' attempt to organize without connecting with the democratic movements in China. This is what Xiang's pamphlet, early

on, already presaged.

### **Democrat and Socialist**

Xiang Qing was not only a democrat, but a socialist. Once when we were discussing this topic, he stressed that genuine socialism can only mean the total manifestation of democracy. And so his key work (collected in *On Bureaucratic Socialism and From Bureaucratic Socialism to Bureaucratic Capitalism*) sought to expose and critique the CCP's inauthentic brand of socialism.

In 1966, when tens of millions of students were "rebellious" at the peak of the Cultural Revolution, there were many youth from all across the world who echoed their slogans. But Xiang argued in his "Brief Remarks on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" that "even though the movement unleashed by Mao Zedong is painted with the colors of the left, its basic structure is neither progressive nor revolutionary, but conservative and reactionary, aiming to safeguard Stalinist authoritarian rule and the elite privileges of Mao's ruling clique."

His erudition and self-cultivation always kept him politically clear-headed.

In the last decade or so, Xiang's output slowed, but he continued to study and reflect on world affairs. His last long-form piece analyzed the global political situation in 2013, suggesting that "the 2008 financial crisis not only triggered a political and social crisis, but also pointed toward the unprecedented climate crisis. Mass-scale anti-government movements, even revolutionary ones, are growing in power in and between different countries."

His article also discussed the situation in China: "In the next few years, a revolution that few can predict is entirely possible."

He even speculated that the first phase of the revolution would see liberals first taking power, but that they themselves cannot solve China's politico-economic crisis — only a democratic government with workers leading other oppressed groups has the power to do so.

I did not share his optimistic assessment at the time. I began solidarity work with Chinese workers at the turn of the century in order to more concretely grasp the situation on the ground, and came to the conclusion that he overestimated the power of not only the labor movement, but also the liberals, in the mainland.

But differences in political assessment are quite normal; Xiang was also coming from a place of care for people — for working people. In retrospect, a great majority of his work can stand the test of time.

He often joked that he might have 120 years of life, which he ultimately did not. But I know that he would not mind: he joyfully lived a simple and virtuous life, without any care for his own self-interest.

Goodbye, Xiang Qing. ■

## Leo Frumkin, 1928-2022

By Sherry Frumkin

TO HIS GRANDCHILDREN and great-grandchildren, Leo Frumkin was the funniest man on the planet. With sparkling blue eyes and a full head of silver hair, he told jokes that made them giggle with glee up until weeks before his death. With a natural ease and a smile that would light up the room, he lived his life dedicated to creating a more just, equitable and sustainable world for them, his entire family and for the world.

Leo was born in East Los Angeles on August 4, 1928 and died June 23rd, just shy of his 94th birthday. Throughout his long life, he was a powerful and highly effective force for peace and social justice.

Leo was greatly influenced by his older sisters and brothers-in-law, all of whom were members of the Socialist Workers Party, and by the multi-racial and multi-ethnic communities of Boyle Heights and Belvedere where he grew up. [See historian George Sanchez's *Boyle Heights: How a Los Angeles Neighborhood Became the Future of American Democracy* (2021). Leo is featured in Chapter 3.]

As a high school student, he formed a youth group affiliated to the SWP. While a senior at Roosevelt High School, he helped organize and lead a student strike to protest an appearance by the fascist agitator Gerald L.K. Smith. He was arrested along with other student activists. A November 2, 1945 photo of him in the *Los Angeles Examiner* was the inspiration for a painting of that moment. It became a focal point of the home in Tarzana he shared for 45 years with his wife Sherry and their two daughters.

At 19 Leo was elected president of a UAW Local, the youngest person at that time ever to hold that position. During the Korean War became a merchant seaman, but was drafted off a ship into the U.S. Army. Just as promptly, he was thrown out of the Army because of his socialist political beliefs and outspoken opposition to the war.

The Army later reversed itself and issued him an honorable discharge. With GI Bill benefits, he studied radio at LA City College. His deep, resonant voice landed him a job as a disc jockey at a Burbank radio station where he used the name Lee Davis. The

---

*Sherry Frumkin is director at Santa Monica Art Studios and the Sherry Frumkin Gallery. A version of this article appeared in the 7/10/22 LA Times. Thanks to Jim Lafferty for his help.*

station insisted Frumkin sounded too Jewish.

However, his brief radio career was cut short when he refused to cross a picket line set up by the station's engineers who were trying to form a union. Once again, his political sympathies landed him on a blacklist.

### Activism and Hope

At the height of the McCarthy period Leo, as an activist in the SWP, became the chairperson of the Wendell Phillips Academic Freedom Committee, which led a successful public campaign to reinstate the Fullerton Junior College instructor who had been fired for refusing to "name names." Also as a SWP activist, Leo was a founding member of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. Later he helped organize and defend the massive mobilizations against the war in Vietnam.

In reading hundreds of pages of files obtained through the Freedom of Information Act — obtained with help from the ACLU — Leo later learned that the FBI had been following him for years. But they bumbled in their efforts to have him arrested for belonging to an organization on the Attorney General's List (which at its peak contained 90 organizations considered "subversive," including everyone from the Quakers to socialist and communist groups). However, they went so far as tailing him to the Little League games he coached for his son.

Screened out of the merchant marines, kicked out of the Army and blacklisted from radio, Leo worked for and then founded a successful automotive parts business which



Leo Frumkin at home.

Edmon J. Rodman

he ran for 41 years. He settled for a lesser price from a buyer who would guarantee that all the 70-plus employees would retain their jobs, and retired at age 84.

Leo was greatly disheartened by the rightward shift in the United States, and dismayed by the transformation of the SWP into an authoritarian sect. For a while he was active in Solidarity, and always held out hope, cheering on the youth who poured into the streets in the wake of the George Floyd and Breonna Taylor killings. He only half joked that his headstone should read, "I tried."

In addition to his wife Sherry, Leo is survived by his children Sally Frumkin, Mark Frumkin, daughter-in-law Julie Frumkin, Alisa Kinori, son-in-law Gilad Kinori, Syndee Frumkin and her partner Marcus Floyd, grandchildren Aaron, Gloria, Mayira, Ziv, Shoshana, Kai and Cyrus, great-grandchildren Courtney, Quetzalli, Keely and Salvador, great-great granddaughter Ava, nieces and nephews, and lifelong friends. A memorial will be held at a later time. ■

ballot drop boxes, numbers of polling sites, even bans on distributing water to voters (e.g. Georgia) — and ominously — recruitment of thugs to act as intimidating “poll watchers” especially in heavily-Black and Latinx precincts.

• State bans on high school transgender athletes as well as meaningful sex education, anything that ignorant legislators choose to call “Critical Race Theory,” and whatever else suits the purpose of pandering to a rightwing base.

As for responding to mass shootings, plans also abound to weaponize and lock down school buildings, making students’ daily experience roughly like entering a medium-security prison.

## **Pending Debacle, and Fightback**

The Democratic Party establishment is engaged in a two-front battle — against the Republican right wing, which it’s largely losing, and against its own party’s progressive wing, where it’s having some considerable success.

Especially in a fraught economic climate, the thin Democratic House of Representatives majority and fragile control (such as it is) of the Senate have been expected to shatter. Possibly, however, the brutality of the *Roe* overturn, the still unfolding revelations of the January 6 conspiracy, and counter-mobilizations against voter suppression may alter the result in some key states and races.

In addition to the powerful response to the *Roe* overturn, another arena of resistance is the movement at grassroots levels in states where voting rights and access are under attack — to get folks registered and informed of their rights, to get “souls to the polls” for early voting (for example, on Saturdays if it’s being banned on Sundays to curtail the African American vote), and to fight back waves of voter intimidation tactics that threaten to turn election-day sites into combat zones.

It mustn’t be forgotten that the spirit of the new labor organizing drives and campaigns — to unionize corporate giants like Starbucks and Amazon, to win decent contracts for nurses and teachers and UPS workers, and more — are also key democratic actions in an atmosphere where labor laws and courts are heavily stacked against working people. *In the long run, labor’s revival and fight for economic justice is decisive for any progressive outcome.*

These are first steps toward building resistance struggles that will be complex and protracted, whatever the electoral dice rolls in November may produce. The signals of revulsion and fightback are absolutely vital, even if they aren’t yet the huge mass movements — on the scale of the historic Civil Rights, antiwar and labor organizing upsurges — that are needed to transform the situation.

## **Where Are We Going?**

It’s important in the circumstances to be combative, but clear-eyed about the threats of the far-right offensive.

The reasons why we’ve taken to labeling the Supreme Court majority engineered by the Bush and Trump regimes as WSCOTUS — White Supremacy Court of the United States — come into clearer focus by the day. To be sure, the unelected Court is not a unilateral actor initiating law or policy on its own. In normal circumstances it wasn’t meant to be the continual center of attention.

But nothing is “normal” now. And in view of the Court’s incredibly overweight role during the U.S. condition of capitalist political gridlock, something needs to be said about the conventional media labeling of this WSCOTUS majority as “conservative” or even “ultraconservative.”

Conservatism in any meaningful sense — guiding principles like resistance to rapid radical change, respect for institutions and customs, to say nothing of judicial precedent, etc. — has practically nothing to do with it. That’s why WSCOTUS is enabling, not restraining, the far right’s manipulation and subversion of what were supposed to be institutions of constitutional government and “our democracy.”

Radical socialists like the editors of this magazine, of course, *do* believe in the urgency of rapid social change. We expect those to be achieved by movements through mass democratic politics and action, not handed down from bourgeois courts. But within the narrow arena of legal reasoning, there’s something to be said for judicial restraint and a decent dose of humility, to say nothing of consideration for rulings’ impact on ordinary people’s lives.

None of that motivates the present WSCOTUS. Rather, it is fuelled by an unrestrained far-rightwing ideological marriage of extreme corporate greed, pseudo-libertarianism and white-supremacist Christian nationalism.

These elements are synergistic and mutually reinforcing. The first accounts for striking down Environmental Protection Agency: greenhouse gas emissions regulations, thereby speeding up capitalism’s forced march to ecosuicide.

The second explains the Court majority’s lunatic reading of the Second Amendment’s arcane text, murkily worded but which never said, implied or was ever before understood to mean unregulated private rights of anyone to carry concealed firearms, anywhere.

And the combination of white-supremacist nationalism and fundamentalist Christian theology produced the years-long gutting of the Voting Rights Act and a century of campaign finance laws, enabling extreme racial gerrymandering and now the brutal overturn of *Roe v. Wade*.

Unless this Court’s ideologically driven majority is properly frightened of the public backlash, cases to overturn rights to same-sex marriage, contraception and anything else that’s been taken to be governed by the Equal Protection clause of the 14th Amendment could come next.

The aroused and emboldened Justice Clarence Thomas promised as much. (Enough Republican Senate votes might be rounded up to codify national same-sex and interracial marriage equality as well as contraception rights, frankly saving the Court’s butt on these issues.)

By the time of the 2024 election, the Court may have taken up the ultimate “independent state legislatures” claim to enable the outright overturn of elections where rightwing state lawmakers decide they don’t like the results. By all rational calculations that should be many bridges too far. But rationality in these inflationary days doesn’t buy what it used to.

Taken to the outer limits that an ascendant right wing envisions, the results could include an unsolvable crisis of legitimacy and political fracturing of the country — with incalculable consequences. Might the August 2 Kansas result point toward a brighter, hopeful future for democracy? ■

**Against the Current** is only possible through support from readers like you. **Subscribe today!**

AGAINST THE CURRENT

**THERE ARE MANY GOOD REASONS TO SUBSCRIBE!**

Affirmative Action. Anti-Imperialism. Anti-Racist Struggle. Black Lives Matter. Disability Rights. Ecosocialism. Environmental Justice. Feminism. Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender Rights. Left Unity. Marxism. #MeToo. Palestine and BDS. Reparations. Reproductive Justice. The Right to Organize. Rank-and-File Movements. Single-Payer Health Care. Socialist Theory. Solidarity. War and Occupation. Water. Workers Centers. Workers Democracy. To name a few.

**1 Year: \$30 • 1 Year Overseas or Supporting Sub: \$35 • 2 Years \$50**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

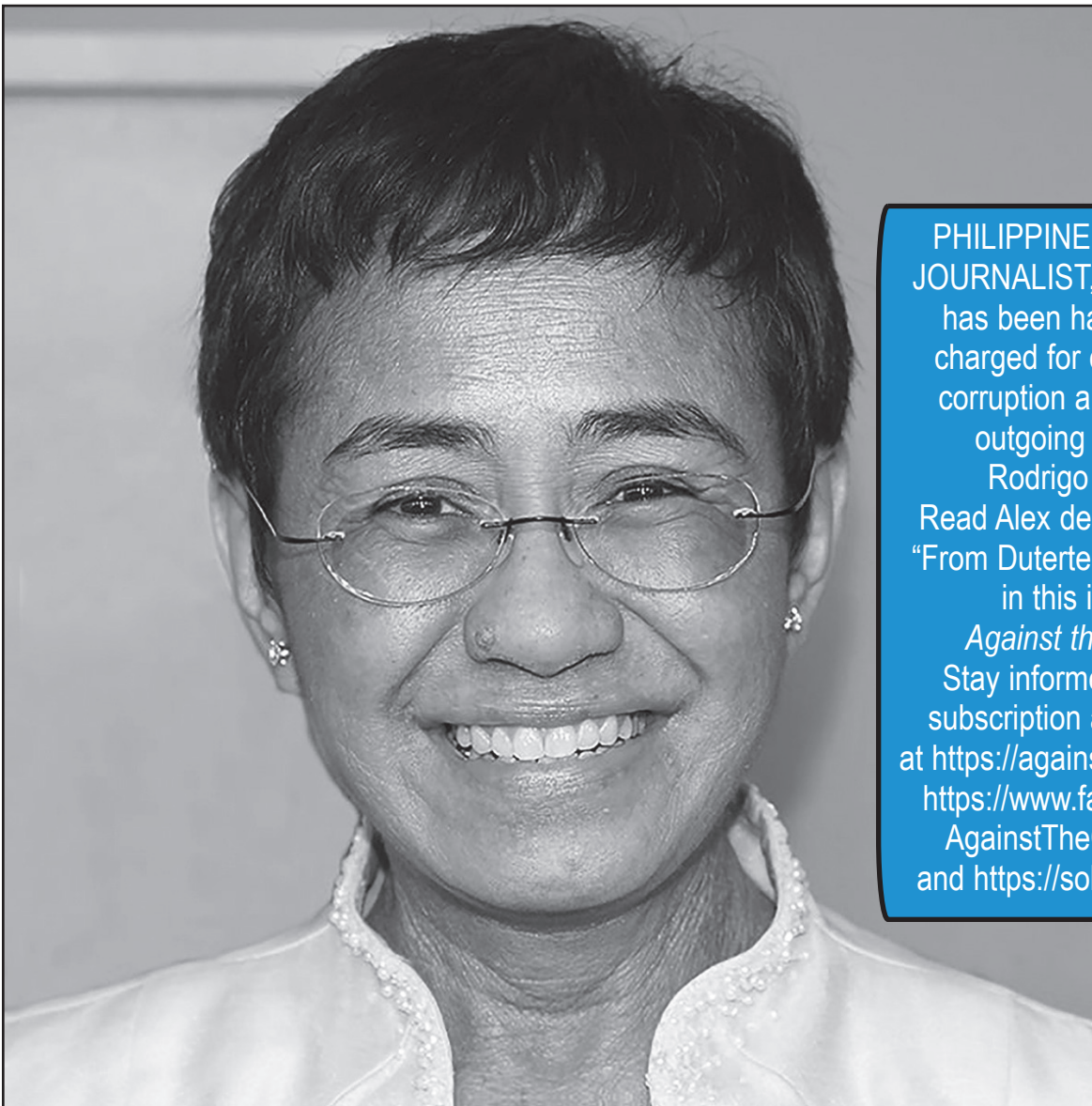
Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Return to *Against the Current*, 7012 Michigan Avenue, Detroit, MI 48210

PERIODICALS  
POSTAGE  
PAID  
DETROIT, MI



PHILIPPINES VETERAN JOURNALIST, Maria Ressa, has been harassed and charged for exposing the corruption and crimes of outgoing president Rodrigo Duterte. Read Alex de Jong's article "From Duterte to Marcos Jr." in this issue of *Against the Current*. Stay informed with your subscription and follow us at <https://againstthecurent.org/> <https://www.facebook.com/AgainstTheCurrentmag> and <https://solidarity-us.org>.

@mariaressa (Twitter)