The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it. —Karl Marx

War. Who is it Good For? - Page 4
To the Socialist Future - Page 12
Demise of the Labour Party and the Future for United Kingdom Socialism - Page 18
American Bottom - Page 31
Cuba is the most sustainably developed country in the world, according to a new report launched on November 29.

The socialist island outperforms advanced capitalist countries including Britain and the United States, which has subjected Cuba to a punitive six-decades-long economic blockade.

The Sustainable Development Index (SDI), designed by anthropologist and author Dr. Jason Hickel, calculates its results by dividing a nation’s “human development” score, obtained by looking at statistics on life expectancy, health and education, by its “ecological overshoot,” the extent to which the per capita carbon footprint exceeds Earth’s natural limits.

Countries with strong human development and a lower environmental impact score highly, but countries with poorer life expectancies and literacy rates as well as those which exceed ecological limits are marked down.

Based on the most recent figures, from 2015, Cuba is top with a score of 0.859, while Venezuela is 12th and Argentina 18th.

The SDI was created to update the Human Development Index (HDI), developed by Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq and used by the United Nations Development Program to produce its annual reports since 1990.

The HDI considers life expectancy, education and gross national income per capita, but ignores environmental degradation caused by the economic growth of top performers such as Britain and the U.S.

“These countries are major contributors to climate change and other forms of ecological breakdown, which disproportionately affects the poorer countries of the global South, where climate change is already causing hunger rates to rise,” Hickel said.

“In this sense, the HDI promotes a model of development that is empirically incompatible with ecology and which embodies a fundamental contradiction: achieving high development according to HDI means driving development elsewhere in the world. For a development indicator that purports to be universal, such a contradiction is indefensible.”

Britain, ranked 14th in 2018’s HDI, falls to 131st in the SDI, while the U.S., 13th in the HDI, is 159th out of 163 countries featured in the new system.

Hickel added: “The SDI ranking reveals that all countries are still “developing”—countries with the highest levels of human development still need to significantly reduce their ecological impact, while countries with the lowest levels of ecological impact still need to significantly improve their performance on social indicators.”

The SDI is available at: sustainabledevelopmentindex.org

https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/cuba-found-be-most-sustainably-developed-country-world
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In a February 10, 2020 New York Times article by David E. Sanger titled, “Trump Budget Calls for New Nuclear Warheads and Two Types of Missiles:”

“In the 2021 budget released on Monday, [February 10, 2020,] the administration revealed for the first time that it intended to create a new submarine-launched nuclear warhead, named the W93. Its development is part of a proposed 19 percent increase this year, to $19.8 billion, for the National Nuclear Security Administration, the Energy Department agency that maintains the nuclear stockpile and develops new nuclear warheads. ...The budget also proposes $3.2 billion for hypersonic weapons, a 23 percent increase in research and development....For more than 18 years, the war on terrorism—the ‘forever war’ or ‘endless war,’ as many call it—has been used as the basis for an ever-expanding range of military actions: an invasion of Iraq that, by one count, has left nearly 300,000 dead...”

War is capitalism’s ultimate tool of oppression and profit

Capitalism is in a constant state of “forever war.” That’s because the capitalist class—those who own the means of production and the raw materials needed for that production—are in constant competition with each other for profits and the power necessary to maintain and increase their profits. The purpose of the government, the military and the police is to support the capitalists and their system.

And, most importantly, capitalism needs a massive, acquiescent labor force to do the work for them, and to fill the ranks of the military, police and the prison industrial complex—all at the lowest cost possible.

Profiting from war


“As of October 2019, the Army had paid $11.5 million to Northrop Grumman and $23.3 million to...
Textron for the development of new anti-vehicle mines, according to officials at Picatinny Arsenal, an Army weapons research and development center in New Jersey. At that time, the total value of the two contracts was estimated at nearly $60 million. ...Cluster bombs and antipersonnel land mines, deadly explosives known for maiming and killing civilians long after the fighting ended, have become integral to the Pentagon’s future war plans—but with little public rationale offered for where and why they would be used. ...As of October 2019, the Army had paid $11.5 million to Northrop Grumman and $23.3 million to Textron for the development of new anti-vehicle mines, according to officials at Picatinny Arsenal, an Army weapons research and development center in New Jersey. At that time, the total value of the two contracts was estimated at nearly $60 million.”

**We pay for war**

All the money to pay for these weapons of mass destruction that enrich and empower the most massive military industrial complex in the world—the U.S. military—comes from the working class through our tax dollars. Not a penny comes from the coffers of the capitalist class itself. U.S. privately owned weapons manufacturing corporations and their CEOs are among the wealthiest in the world—all paid for by the tax dollars extorted from the working class. We do the working and the dying, and the capitalists rake in the profits.

**We create the wealth**

We are the creators of all the wealth of the world. It is our intellect that they buy on-the-cheap that creates and builds their products. It is our hands they employ to dig the trenches and build the bombs, yet we own none of the profits. And our ever-decreasing wages are determined by how little they can get away with paying us without us beginning to fight back.

**Money for human needs, not war**

All of the resources that go into the big business of war and incarceration—what the capitalist class needs to stay in power—could be used to build housing, schools, provide universal healthcare, clean up the environment and develop safe, clean and efficient energy resources to rebuild the world instead of blowing it up.

We could share all the wealth of the world that we create through our labor, equally, among everyone—each contributing to the best of their ability, and each receiving what they need and want—while preserving and refreshing our environment instead of wasting it.

Together, we could democratically plan the world’s economy to produce more efficiently according to what is most needed and wanted by all, on an equal basis, instead of maximizing profits for the tiny few and to hell with everyone else.

**The capitalist system has to go**

Socialism—sharing the world democratically and equally among us all—is the system that can save the planet.

That’s because a socialist society is based upon the idea that the health and welfare of each one of us is dependent upon the health and welfare of all of us.

It is a system that not only benefits everyone equally but is dependent upon a healthy and clean environment for all in order to develop our society to the fullest.

We, the masses of humanity, united in solidarity with those goals, have the power to achieve them.

**All the money to pay for these weapons of mass destruction that enrich and empower the most massive military industrial complex in the world—the U.S. military—comes from the working class through our tax dollars.**

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January 13, 2020—We’re only a few days into the new decade and it’s somehow already a bigger dumpster fire than the last. On January 2nd, President Trump decided to order what one expert called “the most important decapitation strike America has ever launched.” This one took out not some nameless terrorist in a distant land or a group of civilians who happened to get in the way, but Major General Qassem Suleimani, the leader of Iran’s elite Quds Force and the mastermind of its military operations across the Middle East.

Among the thousands of ignored American drone strikes since the 9/11 attacks, this was not one of them. In the wake of the assassination, we’ve seen: the Iraqi parliament vote to expel American forces from their country; all the Democratic presidential candidates make statements condemning the strike; thousands of protestors around the world take to the streets; and both chambers of Congress introduce resolutions aimed at curbing the president’s expanding war powers. Even though there is still so much we don’t know, one thing is for sure. Everything we thought we knew about drone warfare—and America’s wars more broadly—is about to be thrown out the window.

When I first started writing this piece, I was simply reflecting on a decade of U.S. drone warfare and the problems it had spawned. But when this world-altering news broke, I immediately started thinking about how I got here, as well as how my country could continue to recklessly breed chaos and destruction throughout the Greater Middle East.

New decades afford us a chance to take a good, hard look at what transpired in years past. Until that strike in Iraq occurred, it seemed like every time I opened Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram in the new year, I was inundated with sentimental reflections about how far we’ve come in the last ten years and where we’re going next. And I get it. I really do. It’s the beginning of a new decade and nostalgia is in the air.

...by the end of his second term, President Obama had authorized 528 strikes with a death toll reaching somewhere between 380 and 801 civilians in Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen alone. And that’s believed to be a conservative estimate...

In fact, over the holiday season, I found myself with time on my hands and that same sort of sentimentality creeping up on me. So, I decided to indulge myself by looking through old journals of mine. One entry in particular caught my attention. In 2010, when I was still an idealistic high school student in Tennessee, I wrote about the democracy movement I saw rising in the Middle East (what we came to know as “the Arab Spring”) and how hopeful it made me that global peace might be achieved in my lifetime. I wrote about my desire not only to see the world but to help make it a better place.

Rereading that entry ten years later, a few thoughts came to mind. First, I was amused by my unwavering optimism and how sure I was that everything would work out okay. Although I’d like to think that I still see glasses as at least half-full, the never-endingly destructive feedback loop of American foreign policy has certainly left me a more jaded twenty-something.

Then I was suddenly impressed by how close I’d actually come to living the life that the 16-year-old me once imagined. Of course, I haven’t yet seen the entire world (though it’s on my bucket list) or managed to bring about world peace (a girl’s gotta sleep, ya know). Still, working to bring attention to under-covered issues like drone warfare seems like a reasonable first step to have taken.

With the world veering into unprecedented territory, I realized that it was time for me to take off those rose-colored glasses, reflect on what our world really looked like ten years ago and how oblivious I was to so many of the darker parts of it.

If you remember, as 2009 ended, President Barack Obama went to Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. While accepting the award, he made a moving speech about war and peace. Noting the absurdity of receiving the prize while still “the commander-in-chief of a nation in the midst of two wars,” he laid out his ideas on how to build a just and lasting world of peace. At the same time, he defended his continued use of military force in the Middle East, arguing that “the instruments of war do have a role to play in preserving the peace,” even if we “must also think clearly about how we fight” war.

Looking back, there’s no doubt about the eloquence of his words, which fit well with my 16-year-old dreams. Unfortunately—for him, for me, and for the world—he didn’t take his own advice. Instead of preserving the peace, he quickly embraced the lat-
I am the living example of what drones Guardian survived the attack, told the ner. Nine civilians were killed. As friends and family sitting down to din- ration, a CIA drone strike in Pakistan just three days after Obama's inaugu-

Yemen and Somalia.

strikes had already killed dozens, if not hund- ends, of civilians in countries rang-

ing from Pakistan and Afghanistan to hundreds, of civilians in countries rang-

for those not familiar with those “laws,” the Geneva Conventions and their additional protocols specifically protect people in areas of armed conflict who are not taking part in the hostilities (civilians, health workers, and aid workers in particular) and those who are no longer participating in the hostilities, including the wounded, the sick, and prisoners of war.

Unsurprisingly, nowhere in Obama’s 36-minute speech did he mention that he had already authorized more drone strikes than his predecessor, George W. Bush, approved during his entire presi- dency. Nor did he mention that those strikes had already killed dozens, if not hundreds, of civilians in countries ranging from Pakistan and Afghanistan to Yemen and Somalia.

On January 23, 2009, for instance, just three days after Obama’s inaugu-

ration, a CIA drone strike in Pakistan ripped through a house filled with friends and family sitting down to dinner. Nine civilians were killed. As Faheem Qureshi, a teenager who barely survived the attack, told the Guardian, “I am the living example of what drones are... They have affected Waziristan [the district of Pakistan where he lived] as they have affected my personal life. I had all the hopes and potential and now I am doing nothing.”

More than a decade later, Faheem has still not been given an explanation for what happened to his family, even though the president was told almost immediately that a mistake had been made and innocent civilians had been killed.

"...the White House is deeply misleading about the precision of drone strikes. They are, in fact, roughly thirty times more likely to result in a civilian fatality than an airstrike by a manned aircraft.”

Six months later, a U.S. drone strike took out a mid-ranking Taliban com- mander in Pakistan. At his funeral, attended by 5,000 people, another drone fired missiles into the crowd in an attempt to kill Baitullah Mehsud, the founder of the Pakistani wing of the Taliban. Forty-five civilians would die, but not Mehsud who was targeted seven times before eventually being killed on August 5, 2009. The drone pursuit of him would leave at least 164 dead, including eight-year-old Noor Syed who was playing in a house near one of Mehsud’s suspected hideouts when a piece of shrapnel hit him.

Throughout Obama’s presidency events like these occurred with alarming frequency. A pregnant woman in Yemen died while driving with her children. A four-year-old girl was left without an eye, nose, or lower lip in a rural province of Afghanistan. Rescue workers in Pakistan were killed while trying to retrieve bodies after an air-

strike. Even American military personnel weren’t spared. In 2011, for instance, Marine Staff Sergeant Jeremy Smith and Navy corpsman Benjamin Rast were unintentionally killed near Sangin, Afghanistan, by a drone strike while on their way to rescue Marines pinned down by Taliban gunfire. According to outside monitoring groups, by the end of his second term, President Obama had authorized 528 strikes with a death toll reaching somewhere between 380 and 801 civilians in Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen alone. And that’s believed to be a con-

servative estimate.

The “precision” of drone warfare

In 2013, when discussing the high number of civilian casualties from drone strikes, the president defended them by claiming that “conventional airpower or missiles are far less precise than drones and are likely to cause more civilian casualties and more local outrage.” That same year, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates declared, “You can far more easily limit collateral damage with a drone than you can with a bomb, even a pre-

cision-guided munition, off an air-

plane.” Or, as former CIA Director Leon Panetta put it, “I think this is one of the most precise weapons that we have in our arsenal.”

If it sounded too good to be true, that’s because it was and still is.

When political scientists Micah Zenko and Amelia Wolf did a careful analysis of this claim for the Council on Foreign Relations, they found that “the White House is deeply misleading about the precision of drone strikes. They are, in fact, roughly thirty times more likely to result in a civilian fatality than an airstrike by a manned aircraft.” A deeper dive into the technol-

ogy used for military drones showed that it’s prone to significant error. After analyzing documents obtained via the Freedom of Information Act related to drones, previously unpub-
lashed court documents, dozens of engineering and technical studies, and contract data, CorpWatch’s Pratap Chatterjee and Christian Stork came to a similar conclusion: “Planning for drone operations was handicapped by a fog of numbers and raw data derived from flawed technology marketed by contractors, the military, and the intelligence agencies.”

The false notion that drones are more precise and effective—and so less dangerous—to civilians gained special, if grim, traction in the Obama era. During the Trump presidency, it would only become more of a given. In the years since Donald Trump entered the Oval Office, in fact, the U.S. military has only expanded its use of artificial intelligence, or AI, in warfare in order, as the Pentagon’s chief information officer Dana Deasy puts it, to maintain America’s “strategic position and prevail on future battlefields.”

Unfortunately, as my colleague Emily Manna and I have pointed out, this is a development that’s anything but relegated to those “future battlefields.” The military is already hard at work making its existing weapons systems, including drones, ever more autonomous. This process is sure to accelerate, even if the American public will hear little about it, thanks to the secrecy surrounding the application of AI and the fact that private companies with no commitment to public accountability are deeply involved in creating the technology.

Under the circumstances, one thing is predictable: ever more civilians are going to die in America’s wars.

**Drone war escalates under Trump**

Almost as alarming as the rate of civilian casualties from drone and other air strikes in the Obama years was the lack of information provided about them. The American public couldn’t find out how many civilians had actually been killed, whether their government compensated those who were harmed or not, or even the legal rationale for such strikes. Sometimes, it was impossible to tell whether drones were even behind them. Most of what could be known about the U.S. drone program, in fact, including the CIA’s role in it, how its “targets” were tracked, or even what those in targeted countries thought about such strikes, came from leaked information and independent reporting. On rare occasions when the drone program was officially acknowledged, statements made about it usually turned out to be lies.

Through executive orders just before he left office, President Obama finally put in place modest reforms to make the drone program more transparent and accountable. His key order outlined a process of review and investigation that had to be set in motion anytime reports of civilian casualties from drone strikes came in. Information from all available sources, including non-military or government organizations, was to be taken into account and the government was required to acknowledge responsibility for civilian deaths and injuries while providing redress to the victims and their families. Finally, the director of national intelligence was to release estimates of the number of combatants and civilians killed by military drone strikes since 2009. Another executive order required future presidents to release similar information annually. Although the numbers still proved dubious and many questions remained about, among other things, the CIA civilian casualty count, at least the pendulum finally seemed to be swinging in the right direction.

No such luck. Soon after President Trump took office, his administration began to quietly dismantle the safeguards Obama had just created. His administration would subsequently expand the battlefields on which drones would be used, ease combat rules in Somalia intended to protect civilians, rescind most aspects of Obama’s executive orders, and stop publishing civilian casualty data entirely, while telling the public even less about the program. Not surprisingly, drone strikes across the Greater Middle East and parts of Africa would rise and a lot more civilians would start dying from them. None of this was exactly shocking from a commander-in-chief who had once asked a CIA official why he didn’t kill a terrorist target’s family during a drone strike.

In his Nobel Prize speech, Obama claimed that the reason the United States adhered to certain rules of conduct in war like protecting civilians was because “that’s what makes us different from those whom we fight. That is the source of our strength.” In the first half of last year, U.S. and Afghan air and drone strikes killed more civilians than the Taliban for the first time ever. Those strikes hit wedding parties, farmers, pregnant women, and small children. In Somalia, drone strikes decimated entire communities, destroying not only lives, but crops, homes, and livelihoods. And as the new decade began, President Trump not only carried out a drone strike so drastic and rare that many experts believed it was a straightforward act of (and declaration of) war, but also threatened to bomb non-military targets (“cultural” sites), a move which is generally considered a war crime under international law.

In its recklessness and brutality, Trump’s escalating drone war should remind us all of just how dangerous it is when a president claims the legal authority to kill in secret and no one can stop him. Maybe this decade we’ll learn our lesson.

—Common Dreams, January 13, 2020

In 1945, United States scientists who worked on the first nuclear weapons (two were used against Japanese cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki) set up an organization to print *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, which warned of the dangers of nuclear weapons. As the Soviet Union began to develop such nuclear weapons, the *Bulletin* began to feature a Doomsday Clock, which set 12 midnight as doomsday, and a minute hand that signaled in a graphic way the danger of nuclear annihilation by how close it was to midnight.

Over the decades the minute hand has moved closer or further away from midnight as the situation of the world changed.

Recently, it has moved to one minute and 40 seconds, the closest ever. The *Bulletin* explained that there were now two main dangers. One was the increased likelihood of the use of nuclear weapons due to technological advances, if one could use that word to describe such a negative development. The other was the danger of massive destruction due to climate change.

This article will discuss the first increased danger.

The Obama administration, with bipartisan approval, set aside ten trillion dollars over ten years to “modernize” the American nuclear arsenal. This set off a renewal of the nuclear arms race with the other major nuclear power, Russia. This has now been accelerated by the withdrawal of the U.S. from talks with Russia to establish a new nuclear equilibrium.

Of course, exactly what “modernization” has been underway is secret. One aspect that has become known is the development of supersonic ICBMs (Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles) that would be harder for defenses to destroy, as well as reduce the time from launch to reaching the target.

The danger of accidental launching of atomic missiles would be increased, as it may mistakenly appear on radar, etc., that missiles that are harder to destroy were quickly approaching, as well as reducing the time to verify whether the apparent attack was real or not, and an accidental retaliatory attack could be ordered.

Another result of the “modernization” of the nuclear arsenal: The Federation of American Scientists revealed in late January that the U.S. Navy had deployed in the Atlantic a submarine armed with a low-yield Trident nuclear warhead.

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons said this was “an alarming development that heightens the risk of nuclear war.” The Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Adam Smith, said “This destabilizing deployment further increases the potential for miscalculation during a crisis.”

**Lowering the nuclear threshold**

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov responded, “This reflects the fact that the United States is actually lowering the nuclear threshold and that they are conceding the possibility of them waging a limited nuclear war and winning this war.”

This news has been only scantily covered in the mainstream press. What follows is taken from an interview with William Arkin, who co-authored the Federation of American Scientists article, on the independent news program *Democracy Now*!

Continued on page 28
We print this article now, months after it appeared in Left Voice, because it clearly states the problem of supporting the Democratic Party as a realistic alternative to the Republican administration of Donald Trump. Both parties are equally responsible for a military budget and imperialist foreign policy that only represents the interests of the capitalist class. Both parties represent a domestic policy of military expenditures first, leading to the severe multiple crisis of homelessness, unavailability of healthcare, poor quality education, crumbling infrastructure, a vast wealth gap where the wealth of the richest one percent of Americans own about the same wealth as 90 percent of the rest of the country. —The Editors

On August 1, 2019, the House of Representatives passed legislation that will, once signed into law, set one of the highest caps ever on the discretionary budget for the Pentagon and related programs. The Democratic Party that now controls the House voted by a vast majority in favor of the bill, and, remarkably, so did Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib.

In recent news, we learn that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez joined 218 other Democrats to approve a budget bill that includes a record amount of military spending for the next two years. Given that AOC has become a symbol of the opposition to Trump and his administration, this surely comes as a surprise. Rashida Tlaib, another outspoken leftist and member of the Democratic Socialists of America, also voted for the bill.

At first glance, the entire scenario is a bit of a head scratcher. Approved on July 25, with a vote of 284-149 in the House of Representatives, the “Bipartisan Budget Act of 2019” passed with the overwhelming support of House Democrats, only 16 of whom voted against the bill. The Republican side was mostly opposed (with 132 no votes and 65 yes votes). This in spite of the fact that in the lead-up to the vote President Trump urged his party to back the measure, tweeting: “House Republicans should support the TWO-YEAR BUDGET AGREEMENT which greatly helps our Military and our Vets. I am totally with you.”

...it is difficult to see how they could reasonably justify having supported a resolution that allots almost $1.5 trillion to the Pentagon and only $1.3 trillion to the entire rest of the government...

One might wonder, if the majority of Republicans were not compelled by their party leader’s cajoling (primarily citing, of course, their rejection of any further increase of the debt,) why did the Democrats vote almost unanimously for this bill? The answer is simple: Because it was a deal brokered by Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House and quintessential representative of the Democratic Party establishment. In collaboration with Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, Pelosi took charge of the project and successfully rallied her troops around it, including some of the most progressive party members.

In an effort to avoid automatic budget cuts (sequestration) and another government shutdown, Pelosi managed an agreement that, in her own words, meets the needs of Americans by “investing in middle class priorities that advance the health, financial security and well-being of the American people and enhancing our national security” and by “safeguarding the full faith and credit of the United States of America by achieving a lifting of the debt limit until July 31, 2021.” What’s not to love?

The $2.7 trillion budget includes more money for domestic spending as well as more money for the military, increasing defense and non-defense expenses by $22 and $27 billion, or three and four percent hikes, respectively, for fiscal year 2020. And like any good compromise between the two capitalist parties, this act presents a further expansion of the military as being in the interest of the people. Except in this case, the increase in the already massive military budget did not even require the full backing of the party that is traditionally more interested in national security; the Democrats did the job almost all on their own.

Ultimately, this bill allows both parties to avoid another government shutdown (and thus potentially political unrest) before and during the 2020 elections. While many Republicans polemicize all day long about the deficit, they too will benefit from the suspension of the debt ceiling and thereby averting the prospect of another government funding impasse in the middle of trying to hold on to the White House and battling the Democrats over congressional seats.

Team Player

Cynics will perhaps argue that AOC has to start being more of a “team player.” Judging from her recent photo ops with Pelosi, the appearance of unity is important, and AOC is playing along quite nicely. If those images of recon-

Voting Big Bucks for Military

AOC follows Pelosi, Trump’s lead

By Sonja Krieger
ciliation are any indication, AOC and the rest of the “Squad” may soon temper their leftism in order not to be seen as too divisive. Regardless of Pelosi’s attacks on her and their differences on immigration, impeachment, etc., AOC will be expected to swear allegiance to the party establishment. After all, her team is the Democratic Party.

That said, AOC could have easily done what her fellow “Squad” members Ilhan Omar and Ayanna Pressley did by voting no. She could have very easily added her name to the few Democrats who refused to give in to Pelosi’s pressure. To her considerable credit, Omar made a statement, in which she explained her rejection of the bill:

“I cannot in good conscience support a bill that continues to throw billions of dollars at endless wars and Pentagon contractors. In order to pursue peace and prosperity at home, we must not continue to destabilize entire countries, fuel migration crises, and put American troops at risk.

“We must reduce Pentagon waste and reinvest that money into healthcare, education, housing, jobs, clean energy and infrastructure.”

All of this is perfectly correct and consistent with Omar’s record of speaking out strongly against U.S. imperialism. However, there is an obvious contradiction here, which is that her own party has historically been a pillar of the very imperialist system she is criticizing.

It is also noteworthy that neither AOC nor Rashida Tlaib, who also voted yes, offered a public statement. But then again, it is difficult to see how they could reasonably justify having supported a resolution that allots almost $1.5 trillion to the Pentagon and only $1.3 trillion to the entire rest of the government. Is this disappointing? That depends on one’s expectations and hopes regarding the group of newly elected “socialists” in Congress and regarding the Democrats in general. However, even AOC’s fans, especially in the DSA, would do well to stop and think about just what it means when one of the most left politicians in the Democratic Party has no problems signing on to a measure that directly contributes to the perpetuation and exacerbation of U.S. imperialism in the world.

Thanks to this legislation, half of the country’s discretionary funds will once again be spent on defense. It is useful to remember that this amount is almost enough to completely eliminate poverty in the U.S., which has been estimated to cost 1.7 trillion. Also thanks to this legislation, the U.S. will further boost an apparatus that contributes more than anything else to the devastation of the global environment with its raw material consumption and its pollution and destruction of the natural world.

The Senate is expected to debate the bill in the coming days and pass it. President Trump is planning to sign it into law. It’s business as usual, and we can safely count on progressive Democrats to work with their Republican colleagues, or to even do their jobs for them, “in the service of the American people.” Nancy Pelosi is clearly able to get her party in line when it comes to guaranteeing the continued smooth operation of the capitalist state.

“Democratic socialists” like AOC can make a lot of noise when they want to but have demonstrated on several occasions that they will fold under the pressure to comply with their party’s demands. Her and Tlaib’s yes votes illustrate that their opposition to Trump’s policies, while often brave and sharp, is inevitably subject to being reigned in by their own political party. Of course, turning a blind eye to U.S. militarism and imperialist domination is necessary to work within the Democratic Party, which is one of the reasons why imagining that the Democrats as the lesser of two evils can affect substantial social change reveals itself once again as a pipe dream.

—Left Voice, July 31, 2019

https://www.leftvoice.org/aoc-follows-pelosi-trumps-lead-by-voting-big-bucks-for-military

Pelosi and AOC after a meeting on July 26. “We had a very positive conversation about our districts and how we represent our country and how we need to meet the needs, the diversity of America and the challenges we face in terms of issues and how immigration and people are respected,” Pelosi said.
To the Socialist Future

By Mark Harris

There’s probably no bigger sin in American politics than to imagine a world without war, inequality, and capitalism. Actually, imagining just a kinder, more equitable version of capitalism, one in which the existence of elite wealth is tempered by the people’s right to healthcare, a college education, affordable housing, strong workplace unions, full reproductive rights for women, and an end to racial discrimination is enough to be dismissed as a utopian ideologue by the high priests of the corporate media and political establishment.

Indeed, it’s probably easier as some observe for most media pundits and mainstream politicians to envision the climate crisis bringing a cataclysmic end to all human civilization than to imagine the end of capitalism. To advocate the socialist vision of a world beyond capitalism, where the human needs of all prevail over the private profits of a few, is the quickest route to the trash dumpsters parked in the alleys outside the headquarters of CNN, MSNBC, and other corporate purveyors of news.

Of course, this near-sighted outlook is intrinsic to establishment politics. But it’s also increasingly out-of-touch with the outlook especially of many younger Americans. Consider one recent poll that shows about 70 percent of U.S. millennials (between the ages of 23 and 38) would vote for a socialist presidential candidate. Similar pro-socialist sentiment exists among teens and college-aged youth. Earlier this year another Gallup poll revealed 43 percent of Americans embrace the idea of “some form of socialism” as a positive direction for the nation. As well, a 2018 Harvard Institute of Politics poll found a majority of young people support “democratic socialist” policies for healthcare, education, and jobs.

Significantly, among young adults (ages 18 to 29), the Harvard survey found majority support (56 percent) for a federal jobs guarantee and at least $15-an-hour with paid family/sick leave and health benefits. There was also majority support for eliminating tuition and fees at public colleges and universities for anyone from a family earning under $125,000, with free community college for all income levels. Single-payer healthcare was supported by 55 percent of young Americans. There was also support (37 percent) among young adults for the idea of “building a militant and powerful labor movement...rooted in the multi-racial working class.”

Sanders idea of socialism is basically a modernized version of the old 1930s New Deal liberalism. This isn’t the socialism of Karl Marx or Eugene V. Debs. There’s no vision of an actual anti-capitalist revolution on the Sanders agenda, no vision of workers control of industry and production.

The resurgence of socialism

This new openness to socialist perspectives is part of a dynamic shift in the political landscape at work at least since the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011. The Occupy protests grew out of the disappointment of many youth with the Obama administration’s failure to confront in any meaningful way the demoralizing reality of growing wealth inequality in the United States.

In turn, there has been a long, slow decline of American living standards, driven by the embrace of the ideology of “free market” neoliberalism by both established parties. Neoliberalism is the barren ideology of contemporary corporate politicians of all stripes, millionaires most of them, an opportunistic scourge of ideas and policies that have been stealing hopes for the future from ordinary working people for more than four decades now.

According to the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) 2017 report, “Billionaire Bonanza: The Forbes 400 and the Rest of Us,” the wealthiest 400 Americans now have combined wealth greater than the bottom 64 percent of the U.S. population. That’s 400 people vs. 204 million people! Additionally, three corporate CEOs, Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and Warren Buffett, now own more wealth than 160 million Americans combined. That’s three people versus half the population of the entire United States!

How is it even possible to pretend a healthy democratic society exists when such extreme wealth inequality prevails? The United States might better be described as a “hereditary aristocracy of wealth and power,” as IPS concludes, citing French economist Thomas Piketty’s assessment.

A society dominated by the normalization of wealth inequality, where political democracy is just another prop for class rule by elites, is also a society highly vulnerable to the rise of far-right demagogues, the counterfeit populists who crawl out of the political sewers with loud promises to “shake up” the status quo. Their targets are never those with wealth and power, but
always the most victimized and oppressed people.

Unfortunately, in the absence of a genuine mass political opposition, organized to compete in elections, support worker’s strikes, and build social movements in the streets, there is little to prevent the rise of these lieutenants of the far-right from raising their ugly salutes to the worst cruelties imaginable under the rule of capital.

Today, there are millions of Americans apparently ready to believe any idiotic nonsense oozing out of Donald Trump. This corrupt, racist, misogynistic, lying, greedy narcissistic businessman turned far-right politician is a blight on every decent impulse in the human condition. Trump and his Republican defenders in Congress are rank enemies of human rights, social justice, and democracy. As for their supporters in the general population, they are largely miseducated plebeians of a dying social system, too naïve or maladjusted to know that their wealthy “leaders” could care less about their well-being. They are unwitting stage props in an unfolding dystopian nightmare.

**Capitalism resists reform**

Fortunately, there are millions of others who want something better. From the Occupy Wall Street protests to the more recent wave of national teachers strikes, the popularity of Senator Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and his “democratic socialist” campaigns for the presidency, the success of socialist city council member Kshama Sawant in Seattle and more, socialism is no longer a forbidden word in the American political vernacular.

What’s especially notable is the particularly strong support among younger voters for Sanders “socialist” presidential primary campaign. For example, one recent Emerson poll among voters ages 18-29 showed 45 percent support for Sanders. The Vermont senator also just won the endorsement of the California Young Democrats, swamping his closest primary contenders with 67 percent of the votes in one of the state party’s largest caucuses.

Of course, the Sanders idea of socialism is basically a modernized version of the old 1930s New Deal liberalism. This isn’t the socialism of Karl Marx or Eugene V. Debs. There’s no vision of an actual anti-capitalist revolution on the Sanders agenda, no vision of workers control of industry and production. This is not the socialism of mass economic democracy, with the top-down authoritarianism of the modern corporation turned on its head and decision-making powers put in the hands of the workers themselves.

The sooner the capitalist profit system can be relegated to history’s proverbial dustbin, the sooner our species can get on with the work of discovering what it actually means to be fully human, fully alive.

The Sanders vision of socialism is more one of the kinder, gentler social-democratic model of capitalism that has long existed in parts of Europe, where social benefits like longer vacations, paid family leave, free public healthcare, and other social supports have in the past helped to stabilize capitalist economies. This is less a vision of labor in power than one of labor in partnership with capital, sharing a seat at the decision-making table.

Under Sanders-style socialism, the Wall Street dinosaurs could breathe a sigh of relief. They won’t be divested of their private wealth and investments and sent packing to some uninhabited South Pacific island to live out their days playing pretend capitalism among themselves. But they might be forced to pay more taxes and follow more worker-friendly regulatory rules.

The progressive reforms Sanders proposes are hardly a bad thing, but whether it is enough to save society is questionable. In fact, the rule of capital is increasingly toxic to social development. Those with vested interests in perpetuating this dying system cannot allow themselves much in the way of latitude, even for reforms in the people’s interests based on old social-democratic models. As Glen Ford recently observed in Black Agenda Report¹, “late stage capitalism is relentlessly eviscerating the European model and has no
intention of allowing a replica to be erected in the United Corporate States of America, the global headquarters and armory of the Lords of Capital.”

Ironically, the political center in the United States has shifted so far to the right that the New Deal-style politics Sanders espouses are now perceived by establishment ideologues as some sort of way-out, radical vision rather than a program entirely within the purview of the capitalist order. Tellingly, the day after Sanders’ enthusiastic New York City rally of more than 25,000 people with speeches by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), Michael Moore, and others, NBC News featured a story with this headline: “Bernie Sanders struggles to rebound: Staffing, strategy, health.”

In late-stage capitalism, Wall Street and the corporate media consider a return to even the New Deal programs that Sanders espouses, and which saved capitalism in the 1930s, a now intolerable option. Hence, their ongoing efforts to deflate the public’s enthusiasm for Sanders “democratic socialist” movement. Hence, the attempts by candidates Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg, and basically the whole DNC crowd to undermine the Sanders vision of progressive change, such as Medicare for All, free college, and other popular reforms. These ostensibly liberal candidates essentially proclaim to the world that the United States, the richest global nation, can’t afford far-reaching progressive change, only permanent war spending.

Yet even with a malignant far-right crackpot in office like Trump, most of the national leaders of the Democratic Party persist in the illusion of restoring the old respectful bipartisan collegiality of the Republican-Democratic partnership, where everyone agreed to disagree as long as service to Wall Street remained the implicit definition of “legitimate” politics.

For many young people, those days are over. As Ford acknowledges, it is “the youth of all races who know that capitalism has nothing to offer but endless economic austerity and war.”

**Running out of time and democracy**

In an interview last summer with FOX News host Tucker Carlson, Senator John Kennedy (R-LA) referred to Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), Representative Ilhan Omar (D-MN), Representative Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), and Representative Ayanna Pressley (D-MA) the “Four Horsewomen of the Apocalypse.” A former Democrat turned Republican, the “folksy” Kennedy dismissed the congresswomen as “left-wing cranks” and “the reason why there are directions on a shampoo bottle.”

Kennedy claimed Omar and colleagues believe the United States has always been a “wicked” and “evil” country. What to do about these America-haters? “This is not China, this is America,” declared Kennedy. “And in America, if you hate our country, you’re free to leave.”

Apparently, the old Vietnam War-era shibboleth of “love it or leave it” is now held up as a gesture of magnanimous tolerance on the part of right-wing authoritarians. But perhaps we should be grateful. After all, the rhetorical thuggery of these right-wing clods is giving everyone with a grievance about the high cost of healthcare or college education, low wages, assaults on reproductive rights or other injustices a chance to get the hell out of here before the nation’s upstanding patriots demand the hammer of government repression be brought down upon their ignorant skulls.

That is where all this is leading. How long now before the crude, bullying rhetoric of Republicans in power eventually turns to their own Bolivian “solution” applied to the dissenting streets of the United States?

Enough! The clock is ticking on the capitalist system, both in the United States and globally. The present system with its unfolding climate crisis is leading us into a social and environmental abyss where a raw and brutal, even fascist future, is not out of the question. Now, there is only so much time for the mass of humanity to get organized politically, to seize the reins of society from the right-wing demagogues, corporate polluters, Pentagon militarists, and Wall Street elites who have brought society to the brink of disaster.

To save society and the planet, we don’t need billionaires named Bezos or Buffet to bless us with their largesse, as long as we recognize the sanctity of their extreme wealth. Actually, the entire alphabet of billionaires from A to Z are unnecessary to civilization’s survival. Social hierarchies based on class, wealth, and armed power are a brake on human development. What we need now is more mass social protest, more criticism of the limits of the two-party system, and perhaps soon the first bold steps toward creation of a new, mass independent socialist party.

The sooner the capitalist profit system can be relegated to history’s proverbial dustbin, the sooner our species can get on with the work of discovering what it actually means to be fully human, fully alive. For now, there is little room for the perspective of anti-capitalist revolution in the current U.S. elections debates. Nonetheless, the choice of a socialist future, or no future, hangs in the balance.

—Mark Harris, November 23, 2019

Class Domination, Social Hierarchy and the Fight for Equality

By Dr. Nayvin Gordon

Class domination has not always existed in human society, but once established, social hierarchy has deeply penetrated and permeated culture to create both implicit and explicit biases for social status, for hierarchy. Returning to an egalitarian society requires both systemic-institutional change and change in our conscious and unconscious minds.

As long as class society has existed, it has been a social dominance hierarchy. Hierarchy is a social construct, used to justify domination and exploitation. Myths have always been used to justify the rule of the few over the many. Kings and Lords maintained that God gave them the authority to rule over peasants. Slave-owners declared that non-Christians could be enslaved. Today capitalists say that they are smarter and worked harder and thus have the right to privately own production and pay workers wages. They made themselves rulers, and then they sought to divide those whom they ruled.

The brutal economic system of slavery in America required social control to prevent the unity of Black and white labor. The slave-owners created the lies and laws of racism. Frederick Douglas, the famous abolitionist, wrote: “The hostility between the whites and the Blacks of the South is easily explained. It has its root and sap in the relation of slavery and was incited on both sides by the cunning of the slave masters. Those masters secured their ascendancy over both the poor white and the Blacks by putting enmity between them. They divided both to conquer each.”

Social status is widely accepted implicitly even among those who hold egalitarian world views. Studies have shown that status is more important than money.2

Today we live in a capitalist economy where the one percent owns controlling interest in corporations, industry, finance and land, while the 99 percent are exploited. A few thousand years of social hierarchy has created a cultural environment where it is largely accepted as “natural.” It is “in the air,” consciously and unconsciously embedded in our culture. We generally accept the oppressive system of social dominance. Children as young as six are implicitly (unconsciously) aware of status.1

“The hostility between the whites and the Blacks of the South is easily explained. It has its root and sap in the relation of slavery and was incited on both sides by the cunning of the slave masters. Those masters secured their ascendancy over both the poor white and the Blacks by putting enmity between them. They divided both to conquer each.”

Social status is widely accepted implicitly even among those who hold egalitarian world views. Studies have shown that status is more important than money.2

Significantly, social status is strongly linked to fear in our brain’s emotional center. The one percent use their power to deflect and divide the 99 percent by promoting stereotypes and mass propaganda to dehumanize certain groups “which impact the limbic system, the primitive brain, with the powerful emotions of fear and hate.”3

When status is threatened the emotion of fear is generated leading to hatred and violence. History reveals that when the 99 percent begin to organize for progressive social change that could create more social equality, the ruling class feels threatened. “Confrontation is inevitable—since it is invariably initiated by the forces of reaction who see their power threatened.”4

A famous economist once wrote: “…the most violent, mean and malignant passions of the human breast, the furies of private interest.”5

The top down dominance of corporate capitalism continues to divide and subdivide the 99 percent into those who are considered worthy and those who are less worthy—race, nation, religion, sex, immigrant, tribe and more, ad-infinatum. The power systems of dominance hierarchy are built into the major institutions and organizations of society—corporations, the state, the police and the military for example. It is not a few bad apples, but “the rotten barrel of the barrel makers.”6

There are those who maintain that it is “in human nature” to dominate and exploit—they say it has always been so. Nothing could be further from the truth. Anthropologists have repeatedly demonstrated that humans have lived for thousands of years in egalitarian societies. In fact, many have practiced “reverse hierarchy”—those who sought to dominate as despots were punished, banished or killed.7

Social hierarchy is a created oppressive social construct as is racism. It can be abolished. Social dominance hierarchy and the fear of losing status are not
Sanctions Kill
How U.S. sanctions on Iran are killing innocent people
By Vijay Prashad

In late October, Human Rights Watch released a short report with a sharp title, “Maximum Pressure: U.S. Economic Sanctions Harm Iranians’ Right to Health.” In November 2018, a year ago, the U.S. renewed its unilateral sanctions against Iran, and included “secondary sanctions” on non-U.S. entities. These secondary sanctions choked off Iran’s ability to commercially buy many products, including crucial medical supplies. “The consequences of redoubled U.S. sanctions,” writes Human Rights Watch, “pose a serious threat to Iranians’ right to health and access to essential medicines—and has almost certainly contributed to documented shortages—ranging from a lack of critical drugs for epilepsy patients to limited chemotherapy medications for Iranians with cancer.”

Human Rights Watch is not the first to document this serious situation. The unilateral U.S. sanctions in the Obama period had already badly damaged the health of Iranians. In 2013, Siamak Namazi wrote a first-rate report for the Wilson Center, in which he noted, “sanctions are indeed causing disruptions in the supply of medicine and medical equipment in Iran. Procurement of the most advanced life-saving medicines and their chemical raw materials from the United States and Europe has been particularly challenging.”

Over the course of the past several years, the medical journal The Lancet has run a series of important studies of the deteriorating health conditions in Iran as a result of the unilateral U.S. sanctions. This August, five doctors based in the United States and Iran wrote a powerful editorial in The Lancet, which pointed out that Iran’s system of universal health coverage has been deeply damaged by the sanctions, and that Iran is at “a high risk of moving towards a severe situation for the provision of health services with a potentially substantive impact on mortality and morbidity.”

A year ago, Dr. Seyed Alireza Marandi, the president of Iran’s Academy of Medical Sciences, wrote one of many letters to the UN secretary-general. He pointed out that patients who require organ transplants and who have cancer are being “deliberately denied medicine and medical equipment.” There has been no public answer to these letters.

The evidence is undeniable. The U.S. sanctions are seriously destroying Iran’s health infrastructure and are leading to immediate deaths and suffering of the Iranian population. Last year, UN special rapporteur on the negative impact of the unilateral coercive measures Idriss Jazairy concluded from a look at the sanctions regime, “The current system creates doubt and ambiguity which makes it all but impossible for Iran to import these urgently needed humanitarian goods. This ambiguity causes a ‘chilling effect’ which is likely to lead to silent deaths in hospitals as medicines run out, while the international media fail to notice.”

Collective punishment
The United States government has used whatever mechanisms possible to
suffocate Iran. It has used its Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) facility, its Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDN) list, and its Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) to tighten its grip on the Iranian economy. Human Rights Watch reiterated what humanitarian agencies have been saying over this past year, which is that banks refuse to allow their services to be used to transfer money even for humanitarian reasons.

The United States is welcome to trade or not to trade with any country that it wishes, but the stranglehold that the United States has on the financial system means that U.S. sanctions and secondary sanctions prevent other countries from making their trading decisions.

In August 2019, Jan Egeland, the head of the Norwegian Refugee Council, which works with Afghan refugees in Iran, said, “We have now, for a full year, tried to find banks that are able and willing to transfer money from donors.” Egeland is not naïve. He was the UN’s undersecretary-general for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief from 2003 to 2006.

Squeezing the banks has allowed the U.S. government to wreak havoc on Iran’s ability to import food and medicines, impacting the human rights of Iranians. There is ample evidence that the U.S. government is not merely intent on hurting the government, but in fact has a strategy to attack the Iranian people.

The Human Rights Watch report is called “Maximum Pressure” for a reason. This is the phrase associated with the Trump–John Bolton policy toward Iran that led to the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) and the reinstatement of harsh sanctions. As the U.S. put these sanctions on Iran in November 2018, U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said, “The maximum pressure exerted by the United States is only going to mount from here.” This is, as Human Rights Watch notes, “a recipe for collective punishment.”

There is ample evidence that the U.S. government is not merely intent on hurting the government, but in fact has a strategy to attack the Iranian people.

Self-reliance

Universal healthcare has been the basic policy orientation of the Iranian government. The program received focus in 1985 with the establishment of the National Health Network, and then over the next several decades—hampered by lack of resources—the rural and urban Family Physician programs. By all indications, the healthcare system in Iran has been sharply hit by the sanctions—mainly since this has made it impossible to import key materials (such as bandages for epidermolysis bullosa and drugs to reduce inflammations such as tumor necrosis—a factor that inflicts those who had been struck by chemical weapons used by Iraq against Iran—and supplied by Western Europe and the United States.)

Iran has over the past century developed a high-quality indigenous pharmaceutical industry—now rooted in the public sector Social Security Investment Company. Until the past few years, Iran had been able to produce a wide range of drugs, but even here there has been attrition, since several of these production lines rely upon imports of key components of the drugs.

A few days ago, Venezuela’s Minister for Science and Technology Gabriela Jiménez was in Tehran to buy medical equipment, including a hundred dialysis machines. This tells us two things: first, that Iran continues to produce medical equipment and pharmaceutical drugs—despite the sanctions; and second, that these two countries that are being hit hard by the West’s hybrid war have had to turn to each other for trade. Venezuela’s medical system has been hit harder than that of Iran—last year, the Venezuelan Pharmaceutical Federation reported that it was suffering from an 85 percent shortage of essential medicines.

It is a measure of the fortitude of Iran that—despite these unilateral U.S. sanctions—it has been able to maintain production of medical equipment and drugs. Nonetheless, the Human Rights Watch report should be seen as an alarm.

Humanitarian exceptions

The United Nations has repeatedly said that sanctions are not a humane policy and must no longer be allowed to be part of the arsenal of the powerful nations. Exceptions for medicines and food are routinely argued for. The United States claims that it does not use sanctions to hurt people, which is why it often provides exceptions. In August 2019, the U.S. government released guidance that putatively softened its policy vis-à-vis Venezuela. It said that “humanitarian support can flow” into Venezuela. Even if this is merely rhetoric, no such softening has occurred for Iran. The U.S. has not issued any such guidance toward its policy on Iran. Rather, it has tightened these dangerous sanctions as part of its hybrid war against Iran.

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—Common Dreams, November 7, 2019

https://www.commondreams.org/views/2019/11/07/how-us-sanctions-iran-are-killing-innocent-
Recent elections in the UK have resulted in a seismic shift in the political landscape with the Labour Party being completely decimated: losing over 50 seats, many in places that had voted Labour for generations. The significance of this defeat, particularly regarding the party’s long-term prospects, is currently being hotly debated. With the Tories under Boris Johnson having an 80 seat majority in parliament and being entitled to effectively rule without opposition for the next five years, there is speculation about whether the Labour Party will ever recover and, indeed, whether it still has a place in British politics, having been so roundly abandoned by the very class it is supposed to represent.

The referendum on European Union (EU) membership, which was held in June 2016 and saw the “leave” side triumph, was a special factor in the demise of UK Socialism under Labour. However, it was the Labour Party’s reaction to the referendum result rather than the “leave” vote itself which has proved so destructive. What the question of continued membership of the EU brought into focus were the social, political and economic priorities of the British people. When they were asked what was most important, the British public powerfully responded by putting politics first: they chose democracy over technocracy. Since for many Brits the EU is seen as an anti-democratic, corporate institution, run by technocrats and supported by self-serving politicians. This was a response large swathes of the political establishment, the entire middle ground in fact, could not understand and refused to accept. The result has been a three-year impasse in parliament, with a minority Tory government being unable to put into effect the will of the British people. The essential problem has been a predominately “remain” parliament—made up of “remain”-backing MPs from all parties—unwilling to enact the legislation required for leaving the EU.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given that all political parties, the media, and most economic “experts” campaigned strongly for “remain,” the result came as quite a shock. That and the ensuing parliamentary gridlock led to a degree of political fragmentation within the “remain” camp. As a number of “remain”-voting MPs simply refused to accept the new status quo. This led to a number of party defections and the formation of entirely new cross-party allegiances, which not only insisted that they represented a new vision of politics, but that they embodied higher moral values. Without exception, these unelected new alliances for “remain,” which were united in their determination to set aside the referendum result, were easily recognizable as expressions of self-aggrandizement, and were wiped out at the last election.

Working class punishing the Labour Party

It was also a time of extreme vitriol. As much as parliamentarians were abused by angry members of the public—primarily “leave” voters frustrated at what they regarded as parliament’s “blocking tactics,” parliamentarians were not slow to sling mud on “leave” voters, characterizing them as ignorant and ill-informed and accusing them of bigotry and racism. The large majority bestowed on Johnson in the recent election was no doubt motivated by a strong desire to eradicate this injurious stalemate and install a government capable of delivering on the referendum result. But it was also motivated by a desire on the part of the working class to punish the Labour Party for its betrayal.

A robust opposition is an essential part of any democratic system, and in that respect, the decimation of the Labour Party is manifestly a loss in absolute terms. Whether it is also a
particular loss so far as the working class is concerned depends on whether it is still an authentically representative party. The fact that the Labour leadership prevaricated and stalled on the EU question is perhaps the clearest indication of the difficulties they faced in terms of their support base. They simply couldn’t decide whether they were “leave” or “remain.”

Having its roots in working class communities that had been decimated by de-industrialization in the 1990s and had suffered under the strict neo-liberal rules of EU membership—neutering the Trade Unions and destroying workers’ rights—the Labour Leadership was well-acquainted with the demands of the “leave” side. And, prior to the 2016 referendum, both Leader Jeremy Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell were aligned to that view. However, the difficulty Corbyn faced was that the surge in support for the Labour Party that his “leftist” leadership attracted—membership had tipped over 500,000 by 2017, making it the largest Socialist party in Europe—was largely drawn, not from the Euro-sceptic working class but from the avidly pro-EU metropolitan class. And these new members comprised the majority of the party’s grass-root activists. In the end, the party swung in favor of the metropolitan elite and campaigned to remain in the EU. That decision probably cost them some working class votes but wouldn’t have been fatal. The death knell came later, when the lack of decisive leadership in respecting the referendum result emboldened disgruntled “remainers” within the party, who began to look for ways to overturn the vote. When the leadership caved into their demands to campaign for a second referendum, this led to justifiable outrage in those parts of the country the Labour Party had forgotten about. It was this that lost Labour the 2019 election. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Does the Labour Party represent the working class?

At this juncture, the most important question to ask, it seems to me, is whether the present Labour Party is an authentic left-wing political organization representing the interests of the working class. If it has become something else, what or whose political agenda is it serving? And it isn’t possible to answer that question without an appreciation of the case for Lexit: the left-wing argument for leaving the EU. The reason being that Lexit represents the political interests of the working class, and is, after all, what they themselves voted for. The case for Lexit is overwhelming; it is a powerful argument against global capitalism, and for that reason was never discussed or even alluded to by any of the main political parties. Unfortunately, many Labour MPs, rather than debating the case for “leave,” deemed it more politically expedient to label the Lexit-voting working class ignorant and racist. And it is from this shamefully low position that the Labour Party is now struggling to climb back.

There is little interest in the rights of individual workers, since the constitutions’ primary concern is with labor as a resource or cost.

The case for Lexit had been powerfully made by British trade unionist’s decades before the 2016 referendum. Many saw through the façade of “Social Partnership” the EU began promoting in the 1980s in a crude attempt to sweeten the pill of unregulated capitalism.

As the late Bob Crow, Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) General Secretary, pointed out in 2012, “The ‘Social Europe’ agenda has been used over many years to justify trade union support for a vicious right-wing corporate project known as the European Union. [It] was always a smoke screen to fool the organized working class that we had something in common with big business. We didn’t then and we don’t today when unelected EU institutions, directly representing Europe’s biggest banks, are removing elected governments and imposing mass unemployment, social dumping and unending austerity everywhere.”

Ever since the UK’s entry into the EU in 1975, trade unions had been arguing against the neo-liberal strait-jacket imposed by EU membership. What those who stood on the front-line defending workers’ rights could see was that through the practice of “Social Dumping” private corporations were bringing workers from low-wage countries into higher wage economies to undercut local, collectively-agreed wages in order to accrue higher profits.

The strikes that broke out to protest this practice, insisting that all workers be paid the same wages, were declared illegal by the European Court of Justice in a series of legal challenges. What was thereby established in cases, such as International Transport Workers Federation v. Viking [2007]; Laval v. Swedish Building Workers Union [2008]; and Ruffert v. State of Lower Saxony [2008], which involved workers and trade unions from all over Europe, was that corporate entitlement to profits overrode long-fought workers’ rights. As RMT President, Alex Gordon, pointed out in 2011, what was enshrined in the EU constitution and enforced by the European Court regarding the free movement of goods, services, capital and labor “represents the most fundamental attack on trade union rights and democracy in general since the end of World War Two.”

Since no Leftist party, (other than the tiny Communist Party) was advo-
cating “leave,” it isn’t surprising that issues such as “Social Dumping” and the undercutting of wages were never revealed to the electorate. What is surprising is that pro-remain Labour Party activists should attempt to sell the EU’s corporately managed “free flow of labor” as an expression of international socialism. An error which surely points to a deep confusion over the nature of globalization itself.

The commodification of labor

For the free movement of labor enshrined in the EU constitution is, quite literally, the stuff of globalization: it’s the commodification of labor.

There is little interest in the rights of individual workers, since the constitutions’ primary concern is with labor as a resource or cost. This is the liquefaction of human flesh, poured from one market to another and settling at the lowest points in order to yield the highest profit. This is how wages get dragged down in a race to the bottom. Such commodified labor has nothing to do with internationalism which is a cross-national expression of solidarity between workers, co-operatives and trade unions, and was established by self-organized labor.

The Labour Party’s dogged insistence that continued membership of the EU was essential for protecting workers’ rights wasn’t very persuasive in the referendum campaign. But it surely would have proved even less persuasive if the UK media had shown the electorate just how the EU was “protecting” the rights of workers in France.

Providing a poignant backdrop to the “remain” camp’s “workers’ rights” mantra were violent images of the French riot police beating up workers lawfully protesting against “Socialist” President Hollande’s new labor laws. The violence on the streets of France has continued to this day—as has the news blackout in the UK—with workers now protesting against President Macron’s plans to privatize the pensions and extend the retirement age. The result has been an extensive general strike, with Paris virtually closed down. Lamentably, not a single Labour MP has commented publicly on the scandal of the EU’s destruction of workers’ rights or expressed any solidarity with or even concern for the plight of French workers. So much for international socialism.

Labour has become a party that symbolizes identity interests but no longer represents class politics.

Since the Labour Party did not support the decision of the working class to vote “leave” but chose to perpetuate the EU’s “Social Partnership” façade instead, it is questionable whether it remains a party committed to working class interests. Does it still have anything to offer the people it claims to represent other than handouts? A glance at its bland, give-away 2019 manifesto provides a negative answer, and clearly reveals the fundamental challenges faced by a Labour Party that has chosen to get into bed with capitalism. It simply can’t get out again without effecting radical change. And it can’t do that because it has, by that very accommodation, normalized the draconian economic policies, it was created to confront. It has simply made itself irrelevant, offering amelioration but nothing structurally different.

All this was foreseen by the left-wing of the Party back in the ’70s, when the then parliamentary Labour Party declared the working class “irresponsible” for trying to force structural change and aligned itself with big business instead.

Tony Benn, the Labour Party’s most vocal left-wing critic in those days, Corbyn’s mentor and a vociferous campaigner against EU membership, thought the “handouts” view of politics elitist and incompatible with radical government. He was right, people want to be empowered not patronized. However, this paternalistic, managerial stance sits well with the middle classes that currently dominate the Labour Party membership. Such largesse reinforces society’s stratification, usefully relieving the bourgeoisie of the stress of managing class boundaries. It also reassures them that nothing is going to be radically different.

In short, Labour has become a party that symbolizes identity interests but no longer represents class politics. It is now something of a brand: a logo appropriated by the “woke” middle classes seeking to embellish their leftist credentials. If only the working class had stayed quiet, the pretense could have continued for years.

Since so many members of the current Labour Party appear to enjoy the cachet of a Marxist label, whilst denigrating the working class and being terrified of radical change, it seems appropriate to defer to Marx on the topic of self-alienation. For, whilst both classes share the same objective, alienating reality, Marx saw that it is through the realizations of the working class that society is restored to a human level of existence.

As an assessment of UK politics in the age of global capitalism, he seems spot on: “The property-owning class and the class of the proletariat represent the same human self-alienation. But the former feels at home in this self-alienation and feels itself confirmed by it; it recognizes alienation as its own instrument and in it possesses the semblance of a human existence. The latter feels itself destroyed by this alienation and sees in it its own impotence and the reality of an inhuman existence.”

—January 2020
French Strike Movement Continues
Up against Macron and his world, no shortage of surprises!
EDITORIAL OF THE JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2020 ISSUE OF CONVERGENCES REVOLUTIONNAIRES MAGAZINE

On Sunday, January 19, the UNSA (National Union of Autonomous Unions)-RATP (Autonomous Parisian Transportation Administration) union, main leader of the metro workers’ unions, announced the suspension of the strike in the Paris metro, with a call nevertheless to strike again on Friday, January 24. The SNCF (French National Railway Company), the CGT (General Confederation of Labor) and the Sud-Rail (South-Rail) unions, the most influential ones in many stations and yards, were so insistent on announcing upcoming “days of intense struggle” that it was difficult not to deduce that they were encouraging a light struggle for the present! Already on January 13 and 14, these union leaderships no longer supported a continuation of the renewable strike, but instead proposed “targeted” days of demonstrations, and in particular, “the next interprofessional day of struggle on January 24, 2020, day on which the Council of Ministers” must decide on the pension reform project.

The chicken or the egg? Are these union choices imposed by the pressure of tired strikers who have been wiped out financially by 46 days of strike—a record for decades—as the unionists claim? Or did the inter-union organization get tired before the strikers? Had it not displayed its “fatigue” already before the Christmas holidays, by calling for nothing after the huge day of national strike on December 17 aside from another day on January 9, almost three weeks later? At the RATP (metro) as at the SNCF (trains), the most determined strikers took this actual disappearance of the leaders during the Christmas holidays as cowardice, and organized themselves, unionized and non-unionized rank and file workers together, so that there would be no truce. And there was none.

Continuing the strike in order to support others
At the time of this writing, the 46th day of the strike, January 19, 2020, exhaustion—especially financial exhaustion—is evident. Subways, trains and buses are starting to roll again. This is happening, but not without difficulties, because the hardcore of strikers at the SNCF just as at RATP, around the whole the country as well as in Paris area, have decided to continue striking and meeting to renew this, daily.

...we have a strike in which the strikers are the principle craftspeople, a “strike that belongs to the strikers.”

The goal is not to “shame” colleagues who go back to work on this or that day (few are those who actually did not do this at some point, so as not to see their holiday completely upended,) but to give the movement the best chance of continuing and being reinforced, even tipping it toward further generalization, through actions organized especially by the SNCF and the RATP strikers toward milieus outside their own sector.

The plan thus is to continue the strike and to campaign, shoulder to shoulder with those who have stepped up, in particular with the teachers whose anger all around the country seems to be growing, against both the pension reform, which penalizes them in particular, and against the start of a reform of the baccalaureate exam (exit exam from high school) which will formalize social segregation at school.

Railroad workers and RATP metro agents have signed up for actions with teachers and high school students who are preparing to put an end to this à la carte baccalaureate exam. Many of the transportation workers have had striking teachers join their general assemblies and picket lines, coming to their rescue during the strikes of the last period. So, it’s time to return the favor! Though the SNCF and the RATP workers were obviously the leading sectors of this strike by their numbers, by the paralysis they caused in transportation as well as in the economy, and also by the duration of their movement, the teachers were involved nevertheless from the start, before their Christmas holidays. And at the start of the 2020 school year, these mobilized teacher nuclei seem to be swarming; the striking teaching sector is in a position to take the lead. These teachers are encouraged in turn by the continuation of the transportation strike, for another good week still, for sure, and for this reason the determination of the railway workers and RATP agents remains important.

“The strikers must control the strike” at the bottom, but how about at the top?
What all transport activists who remain fiercely on strike observe and report is that not one of their colleagues has resumed work—whether temporarily or not—approving Macron and his government’s pension reform project. Everyone continues to be repulsed by it.

The railroad workers didn’t let themselves be taken in by the first dirty trick, the proposal of the “pivotal age” as an acceptable compromise (their response was a play on words, calling...
the “âge pivot” “âge pipeau”—or “BS age” (“That’s pipeau” means it lacks seriousness or has no value)—and this compromise was accepted only by the leader of the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labor) union which opposed the strikes to begin with!) nor were they appeased by the latest semantic twist consisting in replacing “pivotal age” by the “age of balance” in a text.

The game between the state power and the chief of the CFDT was, in its own way, a great moment and a great lesson in this movement. On the one hand, we have a powerful strike movement, with the emergence of assemblies or lively picket lines, strike committees or mobilization committees, more numerous than in the past, or even the coordination of strikers and “interprofessional assemblies (abbreviated ‘interpros’,”) that take the initiative to engage in an abundance of actions in connection with and toward other sectors and companies to discuss with them, and try to rally them—not to mention the parties, rallies and multiple surprises reserved for the employers and “Macronist” authorities. In short on the one side we have a strike in which the strikers are the principle craftspeople, a “strike that belongs to the strikers.”

On the other hand, however—and what a paradox—we have a president and a prime minister who have set themselves up to engage in discussions with the leader of a trade union that is not even on strike. But Laurent Berger (the general secretary of the CFDT union) did the job! He’s been decorated and awarded the medal of “Class A reformist” by the government. This has helped revolutionaries explain the “camps” and the class struggle to the workers, even though we still need to be nuanced, because the class struggle is more complex, and the “reformism” of the union leaders much more widely and subtly shared than what Macron and his minister Philippe would have us believe.

Union leadership, and how about us?

But we learn through the struggle, and what rich experiences it offers! You have to organize at the bottom, come together and decide at the bottom, develop a myriad of democratic and active structures at the bottom, and this movement remains extremely rich, but we must or should also seek to give ourselves representation at a higher level, at the national level, to the point of forcing Macron and his henchmen to speak to the strikers, and not to be robbed of the monopoly of representation by Laurent Berger, Philippe Martinez or some other union leader, especially since it is certain that none of them, each with his different style, defends the general interests of workers in struggle.

Because for each of these “leaders,” it is always their personal petty interests that prevail, they are always motivated by the competition for their personal place and rank as representatives and negotiators with the powers that be—even if to get there, they have to hoist themselves to that top spot by spouting some radical demagoguery—at least for a while. It should be remembered that the leaders of the CGT have scored as many meetings in high places with representatives of the state and employers on this damn false pension problem (which would not exist if wages were good and if there was no unemployment,) than those of the CFDT. They can chant in unison with the strikers, “Withdrawal of the proj-
Such a long strike involves a lot of action, but not only action

This struggle involves also a lot of thinking, of discussion, of awareness. Social awareness is developing, with the distinction between the “sides” becoming clearer. This awareness grows through the experience of solidarity in the struggle, the convergence between various sectors among the workers who have met each other, discovered each other in the fight, but have no desire to be distinguished from each other, because of the common general interest in the fight against an unequal system that attacks everyone.

Political awareness, in the face of clubs, police custody, tear gas and sometimes unfortunately worse, sheds light on the role of the state and its police. Throughout this movement, which is not over, the strikers experienced great moments of jubilation and emotion, and of adversity too. It comes to them like a big whiff of wishing to keep it up, whatever happens, to continue on the political front, in search of milestones for the construction of a party which would be that of the working class, all “for the honor of the workers and for a better world,” a slogan that has become a program in the course of these fights over the past few years. It is perhaps still vague but is heavy in meaning.

Yes, the clear scent of a better future

What continues to weld the strikers—whether still active or in reserve!—and allows us to hope for new developments, it is the emergence of struggles in many sectors other than railways, metros, buses and schools, even if these struggles—notable in the cultural, performing arts sector or among lawyers—have not affected the large battalions of private industry, whose participation would obviously be decisive.

But who knows? And what also continues to unite the strikers is the avalanche of what we could call “Macron welcoming parties”—the welcome committees which are reserved for his ministers and other officials under his boot during their travels, and for himself when he goes to the theater, peacefully, while others are fighting for their survival. If you don’t have bread, eat cake! That’s Macron’s policy.

If you don’t have bread, eat cake! That’s Macron’s policy.

A sign that this pension policy has crossed the limits certainly obvious in the way that entertainment workers—the artists who are on stage as well as the many more workers who are behind them—have taken to organizing spectacular demonstrations, repeatedly already. They have organized public shows outside the walls of operas, in Paris on the esplanade in front of the worthy institution of the Garnier Palace and the Bastille Opera, as well as here and there in the provinces. These shows say two things. On the one hand, the determination against the policy of Macron and his boss friends is strong and contagious. On the other hand, that another kind of life is possible, with operas and theaters, transportation and health establishments, schools and universities, and the multiple areas that have been open and free for all. Like a taste for a socialism and communism that is quite different than the socialism and communism of the political parties that disgusted us when they took a seat in bourgeois institutions.

This is what strikers—workers in transportation, hospitals, schools, museums and theaters—put forward, although confusedly, when they express that they are fed up with a policy drawn up against them all, but also in particular against the users of the services they hoped to offer in their work, in which their bosses present users as “clients” to be favored according to the state of their fortune: mistreating the overwhelming majority, and pampering only the rich, even super-rich.

After the long struggle of the Yellow Vests, this strike, which is not over and probably has some surprises in store for us, is the expression of how fed up people are with a system of exploitation and inequality that has overstayed its welcome. Out with this system! Yes, this strike is decidedly very political. Just as many other, even more intense social movements around the world at this time.

As of our publication date, strikes are still going on in France—French protests at planned labor reforms hit the ski resorts on Saturday, February 15, 2020.1

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1 “French ski slopes hit by new wave of strikes”
http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/19/c_138718822.htm

...this strike, which is not over and probably has some surprises in store for us, is the expression of how fed up people are with a system of exploitation and inequality that has overstayed its welcome.
French Labor-Organizing Continues
How French rank-and-file workers have circumvented bureaucratic leaders to continue the strikes
By Daniela Corbet

February 17, 2020—After more than 50 days of strikes in France against the Macron government, workers from the state train company SNCF (French National Railway Company) and the Paris public transport company RATP (Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens) formed their own Coordinating Committee. This is an example of self-organization and workers’ democracy that is relevant for the entire working class.

On January 17, a new player burst into the media spotlight—the RATP-SNCF Coordinating Committee. It was immediately accused by Laurent Berger, secretary-general of the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labor), of being responsible for the action that targeted the headquarters of his trade union.1 But what is the origin and nature of this organization that has become the expression in the Paris region Ile-de-France of the radicalized base of the state passenger railroad company SNCF and, above all, the Paris public transit company RATP?

Although the group did not have a name before then, its actions garnered lots of publicity, especially during the end-of-the-year holiday period when strikers were left to their own devices by their union leaders: a rally at RATP headquarters on December 23, followed by a surprise action at the Gare de Lyon [train station in Paris] that ended up paralyzing traffic on one of the metro’s two automated lines; a march of than 3,000 people from the Gare de l’Est to the Gare Saint-Lazare [Paris train stations], called and organized from start to finish by the strikers themselves on December 26; an action at the main office of La République En Marche (LREM)2 on January 2; a protest on January 15 at the headquarters of Derichebourg Group in solidarity with Adama Cissé, who had been unfairly fired3; and an action at the CFDT headquarters on January 17.

But the scope of this Coordinating Committee goes far beyond organizing “lightning actions.” It is one of the strikers’ most important experiences of self-organization and workers’ democracy, independent of their trade union organizations. It is the most far-reaching since the experience of coordinating committees among railway workers and nurses in the latter-half of the 1980s.

At its best moments, this Coordinating Committee has succeeded in bringing together representatives (and often some of the leaders) from about 15 bus depots, two RER lines [a hybrid commuter rail-subway line] and five metro lines, in addition to several stations and important sectors of the SNCF in the Paris region, which makes it a key player in the mobilization in the area.

And it all began on September 13…

The starting point of this story and of the entire sequence we are still going through is undoubtedly September 13, 2019, a day of mobilization confined to the RATP but that “set the record straight”—to use the expression of some of the strikers. Everyone expected a confrontation to come much later, after the public release of the pension reform bill. But that didn’t account for a return to the method of the strike—regardless of the objective difficulties that might have arisen due to lack of support by union leaders—which had been discredited by a series of defeats and poorly led battles and that had, among other things, led the Yellow Vests to reject it in part. Nevertheless, at the RATP in September, a walkout of more than 90 percent of the workers demonstrated the effectiveness of a mass strike—directly contradicting the claim of former President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008 that “when there is a strike, nobody notices it.”

And they didn’t stop there. That very day, at a rally at the RATP headquarters, their battle plan was synthe-
sized in the slogan they shouted into the ears of their union leaders: “Unlimited strike in December! Unlimited strike in December!” The December 5 date then set by the unions thus reflected, in part, the pressure of the rank and file (after a moment of hesitation on the part of the CGT (General Confederation of Labor) trade union federation’s RATP leaders⁴). From that moment on, the December 5 date gradually became set in stone.

The RATP strike on September 13 also had a strong impact at the SNCF, where the bitter taste of defeat in the strike against the 2018 Railway Pact lingered. For very concrete reasons, employees of these two companies feel a common sentiment for what the Yellow Vests had gone through was palpable, and this very quickly found an echo at the SNCF in the deep tremors reflected in the national right of withdrawal for drivers/conductors following the accident in Champagne-Ardenne⁵ or the “wildcat” strike in the Technicentre in Châtillon.⁶

Origins of the Coordinating Committee: A Facebook Group and the RATP-SNCF meetings

It is in this context that contacts were established very quickly between RATP and SNCF employees in the Paris region, in anticipation of the unlimited strike that would begin on December 5. This first took place on Facebook, with the creation of a group called RATP-SNCF agents, l’union fait la force (“RATP-SNCF agents: unity is strength,”) which was the venue for the initial exchanges, before a first meeting was held in Saint-Denis on October 16. It had been proposed by the railway workers grouped around the Intergares [Inter-station] collective, which had been formed after the 2018 strike against the Railway Pact.

There were three of these “RATP-SNCF meetings” in October and November. They constituted a sort of embryo of coordination, enabling links to be forged and joint work to be commenced in preparation for the December strike.

This work was constituted on the basis of extremely clear positions on the need to fight for the complete withdrawal of Macron’s pension reform and the fact that the rank and file should continue to impose its agenda on the union leaders, but above all by patient work to educate their colleagues, through joint tours by RATP and SNCF employees, who from the third meeting onward were joined by teachers.

These meetings continued to take place once the strike began, with the first one on December 6 and others in the weeks that followed. Up until that point, they brought together a relatively limited number of sectors, particularly those in which part of the extreme Left had militants and contacts.

The December 20 turning point

It was only at the end of December that these meetings took a leap forward and a framework emerged that began to resemble a real coordinating group of strikers. On December 19, after a negotiating session with the government, the union confederations decided to call a holiday truce in the strike. This position was made explicit by the CFDT and UNSA (National Union of Autonomous Unions)⁷ and was implicit with respect to the CGT. Without mentioning the word “truce,” CGT Secretary General Philippe Martinez declared that day, in front of Matignon, the official residence of the French prime minister, that unions would “meet on January 9 for a new day of inter-branch action.”

The news was like a cold shower for the SNCF and RATP strikers, who had already logged two weeks of open-ended strike and who very quickly understood that a truce would concretely mean the end of their movement.

Anasse Kazib, a railway worker at Le Bourget who had been a figure in the movement against the 2018 Railway Pact, had become an example for many strikers, thanks in part to some notable media coverage in which he dissected all the attacks contained in the Delevoye (Jean-Paul Delevoye) report that would serve as the basis for the reform project.⁸ That same evening, Kazib announced that he would be doing a live stream broadcast on the Facebook page of Révolution Permanent⁹ to discuss the ongoing betrayal by the union leaders and the aftermath of the movement, and that he would be making a direct appeal to strikers from several sectors.

The live stream was a huge success, with more than 4,000 people logging in. Tens-of-thousands watched on replay in the days that followed. The opinion of the rank and file was clear: no one wanted the unions to call a truce! Anasse Kazib proposed on the live stream that a physical meeting be held the next day to discuss a battle plan for holding on through the holidays.

All of a sudden, the idea of rank-and-file coordination of the strike, which until then had appeared to most people as “the political activists’ thing,” became an urgent need in the eyes of all, an indispensable tool to impose the will of the strikers and the continuation of the movement despite the position taken by the union leadership.

The union truce and the emergence of the rank and file

That subsequent meeting was also a success. More than a hundred strikers met in a basement room provided by comrades from SUD-Rail Paris Saint-Lazare, along with representatives of more than a dozen bus depots, RER (Réseau Express Régional) A and B trains, a few metro lines, and several sectors of the SNCF. In an atmosphere of open exchange, the strikers worked out their own agenda for the first week of the holidays, with actions to raise public awareness and collect money for...
the strike funds in shopping centers over the December 21–22 weekend, a rally in front of RATP headquarters on Monday, December 23 to denounce the repression that was raining down on the bus depot pickets, and a self-organized demonstration by the strikers on Thursday, December 26.

The rally on December 23 brought together several thousand people, before turning into a “lightning action” at the Gare de Lyon and for a few hours paralyzing traffic on Metro Line 1, one of the two automated lines operating during the strike.

That day, the press was dumb-founded to discover a force that had been erased from the media for two weeks. It was lurking behind the union confederations’ calls for a truce: the rank and file of the strike. It was a rank and file not only determined to prevent the suspension of the movement, but on the contrary to radicalize it! One expression of this combative spirit: surrounded by police outside the train station, railway workers and RATP agents didn’t flinch and broke through the police lines, cheered on by their colleagues and supporters.

After holidays spent between families and pickets, the fledgling Coordinating Committee returned to the streets on Boxing Day, with a march between the Gare de l’Est and the Gare Saint-Lazare. The idea had come from an RATP agent who, during the Facebook live stream on December 19, asked Anasse Kazib whether it would be possible for the strikers to organize their own demonstration independent of the trade unions. The meeting on December 20 decided to take this on and, with logistical support from the SUD-Rail workers (filling the route with the local authorities; lending a van with a sound system), the march was on.

More than 3,000 people came out in response to the call for this combative demonstration, in which the strikers themselves took on all the tasks, from security to leading the march. The speeches at the end of the march were proof of the pride in that success. As Karim, from the Pavillon-sous-Bois depot, declared: “Today it was the rank and file that spoke. It was the rank and file in the street. And frankly, we showed that we are as mobilized as ever and that we will go all the way!”

The demonstration also significantly bridged the gap with the Yellow Vests, many of whom took part. Yellow Vest leader Jérôme Rodrigues also took the microphone to salute the strikers’ initiative: “Bravo to you. You don’t need your leaders. You don’t need your confederations. Today, you are like the ‘Yellow Vest’ voice that makes itself heard in the streets.” He then called for convergence not only against pension reform but to “overthrow this system.”

Nevertheless, the Coordinating Committee never saw itself as an anti-union framework, which is why it called on the marchers to join the Île-de-France trade union coalition demonstration scheduled for two days later.

**Strikers have their say**

But the Coordinating Committee did not limit itself to organizing “punch” actions, even though they were an important part of boosting striker morale and showing the media—and through them other workers all over the country—that the movement was continuing and that there would be no truce. It also gave a voice to the rank-and-file strikers, to all those who were still holding daily pickets and general meetings.

Anasse became a *de facto* spokesperson for the Coordinating Committee, not only speaking to the media at actions but also directly confronting government representatives on television, who often found it quite difficult to counter his arguments—which were backed by the determination of the strikers and Anasse’s mastery of the Delevoye report recommendations that often far exceeded the very LREM (La République En Marche!) deputies who were supposed to defend the reform project.

The desire to give the strikers a voice could not be limited to that, however, which is why the Coordinating Committee organized several press conferences. The first one took the form of the strikers’ response to Macron’s New Year’s speech. In a *café* in the north of Paris and in front of the press, they addressed “first all the users of public transit who, as we know, are affected by the president’s ‘rotting’ strategy” before committing to continue to fight in 2020 “against this reform, which offers nothing but a world of precariousness to the working population and future generations” and calling on “all sectors, private and public, as well as young people, to join us in the fight.”

The Coordinating Committee held other press conferences to denounce the repression during the January 9 demonstration and the disciplinary action taken against striking workers, and then to respond to the attacks by the government and the trade union confederations following the action at the CFDT (French Democratic Confederation of Labour) headquarters.

**A tool for organizing the strike, extending it, and combating repression**

The Coordinating Committee also proved to be an effective tool for organizing and coordinating the strike itself, especially during the difficult end-of-the-year-holidays period when the picket lines at bus depots were deprived of much of the support they had enjoyed other mornings. A decision was made to adopt rotating pickets as a tactic: each day, the strikers and their supporters concentrated on two bus depots, one each in the north and south Paris region. They often managed to block the buses from leaving, either with the picket itself or because the depot management would call in police repression that non-striking colleagues couldn’t tolerate and who
would then exercise their right of withdrawal from work.

The Coordinating Committee didn’t limit itself to organizing strikers at the two companies, but initiated meetings with many sectors, in universities, within the national public school system, and even in the private sector, with delegations organized to go to Total’s refinery in Grandpuits and PSA’s auto plant in Poissy, Yvelines.

The Coordinating Committee has also been important in countering employer and police repression against strikers and their supporters. Each time a striker was taken into custody, the Coordinating Committee organized rallies in front of the police station until their colleague was released. Similarly, it has been involved in defending all the RATP employees subjected to disciplinary proceedings for strike-related offenses.

The case of Hani Labidi is emblematic. A main organizer of the strike at the Belliard depot in the capital’s 18th district and an active member of the Coordinating Committee, Hani faced RATP discipline for events that took place prior to the strike. The two mass rallies organized by the Coordinating Committee in front of the RATP building where its disciplinary board was meeting largely contributed to the penalty the company had asked for—a one-month suspension that could be extended to dismissal—being reduced to just a 15-day suspension. In a gesture of solidarity that testifies to the fraternity created between SNCF and RATP strikers within the Coordinating Committee, railway workers at Le Bourget decided to use 500 from their strike fund to help compensate Hani for the loss of wages from that sanction.

Not the strike managers, but a counter-power from the striking rank and file

The RATP-SNCF Coordinating Committee was never in charge of the strike. It would have needed a stronger presence, particularly in the Metro, one of the pillars of the strike. It would have needed a more solid base of general meetings and/or strike committees, but these were limited due to the combination of travel difficulties caused by the strike itself and a lack of experience in a sector that had not had a huge strike for more than ten years. (It would also have required extending more deeply inside the SNCF, where the control of the union leadership was stronger on the ground.)

Nevertheless, the Coordinating Committee exercised a form of genuine counter-power. Imposing its own agenda during the holiday period and throughout the conflict put real pressure on the union leaders against calling a truce and for resuming the strike. If the media are to be believed, moreover, it was that pressure that forced RATP’s union leaders to agree only to unofficial meetings with the government in the most improbable places (for fear that strikers would show up to protest.) The Coordinating Committee was the conscious and organized expression of this pressure, which greatly restricted management’s room for maneuvers and negotiation, hindering an easy return to work. It thus played a central role in extending the movement beyond December, creating the conditions for other sectors to take over once the resources of the transport strike began to run out, especially from a financial point of view.

Again, it was Karim, the movement’s leader at the Pavillon-sous-Bois depot, who best summed this up in a conversation about the role of the Coordinating Committee: “Without it, the unions would have had a free hand to call for the suspension of the strike at the end of December—and that would have killed the movement.”

Confidence building, the emergence of a militant core, and the experience of workers’ democracy

This objective assessment of the role played by the RATP-SNCF Coordinating Committee must not, however, erase one of its main achievements—a subjective one. The rank-and-file strikers, among whom were many non-unionized employees, were used to movements led from start to finish by union leaders and to general assemblies that looked like meetings of union representatives. But the strikers here gained confidence in their own strength and capabilities, in their collective intelligence, and in their ability to learn from each other’s experiences.

Unaccustomed to meetings of this type at the beginning, the strikers on the Coordinating Committee learned to discuss together, argue when they disagreed, and decide according to the majority opinion so that week after week they could come out with a collective battle plan. Over the course of the meetings, the maturation of both the framework and its actors was palpable, with better put-together interventions and real debates on strategy for the movement, the role of the union leadership, and the obstacles to expanding the movement.

It was through this as well that a number of women strikers were able to organize themselves, gaining confidence not only by playing leading roles in the strike in their respective sectors, but also on the Coordinating Committee itself. These include Laura, a railway worker from Le Bourget; Nadia, a machine operator at the Flanders depot; Hanane, a driver on Line 5 of the Metro; and others. These female warriors were able to take the floor, discuss on an equal footing with their male colleagues, and played a role in implementing the committee’s decisions week after week.

The Coordinating Committee thus contributed to the emergence of a solid militant core, aware of the strength of the workers and the role of the union leadership and whose concerns went far beyond the issue of pensions alone.

The emergence of this layer of conscious strikers—real leaders emanating from the rank and file—will be an asset for continuing the battle against pension reform and more generally in the French class struggle.
Knowing how to organize the retreat in order to be able to think about a return

Let’s not deceive ourselves: today, the transport strike is in a clear ebb, and only a small nucleus continues to strike and to advocate for an extension of the movement to other sectors. Nevertheless, the feeling that reigns among the strikers who participated on the Coordinating Committee is far from one of defeat or demoralization. The strikers understand that while the fight against pension reform is far from over, continuing a strike that has become one of only a minority of the workers and without immediate prospects for victory is not the most effective method of struggle.

Nevertheless, they remain organized to continue to explore possibilities for a massive movement in other sectors (and particularly now among the youth,) and to combat the repressive counter-offensive by RATP management, which is expanding its disciplinary procedures. It seeks to generalize the example of the Coordinating Committee to other sectors and regions of the country, with a view to organizing a national meeting to lay out a real battle plan that includes a general strike against the government and its reform. It is a sign that this singular experience of self-organization of our class has not yet had its last word.

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Translation: Scott Cooper

A submarine could get close to a target country, reducing the time from launch to explosion to “15 minutes or less,” Atkins noted, “and with an assured capability—that is, a missile that’s able to penetrate any enemy air defenses.”

Given the bi-partisan stance that Iran must not be able to have a nuclear weapon (while Israel has many of them,) it is not ruled out that the U.S. would use such a bomb to destroy Iran’s nuclear facilities even if Iran isn’t on the verge of a nuclear weapon. How is Iran likely to respond? We got an indication recently when Iran retaliated against Trump’s assassination of one of its top generals by using its accurate missiles with conventional warheads against U.S. forces in Iraq.

Iranian missiles can reach all U.S. bases in the region, as well as the U.S.’s client, Israel. There would likely be a wider war in response with the potential for the use of more powerful nuclear bombs.

What would Russia do with such a situation developing at its borders?

A similar scenario could be imagined regarding North Korea, which does have missiles with nuclear warheads. Would a U.S. strike with low-yield weapons be assured to destroy all of North Korea’s missiles? North Korea would likely strike with nuclear warheads U.S. bases in South Korea and in the Pacific.

What would China do with a nuclear exchange on its borders?

The point of raising such possibilities is not to say they are likely, but to indicate the real danger that the use of any atomic weapons would be greatly destabilizing and could result in the Doomsday Clock reaching midnight for humanity.
The California company that evicted a group of homeless mothers from a West Oakland, California, home this week is the force behind a sprawling national home-flipping operation. Through a related entity, the company, Wedgewood Properties, also benefited from a controversial government program to offload distressed, federally insured loans to investors.

Early Tuesday morning, January 14, 2020, sheriff’s deputies evicted the group Moms 4 Housing, who were occupying a foreclosed, investor-owned home in West Oakland. In November, the four women and their children moved into a home that had sat vacant for two years, rallying community support for their fight against real estate speculators they accused of exacerbating the area’s housing crisis.

“There are four times as many empty homes in Oakland as there are homeless people,” said Sameerah Karim, one of the mothers, at a press conference outside the home in November. “Why should anyone, especially children, sleep on the street while perfectly good homes sit empty?”

This week, after the mothers lost a court battle to stay in the home, the Alameda County Sheriff’s Department descended with armored vehicles and AR-15 rifles, arresting two of the women and two of their supporters. It recalled the housing standoffs that grabbed headlines in the years following the 2008 housing market crash, as groups like the Occupy movement took over vacant, foreclosed houses.

But where housing activists once faced off against major banks, they’re increasingly coming up against faceless corporations operating with even less transparency. The West Oakland home occupied by Moms 4 Housing was purchased at a foreclosure auction by a subsidiary of Wedgewood Properties, a home-flipping giant that does business nationwide through an alphabet-soup of companies such as HMC Assets LLC and FI-337 LLC.

Wedgewood did not respond to a request for comment. But after the company prevailed in court against the mothers, spokesperson Sam Singer issued a statement celebrating the ruling. Singer also chastised three Oakland City Council members who tried to negotiate a deal to sell the home to an affordable housing land trust, thereby allowing the mothers to stay.

“The solution to Oakland’s housing crisis is not the redistribution of citizens’ homes through illegal break-ins and seizures by squatters,” said Singer, adding that the three council members “must take real steps to address Oakland’s drug abuse, mental illness, and homeless issues.”

Displacement machine

Anya Svanoe, communications director for Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment, which supported the mothers’ protest, called Wedgewood “a displacement machine.”

Wedgewood has filed hundreds of eviction cases in the Bay Area and has been sued at least three times for wrongful eviction; two suits ended in settlements, while a third is still active.

Wedgewood’s sprawling operation epitomizes a major shift in the housing market, which is increasingly dominated by anonymous owners operating through a web of shell companies. More than three million homes and 13 million apartment buildings are owned by LLP, LC, or LLC entities, according to 2015 census data, business structures that do not mandate naming owners or investors.

Most states no longer require limited liability companies to disclose their owners, making them an attractive vehicle for “individuals who wish to own real estate but want to be able to hide their identity,” said Susan Pace.
Hamill, a University of Alabama Law professor. That often poses a major problem for tenants trying to figure out who exactly is evicting them, or cities that want to go after the owner of vacant properties in disrepair.

In 2018, The Guardian exposed conservative TV host Sean Hannity’s multimillion-dollar property empire, which he assembled via dozens of shell companies with names combining the initials of his children’s names. And a series of New York Times investigations in 2015 and 2016 chronicled how in New York City, limited liability companies were being used to launder money and defraud struggling homeowners.

The aftermath of the foreclosure crisis offered an unparalleled opportunity for institutional investors. Operating through a maze of subsidiaries, they flooded the housing market to buy up cheap, foreclosed homes nationwide. In Atlanta, the private-equity giant Blackstone bought 1,400 homes in a single day in 2013.

In many cases, federal policies enabled the investor feeding frenzy. After largely failing to aid homeowners at risk of defaulting, government-backed mortgage entities auctioned tens-of-thousands of distressed loans that they wanted off their books. The program was supposed to give borrowers a last shot at hanging on to their homes, but the hedge funds and private-equity firms buying loans were often quick to foreclose, as a 2015 New York Times investigation detailed. Community organizations labeled the programs a “Wall Street giveaway” and staged a series of protests, winning reforms in 2016 that made it easier for nonprofits to purchase the loans.

But much of the damage had been done. Of more than 100,000 [home] loans sold through the programs, the majority ended up in the hands of just four large investors. One of them, HMC Assets, purchased loans from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Fannie Mae, and Freddie Mac using a series of special-purpose entities. In 2014, HMC Assets merged with Wedgewood.

The result of these government loans sales was the rapid concentration of ownership in many communities hard-hit by the foreclosure crisis, noted a 2017 study in the NYU Journal of Legislation and Public Policy.

There are four times as many empty homes in Oakland as there are homeless people...

“We see the foreclosure crisis coming full circle,” wrote attorney Brad Greenburg, the study’s author. “Homeowners in communities that were previously targeted by subprime lenders are now burdened by housing markets dominated by organized money in a different form—institutional investors with consolidated holdings.”

In the Bay Area, an investigation by the local NBC affiliate found 98 active LLCs linked to Wedgewood. Through them, it’s been involved in thousands of property transactions and more than 300 court cases, mostly evictions, since 2015. A monopoly board renamed “Wedgewood” is affixed to the wall of the company’s Redondo Beach headquarters.

California housing activists first faced off against Wedgewood in 2016, when they supported an immigrant couple attempting to buy their home of ten years back from Wedgewood. The couple said their lender sold the home at auction while they were attempting to negotiate a loan modification when her home was sold to a Wedgewood subsidiary without the required legal notice. There are at least 500 deed records tied to Wedgewood LLCs in Dallas County.

The full scope of the company’s activities are exceedingly difficult to trace, but entities related to Wedgewood operate in at least 18 states, according to the NBC investigation.

The Moms 4 Housing protest in Oakland is over for now, but the organizers are looking to build a larger campaign against the kind of harmful actors they say Wedgewood exemplifies.

“We want speculators out of our community,” Dominique Walker told reporters on Monday. “They’re coming in, they’re profiting off harm that’s done in our community, and we want them out.”

Update: “Marking a major victory for a controversial group of housing activists, Moms 4 Housing will get a chance to move back into the West Oakland home its members were squatting in for two months before they were evicted...The owner of the empty house on Magnolia Street, real estate investment group Wedgewood, has agreed to negotiate the sale of the property to the Oakland Community Land Trust—a nonprofit that works with community members to buy properties to convert to affordable housing.”

—The Intercept, January 17, 2020
https://theintercept.com/2020/01/17/moms-4-housing-eviction/

1 “Moms 4 Housing victory: Property owner gives squatters chance to reclaim house’
https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/01/20/moms-4-housing-victory-group-gets-chance-to-buy-house-through-nonprofit/
One of the poorest towns in the nation, nearly all-Black Centreville, Illinois, floods with raw sewage every time it rains.

South of East St. Louis, down in the broad flood plain of the Mississippi known as the American Bottom, there is a little town that is gradually sinking in a flood of human waste. There is just no other way to say it, no other way to begin to tell the story of Centreville, Illinois. If you drove through quickly and did not look very carefully, it might look like any other rural town in this part of the Midwest. Gravel roads lined by storm-torn trees, large lots, small one-story houses, bread-box shaped mailboxes with small red flags out at the ends of driveways. But there are signs of the floods everywhere: abandoned houses surrounded by swampy yards, drainage ditches filled with brackish water, little wads of toilet paper hanging waist-high from the bushes by the side of the road.

Even a moderate rain can flood the intersections and lowlands of Centreville. When it rains heavily, much of the town is submerged in two or three feet of water. Water wears away at the foundations of homes and shorts out furnaces and hot water heaters. Outside some of the houses in Centreville, you can see three or four generations of ruined appliances lined up in a row. A resident I met last year told me that he had spent most of the winter living in the back room of his house with a space heater running around the clock. Without a functioning furnace or hot water heater, he had turned off the water to the house so the pipes did not freeze, drinking, cooking, and even bathing with bottled water.

Almost all of the water that surrounds the houses and floods the roads is dangerously contaminated. The sewer system in Centreville works as poorly as the storm drains. Each resident’s yard has a sewer cleanout so sluggish pipes can be cleared with a drain snake—but many of them run backward. Small fountains of raw sewage bubble up into the yards twenty-four hours a day, flowing into fetid sluiceways that run between the houses. Some days, especially in the summer, the whole town smells like an outhouse. And when it rains, and the water begins to rise, the sewage follows the water, out into the drainage ditches and the roadways, across the yards, into the houses. Many of the houses in Centreville, even the best-maintained houses, bow in the middle, where the foundations are gradually sinking into swampy ground.

Like Mississippi in the 1930s

It is easy to recognize in Centreville, which is 97 percent Black, an outline of the African American past: segregation, rurality, poverty. More than one time I have heard visitors say, “It’s like Mississippi in the 1930s.” And there is something true and revealing about the comparison. But more even than the past, Centreville looks like the future—a future unfolding at the confluence of climate catastrophe, structural racism, infrastructural deterioration, and widespread indifference to Black suffering.

Centreville, incorporated in 1957, lies just south of East St. Louis. To the east along the river is Sauget, Illinois—formerly Monsanto, Illinois—where the eponymous (and notorious) chemical company got its start producing, among other things, toxic PCBs. There are still chemical plants in Sauget today, although not much else—some small neighborhoods, and several mostly abandoned roadside malls along Illinois State Highway 3, where the truckers who come and go from the plants keep a couple of greasy spoon diners and several weather-beaten strip clubs in business. Centreville itself is shaped like a horseshoe. The two sides bracket the city of Alorton, the one-time home of the largest aluminum ore processing plant in the United States (Al-or-ton). The cynical deployment of Black strikebreakers against the unrepentantly segregated AFL union in the Alorton plant was one of the causes of the 1917 East St. Louis massacre: a mob of thousands of whites killed hundreds of their Black neighbors on July 2 that year. They burned thousands of buildings, permanently driving as many as 5,000 African Americans—men, women, and children—across the river to St. Louis.
Both work and wealth in East St. Louis were mostly controlled by whites through World War II (indeed, the city was briefly governed by the Ku Klux Klan), and Centreville was developed as a small, rural, white residential enclave in the midst of surrounding industry. The city was laid out and built on low-lying land at the far margin of the Mississippi flood plain, bounded on the east by high bluffs and the city of Belleville. By 1960 the city had completed the network of ditches necessary to keep the area dry, and the sewer system had been tied into the pipes that served East St. Louis. Weirdly, incongruously, surreally, there remain today several geodesic houses at the edge of Centreville—architectural studies for Buckminster Fuller’s visionary 1971 plan to rehouse the entire population of East St. Louis in a gigantic thousand-foot dome that would have accommodated as many as 125,000 people.

By that time, East St. Louis, like virtually every other city in the industrial Midwest, was losing both its industrial base and its white population. By the 1980s, the city had become a byword for Black poverty and urban decay. Like many of the surrounding municipalities in what has come to be called Metro East, the city of East St. Louis had always served as more of a legal shell for corporate privilege—low taxes, nonexistent regulation, minimal public services—than a fully functioning city. By the late 1980s, the city’s sewer system was failing, and the city government was being sued by the EPA for misusing federal funds that had been earmarked for its repair.

**Centreville became a Black town**

In these same years, Centreville became a majority- and then an almost entirely Black town. Many of the new residents were first-generation homeowners who moved to Centreville to escape deteriorating conditions elsewhere in the Metro East region. The town was one of the few suburbs in the St. Louis metro area into which working-class Blacks of moderate means could move during the 1960s and even into the ’70s and ’80s. Quite a few moved from homes that were slated for destruction in advance of the construction of Interstate 55 through East St. Louis. To this day, residents talk about the sense of safety and solitude they felt when they moved into their new houses—no gangs, no guns, no police, no problems.

Centreville looks like the future—a future unfolding at the confluence of climate catastrophe, structural racism, infrastructural deterioration, and widespread indifference to Black suffering.

Until the water began to rise. Many of those who moved to Centreville put their life savings into homes that were worth fifteen or twenty thousand dollars when they bought them; their homes are now worth literally ten cents on the dollar of what they paid decades ago. One resident, Vittorio Blaylock, has paid thousands of dollars to have hundreds of thousands of cubic feet of dirt spread over his lot in a futile effort to raise it out of the municipal flood plain; another, Cornelius Bennett, showed me a sheaf of receipts from a plumbing company that, after repeatedly cleaning out the pipes running under his yard, finally told him they would not take any more of his money.

The residents of Centreville are not wealthy—quite the opposite. The median family income in town is among the lowest of any municipality in the United States, just over $17,000 a year. Many of those who could afford to leave have done so, but a tight-knit remnant hangs on; more than a quarter are elderly. They support one another through the floods. Longtime resident Walter Byrd keeps a flatboat in his yard that he uses to ferry his neighbors when the water gets high. Recently, the residents have begun to organize themselves to take on the shadowy constellation of private interests, semi-public agencies, and municipal authorities that oversee their water and waste—each of which seems to believe the solution to the problem lies anywhere but within the boundaries of their authority. “We have lived here forty-two years,” Hazel Leflore told me, “I can’t even tell you the amount of times we’ve called.” “After the white folks moved, they stopped doing stuff out here,” adds her neighbor Michael McNeal.

Some date the beginning of the problem to the 1986 completion of Interstate 255, which looped traffic around the southern edge of the Metro East region, and was eventually (in 2002) declared by the Army Corps of Engineers to be impeding the flow of water from Centreville into the Harding Ditch, the drainage canal designed to collect surface water from the American Bottom and carry it to the Mississippi. The situation has only deteriorated in the meantime.

**A litany of abuses**

Water and sewer service in Centreville and several of the surrounding municipalities is (and has been since the 1970s) provided by Commonfields of Cahokia, a nonprofit public utility. It is hard to find out much about Commonfields, which does not maintain a website, but what information is publicly available is not reassuring. In a 2012 federal court case, Commonfields general manager, Dennis Traiteur, Sr., testified in court that “everyone” at Commonfields was “hired for political reasons.” The prac-
As early as the 1980s, she remembers, there were problems with water. She remembers her father borrowing a backhoe from the plant where he worked in East St. Louis to try to dig out the area behind the house so that the water would drain better. But the flooding is much worse today, she says, “much, much much, as much time as you can say much.” The house on Piat is gradually falling down around Greenwood, her husband, Lonnie, and their fifteen-year-old son, Arthur. Five years ago, she walked into one of the rooms in the front of the house to find that the floor had collapsed. Her father and husband went under the house and rebuilt the floor and its supports, but when she walked into the same room not long after, she had the uncanny sense that the walls did not look straight. She walked over and looked down, only to find that the floor of the house was pulling away from the wall. She could see through the crack between the wall and the floor into the muddy swamp below. The house on Piat was gradually shifting off of its foundation.

The repeated floods have left behind a residue of Black mold that comes up through the floor of the Greenwoods’ house. It rots away the windowills, tints the glass yellow, and stains the curtains as it crawls up the walls. Mrs. Greenwood washes the curtains with Clorox, but the mold comes back again and again. She’s gone to the Red Cross office in nearby Belleville, and brought home flood cleanup kits. They work for a couple of weeks, and then the smell comes back.

Mrs. Greenwood, like many of the residents of Centreville, speaks of “the smell” as a force of nature—as something both unpredictable and uncontrollable. It is the smell of raw sewage. It was what drew her into the front room the morning that she discovered that the floor had collapsed, and what keeps her from inviting her family and friends to the house in the way that she once did, for parties and barbecues, before the smell became so frequent and noxious that it stopped seeming as if celebrating or entertaining might be fun. Last April her bathroom backed up—sewage coming out of toilet, sink, and shower—and would not clear. Mr. Greenwood, who was recovering from quintuple bypass surgery, nevertheless cut a hole in the floor of the bathroom and tried to dig down under the house in a futile effort to clear the area around the inundated sewer pipes. Today, the hole in the bathroom floor is covered with a piece of plywood, and there is a constant backwash of sewer water in their shower.

Defining a disaster

The disaster response bureaucracy of the state of Illinois considers the events in Centreville to be a more-or-less random series of flash floods rather than a slow-rolling disaster worthy of state intervention. To fit the official understanding of “disaster,” apparently, the damage must be caused by a single, discrete event, rather than being spread across wearying years. In 1993, when the Mississippi River flooded the American Bottom, the mayor of
Centreville walked down Piat Place to inspect the damage. When he stopped at the Greenwoods, he remarked on the smell and then moved on. Mrs. Greenwood does not remember anyone from the city or county—or from Commonfields of Cahokia—being on the street since then, although at some point in the past year a candidate for local office stopped by her next-door neighbor’s house to assure him they were going to do something about the flooding. With a Sharpie, the candidate sketched on a piece of printer paper a diagram of how the problem would be fixed, leaving the drawing along with a glossy brochure.

The Greenwoods all have respiratory problems and constant headaches, and Mrs. Greenwood worries constantly about Arthur. The family lives on a fixed income, and have spent much of what they had on a succession of replacement furnace, hot water heaters, refrigerators, washers, and dryers to replace those ruined by water. “I can’t count how many,” Mrs. Greenwood says. So far, they been able to keep the house and garage patched together enough to keep the roof over their heads, if not much more.

I have spoken with almost a dozen people in Centreville whose stories are, in broad outline, the same as Mrs. Greenwood’s. They are, to a person, polite in an old-fashioned, country kind of way. They refer to one another as Mr. Byrd and Mrs. Greenwood, and will not say anything more about the smell than that it smells really bad—they are too polite to name the odor that haunts their lives, as if they are worried that visitors might be offended by the words. They stop to talk when they are driving along the road and see one of their neighbors out in the yard. They look out for one another. Recently, they have begun to work with some public interest lawyers—a couple of young Black women, Nicole Nelson from nearby O’Fallon, Illinois, and Kalila Jackson from St. Louis, who have assembled a larger team of environmentalists, scientists, and student activists in order to try to sort the flood tide of history into an accounting of legal liability and moral responsibility.

Asked where she thinks the water and the waste come from, Mrs. Greenwood answers that it comes “from the people above us”—the people who live on the higher ground that surrounds Centreville: the more prosperous suburbs of Belleville, O’Fallon, and Collinsville. In Centreville, the flow of social power, storm water, and even human waste all follow the same course. Poor and working-class Black people from the 1960s on found their way to a place where they thought they could get a foothold in the middle class, only to see their dreams washed away by a tide of malfeasance and indifference. Highways planned without regard to their homes; bureaucratic definitions of disaster which define their chronic flooding, suffering, and sickness as acceptable; local “representatives” whose only resource for dealing with the longstanding problems of structural racism, infrastructural deterioration, and environmental catastrophe appears to be boundless cynicism.

And yet, as tired as they are of hoping that something will change, that someone will care, the residents of Centreville are once again telling their stories. “Bring us back some help,” Mrs. Greenwood told me when I last said goodbye to her, standing in her front yard, “tell them we’re still here.”

Black Agenda Report, February 12, 2020

https://Blackagendareport.com/american-bottom
Michigan Court of Appeals, the U.S. state’s second-highest court, ruled against Nestlé’s Ice Mountain water brand last month.

The court ruled that Nestlé’s commercial water-bottling operation is “not an essential public service” nor is theirs a public water supply. This is a huge victory for Osceola Township, a small Michigan town that blocked Nestlé from building a pumping station that doesn’t comply with its zoning laws.

Nestlé fought the township where five indigenous tribes represented by the Chippewa Ottawa Resource Authority (CORA) were worried that the increased water withdrawal for the new booster pump station would affect the flora, fauna, wetlands and streams in the area where the state has a legal obligation to protect the habitat for tribal use under a 182-year-old treaty.

Repercussions

Nestlé had received approval to increase the pumping rates from 250-gallons-per-minute to 400-gallons-per-minute from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. However, Osceola was unwilling to cede Nestlé’s attempt to control water in its authority and in 2017 denied Nestlé the increase of water it planned to pull from the ground.

Towards the end of 2017, a lower Michigan court wrote that water was essential for life and framed Nestlé’s operations of extracting and bottling water was an “essential public service” that met a public demand thus trumping Osceola township’s zoning laws.

This case is emblematic of the types of battles that local governments face when squaring-off toe-to-toe with large multi-national corporations that are attempting to privatize water around the country and around the world.

Ironically, even Nestlé’s own investigation into the repercussions of its pumping such immense quantities of water from Michigan’s aquifers demonstrates that increased pumping could harm Michigan’s wetlands.

Former Nestlé CEO, Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, has gone on record as saying that the notion that water is a human right is “extreme.”

Yet, for over three years Nestlé argued that its own research had not suggested this in order to pull more water and profits. There is little stopping companies like Nestlé which are setting up camp across the planet, attempting to manipulate local and national laws to extract vast quantities of water to bottle and then sell back to the very people whose aquifers they are depleting.

Privatizing water

This is not a new story—we have been here before, again and again as media reports of Pepsi-Cola’s and Coca-Cola’s depletion of water in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu where in 2015 in Perundurai, an agricultural region, hundreds of farmers demonstrated for several weeks against a plan by Coca-Cola to build a five-billion-rupee ($75 million) bottling plant.

The Tamil Nadu development authority initially approved the plant’s request to withdraw four million liters of groundwater a day only to find itself gripped by months of protests after which the authority reversed its decision.

Then again in 2017, Tamil Nadu experienced the worst drought in over 140 years and both companies stopped these plants from drawing water from the Thamirabarani River.

It is no secret that Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola are largely regarded by Indians as foreign interlopers that have colonized the region’s water table in order to make billions of dollars in profits while appropriating the scarce water supplies that should have been reserved for local farmers and citizens. But Michigan and Tamil Nadu are merely two of hundreds of areas around the world affected by companies privatizing water.

Skip over to Serbia and approximately 80 percent of the water in the market is foreign-owned with Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola making up about 40 percent of the water ownership in the country.

Economic asset

Bechtel joined forces with Befesa, Abengoa and Edison to create the company Aguas del Tunari in Bolivia, just prior to its ventures in Iraq, which put in a bid to the local government to privatize the water of Cochabamba.

In November of 1999 the citizens of Cochabamba protested the privatization of their water system and the additional 200 percent increases in water rates that Aguas del Tunari implemented. By April 2000, Aguas del Tunari was kicked out of Bolivia and replaced by a public company.

In South Africa where the right to water is written into the country’s constitution, many companies have been
lobbying the government to privatize the country’s water supplies.

Nestlé is one of the usual suspects in this panorama, having foreseen the increasingly lucrative value of water as an economic asset. Former Nestlé CEO, Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, has gone on record as saying that the notion that water is a human right is “extreme.”

As a result of this statement, Nestlé South Africa has been under pressure to justify its water extraction operations for its PureLife bottled water brand.

“Water lords”

Environmental activists have, since the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, been acutely aware of the encroachment of private industry on South Africa’s constitutional protection of public water.

Following the release of the German documentary *Bottled Life* (2012), which details Nestlé’s exploitation of water around the world, consciousness of the corporate “water lords” has increased as more and more activism is focused on keeping tabs on these corporations.

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**Skip over to Serbia**

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Some countries, however, have a legacy of awareness around colonial encounters with natural resources. Immediately after Ghana’s independence, President Kwame Nkrumah established a policy of nationalization which was in vigor until the period of market liberalization when water privatization began in the country.

During the 1990s, privatization caused water fees to increase by 95 percent and as a result one-third of Ghana’s population has no access to clean water.

Meanwhile, according to *Bloomberg*, privatization in Brazil would ostensibly make the country’s current water crisis go away, as if poor Brazilians who are currently unable to drink or shower in clean water can go into their local shop daily and whip out their credit card in order to buy a 20-litre supply of water for their families.

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**Public good**

Still, despite the well-known harms of privatization—for the poor especially—some Brazilians are opting in favor of the private model.

In a country that has the world’s largest freshwater reserves but has also suffered years of a water crisis, Brazilians increasingly view the privatization of its water as the solution. Much of Rio’s raw sewage ends up in its rivers, and only 29 percent of the country’s water is treated.

This attitude was recently reflected in law in December when the government’s lower house approved measures that are expected to result in the privatization of water.

Similarly, many governments in South Asia, the Middle East, South America, and Africa have turned to privately-owned water tankers in order to fill the depletion of its local water supplies.

Hiring private water suppliers instead of investing in long-term solutions will not hold. The water crisis around the world is not being addressed because to do so would involve criticizing the many multi-nationals making a killing through pulling and depleting public water supplies in the name of profits.

—Ecologist, January 31, 2020

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in the early 1990s, food production on the island of Cuba was reduced—as the supply of Russian fertilizers, pesticides, tractors, and oil dried up. Under the stress of an imminent food crisis, the island quickly rebuilt a new form of diversified farming—including many urban organic gardens—that depended less on imported synthetic chemicals. Over the last two decades, Cuba blossomed into a worldwide model for conservation agriculture, with improved soils and cleaner water.

At least that’s been a popular story among journalists.

Now—for the first time in more than fifty years—a team of Cuban and U.S. field scientists have worked together to rigorously test a key aspect of this story: the impacts of contemporary agriculture on water quality in Cuba’s rivers. Despite centuries of sugarcane plantations and other intensive farming, the international team discovered that none of the rivers they explored show deep damage.

Instead, the scientists measured much lower nutrient-pollution concentrations in all of the twenty-five Cuban rivers they studied than are found in the U.S.’s Mississippi River. And they think Cuba’s transition toward sustainable agriculture—and its reduced use of fertilizers on cropland—may be a primary cause.

“A lot of stories about the value of Cuba’s shift to conservation agriculture have been based on fuzzy, feel-good evidence,” says University of Vermont geologist Paul Bierman, who co-led the new research. “This study provides hard data that a crucial part of this story is true.”

Bierman and geoscientist Amanda Schmidt from Oberlin College led the American half of the international team, while Rita Yvelice Sibello Hernández, a scientist with CEAC (Centro de Estudios Ambientales de Cienfuegos), an ecological research group, headed up the Cuban effort with CEAC science director Carlos Alonso-Hernández.

“The new study, “¡Cuba! River Water Chemistry Reveals Rapid Chemical Weathering, the Echo of Uplift, and the Promise of More Sustainable Agriculture,” was published January 30, in the early online edition of the journal GSA Today, the leading publication of the Geological Society of America.

The scientists from both countries worked side-by-side as one team doing extensive fieldwork—with support from the U.S. National Science Foundation—and then coordinated lab work and analysis to look at many measures of river water across central Cuba. The team found high levels of E. coli bacteria in the waters—likely the result of large numbers of livestock and Cuba’s intensive use of horses and other draft animals for transportation and farm work.

However, the scientists also found much lower levels of phosphorus and nitrogen pollution in Cuban rivers than in the United States where intensive farming and chemical fertilizer use is widespread. The new study shows dissolved nitrogen levels in Cuban rivers running at roughly a quarter to a third of those found in the Mississippi River—where excess nitrogen is a primary engine of the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico.

“Cuban river waters provide evidence that agriculture need not overload rivers, and thus reservoirs and...
coastal zones, with nutrients,” writes the 15-person research team that included seven Cuban scientists and students and eight U.S. scientists and students from UVM, Oberlin, and Williams College.

“This research can help us to better understand how land and rivers interact in the context of sustainable organic agriculture,” said the CEAC’s Rita Yvelice Sibello Hernández, “and may give a good example to other people in the Caribbean and all over the world.”

**Scientific diplomacy**

Cuba is a motorboat trip from Florida—less than a hundred miles. And the island nation is the most populous in the Caribbean with more than 11 million citizens and a long and tortuous history of complex relations—cooperation and conflict—with the United States. But there has been vanishingly little collaboration between U.S. and Cuban scientists since the 1960s—much less than with other, more-potent geopolitical foes of the United States, from Iran to China.

“We have much to learn from each other,” says Cuban scientist Alejandro Garcia Moya, a co-author on the new study. The kind of river data that the team collected “are needed to guide sustainable development in Cuba, and by example, in other tropical and island nations,” the team writes. Not only did the U.S. team provide important technical expertise and verification of results—but the joint research reveals that Cuba also has a lot of opportunity to improve its river water quality.

The new study points toward the need for improved management strategies to reduce animal manure and sediment loads going into rivers—such as fencing to keep cattle off riverbanks—that “could further and rapidly improve central Cuban river water quality,” the scientists note.

Conversely, “Cuba has been having a forced experiment in organic agriculture since the late 1980s,” says Oberlin’s Amanda Schmidt. “So, Cuba is a very interesting place to look at the effects of both conventional agriculture and the effects of organic agriculture at a national scale,”—and may suggest pathways to improve U.S. agriculture.

Fertilizer use in Cuba peaked in 1978 and has been lower since, according to World Bank and other data. U.S. fertilizer use spiked after the 1960s and has remained at more than twice the Cuban use rate.

“There’s a takeaway we bring back to the U.S.: our river waters do not need to look the way they do,” says Paul Bierman—a professor in UVM’s Geology Department, Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources, and Gund Institute for Environment—“we can manage fertilizer differently.”

There are, of course, complex questions about yields, farm policy and more, but this newly reported data on the low levels of nutrient pollution found in twenty-five Cuban rivers, “suggests the benefits of Cuba’s shift to conservation agriculture after 1990,” the U.S./Cuban team writes, “and provides a model for more sustainable agriculture worldwide.”

—*Climate and Capitalism*, January 31, 2020

[https://climateandcapitalism.com/2020/01/31/cuba-farming-rivers/](https://climateandcapitalism.com/2020/01/31/cuba-farming-rivers/)

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1 Nutrient pollution is the process where too many nutrients, mainly nitrogen and phosphorus, are added to bodies of water and can act like fertilizer, causing excessive growth of algae. Nutrients can run off of land in urban areas where lawn and garden fertilizers are used.

[https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/nutpollution.html](https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/nutpollution.html)
Apocalypse Now!
Insects, pesticide and a public health crisis
By Colin Todhunter

In 2017, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Hilal Elver, and UN Special Rapporteur on Toxics, Baskut Tuncak, produced a report that called for a comprehensive new global treaty to regulate and phase out the use of dangerous pesticides in farming and move towards sustainable agricultural practices.

In addition to the devastating impacts on human health, the two authors argued that the excessive use of pesticides contaminates soil and water sources, causing loss of biodiversity, the destruction of the natural enemies of pests and the reduction in the nutritional value of food. They drew attention to denials by the agroindustry of the hazards of certain pesticides and expressed concern about aggressive, unethical marketing tactics that remain unchallenged and the huge sums spent by the powerful chemical industry to influence policymakers and contest scientific evidence.

At the time, Elver said that agroecological approaches, which replace harmful chemicals, are capable of delivering sufficient yields to feed and nourish the entire world population, without undermining the rights of future generations to adequate food and health. The two authors added that it was time to overturn the myth that pesticides are necessary to feed the world and create a global process to transition toward safer and healthier food and agricultural production.

The authors were adamant that access to healthy, uncontaminated food is a human rights issue.

And this is not lost on environmental campaigner Dr. Rosemary Mason who has just sent a detailed open letter/report to Minette Batters, president of the National Farmers Union (NFU) in the UK—"Open Letter to the National Farmers Union About Fraud in Europe and the UK.” Mason’s report contains a good deal of information about pesticides, health and the environment.

Health impacts aside, Mason decided to write to Batters because it is increasingly clear that pesticides are responsible for declines in insects and wildlife, something which the NFU has consistently denied.

In 2017, the Soil Association obtained figures from FERA Science Ltd under a freedom of information request. Using data extracted for the first time from the records of FERA Science Ltd, which holds UK Government data on pesticide use in farming, it was found that pesticide active ingredients applied to three British crops have increased markedly. The data covered British staples wheat, potatoes and onions. Far from a 50 percent cut—which the NFU had claimed—the increase in active ingredients applied to these crops range from 480 percent to 1,700 percent over the last 40-odd years.

Health of the nation
Mason’s aim is to make Batters aware that chemical-dependent, industrial agriculture is a major cause of an ongoing public health crisis and is largely responsible for an unfolding, catastrophic ecological collapse in the UK and globally. Mason places agrochemicals at the center of her argument, especially globally ubiquitous glyphosate-based herbicides, the use of which have spiraled over the last few decades.

Batters is given information about important studies that suggest glyphosate causes epigenetic changes in humans and animals (diseases skip a
generation before appearing) and that it is a major cause of severe obesity in children in the UK, not least because of its impact on the gut microbiome. As a result, Mason says, we are facing a global metabolic health crisis that places glyphosate at the heart of the matter.

And yet glyphosate may be on the market because of fraud. Mason points out that a new study has revealed the Laboratory of Pharmacology and Toxicology (LPT) in Hamburg has committed fraud in a series of regulatory tests, several of which had been carried out as part of the glyphosate re-approval process in 2017. At least 14 percent of new regulatory studies submitted for the re-approval of glyphosate were conducted by LPT Hamburg. The number could be higher, as this information in the dossiers often remains undisclosed to the public.

In light of this, Angeliki Lyssimachou, environmental toxicologist at Pesticide Action Network Europe, says:

“The vast majority of studies leading to the approval of a pesticide are carried out by the pesticide industry itself, either directly or via contract laboratories such as LPT Hamburg…Our 140+ NGO coalition ‘Citizens for Science in Pesticide Regulation’ regularly calls on the (European) Commission to quit this scandalous process: tests must be carried out by independent laboratories under public scrutiny, while the financing of studies should be supported by industry.”

Mason then outlines the state of public health in the UK. A report, “The Health of the Nation: A Strategy for Healthier Longer Lives,” written by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Longevity found that women in the UK are living for 29 years in poor health and men for 23 years: an increase of 50 percent for women and 42 percent for men on previous estimates based on self-reported data.

In 2035, there will be around 16 million cases of dementia, arthritis, type 2 diabetes and cancers in people aged 65 and over in the UK—twice as many as in 2015. In ten years, there will be 5.5 million people with type 2 diabetes while 70 percent of people aged 55+ will have at least one obesity-related disease.

The report found that the number of major illnesses suffered by older people will increase by 85 percent between 2015 and 2035.

The public is being conned, according to Mason, by contributing to ‘cancer research’ with the fraudulent promise of ‘cures’ based on highly profitable drugs manufactured by pharmaceutical companies whose links to the agrochemical sector are clear.

Ecological collapse
Batters is also made aware that there is an insect apocalypse due to pesticides—numerous studies have indicated catastrophic declines. Mason mentions two scientific studies of the number of insects splattered by cars that have revealed a huge decline in abundance at European sites in two decades. The research adds to growing evidence of what some scientists have called an “insect apocalypse,” which is threatening a collapse in the natural world that sustains humans and all life on Earth. A third study which Mason mentions shows plummeting numbers of aquatic insects in streams.

The survey of insects hitting car windscreens in rural Denmark used data collected every summer from 1997 to 2017 and found an 80 percent decline in abundance. It also found a parallel decline in the number of swallows and martins, birds that live on insects.

Matt Shardlow, the chief executive of the charity Buglife, says:

“These new studies reinforce our understanding of the dangerously rapid disappearance of insect life in both the air and water…It is essential we create more joined up space for insects that is safe from pesticides, climate change and other harm.”

Of course, it is not just insects that have been affected. Mason provides disturbing evidence of the decline in British wildlife in general.

Conning the public
Mason argues that the public are being hoodwinked by officials who dance to the tune of the agrochemical conglomerates. For instance, she argues that Cancer Research UK (CRUK) has been hijacked by the agrochemical industry: David Cameron appointed Michael Pragnell, founder of Syngenta to the board of CRUK in 2010 and he became Chairman in 2011.

She asserts that CRUK invented causes of cancer and put the blame on the people for lifestyle choices:

“A red-herring fabricated by industry and ‘top’ doctors in Britain: alcohol was claimed to be linked to seven forms of cancer: this ‘alleged fact’ was endlessly reinforced by the UK media until people in the UK were brainwashed.”

By 2018, CRUK was also claiming that obesity caused 13 different cancers and that obesity was due to ‘lifestyle choice’.

Each year there are steady increases in the numbers of new cancers in the UK and increases in deaths from the same cancers. Mason says that treatments are having no impact on the numbers.

She argues that the Francis Crick Institute in London with its ‘world class resources’ is failing to improve
people’s lives with its treatments and is merely strengthening the pesticides and pharmaceutical industries. The institute is analyzing people’s genetic profile with what Mason says is an “empty promise” that one day they could tailor therapy to the individual patient. Mason adds that CRUK is a major funder of the Crick Institute.

The public is being conned, according to Mason, by contributing to ‘cancer research’ with the fraudulent promise of ‘cures’ based on highly profitable drugs manufactured by pharmaceutical companies whose links to the agrochemical sector are clear. CRUK’s research is funded entirely by the public, whose donations support over 4,000 scientists, doctors and nurses across the UK. Several hundred of these scientists worked at CRUK’s London Research Institute at Lincoln’s Inn Fields and Clare Hall (LRI), which became part of the Crick institute in 2015.

Mason notes that recent research involving the Crick Institute that has claimed “breakthroughs” in discoveries about the genome and cancer genetics is misleading. The work was carried out as part of the Pan-Cancer Analysis of Whole Genomes project, which claims to be the most comprehensive study of cancer genetics to date. The emphasis is on mapping genetic changes and early diagnosis.

However, Mason says such research misses the point—most cancers are not inherited. She says:

“The genetic damage is caused by mutations secondary to a lifetimes’ exposure to thousands of synthetic chemicals that contaminate the blood and urine of nearly every person tested—a global mass poisoning.”

And she supports her claim by citing research by Lisa Gross and Linda Birnbaum which argues that in the U.S. 60,000-plus chemicals already in use were grandfathered into the law on the assumption that they were safe. Moreover, the EPA faced numerous hurdles, including pushback from the chemical industry, that undermined its ability to implement the law. Today, hundreds of industrial chemicals contaminate the blood and urine of nearly every person tested—in the U.S. and beyond.

...hundreds of industrial chemicals contaminate the blood and urine of nearly every person tested—in the U.S. and beyond...

Mason refers to another study by Maricel V. Maffini, Thomas G. Neltner and Sarah Vogel which notes that thousands of chemicals have entered the food system, but their long-term, chronic effects have been woefully understudied and their health risks inadequately assessed. As if to underline this, recent media reports have focused on Jeremy Bentham, a well-respected CEO of an asset management company, who argued that infertility caused by endocrine disrupting chemicals will wipe out humans.

Mason argues that glyphosate-based Roundup has caused a 50 percent decrease in sperm count in males: Roundup disrupts male reproductive functions by triggering calcium-mediated cell death in rat testis and Sertoli cells. She also notes that Roundup causes infertility—based on studies that were carried out in South America and which were ignored by regulators in Europe when relicensing glyphosate.

Neoliberal global landscape
Mason draws on a good deal of important (recent) research and media reports to produce a convincing narrative. But what she outlines is not specific to Britain. For instance, the human and environmental costs of pesticides in Argentina have been well documented and in India Punjab has become a “cancer capital” due to pesticide contamination.

UN Special Rapporteurs Elver and Tuncak argue that while scientific research confirms the adverse effects of pesticides, proving a definitive link between exposure and human diseases or conditions or harm to the ecosystem presents a considerable challenge, especially given the systematic denial by the pesticide and agro-industry of the magnitude of the damage inflicted by these chemicals.

In the meantime, we are told that many diseases and illnesses are the result of personal choice or lifestyle behavior. It has become highly convenient for public officials and industry mouthpieces to place the blame on ordinary people, while fraudulent science, regulatory delinquency and institutional corruption allow toxic food to enter the marketplace and the agrochemical industry to rake in massive profits.

Health outcomes are merely regarded as the result of individual choices, rather than the outcome of fraudulent activities which have become embedded in political structures and macro-economic “free” market policies. In the brave new world of neoliberalism and “consumer choice,” it suits industry and its crony politicians and representatives to convince ordinary people to internalize notions of personal responsibility and self-blame.

Readers are urged to read Rosemary Mason’s new report which can be downloaded from the academia.edu website.

Colin Todhunter is an extensively published independent writer and former social policy researcher based in the UK and India.

—CounterPunch, February 21, 2020

There’s a lot of talk in the Trump era about the “war on science.” But this war, such as it is, extends far beyond uninformed Republican attacks on climate change science or Donald Trump’s mocking insults of Greta Thunberg, the teen climate activist nearly 60 years the old bully’s junior. This war involves not only outright science denial, but the myriad ways science is corrupted to serve corporate interests instead of the public good.

One of the latest salvos came this past December when the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), under the leadership of a Trump-appointed coal industry lobbyist, asked a federal appeals court to reverse the lower court ruling that held Bayer AG, now owner of Monsanto’s Roundup herbicide, responsible for a California man’s cancer. The German-based conglomerate purchased Monsanto in 2018 for $63 billion.

The friend of the court brief, filed in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Justice, argues the California state law requiring a health warning label for glyphosate-based herbicides was unnecessary since the EPA does not categorize glyphosate as a carcinogen. In fact, Bayer AG has already lost three recent lawsuits filed by individuals who developed non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a cancer of the immune system, after long-standing use of the Roundup product. The company now faces over 40,000 lawsuits over Roundup’s potential health risks.

The legal challenges to glyphosate-based herbicides are based on a growing body of epidemiological evidence that link exposure to non-Hodgkin lymphoma, neurodevelopmental changes, and impact on the reproductive system. Most notably, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), an affiliate of the World Health Organization, determined in 2015 that glyphosate was “probably carcinogenic to humans.”

The agency’s position was based on about 1,000 studies of glyphosate exposure among largely agricultural workers, such as farmers and pesticide applicators, primarily in the United States, Canada, and Sweden, along with evidence from animal studies. The link to cancer in humans was based on what IARC describes as “limited,” but “statistically significant” evidence. The IARC report also noted some evidence glyphosate caused DNA and chromosomal damage in human cells.

Further, the Environmental Working Group (EGW), in an August 21, 2019 statement to the EPA, cites evidence from five of eight epidemiological studies of an elevated risk of non-Hodgkin lymphoma among those exposed to glyphosate-based herbicides. One recent study, a 2019 meta-analysis done by researchers at the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Washington, found those with the highest cumulative exposure to glyphosate, such as agricultural workers, had a 41 percent greater risk of developing non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

World’s leading herbicide

Today, glyphosate-based herbicides are a ubiquitous global presence. The use of this group of herbicide products has grown approximately 100-fold since first introduced in 1974. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the volume of glyphosate-based herbicides in use in the United States increased from less than 25 million pounds in 1992 to over 250 million pounds in 2016. Significantly, the advent in 1996 of Monsanto’s genetically engineered “Roundup Ready” crops, tolerant of the Roundup herbicide, has only accelerated the herbicide’s use.

Of course, nature has a way of adapting to even the most effective of human interventions. Just as widespread use of antibiotics led to the phenomenon of antibiotic resistance, rendering many such drugs ineffective against infectious disease, the extensive commercial use of Roundup and similar products has engendered the emergence of glyphosate-tolerant weeds. In response, there’s thus far been a compensatory increase in the volume of the herbicide’s commercial applications.

It’s worth noting the EPA had actually classified glyphosate as carcinogenic in 1985. Subsequently, the company spent the next several years working to persuade the EPA to reverse its position on glyphosate, which it eventually did in 1991, writes science historian Elena Conis, PhD, for The Washington Post (April 9, 2019).
“In the decades that followed, the company commissioned its own science from its preferred scientists and asked federal regulators to base decisions on that science,” reports Conis, who is affiliated with the Center for Science, Technology, Medicine and Society at the University of California, Berkeley. “In one instance, the EPA ceded to industry requests to remove a certain scientist from a glyphosate safety review panel. In another, an EPA scientist promised Monsanto it would block a planned glyphosate safety review. The president whose EPA made this promise? Barack Obama.”

The latter point is a reminder that science in service to for-profit corporate interests is hardly the exclusive preserve of Trump Republicans. In fact, as Conis reminds us, since the 1970s the EPA has allowed companies to register new pesticide products “conditionally;” in other words, without submitting all the otherwise required safety and testing data. To note, such practices parallel similar laxity in regulatory practices in the pharmaceutical and medical devices industries. As for the pesticide industry, Conis notes that more than two-thirds of the 16,000 pesticides used in the United States were initially registered under conditional status. This includes glyphosate.

With human exposures to glyphosate increasing, many researchers believe there is a vital need for updated assessments of the potential toxic risks associated with glyphosate-based products. Indeed, most studies have evaluated the impact of high-level exposures in humans, with only limited data available on the impact of long-standing, low-level exposures, such as might occur with residential lawn applications or from residues in food, water, and air.

In fact, it’s difficult for researchers to even study the health effects of glyphosate-based herbicide products since manufacturers are not required to provide full disclosure of their ingredients. This lack of data is a burden for toxicology studies, say experts. As Vanessa Fitsanakis, PhD, a neurotoxicologist at Northeast Ohio Medical University, told The Scientist in 2018, “From a research perspective, I can’t tell which component might need to be changed [to reduce possible toxicity] in those formulations because I don’t know what some of those components are.”

In an economy driven by “free market” capitalism, healthy living and the protection of nature is always at risk.

This is a concern as glyphosate-based products, formulated with other “inert” substances, show evidence of being more potent than glyphosate alone, according to Fitsanakis and other researchers. This is especially concerning for researchers who want to better understand the potential for what is described as the “subtle and accumulative” health effects over years of exposure to these commercial products. One thing is certain. The science involved in the issue of long-term health effects is far from settled.

Where is the democracy?
To start the new year, France’s health and environment agency announced a ban on dozens of glyphosate-based herbicides, explaining there was insufficient data to establish they were not harmful to human health. The ban so far covers about three-quarters of the volume of glyphosate products annually sold in France. In recent years, more than three dozen nations have similarly moved to ban or restrict glyphosate-based herbicides.

In the United States, things continue to work a little differently. “This is our system for ensuring that pesticides are safe,” concludes Conis. “They are innocent and on the market until proven guilty. Close relationships between industry and our regulatory agencies help keep them there. By the time enough independent science has produced evidence of harm, it’s far too late to reverse the damage done.”

Where is the democracy in this? Why should humans, wildlife, and the environment be potentially put at risk by the long, slow pollution of the planet by agrochemical corporations, whose primary driver is their own enrichment and profits? In light of charges by some civil litigants that Monsanto suppressed evidence of known health risks, the story lurches even more into the realm of corporate criminality.

Certainly, independent scientific reviews of agrochemical products, free of corporate influence or collusion, should be demanded of all chemical products to confirm their essential safety before being introduced into use. The health of the public, including the occupational health of workers, and protection of the natural environment should always come first.

In an economy driven by “free market” capitalism, healthy living and the protection of nature is always at risk. Over the course of time industrial capitalism has exposed humans to leaded gasoline, asbestos, cigarettes, DDT, smog, toxic chemicals in water and food, and fossil fuel pollution that now threatens to denigrate the climate to the point of no return. All of this and more has been brought to us courtesy of manufacturer’s safety assurances and the backing of “authoritative” science.

Unfortunately, when the latter is in the paid employ of private industry, and public health agencies work, however subtly or indirectly, to facilitate the interests of the corporate marketplace over public health, those who are not scientists are left in the position of being expected to just have faith in the good intentions of profiteers and their experts.

—Mark Harris, January 6, 2020
https://harrismedia.org
Planned Obsolescence

How the products you buy are designed to break

By Sofo Archon

How many times have you bought an electronic device, only to find out that it has stopped functioning properly just a short time after your purchase? You spent so much money on it, and suddenly you’re sad to know that it’s not working properly anymore. The result? Wasted expenses, labor, energy and resources, not to mention the toxic waste that ends up in landfills, poisoning our planet.

But why is that so? Why are most products’ lifespan so short, considering the advanced modern technological means of production? Enter planned obsolescence.

Cyclical consumption and planned obsolescence

Our economic system is based on consumption—the more we buy, the more money moves into the economy, and hence the more the economy grows. If money stops moving, the economic system is bound to collapse, since people will not be paid or have money to pay for the products and services they need or want.

There are two main ways our society manages to keep people buying stuff:

Firstly, through advertising. We’re exposed to thousands of advertisements each and every day whose sole purpose is to convince us to keep on shopping under the promise that doing so will make our lives better. Through advertising, companies have managed to make us confuse our needs with our wants, thus making us desire to acquire things that we don’t truly need, so that we can fill in their pockets by emptying our own.

Secondly, through planned obsolescence, although this is not yet understood by many. If you didn’t know, planned obsolescence is a production technique that compels people to buy more and more stuff unnecessarily, by providing people with products of short lifespan. Instead of creating goods with the intention to last for as long as it is technically possible—considering that we are living in a finite planet with finite resources, as well as the importance of saving material and human energy—companies, whose sole interest is to make sales, purposefully design products of low quality that will soon break, in order to assure repeat purchases.

...would it not be wiser to make use of our current scientific knowledge to create an economic system that is based on technical efficiency and environmental sustainability?

Planned obsolescence and the Phoebus light bulb cartel

In the early 20th century, technical efficiency brought about by industrial development in the U.S. increased dramatically, which resulted in the production of higher quality goods at a much quicker pace. Although that was a great success from a technological standpoint, the fact that the goods produced had increased lifespan was found to slow down consumption—hence it was an anathema for the economy.

In order to prevent this from happening even further, people were encouraged to make more purchases, but it was found that this alone couldn’t make a significant difference. The “solution” given in the 1930s was to make it legally mandatory for all industries to produce goods of lower lifespan, which was believed to help reduce unemployment and increase consumption.

This brings us to the case of the Phoebus light bulb cartel. In the 1930s,
a single light bulb could last for up to 25,000 hours, but the cartel forced all companies to produce bulbs limited to a maximum life of 1,000 hours in order to increase demand.\(^1\)

In order to make sure that people make repeat purchases, most manufacturers today create products that have short life cycles. In other words, the products sold by most companies have been intentionally designed in such a way that they will break shortly after they’ve been purchased, so as to urge the general public to buy more of them in the future.

**Market efficiency vs. technical efficiency**

In our economic system, which is based on cyclical consumption, technical efficiency is only damaging to the market efficiency—both cannot co-exist by any means. Increased technical efficiency decreases market efficiency, which is disrupting the flow of our economy.

But how stupid is it to keep on having such an economic system, knowing how technically inefficient it is as well as its tremendous negative impacts on society and the natural world? Instead of urging people to buy more and more, would it not be wiser to make use of our current scientific knowledge to create an economic system that is based on technical efficiency and environmental sustainability?

I would like to leave you now with these questions in mind, which will hopefully help you to realize how obsolete our economic system is and urge you to seek out information about how alternative economic systems can be implemented that would actually promote social and environmental well-being.

—*The Unbounded Spirit*, January 2020

[https://theunboundedspirit.com/planned-obsolescence/](https://theunboundedspirit.com/planned-obsolescence/)

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1. *The Light Bulb Conspiracy*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D56nut_9e8s&feature=emb_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D56nut_9e8s&feature=emb_logo)

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**INCARCERATION NATION**

My Visit with Leonard Peltier

*By Gloria La Riva*

From February 1 to 3, I had the honor and privilege of visiting Native warrior and political prisoner Leonard Peltier, where he is unjustly imprisoned in Coleman I, a maximum-security prison near Tampa, Florida. It is now 44 years of the illegal and cruel imprisonment of Leonard Peltier, who was arrested on February 6, 1976 at 31 years old. He is 75 years old.

In those three days of visit, we talked about so many things, from all the ongoing efforts in the campaign for his freedom, to international politics, to listening to his stories of childhood, and hearing about the conditions of life in the prison for him and his fellow prisoners.

On Saturday, I arrived 8:30 A.M. at Coleman maximum security penitentiary, one-hour northeast of Tampa, Florida. I joined many families and friends of 20 other men who received their personal visits in the visitors’ room. The visiting hours are 8:00 A.M. to 3:00 P.M., Saturday through Monday.

While waiting to be let into the visiting room, I spoke with some of the wives, mothers, fiancées, brothers and sisters of other inmates. I heard the stories of their heartbreak of family separation and other cruelties of prison and offered my solidarity.

After clearing security and following regulations that only allow the visitor to carry a clear plastic bag with money to buy food from the machines, we were led through one security gate, across a yard to another gate and the visitors’ room.

I was so excited to finally see Leonard after years of corresponding by mail! After a hug, and a hearty “Good morning!” to each other, we sat down. You are assigned where to sit by the guards, and visitors and inmates sit across from each other, separated by a table. First thing Leonard asked was, “How is Venezuela doing?” I had just flown in the night before from an international anti-imperialist conference in Caracas. I told him of my experience witnessing the determined resistance of the Venezuelan people defending the Bolivarian revolution from the past year of U.S. aggression. In early December, Leonard had conveyed a solidarity greeting to President Nicolás Maduro.

Leonard is extremely well informed, reading daily newspapers and following
alternative, progressive media including radio. Our conversation focused on many current events. He receives and reads many books and shares his materials with the other prisoners.

One of the most memorable moments Leonard shared were stories of his childhood, his youth and his lifelong striving to right wrongs, seeking justice for Native people and all people. He was greatly influenced as a child by his family’s and elders’ activism.

In one incident when he was only six years old with his family living in Montana, he and other little friends were playing outside when a group of white youth began throwing rocks at them, calling them vile, racist names. Leonard was shocked. “I had never seen white people before, and I didn’t understand why they were yelling at us.” He threw a small rock back, which hit one of the boys. He was too afraid to say anything about the incident when he got home.

Soon the same day, the mother of the racist youth who was hit by the rock came to where Leonard and his family were living. She shouted angrily and threatened to call the police on Leonard and have him arrested. “I was numb and afraid. I didn’t want to say what happened, and finally my grandfather told me I needed to tell him.

“When I did, my grandfather knew we were in danger of being kidnapped by authorities and sent away. That night we packed up, left Montana and returned to our home in Turtle Mountain.” That is the Turtle Mountain Nation Reservation, at the northern edge of North Dakota close to the Canadian border.

Leonard told me of his father’s and others’ fight against the federal government’s attempt to “terminate” the reservation and sovereign status of Native nations, in the 1950s. “Our Nation was the second to win that fight and defeat the termination. I was a young teenager and I attended the community meetings.” The first to defeat Washington’s termination plan was the Menominee Nation.

The second day of our visit, he marveled at recalling his little four-year-old great granddaughter’s gymnastics when she visited him a few weeks ago, actually turning back flips! Leonard receives visits regularly, including his relatives, his lawyers, and the dedicated members of the International Leonard Peltier Defense Committee, headed by Paulette Dauteuil. She has worked for Leonard’s freedom for decades.

I shared the work that my comrades and many other supporters have carried out in recent months, from film showings of “Incident at Oglala,” the documentary produced and narrated by Robert Redford, to other activities at Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in the third week of January this year. People have organized letter writing parties, both to Leonard and to the warden during the prison’s recent six-month lockdown, calling for the elders’ unit restrictions to be lifted, while we followed the ILPDC’s guidance.

The visiting hours of all three days passed quickly.

Background

Leonard was wrongly convicted for an incident and surrounding event that the U.S. government and FBI are solely responsible for, and of which he is innocent. That incident was the June 26, 1975 raid by two FBI agents, in plainclothes and unidentified, onto a small ranch in Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota, in the midst of violent repression by U.S.-backed death squads—who called themselves GOON squads—that operated for an extremely corrupt tribal chairman, Dick Wilson. From 1973 to 1975, 64 members, men, women and children of the Lakota reservation, were murdered in those targeted killings, largely because they were opposed to Wilson’s rule.

When the FBI and BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) refused to protect the residents, members of American Indian Movement, among them Leonard Peltier, were asked by the people to protect the residents from the violence. When the FBI agents raced onto the farm, a shootout ensued between them and the AIM defenders. Both FBI agents Jack Coler and Ronald Williams and one Native man, Joe Stuntz, were killed.
Although two of the three Native defendants charged in the agents’ deaths, Bob Robideau and Dino Butler, were completely exonerated in trial, Leonard, who had escaped to Canada, was later tried after an outrageous extradition campaign by the FBI that was accomplished by terrorizing a Native woman, Myrtle Poor Bear, into falsifying testimony against Leonard. She had never met Leonard before her false affidavit, which she signed under threat of death by the FBI.

Because Leonard’s co-defendants were found innocent by reason of self-defense, the FBI decided Leonard would have to pay, even though he had nothing to do with their deaths. There was never an investigation into the death of Joe Stuntz, who was killed by a sharpshooter. The trial was moved to North Dakota with a presiding judge who refused Leonard’s right to present the same case of self-defense as his co-defendants. Witnesses were coerced, evidence was corrupted.

Large numbers of well-known national and international supporters have called for Leonard’s freedom, from 54 U.S. congressmembers to Nelson Mandela to the National Congress of American Indians.

**Fighting for Leonard’s freedom**

In addition to helping organize actions for Leonard over the years, together with my comrades and so many of his supporters, I have anguished over the government’s outrageous persecution of him.

The Party of Socialism and Liberation (PSL) together with many AIM members, prisoners’ rights organizations and prominent individuals, have been involved in rallies, protests, petitions and campaigns on his behalf. A national 1985 tour demanded Freedom for Nelson Mandela and Leonard Peltier. Imagine that! It was a time when Nelson Mandela was virtually unknown in the general U.S. public because of the U.S. government’s complicity with apartheid South Africa, even though he was an international hero for leading the Black freedom struggle against the South African regime.

Nelson Mandela’s legacy is known worldwide today, but the fact most U.S. people were not aware of him in 1985 shows how fully the U.S. government, in supporting the South African regime, suppressed him and the anti-apartheid struggle.

And the same is true of Leonard Peltier. The U.S. government, FBI and federal courts, in vengefully denying Leonard parole or a fair hearing on suppressed evidence that proves his innocence, are also hiding the truth of his case.

If the people of the United States could know the true extent of the U.S. genocide against Native peoples, the wholesale theft of their land, the countless massacres by the army as well as racist settlers, if they could know that the 1970s repression on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation was part of that long war, if they could know of Leonard’s and AIM activists’ protection of the people at Pine Ridge, they would demand Leonard’s immediate freedom.

Meanwhile by 1985, as we struggled to let the U.S. public know of Leonard and Mandela, millions of citizens of the Soviet Union had written letters to the White House calling for Leonard’s freedom. As a socialist country, the Soviet leadership had championed his cause and called him what he is, a political prisoner and a victim of U.S. government persecution.

When I wrote Leonard on behalf of our socialist presidential campaign to ask if he would accept being the PSL’s and Peace and Freedom Party’s Vice Presidential candidate (if we were to win that nomination,) he replied that he would be honored to, as a “traditionalist and a socialist.”

We are organizing this new phase of struggle. We will fight for his freedom and for Native sovereignty, as well as to expose the capitalist system for its racism, poverty and endless war, and ultimately, the fight for socialism.

Despite the unfathomably long time of being imprisoned, Leonard remains a strong, positive individual with a profound sense of principles and justice. He has provided leadership for other inmates and had led in the restoration and defense of religious rights for Native prisoners over the years.

But make no mistake, as he told me, “I don’t want to die in prison. I want to go home now, to my family and people in North Dakota. I want to dedicate the time I have left to help the youth find their way.”

With years of correspondence, sending him birthday greetings, updating him on various struggles like the actions on his behalf, and of Standing Rock, I had not ever been able to visit Leonard in prison. I was truly heartened and inspired to share time with him, and of course I will visit him again until he is free.

It is never easy to visit a prisoner and at the end of the day walk away free while he or she remains locked up. As we walked through our respective doors after the visit, we each raised a fist in salute.

As long as we struggle, we can and will win. We must intensify the struggle to free Leonard Peltier, Mumia Abu-Jamal and all political prisoners, and to end this cruel system of mass incarceration!

**For more information about Leonard Peltier: WholsLeonardPeltier**

To learn about the PSL campaign of LaRiva / Peltier: LaRivaPeltier2020.orgp

—Liberation Newspaper, February 13, 2020

https://www.liberationnews.org/la-riva-my-visit-with-leonard-peltier/
Hundreds of people stood in front of a stage in downtown Jackson, Mississippi, waiting for the rally to start, when a woman’s voice rang through the crowd. “What we gonna do?” she shouted. “SHUT IT DOWN!” the crowd yelled back.

“What we gonna do?”
“SHUT IT DOWN!”
“What we gonna do?”
“SHUT IT DOWN!”

The protesters had gathered at the intersection of Mississippi and North Congress, in the shadow of the state Capitol. Hip-hop blared from the speakers, activists circulated leaflets, and posters carried messages for the news cameras clustered on a nearby platform. One read: “Somebody’s hurting our people and we won’t be silent anymore.”

Just before noon, activist Sharon Brown took the mic. A member of the Mississippi Prison Reform Coalition—and leader in the recent push to change the state flag—she traced the crisis across the state’s prisons to its legacy of slavery, brutally embodied by the Mississippi State Penitentiary, known as Parchman Farm. For more than 100 years, Parchman has been the site of forced labor, a plantation where incarcerated men still work in the fields. In recent weeks, photos and videos from contraband phones had exposed rat-infested cells, unusable toilets, and graphic evidence of medical neglect. As the images went viral, an outbreak of violence and a slew of deaths between December and mid-January thrust Mississippi prisons into the national spotlight.

“I wanna thank those brothers behind the walls that had the courage to let the world know of the injustices,” Brown said. “To let the world know that they are beaten, broken, tired.” The latest death had been reported just two days earlier, on Wednesday, January 22. According to the Mississippi Department of Corrections, 49-year-old Thomas Lee was found hanging in his cell that morning, inside Parchman’s Unit 29. This brought the death tally to ten in less than a month. In the meantime, many families had not heard from their loved ones since the upheaval began.

**Desperate conditions**

Sallye House stood in the front row, in gloves, a winter hat, and a T-shirt reading “FIX YOUR PRISONS.” She had made the two-hour drive to Jackson from Batesville, with her daughter and son-in-law. It was her second protest in two weeks. At a vigil outside Parchman on January 11, she described how the toilet in her son’s cell had been broken for months, forcing him to urinate and defecate in plastic bags.

House carried a red folder containing copies of letters she had written to local officials over the years, begging for help for her 38-year-old son, Alchello. “My sole reason for reaching out to you is my son’s HEALTH and WELFARE,” House wrote in one letter from July 2016. Alchello had been transferred to Parchman after being violently attacked at a different prison. House had begged for him to be moved but was horrified when he was sent to Parchman, where he had been stabbed by a gang member years before. It was also Parchman where Alchello had contracted sarcoidosis, an inflammatory disease affecting the lungs and other organs—and where he was now being denied adequate medical care.

“He’s healthy when he went to prison in 2012, she said, but now he had seizures and suffered from malnutrition. She had not seen him in nine years.

Vera Young nodded in recognition throughout the rally. “That’s what’s happening to my son,” she said. She had come downtown in blue hospital scrubs, ready for her work shift later that day. As the rally wound down, she told me that her son is also housed in Unit 29. A case manager had said that he was OK, but she had not heard from him in weeks. “He’s always told me, from the time he’s been at Parchman, ‘Mama, if you don’t hear from me, there’s something wrong with me.’”
An escalating crisis

It was not long ago that Mississippi’s criminal justice system was hailed as a burgeoning success story: a state that went from decades of federal prison monitoring to a model for reform. In 2010, following years of litigation by the American Civil Liberties Union, MDOC finally shut down Parchman’s Unit 32, where men had been held in punishing isolation for 23-hours-a-day. Corrections Commissioner Christopher Epps was lauded for reducing the number of people in solitary confinement across the state, “saving money, lives, and sanity,” as the New York Times wrote in 2012. Then, in 2013, Mississippi legislators voted to create the bipartisan Corrections and Criminal Justice Oversight Task Force, whose policy recommendations would save millions in taxpayer money by reducing recidivism—and forestalling a ballooning prison population that had grown by 300 percent over 30 years.

But the promised changes never took root. Epps was arrested on corruption charges in 2014. And the state’s nascent criminal justice reforms unraveled before they had even begun. Last year, an investigative series by ProPublica and the Mississippi Center for Investigative Reporting revealed that the millions that were supposed to be reinvested to improve reentry had instead been used to cover corporate tax breaks. “Meanwhile the number of prisoners is creeping back up, and the lack of funding and staff is contributing to worsening conditions.”

Today, one of the biggest problems plaguing Mississippi’s prisons—cited by families and officials alike—is a dangerous lack of qualified staff. The number of guards has gone down from almost 1,600 in 2014 to 731, according to the Mississippi Center for Investigative Reporting. Starting salaries are the lowest in the country, creating further incentive to smuggle and sell contraband cell phones. But while officials have long decried the phones as enabling criminality—particularly by prison gangs—it’s no secret that the phones are a crucial lifeline for those on both sides of the walls. Phone calls can be prohibitively expensive—and families describe a constant lack of information from official channels. It was only because of cell phones that the public learned of a disturbing development in early January: The MDOC had quietly reopened Parchman’s Unit 32. A photo had gone viral on social media, showing five men in striped prison jump-suits lying on the ground in a filthy cell. Lawyers later confirmed that the images came from the long-shuttered hous-
The escalating crisis was made even worse by a lack of leadership among state officials. The upheaval began with a spate of violent incidents in the last days of 2019, before Mississippi’s newly elected governor, Tate Reeves, was sworn into office. Three deaths at three different prisons led to a statewide lockdown on New Year’s Eve. That same day, MDOC Commissioner Pelicia Hall announced she would resign. As the lockdown continued, hundreds of men were moved from Parchman to a facility in Tutwiler, run by private prison giant CoreCivic. “During the entire process, the inmates’ needs have been met,” the MDOC said in a press release.

On January 17, activists and community members packed a room inside the state Supreme Court for a regularly scheduled meeting of the Corrections and Criminal Justice Oversight Task Force. The death toll inside the prisons stood at five. The lockdown had been lifted at all prisons except Parchman, where hundreds of men were still awaiting a transfer, according to MDOC. In the meantime, a high-profile lawsuit had been filed in federal court, while a second prison official announced his retirement.

“At least a few of the task force members appeared to be caught off guard by the public’s interest in their meeting,” wrote the Clarion Ledger. Judge Prentiss Harrell stressed the progress in the state since its policies became law in 2014, including a savings of almost $50 million. While unfortunately the money had not yet gone to increased wages of prison staff or improvements in the facilities, Harrell said, he thought the legislature would be open to such things in the coming session. “We do believe the pendulum is swinging.”

Yet the focus on funding tends to eclipse an obvious factor that has driven the crisis in Mississippi’s prisons: too many people in prison for too long. Activists had long pushed for meaningful sentencing and parole reforms in Mississippi, including revising the state’s habitual offender law and making it easier to grant early release to “geriatric inmates.” Although the task force seemed open to such ideas, it was unclear whether lawmakers would heed the call. The crisis had inspired no-nonsense rhetoric, including from former governor Phil Bryant. “Someone asked earlier ‘Who’s responsible for what’s happening at Parchman?’” he told reporters in early January. “The inmates. The inmates are the ones that take each other’s lives. The inmates are the ones that fashion weapons out of metal. The inmates are the ones that do the damage to the very rooms that they’re living in.”

On January 23, the day after the Mississippi Prison Reform Coalition announced the rally in Jackson, Governor Tate Reeves held a news conference at the state Capitol. In glasses and a dark windbreaker emblazoned with the Mississippi state seal, Reeves read from a prepared statement, announcing that he had visited two of the state prisons in the past 24 hours. One was Parchman; the other was Walnut Grove Correctional Facility, which has stood empty since 2016. The governor was considering transferring men out of Parchman and into Walnut Grove, which would be privately run. “The majority of the prison can hold inmates as early as tomorrow,” he said.

But like reopening Unit 32, moving people to a private prison seemed like an obvious step in the wrong direction. The former juvenile facility run by GEO Group had closed after a federal investigation exposed harrowing conditions, including sexual misconduct by staff described as “among the worst that we have seen in any facility anywhere in the nation.” One judge famously wrote that Walnut Grove “paints a picture of such horror as should be unrealized anywhere in the civilized world.”

Reeves acknowledged that there had been problems at the facility in the past. But he gave a practical explanation for the idea. The cell walls at Walnut Grove were made of poured concrete rather than cinder blocks, he said, which would make it harder to pass contraband.

“A lot of these things will seem like common sense,” he said. “That’s because they are.”

Worsening conditions
I last visited Parchman in 2016, as part of a tour organized through an academic conference at Ole Miss. The prison offers tours to schools, churches, and other groups, and the visit was carefully curated. Prison personnel welcomed our group into a visitor’s center containing rocking chairs and vases of fake flowers, along with a display of contraband collected over the years—shanks made from pens, spoons, and other materials. “They make ’em out of anything,” the guide said.

A tour bus drove our group across the prison’s sprawling grounds, passing fields where men harvest crops. The fieldwork is supposed to address “inmate idleness,” according to MDOC, as well as providing healthy food. “They do squash, broccoli, greens,” the guide said. After providing a hearty lunch—grilled shrimp, teriyaki green beans, and pecan cobbler—the food services director shared a story of a man who trained under him while incarcerated at Parchman. “He’s been released and is cooking in Memphis,” he said proudly.

There was at least one moment of blunt honesty during the tour. It came from a man 40 years into a life sentence, who spoke to the group about the need for education programs.
“There is no rehabilitation in Mississippi,” he said. “Don’t kid yourself.” In the decades he had been at Parchman, sentences had gotten harsher—in Mississippi and across the country—while program after program had been stripped away. There used to be a choir, a radio station, a print shop, he said. “All of that’s gone.”

One woman on the tour became emotional remembering her childhood trips to Parchman, where she would see her father in what was known as extended visitation—weekend-long visits where incarcerated men could spend more time with their families. Mississippi ended the practice in 2012. Then, in 2014, MDOC put an end to conjugal visits. The risk of pregnancies was a concern, our guide explained. “Who’s going to take care of that child?”

In a state that claims to want to reduce recidivism, however, eliminating such programs has undoubtedly done more harm than good. Studies have long shown that stronger ties to family increase the likelihood of success after prison. And those previously incarcerated in Mississippi say that curtailing visitation and other programs have made a dehumanizing experience even worse. Al Coleman was at Parchman in the 1990s, during the time that many states began to eliminate educational opportunities inside prisons. He worked in the fields, picking cotton, potatoes, and okra. Such labor was supposed to keep violence at bay, but Coleman saw rapes and killings during his time there.

“Prison has always been violent,” he said. “It’s like walking into a zone with a bunch of time bombs waiting to explode. …If you’re being treated like you’re nothing, like you’re a dog, an animal, and you’re not getting the right amount of food, water, you don’t have no way to use the restroom, the frustration constantly builds.” The main difference he sees now is that people on the outside can see the evidence for themselves.

On the day after the rally in Jackson, Jessica Young went to visit her brother, Cedric, at Marshall County Correctional Facility, a private prison run by the Utah-based Management and Training Corporation. He’d been transferred to MCCF from Parchman months earlier, but the conditions were not much better. The visitation room was freezing; her brother said it was much colder in the housing units.

Cedric was convicted in 2017 for a crime he swore he did not commit. When he first got to prison, he was not given a change of clothes for months. Photos revealed disgusting meal trays, dull-colored clumps of food impossible to identify. “We were scared to post them because we didn’t want anything to happen to him,” Young said. But now that the images are out in the open. They are less afraid.

The visit lasted from 11 until around 2:30. Later that night, she heard from her brother again. He told her that he had returned to his unit to find out that a man had died at the prison that day. “The whole time we were in visitation with him, there was an inmate in the back, dead,” Young said. A cell phone video captured the scene; men calling out for attention while the lifeless body laid there. Guards are supposed to do routine checks of each housing units, but there was nobody answering. “It’s devastating,” Young said. The problems were much bigger than Parchman, much bigger than Unit 29. “The entire MDOC as a whole is hitting rock-bottom.”

The man who died was later identified as 38-year-old Jermaine Tyler. The next day, another death was reported at Parchman: 26-year-old Joshua Norman, a man from Young’s hometown. Then, two more deaths, at two different prisons across the state: 28-year-old Limarion Reaves on January 29, followed by 52-year-old Nora Ducksworth at MCCF, on the 30th. In total, 14 men died in Mississippi prisons since December 29.1

In the meantime, the governor gave his first State of the State address at the state Capitol. He had a big announcement. “I have instructed the Mississippi Department of Corrections to begin the necessary work to start closing Parchman’s most notorious unit, Unit 29,” he said. Although logistical questions remained, he said, “I have seen enough. We have to turn the page.”

—Intercept, February 1, 2020

https://theintercept.com/2020/02/01/mississippi-state-prisons-parchman-incarceration-deaths/

1 “Mississippi prison crisis: 18th inmate dies, second in 24 hours. He was a Parchman escapee”

“David Lee May, one of two inmates who escaped from the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman, was found unresponsive in his cell at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility in Rankin County. …His death also marks the 18th since December 29, when an inmate was killed during a “major disturbance” at the South Mississippi Correctional Institution at Leakesville.”


“Prison has always been violent,” he said. “It’s like walking into a zone with a bunch of time bombs waiting to explode. …If you’re being treated like you’re nothing, like you’re a dog, an animal, and you’re not getting the right amount of food, water, you don’t have no way to use the restroom, the frustration constantly builds.”
Letter to My Prison Oppressors

By Jonnie Mccolum

May peace be upon the nefarious elements who work tirelessly to stultify my progress. Just so you know, it will take nations of you fainthearted oppressors to even come close.

It’s because of you I rise victoriously every morning to fortify my mind, body and soul against error and weakness, in order to thoroughly make use of tools at my disposal. Your diabolical stratagems and bloodshed will never be forgotten no matter the adversity I’m faced with.

When you saw I wouldn’t adhere to your institutional agenda of non-confrontational compliance you initiated tactics of administrative repression against me by taking away my parole when I was eight weeks away from going home, giving me a year parole hit, put me in the Restricted Housing Unit (RHU), transferred me to another facility and threw away my intellectual/personal property.

In spite of your futile attempts to corrupt the moral fabric of my foundation I remained steadfast in my disposition—helping raise the consciousness of those around me, highlighting the effects of mass incarceration capitalism, illiteracy, poverty, and ecological injustice, the role we play in this, and what’s expected of us for a genuine transformation to take place.

I am aware of how you sought to destroy some of our most esteemed warriors in this treacherous battle. The fight of Steven Biko, Comrade George Jackson and Geronimo Ji Jaga (may all rest in power) is presently united with mine. That’s how I am able to remain implacable in spite of your petty systematic obstructions. The spirits of Malcolm X, Kwame Ture and Fred Hampton stand in my favor to help dismantle your exploitative, corrupt system whose gain is predicated on my demise.

At this point there is nothing you can do to harm me. Although, I am still physically confined in bedlam, mentally I have already dedicated myself towards being a constituent in the mass mobilization of resources to destroy your capitalist system.

We already came to the conclusion that your prison complex system is not to be reformed because it provides a pacification effect. It’s designed to calm us down and endure the psychological abuse in the moment while praying for you to reform the future.

False consciousness describes the tendency of liberal reforms to dupe those at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy with promises of equality, fairness and neutrality.

I will dedicate every breathing second towards waking my people up out of this menticidal bliss! Comrade George Jackson said, “where conditions for revolutions don’t exist, they must be manufactured!”

Write to Jonnie at:
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“The real purpose of socialism is precisely to overcome and advance beyond the predatory phase of human development.”
Faces Full of Gas
Abuse of war crimes chemical weapons in Indiana prisons
By Kevin “Rashid” Johnson

Indiana is the fifth state in which I’ve been imprisoned since 2012. Over this eight-year period, I’ve been bounced from Virginia to Oregon, then Texas to Florida, back to Virginia, and now to Indiana. All in response and efforts to repress my involvement in exposing and resisting the routine abuses that pervade U.S. prisons.

Among the many issues I’ve reported on in each state has been the frequent, often deadly, misuse of tear gas on prisoners. One of my articles specifically exposed that this benignly named agent is actually a chemical weapon created for use in war, having the same grade and lethality as chlorine gas which U.S. officials bombed Syria for supposedly using against its own citizens in 2018. Also, that tear gas, like chlorine, has been banned internationally from use in war because of its inhumane effects.

As with other states, Indiana is no exception to the use (or misuse—even by its own standards) of tear gas on prisoners.

Direct group gas assault
In one such incident which occurred on March 24, 2019, here at Pendleton Correctional Facility (PCF), where I’m confined, I narrowly dodged a bullet myself.

Earlier that morning I signed up to go to outside recreation, but because I was busy writing letters when guards came later that day to take us out, I decided not to go.

At the end of the recreation period several prisoners housed nearby returned to their cells teary-eyed, coughing and protesting that they’d been tear gassed for no reason by a white rookie guard named Kurts (phonetic spelling).

By their description, Kurts was initially arguing with a Black prisoner on the rec yard, where each prisoner was confined to separate one-person cages. Kurts began calling him and other uninvolved Blacks racist names, then went cage to cage spraying many of them in their faces with tear gas from a canister that all guards carry.

Upon returning to his cell, one of the victims protested the assault to the unit supervisor, a sergeant J. Griff. I also spoke up seeking an explanation from Griff to help the victims pursue complaints and to publicize yet another abuse incident hidden behind prison walls.

Griff admitted Kurts’s unprovoked assault on the group of men and that he’d gone home afterwards. Griff casually blew the incident off as just a normal incident of prison life, and suggested that since Kurts was gone, the situation was resolved, and everyone should just let it go.

Of course, nothing was done to afford the victims any redress.

Indirect group gas assault
While I narrowly avoided this gas assault, I wasn’t so fortunate the next time around, when on July 8, 2019 a ranking guard (not a rookie this time) unleashed a similar assault affecting uninvolved bystanders, myself included.

In this incident a lieutenant, J. Davis, vindictively emptied an entire 12.5-ounce canister of tear gas into a neighboring prisoner’s cell, which saturated the closed-in cellblock contaminating me and numerous others.

Investigative officials at all levels (including the PCF superintendent, Internal Affairs and grievance department investigators and the prison system’s Ombudsman’s office,) all avoided and ignored complaints of the abuse and covered it up, even though (or likely because) the entire event was captured on audio and video surveillance records.

Now keep in mind, the federal courts have recognized that inside of closed-in environments like prisons, the “estimated lethal dose” of tear gas is “only six grams.” Again, this guard emptied an entire 12.5-ounce canister.

I was talking on the telephone inside my cell when I heard a guard just outside my cell cursing loudly, so I peered out. I observed Lieutenant Davis in an excited rage cursing and threatening a neighboring prisoner, Charles Elderidge. After a few moments of this, and without further incident, Davis...
stormed off down the tier, walking some 17 cells away.

But upon reaching the front entrance of the tier Davis stopped, seemed to reflect for a moment, then removed a 12.5-ounce canister of tear gas from his equipment belt, turned and proceeded to walk briskly back toward our cells.

I alerted Eldridge that Davis was coming back with the gas in his hand and to be on guard. Upon reaching Eldridge’s cell Davis began spraying a continuous burst of gas into the cell, punctuated by threats and curses.

Davis initially sprayed the gas so wildly he directly sprayed Eldridge’s other neighbor, Alex Milewski.

As he continued to gas Eldridge, Davis taunted him to stop trying to cover himself up and that he was, “going to get all this gas, bitch!” Davis also repeatedly threatened to “kill” Eldridge and to beat him when he came out of the cell handcuffed from behind.

Several times I yelled to Davis to stop spraying, that he was contaminating everyone in the area, and trying another tact to deter his continued assault, pointed out that his actions were being recorded by surveillance cameras on the tier.

Davis then came to my cell as if he were about to spray me. I repeated my protests to which he responded cursing and yelling that he didn’t care about the cameras and challenging me several times then to get him fired.

He then returned to Eldridge’s cell and continued cursing, threatening and spraying him until the entire canister was empty. Only then did Davis leave the tier.

Throughout the incident I was on the telephone inside my cell with Shupavu Wa Kirima, a leading member of the African Peoples Socialist Party. She could clearly hear, and the automated GTL phone system automatically recorded, everything.

In response to what she heard, Ms. Kirima immediately filed a complaint to the Indiana Department of Correction’s (or rather Corruption’s) [IDOC] Ombudsman’s office at 9:39 P.M. EST, through that office’s email complaint system. In blatant violation of Indiana law, that office ignored Ms. Kirima’s complaint and did not notify her of any decision to decline an investigation.

Also, while on the phone with Ms. Kirima, I spoke with a sergeant C. Johnson, who came onto the tier after the gas assault, asking him what would be done about Davis’s actions. Johnson responded that Davis outranked him so he could do nothing but admitted so much gas was sprayed that he too was contaminated while in another area of the building.

The coverup

I and numerous other prisoners who were victimized by Davis’s actions, directed complaints to PCF’s superintendent Dushan Zatecky, the notoriously corrupt and racist Internal Affairs office, the grievance department, and the IDOC ombudsman. Each one of these departments and officials either ignored our complaints or created bogus technical pretexts to avoid processing them. They also refused any investigation or to consult with any of us who were victimized by Davis’s assault.

Davis remains a ranking guard at PCF and continues to carry a 12.5-ounce canister of gas on his side.

Conclusion

Everyone of us, who are imprisoned or confined to impoverished and marginalized communities across the U.S., knows that whether it be guards or cops, the so-called “law enforcement” system is criminal and corrupt at its core.

We are terrorized, brutalized and murdered day in and day out by its members, who are armed with war crimes weapons, and the abusers are not just a few “bad apples.”

Certainly, while most cops and guards are abusers, there are those who take special pleasure, and are particularly extreme, in their acts of abuse. But as exhibited here, the entire system is complicit.

Not only do all the peers (including the so-called “good cops”) of the extreme abusers close ranks with, turn blind eyes and lie to protect them, and by extension the system itself, in accordance with the culture of not crossing the “thin blue line” of protectionism. But as we the common victims of “law enforcement” know, complaints prove pointless. Which is why there are frequent demands from our communities for community oversight committees, private and outside investigators, and similar systems of independent accountability.

Indeed, the supervisors and investigators inside these agencies are the most protectionist. In fact, most rose through the ranks as abusers and by proving to be especially loyal to and effective at toeing the blue line themselves.

It is no coincidence that as the victim class has been able to increasingly expose these corrupt systems to the world through social media and other independent channels over the past several years, there has been a marked increase in movies and television programs to rehabilitate, professionalize, glamorize and make heroic the images of cops and guards.

But for the poor and people of color in America, like their slave patrol and Ku Klux Klan predecessors, cops and guards are not and have never been our protectors or heroes. We must assume these roles ourselves.

Write to Kevin “Rashid” Johnson:
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Why Isn’t Donald Trump Headed to Jail?

By Kevin “Rashid” Johnson

On January 3, 2020 Donald Trump had Qasem Soleimni, an Iranian major general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, murdered. He ordered a drone strike against this man and several others that saw him and his car blown apart and incinerated. So why isn’t Trump headed to jail? Why is no one else asking this question?

All sorts of people called for the prosecution of the Saudi Arabian crown prince on suspicion that he ordered the October 2, 2018 hit on Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi. In that case, a hit squad of Saudi Security officials killed and dismembered Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Turkey. Khashoggi died no less gruesomely than did Soleimani.

The Saudi prince denies ordering Khashoggi’s death, but Trump admits to ordering the attack on Soleimani. Yet, no one is calling for Trump’s prosecution.

U.S. officials admit that killing a high-ranking foreign official like Soleimani was an act of war. Under Article 1, section 8 of the U.S. Constitution and the War Powers Act of 1973, only Congress has the power to declare war. Congress has never declared war with Iran. Trump, therefore, had no legal authority to kill Soleimani. So, again, why isn’t he on his way to jail?

This is the same “law and order” president that denigrated Central American migrants fleeing violence and broken societies as “criminals and rapists,” and made “Lock her up!” a rallying cry among his supporters during his presidential campaign against his opponent, Hillary Clinton. And this is a country that locks up millions of poor people and people of color under the guise of holding them accountable for breaking the law. Even though 9 percent of them were not convicted by juries of their peers, as the Constitution promises, but were instead pressured into pleading guilty, whether innocent or not, under Amerika’s corrupt plea-bargaining system.

But of course, the principles of accountability have never applied when an extrajudicial lynching is going down. The federal government has always played a vacillating role in organizing and defending lynchings versus opposing them. Burning and dismembering dark flesh is nothing new in Amerikan culture. Nor rationalizing and whipping up broad support for extrajudicial lynchings with sensational claims for the victim having committed some unproven crime. Remember Muammar Gaddafi, the late president of Libya? How, after Amerika joined in a bombing campaign against his country in 2011, he was literally lynched by a street mob in broad daylight, having been shot point-blank in the head while a dagger was shoved into his rectum. Remember then-Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton’s glib remarks after his murder, that sounded like a spectator after a southern mob lynching? “We came, we saw, he died!”

As an imprisoned Black man in Amerika, I know imperialist Amerika’s triple standards all too well. I know why no one’s even suggesting that Trump belongs in jail. Why, you ask? Because from yesterday’s nooses and bonfires to today’s high-tech drones, and from the U.S. South to the Global South, lynching is still as Amerikan as apple pie!

Dare to Struggle! Dare to Win!
All Power to the People!

1 The Joint Legislative Committee on Crime in New York described the plea bargain process in a report as follows: “The final climactic act in the plea-bargaining procedure is a charade which in itself has aspects of dishonesty which rival the original crime in many instances. The accused is made to assert publicly that his guilt on a specific crime which in many cases he has not committed; in some cases, he pleads guilty to a non-existent crime. He must further indicate that he is entering his plea freely...and that he is not doing so because of any promises made to him. “In plea bargaining, the accused pleads guilty, whether he is or not, and saves the state the trouble of trial in return for the promise of a less severe punishment.” Quoted in, Howard Zinn’s, A People’s History of the United States (Harper Perennial: NY, 2002)
Delbert Africa, a longtime member of MOVE, is unrepentant about his part in the 1978 Powelton Village confrontation between the group and Philadelphia police that left an officer dead and sent him to prison for more than 40 years.

“Nothing could have been done differently to stop and curtail that assault by the police on us. It wouldn’t have stopped,” Africa, 73, said Tuesday, January 21, 2020, in his first Philadelphia interview since being paroled from state prison on Saturday, January 18, 2020.

One of nine MOVE members imprisoned for the 1978 incident, Africa said he is looking forward to reuniting with the surviving MOVE members who were previously paroled, to continue the work of challenging what he called an unjust criminal justice system. The fact that the city has had African American police commissioners during his time in prison has no bearing on the inequity in the system, he said.

“I want to keep on pushing the whole front of fighting this unjust system. I want to keep on pushing it and do as much as I can in my time here as dictated by the teachings of John Africa. Keep on working, stay on the move,” said Africa, who discussed his past and future goals at a news conference Tuesday at the Kingsessing Branch Library in West Philadelphia.

At the gathering, Africa, his face framed by gray frayed dreadlocks and facial hair, received a hero’s welcome from MOVE members and supporters who listened in rapt attention as he recalled the August confrontation with police, and recounted how he was cursed at and badly beaten by officers after he surrendered.

“I’m unconscious, and that’s when one cop pulled me by the hair across the street, one cop started jumping on my head, one started kicking me in the ribs and beating me,” he said. “Their excuse later on is they thought I was armed. I was naked from the waist up.”

MOVE has always maintained that the bullet that killed Ramp was accidentally fired by police.

By 1980, the group had relocated to the 6200 block of Osage Avenue. Neighbors began to complain to the city about trash, loudspeaker rants, and concerns about child abuse and neglect in MOVE’s house.

On May 13, 1985, the city flew a helicopter over the group’s home and dropped the bomb that left 11 people dead, including John Africa, as well as Delbert Africa’s 13-year-old daughter. The neighborhood was in ruins, with 61 homes destroyed. City officials were found to have acted recklessly, but no charges were filed.

Delbert Africa was among nine MOVE members convicted of third-degree murder for Ramp’s death.

Janine, Janet, and Eddie Africa were released from prison in 2019. Mike Africa Sr. and his wife, Debbie, were released in 2018. Merle Africa died in prison in March 1998 and Phil Africa died in prison in January 2015. Chuck Africa remains imprisoned. [Chuck Africa was released February 7, 2020. See next article in this issue of Socialist Viewpoint.]

—Inquirer, January 21, 2020


Delbert Africa (Photo by Lauren Schneiderman)
Chuck Sims Africa Freed!

Final jailed MOVE 9 member released from prison

By Ed Pilkington

One of the great open wounds of the Black liberation struggle of the 1970s has finally been healed with the release of the last member of the MOVE 9, the group of radicals rounded up in a Philadelphia police siege in 1978 and held behind bars for more than four decades.

Chuck Sims Africa, 59, walked free from the Fayette state correctional institution in La Belle, Pennsylvania, on Friday morning, February 7, 2020. The youngest of the incarcerated group, he has been in custody since shortly after he turned 18.

His freedom marked his reunion with his family for the first time in almost 42 years. It was also historic, as it closed a chapter that had remained unfinished since the Black power movement erupted in the late 1960s.

Alongside the Black Panthers, Philadelphia’s MOVE organization was central to the volatile and at times violent struggle for Black equality that lasted until the 1980s.

Members of the organization regarded themselves—and still do to this day—as part of a family dedicated to race equality, with all members taking the last name “Africa.” Part Panthers and part eco-hippies, they also had a commitment to environmental justice that was ahead of its time.

Mike Africa Jr., the son of two of the MOVE 9, said Chuck’s release put an end to a long and grueling campaign. “We will never have to shout, ‘Free the MOVE 9!’ ever again. It’s been 41 years, and now we’ll never have to say it.”

For Mike Africa, who is also Chuck’s nephew, the release was especially poignant. He was born in a cell five weeks after his mother, Debbie Sims Africa, Chuck’s sister, was rounded up in the 1978 siege and incarcerated—she gave birth to him unbeknown to the prison guards and kept him hidden with her in the cell for the first few days of his life.

The Guardian began investigating the prolonged imprisonment of the MOVE 9 in 2018 as part of an examination into Black power behind bars. At that time all the surviving members of the group were still in custody in various Pennsylvania prisons.

Members of the group described in letters, emails and prison interviews how they had endured so many years inside while keeping their spirits high. Janine Phillips Africa said that she raised therapy dogs in her cell and grew vegetables in the prison yard, avoiding birthdays or holidays that reminded her of the passage of time.

“The years are not my focus,” she wrote in a letter to the Guardian. “I keep my mind on my health and the things I need to do day by day.”

Delbert Orr Africa said: “We’ve suffered the worst that this system can throw at us—decades of imprisonment, loss of loved ones. So, we know we are strong.”

Soon after the Guardian began its investigation, the seven surviving members of the group began to be released on parole. First up was Debbie Sims Africa, set free in June 2018. “We are peaceful people,” she said as she stepped out of Cambridge Springs prison.

Then the other six began to emerge, one after the other like falling dominos:
- Mike Africa Sr, October 2018
- Janine Phillips Africa and Janet Holloway Africa, May 2019
- Eddie Goodman Africa, June 2019
- Delbert Orr Africa, January 2020
- Chuck Sims Africa completes the set.

Chuck Sims Africa upon his release. (Photo by Brad Thomson.Twitter)

The MOVE 9 were arrested following a massive police siege of their collective headquarters and home in Powelton Village, Philadelphia, on August 8, 1978. Hundreds of police officers in SWAT teams armed with machine guns, teargas, bulldozers and water cannons surrounded the property following a long standoff with city authorities that saw the group as a threat to the community.

The siege culminated in a police shootout in which MOVE members allegedly returned fire though they denied doing so. A police officer, James Ramp, was killed in the crossfire.

Nine members were arrested and held jointly responsible for Ramp’s death despite forensic evidence showing he was killed with a single bullet. In 1980 the nine were convicted of third-degree murder and lesser offenses and each sentenced to 30 years to life.

Two of the nine—Merle and Phil Africa—died in prison. The remaining seven fought for many years to convince parole authorities that they were
safe to be let out, pointing to clean discipline sheets in prison.

Over the past two years there have been no security incidents relating to any of the paroled individuals.

Wilson Goode, former mayor of Philadelphia, wrote to the parole board to support Chuck Africa’s bid for freedom. He said: “His release will reunite a family after 40 years and I am convinced he will be a positive contributing voice to the Philadelphia community.”

Goode, the first Black mayor of Philadelphia, was in that position on May 13, 1985 when the second disaster relating to MOVE occurred. Following another prolonged bout of acrimony between the organization and its neighbors and city authorities, the decision was taken forcibly to evict the group from its latest headquarters, then in Osage Avenue.

Another shootout broke out, and when that failed to flush them out police dropped incendiary bombs from a helicopter on to the roof of the building. A fire ensued which was allowed to spread, eventually razing to the ground 61 homes in the overwhelmingly African American neighborhood.

Eleven people in the MOVE house, including five children, died in the inferno. Chuck Africa’s cousin, Frank, was among the adults who were killed.

All the paroled members of the MOVE 9 are now preparing to mark the 35th anniversary of the tragedy. For the first time they will be able to commemorate the event and the relatives and peers they lost outside a prison cell.

—The Guardian, February 7, 2020

For more than 40 years, Chuck Africa of the renowned group “The MOVE 9” and a veteran of the confrontation between MOVE and the Philadelphia Police on August 8, 1978, was imprisoned in prisons in several parts of Pennsylvania with a presumably illegal sentence from 30 to 100 years for third degree homicide.

Several days ago, he came out of prison and came home.

Chuck, the youngest of “The MOVE 9,” was one of the most energetic members.

During the ’80s he was part of a boxing team and fought in fights everywhere in the state, aiming at the jaws of his opponents. He was champion of the punches, inside and out of the ring.

When I was at Dallas State Penitentiary, a white shirt officer disrespected him, and Chuck knocked him out.

For years he studied history. Black History, World History. He taught what he learned to other prisoners.

Finally, Chuck Africa is coming home. The last of “The MOVE 9.”

Write to Mumia at:
Smart Communications/PA DOC
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At the January 2020 Rosa-Luxemburg-Conference in Berlin (Germany) imprisoned journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal commented on the U.S. Military Industrial Complex and the latest developments in and around Iraq. Mumia spoke to a 2000-plus audience in Berlin while supporters mobilized for a series of information events to free the political prisoner.¹

As we look at an impending war in the Middle East it is time to look back and to do something the state has never done, that is learn the lessons of war.

Those of us who lived during the 1960s, those of us who remember the protest of that era, many of us were radicalized by that and other struggles. The media, the politicians, the scholars mostly opposed the protestors but guess what?

The politicians in secret actually admitted that the people were right.

But the military industrial complex demanded they go to war. So, they obeyed capital, not the people. Then came the Pentagon Papers and the war was all but lost. When former defense secretary Robert McNamara released a book of his life, we learned that he too knew for years that the war was lost. Over two million Vietnamese were sacrificed to this blood thirsty god of war. Sacrificed by the millions before it ended—an American loss and disgrace.

When the Iraq war began, based on lies like “weapons of mass destruction,” hundreds-of-thousands of Iraqis were sacrificed to another god of war. But Bush II said, “I am the decider.” Remember the hundreds of thousands of people, the mass of people against that war? Well, they were right. The system was wrong, and the rest was infamy. Iraq became a charnel house of sectarian war. And the Arabs called it “sukut,” collapse. Iraq is still a place of

¹ https://www.thesocialistpointview.org/issue2002/c124.html

Chuck Africa Returns Home
By Mumia Abu-Jamal

U.S. Military Industrial Complex
By Mumia Abu-Jamal

Reviews
U.S.-made disaster and it’s widely regarded as the greatest blunder.

The people were right. Expressed in some of the biggest demonstrations in history, the neo-cons, all the president’s men and women, and Bush too, the decider, were wrong as two left feet.

Afghanistan, allegedly the good war, according to some neo-liberals, was and remains a colossal failure. One of torture, abuse and death.

Recently the Afghanistan papers were released. And it shows that high military and political officials involved in Afghanistan, said during the war itself, that it was a disaster from day one.

The people were right. The politicians were wrong.

What does it mean when the politicians ignore the people and obey the defense industries? It means that democracy is an illusion. Let’s call it something else. How about a capitalist autocracy? For the people are ignored and we now stand on the brink of another war. “The people must organize, organize, organize”—to quote the great Kwame Toure, the Black Nationalist leader of the 1960s and beyond.

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39cqIS191Vo&feature=youtu.be

REVIEWS

Humans Aren’t Inherently Destroying the Planet—Capitalism Is

Interview by Robert R. Raymond

By Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore

One of the biggest ironies of the right-wing trope accusing socialists of wanting “free stuff” is that in reality, the entire capitalist economy would immediately collapse if it couldn’t continue to rely on free stuff. Without free or artificially cheap access to things like natural resources, care work, labor and a whole array of other elements, capitalism could not stay afloat. In fact, the only way that capitalism was ever able to even emerge was through a process of “primitive accumulation”—where things like slavery and colonialism were utilized to extract free labor and resources.

It’s this oft-forgotten history that compelled Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore to write History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet. The book unpacks our modern capitalist world by tracing the fraught history of how seven elements—nature, money, work, care, food, energy and lives—were transformed and reshaped during the emergence of capitalism and up through to the modern day.

Truthout spoke with the book’s co-author Raj Patel, an activist and academic, about why the authors are calling the new geological era that we’re in the “Capitalocene,” and how this era has led to a complete transformation of how we view some of the most important elements in our lives, and what we can do about it.

Robert R. Raymond: You begin the book by introducing the concept of the “Capitalocene.” Can you explain what that term means and its significance?

Raj Patel: We begin the book talking about the Capitalocene as a way of intervening in discussions that are proliferating right now, particularly in the climate change debate around the Anthropocene, which is a term coined by geologists and climate scientists to describe what it is that humans have done to the planet. The reason we wanted to call it the Capitalocene—in fact my co-author Jason W. Moore coined that term in an earlier work—is to observe that to call it the Anthropocene—is misleading.

The Anthropocene is a term that suggests that there’s a geological era that is characterized by human activity, but it’s more accurate to say that the scale of this geological era, characterized by the things that humans have laid into the fossil record—things like plastic, things like residues from atmospheric nuclear weapons tests, things like chicken bone—none of those things have been caused by humans in the normal operation of going about our daily business. On the contrary, it’s a particular kind of human society that has caused all these things—and that’s capitalism.

So, we call it the Capitalocene because it’s not some innate quality of
humans that has destroyed the planet, it’s a product of how the system of capitalism operates. If we are to stop the destruction of the planet, then we need to name the systems that cause it and observe that there are some humans who had nothing to do with it—that some humans are very importantly not to blame for what gets called the Anthropocene. Labeling them with the same term as other humans not only blames the victim in some cases, but it also obscures potential solutions to the climate crisis that aren’t about exploiting nature but are about entering into a much more reasonable relationship to the web of life.

Robert R. Raymond: And you argue that we are coming to the end of the Capitalocene era?

Raj Patel: What we point out in the book is that the climate catastrophe is such that the Capitalocene cannot persist—not in the way that it has for the past few hundred years. We don’t make any prognostications about how capitalism ends, but we do note that capitalism began in a period of intense climate change and the spread of epidemic disease. We observe that capitalism has shown itself very adept at creating climate change and also through industrial agriculture creating the conditions that would be perfect incubating grounds for epidemic disease.

So, we’re not saying capitalism is going to end next Tuesday, but we are saying that the conditions that destroyed feudalism, the system that predated capitalism, were all about epidemic disease and climate change. Well, they seem to be on us again.

Robert R. Raymond: I want to get into each of the different cheap things in more depth in a moment. But can you just briefly go over this idea of cheapness and how it relates to capitalism?

Raj Patel: Capitalism is a system that doesn’t pay its bills—and one way of thinking about that is the idea of cheapness. That’s why we’ve titled our book, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*—it’s a way of pointing to how capitalism dodges the payments of things that it requires in order to be profitable. It’s not necessarily a conscious design of the early capitalists that a system like this would be required, but it has emerged over time that capitalism has figured out ways to defray or move around the real consequences of its uses of things like nature, work, care, lives, energy, food and money. These are all things that capitalists are trying to make a profit from, and in the process, are making disappear in the calculation of the bottom line. All of these things are very important for the perpetuation of capitalism and, unfortunately, they are also the sorts of things that are vital to recognize if we are to have a planet worth living on.

Cheap food is sort of a Faustian bargain that’s struck, particularly here in the United States, where wages are low but workers have cheap food as a corollary so that they don’t get too angry and take to the streets.

Robert R. Raymond: OK, let’s dive into each of the seven things. In the book you use the example of the chicken nugget, which perfectly embodies all of the seven different elements. Can you explain how the chicken nugget unpacks this idea of how nature, work, care, food, energy, money and lives have been cheapened in the Capitalocene?

Raj Patel: We thought that the idea of a chicken nugget was a helpful way of illustrating how the seven things come together, so in the book we make a pitch saying that the chicken nugget is the world’s most capitalist object. The reason we think that is because one of the signs of the Anthropocene is chicken bones—50 billion chickens are eaten every year. That’s a lot of chicken bones, and the numbers are going up. One of the ways that any future intelligence will know that humans were on the planet will be through these chicken bones.

So, we decided to deconstruct the chicken nugget. First of all, in order to have your chicken nugget, you need chicken. Specifically, you need a chicken that’s been modified to the extent that it looks very unlike the red jungle fowl that was the first original chicken, because the modern broiler chicken has breasts so large it can barely walk—it’s really quite unrecognizable from its original ancestor. What that demonstrates is that humans feel so separate from the rest of the web of life that we feel able and licensed to take animals and mutate them in ways that are very much geared toward profit. That’s what cheap nature means. It’s both the idea that we think of the rest of the web of life as an infinite resource and an infinite trashcan, but also that we ourselves do not recognize ourselves as natural—we see ourselves as very distinct from nature.

The second key thing is work, because chickens don’t turn themselves into nuggets by magic—they need workers to be involved in their production. In the United States, for instance, working on the chicken production line is dangerous and underpaid work. In fact, in some cases, prison labor is used and sometimes workers are even assigned to work on chicken production lines as part of therapy and rehabilitation from their addiction to opioids—so that labor is free for the executives who hire them. And that labor is also dangerous—rates of amputation and other kinds of occupational injury are much higher than average in chicken slaughtering. And who is it that has to pick up the bill? It’s not the insurance industry, because usually broken workers are cast aside. Instead, it’s the
work of communities to pick up that tab and to care for broken bodies. Of course, care work is usually coded as women’s work—work that is absolutely essential for society to survive, but that is often desperately underpaid, if it’s paid at all.

There’s another irony here that the making of a chicken nugget is itself a way of making cheap food available to workers. Cheap food is sort of a Faustian bargain that’s struck, particularly here in the United States, where wages are low but workers have cheap food as a corollary so that they don’t get too angry and take to the streets. An important feature of employment in the United States is that wages have been kept low in part because energy prices have been kept low—cheap fuel is important for the chicken industry to be able to heat the hen houses and make sure that the machinery of turning soy into chicken and then into nuggets is kept well-oiled and is fueled relatively cheaply.

Another feature of the fast food industry is that in the United States, every independently owned KFC or fast food outlet is eligible for a Small Business Administration loan. Part of the broader thrust and ambition of capitalism to find cheap money, to find interest rates that are very low, to find money that can be loaned at rates that you or I couldn’t possibly get, but that businesses can because they’ve built a system that entitles them to having cheap money at low interest rates.

And then finally capitalism depends on the policing of bodies and of humans so that there are those humans whose lives are systematically cheaper than others. You’ll find those humans disproportionately represented in the chicken industry because if you look at who’s doing the work, it’s disproportionately people of color and women.

Robert R. Raymond: Early in the book, you suggest that it’s often easier for people to imagine the end of the world than it is for them to imagine the end of capitalism. Why do you think this is?

...capitalism depends on the policing of bodies and of humans so that there are those humans whose lives are systematically cheaper than others. You’ll find those humans disproportionately represented in the chicken industry because if you look at who’s doing the work, it’s disproportionately people of color and women...

Raj Patel: We borrowed that line from the Marxist scholar Fredric Jameson, and part of the logic behind that statement is that quite a lot of capitalist effort has gone into crushing our imaginations for creating utopias and alternatives to capitalism. You can understand what happened in the 1930s around the world, for example, as a series of experiments that investigated what happened when capitalism failed. You saw the Russians with communism and socialism, you saw anarchists in the U.S. and in Europe building communities. You also saw fascism spread through Europe and Asia. And in the United States, you saw the New Deal era taking hold. We can understand the era since then as a long process of revenge by capitalists to make sure the New Deal never happens again, because everything that made it possible, to imagine a world after capitalism—in terms of worker power, in terms of strike activity, in terms of a powerful state administering to the needs of its citizens as articulated by citizen power—all of that has been taken away, so by the 1970s, it was much less possible for people to imagine the end of capitalism. You had people like Francis Fukuyama talking about “the end of history,” for example—an idea that could never have been seriously entertained. It’s a mark of how capitalism, particularly in the 1990s, was so triumphant that it was impossible to imagine anything else.

So, it’s this history that explains why it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. But the good news is that as capitalism collapses in a range of countries, while we are of course seeing the rise of fascism, it is also heartening to see increasing amounts of talk in the United States around things like the Green New Deal, for instance. People are imagining a new way of being in America that is not about the triumph of capitalism but is about an alternative to it—and I’m given some hope by that.

Robert R. Raymond: Speaking of hope, what kinds of political movements do you see arising that are challenging the many crises that have been brought about by capitalism?

Raj Patel: The reason we wrote the book is because in this moment we are seeing a rise in the recognition of the intersectionality of struggles—and we hoped we’d be able to contribute to it. In fact, what we were hoping for Seven Cheap Things is that it would lay bare some of the ways that struggles have always been intersectional.
Just to give you an example from here in Texas: In 1883, we had the Great Cowboy Strike, which was an underappreciated strike in the history of labor. One of the important things about the Cowboy Strike was not only that cowboys—who were grossly exploited and underpaid seasonal workers—wanted higher wages, but that they also wanted higher wages for the cooks [on cattle ranches]. They understood that care work and productive labor shouldn’t be held apart, and that work is work—whether it’s cooking or whether it’s ranching.

So, if you look at the history of a range of different struggles, past and present, you can always see that a struggle for work is usually a struggle around the environment, which is also a struggle around gender, for instance. All of these are struggles at intersectional moments, and what’s exciting about the way that the environmental or the union movement or the climate justice movement are moving is precisely that they’re recognizing the long histories of injustice that have preceded the crisis of capitalism. They also recognize that the way to win is not by following an individual cheap thing, but to see that the system which has rendered these things separate—whether it’s care or labor or the environment—that system has torn us apart and sought to divide these struggles intentionally.

So, the way to reclaim power is by recognizing—as, for example, the international peasant movement Via Campesina does—that a struggle for food sovereignty and against cheap food is also a struggle against patriarchy, against racism and against colonialism. That, I think, is a great source of hope, because not only do you grow your numbers by recognizing that there are many more people involved in the struggle than you initially thought, but you become much more theoretically and practically sophisticated in appreciating how it is that capitalism works, how it seeks to divide, and how victory may yet be won in this long, long struggle for a better planet.

—Truthout, November 18, 2020


Four Narrative Films of Note

BY LOUIS PROYECT

After wasting my time watching a bunch of crappy Hollywood movies to fulfill my obligation as a NYFCO (New York Film Critics Online) member to judge front-runners like “Joker” or “1917” for our awards meeting in early December, I am finally returning to my kind of films. These are generally featured in art houses like the Film Forum in New York and the Laemmle in Los Angeles. The four under review here are worth seeing if you spot them playing in your hometown. There’s a good shot that they will eventually end up on Amazon, the only real contribution Jeff Bezos has made to humanity.

Corpus Christi

In 1936, Ignazio Silone wrote the anti-fascist novel “Bread and Wine” that told the story of a young revolutionary who assumes the identity of a priest in order to throw the cops off his trail. He lives in a poverty-stricken village made up by the kind of backward peasant that Marx had in mind when he called religion the opium of the people. It was not exactly a call for abolishing religion since he also writes, “The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions.”

Once he assumes this identity, the revolutionary is besieged by peasants who need someone to minister to their spiritual and economic needs. This forces him to improvise, often calling upon the good sense and humanitarian instincts that made him a revolutionary.

In Corpus Christi, a Polish film directed by the 38-year old Jan Komasa, we have a similar plot, but the main character Daniel is not a revolutionary. Instead, he is a young man who has just been released from prison to serve the rest of his term for second-degree murder through a work-release program. He is sent to a rural town to labor for a pittance in a sawmill. The town is not nearly so poor economically as the one in “Bread and Wine” but just as spiritually bereft, if not more so.

When he was in prison, Daniel became an assistant to the chaplain. Over time he became more and more spiritually-minded and especially looked forward to singing hymns at prison masses. On the day he was to be released, he asked the priest if there was any possibility of being recommended for the Catholic seminary. He was told that his prison term made that impossible. So much for Jesus’s teachings about forgiveness.

Perhaps as a sign of his yearning for the life of a priest, Daniel purloins a priest’s vestment and takes it with him to the town where he is to become just another parolee carrying out what amounts to indentured servitude. Once there, he stops in at the local church to meditate. When he learns later that day that the local priest is about to go on a
leave of absence, he puts on the clerical clothes he brought with him and convinces the priest that he is legitimate and willing to sub for him. Was he succumbing to baser motives such as higher pay and an easier way of making a living? Or did the time spent in religious services in prison transform him?

The screenwriter Mateusz Pacewicz, who is only 27 years old, told 28 Times Cinema: “What fascinated me from the beginning was the ambivalence of the premise. We have somebody who maybe just does it for money. Perhaps, it’s also for some emotional profit. He wants to feel he’s someone better than he really is. Maybe it’s a whole different reason. This multi-dimensionality was what kept me going on the story.”

They say that clothing makes the man. In his case, Daniel turns out to be much more of a holy man than the one he has replaced. In a town that is tormented by a terrible automobile accident (or deliberate homicide), he brings solace to the families that lost a son or daughter. At the same time, he comforts a woman whose husband was judged guilty for plowing his car into the one that was carrying the young people still being mourned, a year after the tragedy. The town has ostracized her in a manner reminiscent of Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter.

As someone with not a spiritual bone in my body, I found Corpus Christi deeply moving. It lacks the political edge of the kind of films I tend to write about, but the storytelling is first-rate. It moved me in the same way that Robert Bresson’s Diary of a Country Priest did. As Daniel, Bartosz Bielenia is unforgettable.

The Whistlers
This is a Romanian film directed by Corneliu Porumboiu, whose work I am not familiar with. “The Whistlers” is a crime story with a very fresh take on the genre involving crooked cops and the drug trade. The main character is a middle-aged cop named Cristi who teamed up with a Romanian drug dealer to rip off some Spanish dealers.

The plot is far too complicated to go into any kind of detail so suffice it to say that Cristi ends up on the Canary Islands to meet with the Spanish gangsters who will coerce him into leading them to the stash he and his partner have buried back in Romania. To make sure they are not found out by honest cops (a scarcity in Romania, as the film will point out) on their trail, they communicate through a whistled language that is unique to the people of the Gomera island in the Canaries. It has between two and four vowels and between four and ten consonants.

The Whistlers was likely made for an international audience and lacks the darkly introspective character of Romanian films of ten to 15 years ago that explored the corruption of both Communist and post-Communist rule. In its favor, it is a throwback to Alfred Hitchcock’s confections like To Catch a Thief or Marnie. Intricately plotted and swiftly paced, it is far more entertaining than the lead-footed movies I endured in the weeks before the NYFCO awards meeting in early December.

Sorry We Missed You
This is Ken Loach’s 55th credit as a director since 1964. Now 83 years old, he is still capable of making the kind of gut-wrenching, pro-working-class film that has distinguished his career.

In the opening scene, we meet Ricky Turner, a man in his mid-forties, who is being interviewed for a job delivering packages in an unnamed British town. Formally speaking, he will not become an employee but a “franchisee.” Like Uber or Lyft, he is supposedly self-employed but no more so than the people who used to spin cloth at home in the earliest stages of capitalism. That’s a sign of the combined and uneven nature of capitalism today that the most up-to-date technology is used to exploit a worker like Ricky Turner in the same way his fellow Brits were 600 years ago.

To qualify for the position, Ricky needs a van. He can rent one from the subcontractor but at a hefty price. Like most men or women desperate enough to work in such a position, he takes a risk and puts a down payment on a van for a thousand pounds. To raise the cash, his wife Abbie sells their car, something that makes her job much more difficult. She is a home nurse who goes from house to house looking after the elderly, most of whom are suffering from dementia or some other severe geriatric illness. The job is low-paying and emotionally draining. Without a car, Abbie is forced to take the bus. When they get home late at night, they can barely communicate with their children, a teen boy named Sebastian and a grade schoolgirl named Liza Jane.

Their absence only accelerates the self-destructive tendencies of Sebastian whose only pleasure in life is going out with his mates spray-painting graffiti, one step ahead of the cops. When he is arrested for shoplifting spray paint, Ricky has to give up a day’s pay to sort things out at the police station.

In the final moments of the film, everything is falling apart around the family. This, of course, is not just a story about a family. It is the story of the English working class today, as heartfelt and as compelling as Engels’s Conditions of the Working-Class in England. In many ways, Ricky is a casualty of the collapse of this class since the drying up of construction jobs, his mainstay over the years, has plumped him into the depths of contingent labor.

For background on how such workers fare, I recommend an April 14, 2019 Guardian article:

“The Observer has been contacted by three drivers who have delivered parcels for Amazon. They report shifts of 12 hours or more on zero hours contracts, unpaid overtime and penalties for failing to meet onerous targets. Because they are classed as self-employed, they are obliged to pay for their vehicles and
Dear Editors,

Dialectic—The existence or action of opposing social forces.

Hip-hop sprouted out of the murky muddy waters of capitalist oppression like a lotus in a swamp or a poppy growing from decaying leaves in the gutter.

It’s a dialectical occurrence within the most oppressive, discriminatory, divisive, exclusive, self-destructive culture ever known to man, called capitalism.

From the most acutely oppressed and silenced communities there sprouted the most uplifting, inclusive, unifying, empowering culture ever known to man called Hip Hop.

Hip Hop is a language of the heart, which is why it’s so widely appreciated, loved, and excepted around the world—because it speaks, from soul-to-soul with the intention to uplift and empower oppressed people.

Don’t let capitalism dilute the message. Although Hip Hop is one of the only few ways to be the creator of one’s own destiny and has been corrupted in the name of profit and even weaponized against members of the culture itself, Hip Hop is not for sale and will not sell out. The nature of Hip Hop is one of rising up, out of, and against oppression, and for that reason has become the language of revolution.

—Johnny Gould, February 12, 2020

(Follow @tandino415 on Instagram)

Dear Editors,

A video recently emerged surrounding the death of Gregorio Hernandez Vasquez, a 17-year-old migrant who died in the custody of the border patrol detention center, May 20, 2019. The facts of his death are that he was diagnosed with the flu. His body temperature reached an astounding 104 degrees. On this video footage, the first thing to note are the conditions in which he was confined, locked in a cell, forced to sleep on a concrete bunk with no mattress, and only one ridiculous blanket. Minutes prior to his death Vasquez can be observed pacing back-and-forth in his cell while his cellmate was asleep. At one point he proceeded to walk to the toilet area where he collapsed. Hours later his cellmate awoke to find him unconscious and slumped by the toilet. He immediately notified the staff. It is reported that the video was highly edited in an attempt to conceal the staff response or lack thereof.

Other than a minor—who was escaping poverty, violence and corrupt conditions created by U.S. imperialism—being held captive at this facility under oppressive and inhumane conditions, the border patrol essentially captured and sentenced him to death. The medical staff was fully cognizant of the fact that he had a flu, something that has taken many lives just this season. Rather than hold him at the medical unit or a hospital, they discarded him
in a cell utterly apathetic to his medical need and left him to either survive or die, unfortunately the latter happened.

This story reminded me of an article published in *Socialist Viewpoint*, (November/December 2019 Volume 19 Number 6) titled “Our trip to El Paso and Casa Del Refugiado” by Carole Seligman. In this article she described her October 2019 trip, what she observed and learned, especially about the conditions and treatment of migrants coming from these infamous detention centers, (into humane shelters like the Casa del Refugiado.) The government detention centers deprive the detainees of decent food, keep the temperature very cold, do not provide for health care needs, do not provide showers, soap, toothpaste, *etc*. Given the barbaric and deplorable conditions and lacking even the most basic essentials, Vasquez’s death came as no surprise.

I commend any group or individual who takes the initiative to learn about these human warehouses out of genuine concern for other human beings and learning firsthand what they can do to help. We as a whole should not become so desensitized to the point that we turn a blind eye to these existing fascist conditions. Such blatant disregard of human lives isn’t nearly isolated to these detention centers. One has to look no further than to the nearest jail or prison were negligence and apathy run indiscriminately.

The story of Vasquez’s death reminded me of the suicide of a prisoner from Colorado confined in Virginia as the result of interstate transfer who was diagnosed with mental illness yet was housed in solitary confinement conditions well known to exacerbate mental illness, and his calls for help were ignored. When I observed his lifeless body being carted out of his cell I did not only see him, I saw me, my friends and countless other human beings warehoused in these dark places, though in Vasquez’s case he did notcommit suicide. The similarity between these two is predicated upon the sheer and blatant negligence, deliberate indifference and disregard of their lives by those whose duty it was to care for them.

In this country unless you are an indigenous person we are all from somewhere else. Therefore, imagine if Vasquez or countless other migrants warehoused at these border patrol detention centers were your family or friends, you would feel a sense of obligation and be compelled to be their voice. Turning a blind eye to the inhumanity migrants and prisoners are subjected to sets a dangerous precedent and only further encourages the perpetration of such wanton disregard of human lives. Xenophobia, anti-Semitism and racism exist largely due to silence. Your silence whether you intend it or not, is your consent. Elie Wiesel was a Holocaust survivor who stated that “silence encourages the torment not the tormented.” And Martin Luther King, Jr. echoed similar idea when he stated, “there comes a time when silence is betrayal.” History will surely one day judge us. The question is which side will you be on?

All power to the people.
Panther love,
—Comrade Pit
Write to:
Peter Mukuria #1197165
Red Onion State Prison
P.O. Box 1900
Pound, VA 24279
Instagram@PittPanther_art

**SAY WHAT YOU WILL ABOUT PRESIDENT OBAMA**

The Socialist Viewpoint Publishing Association publishes Socialist Viewpoint in the interests of the working class.

The editors take positions consistent with revolutionary Marxism. Within this context the editors will consider for publication articles, reviews or comments. The editors may publish comments to accompany these articles. Photographs and cartoons will be appreciated.

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Note to Readers:

Socialist Viewpoint magazine has been edited and distributed by revolutionaries who share a common political outlook stemming from the old Socialist Workers Party of James P. Cannon, and Socialist Action from 1984 through 1999.

After being expelled from Socialist Action in 1999, we formed Socialist Workers Organization in an attempt to carry on the project of building a nucleus of a revolutionary party true to the historic teachings and program of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky.

What we have found is that our numbers are insufficient for this crucial project of party building. This problem is not ours alone; it is a problem flowing from the division and fragmentation that has plagued the revolutionary movement in capitalist America and the world since the 1980s.

What we intend to do is to continue to promote the idea of building a revolutionary Marxist working class political party through the pages of Socialist Viewpoint magazine. We continue to have an optimistic outlook about the revolutionary potential of the world working class to rule society in its own name—socialism. We are optimistic that the working class, united across borders, and acting in its own class interests can solve the devastating crises of war, poverty, oppression, and environmental destruction that capitalism is responsible for.

We expect that revolutionaries from many different organizations, traditions, and backgrounds will respond to the opportunities that will arise, as workers resist the attacks of the capitalist system and government, to build a new revolutionary political party. Just as we join with others to build every response to war and oppression, we look forward to joining with others in the most important work of building a new mass revolutionary socialist workers’ party as it becomes possible to do so.
In my hometown of Richmond, Virginia, employment opportunities are very scarce and difficult to procure. God forbid if one was labeled a convicted felon. Throughout urban communities, there is widespread awareness that due to lack of economic options, drug dealing or resorting to crime is not only an irresistible temptation in order to survive but inevitable in many cases. The environment dictates the response. It is no wonder that the prisons are overflowing with a large Black and Brown population from impoverished communities.

Though drug-dealing was a means to an end, what I failed to comprehend was that we were all victims entrapped in a cycle of victimizing other victims. To fathom my assertion, it is critical to realize that the United States is divided into classes; upper class (bourgeoisie), middle class (petty bourgeoisie and unionized workers,) and lower class (unorganized workers and lumpen proletariat,) In this article I’ll focus on the latter, which is sometimes referred to as the “underclass.” This class or strata lacks political and economic power and is estranged from mainstream society. Being denied proper means of making a living, the lumpen are forced to resort to illegitimate ones, such as robbery, drug-dealing, prostitution, running cons and so on.

This “declassed” strata depend on criminality for survival. They subsist on income derived from preying upon other poor people and catering to the vices of people promoted by a decadent society. Ultimately, they are pawns because the “illegitimate capitalists” rake off the profits from the “rackets” and “launder” the money for the big bourgeoisie who are the real beneficiaries of crime. It’s all part of how capitalism works to keep the poor making the rich ever richer.

The lumpenproletariat are “scape goats” of bourgeois culture and victims of social injustice because we did not create and cannot control the desperate conditions that drive us to do what we do. The capitalist system creates the conditions that afflict the Black and Brown communities. We just get the blame. Furthermore, this explains why the prison populations are overwhelmingly Black and Brown people from the oppressed communities. Black and Brown communities conspicuously lack decent schools, affordable housing, decent healthcare, job training programs and overall community investment that could uplift the people. Instead, our communities are inflicted with militarized police occupation, leading to harassment, brutalization, deadly encounters, and gratuitous arrests that feed people into the prison-industrial complex.

Desperation and necessity forced me to make decisions within my environment necessary for my survival. Make no mistake, I certainly do hold myself accountable for my choices. Isn’t facing up to our mistakes part of what makes us human beings? But, when it comes to the decisions I was forced to make because of socioeconomic conditions, I had no part in making, I live with no regret except that I was not then part of a movement to eradicate those conditions. I emphatically believe that every human being deserves to have what they need in order to survive at all cost and am committed to making that a reality.

Dare to Struggle Dare to Win!
All Power to the People!
Panther Love!

Write to Comrade Pitt:
Peter Kamau Mukuria #11971165
Red Onion State Prison
PO Box 1900
Pound, VA 24279
On the Front Cover: After more than 50 days of strikes in France against the Macron government, workers from the state train company SNCF and the Paris public transport company RATP formed their own Coordinating Committee. This is an example of self-organization and workers’ democracy that is relevant for the entire working class. Read French Labor Organizing Continues on page 24.

At a bridge in central Cuba, near the city of Cienfuegos, a team of Cuban and U.S. scientists collect water. They explored twenty-five Cuban rivers and found little damage after centuries of sugarcane production. (Photo: Climate and Capitalism) Read Greener Farms Means Cleaner Rivers on page 37.

“An American global killing machine (quite literally so, given that growing force of drones) is now at the beck and call of a single, unaccountable individual.” (Photo: U.S. Air Force/Lt Col Leslie Pratt/Public Domain) Read Droning the World on page 6.

January 4, 2020 San Jose, CA—Close up of No War On Iran sign raised at the anti-war protest in front of the City Hall in downtown San Jose. (Photo by Sundry Photography, Shutterstock) Read Sanctions Kill on page 16.

Attention Prison Mail Room:

Prisoners retain their free speech rights under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. That means you cannot legally suppress the expression and consideration of ideas. Prison walls do not form a barrier separating prisoners from the protection of the Constitution, according to the Turner v. Safley ruling. [482 U.S. 78, 107 Sct 2245 (1987)] If you exclude printed matter on an improper basis, or give a false pretext or rationale for its exclusion, because of the ideas expressed in it, you are breaking the law. The prisoner denied access to material s/he wants to read can bring a civil rights lawsuit against you with cause for seeking punitive damages. In the case of Police Department Chicago v. Mosley, 408 U.S. 92, 95, 92 Sct 2286, 2290 (1972) the court found that “[A]bove all else, the First Amendment means that government has no power to restrict expression because of its message, subject matter or content.”