

NewPolitics

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From the Editors

DONALD TRUMP IN HIS SECOND term is a president like no other American chief executive. Dominating the Republican Party that controls Congress and with a compliant Supreme Court, he has as he promised unleashed political and economic chaos, shattering old international relationships, shredding political pacts, destroying long-standing traditions, and calling everything into question. Overseas, he has become the war president, causing death and destruction in the Middle East, leading to the blocking of the Strait of Hormuz, stopping oil and fertilizer that will lead to hunger in many nations. And at home, he is bringing misery to millions. At the same time, his violent and cruel foreign and domestic policies are enriching his friends in the billionaire class. The results are staggering.

Since our last issue, Trump continued to fully support Israel in its genocidal war against the Palestinians. He joined Israel in its war on Iran and allowed Israel to simultaneously make war on Lebanon. As we go to press, Trump has clearly lost the war but is trying to negotiate a face-saving deal. In the Western hemisphere, Trump ordered the seizure of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife on January 3. And he has continued and worsened the economic strangulation of the Cuban economy.

Domestically, the Trump administration has destroyed the social safety net for working class and poor people, slashing or freezing funds for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Child Care and Development Fund, Social Services block grants, the Women, Infants, and Children program, housing programs, Head Start,

and Job Corps.

Trump, Congress, and the Supreme Court have also waged a domestic, racist war against immigrants. The Supreme Court has upheld the government's policy of turning away immigrants seeking asylum. And it has ended Temporary Protective Status for hundreds of thousands of Haitians and Syrians, with other groups such as Ukrainians to follow. They face deportation back to the dangerous, in many cases life-threatening, conditions they fled.

Trump has destroyed important government agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and fired hundreds of thousands of Federal workers. He has attacked universities attempting to control their curriculum, extra-curricular activities, and faculty, cutting their financial support and enrollment of foreign students. And he has worked to control the media, especially its news programming and its critical talk shows and comics.

Fortunately, however, all these horrific policies have led to an enormous resistance movement. Millions participated in the national No Kings demonstrations, the largest in U.S. history, and tens of thousands joined in Bernie Sanders's "Fighting Oligarchy" rallies against the billionaires.

Democrats won recent gubernatorial elections; they won control of two purple state supreme courts and special elections to several state legislatures. Zohran Mamdani's election as mayor of New York was a spectacular victory for progressives. A Muslim and a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, Mamdani has been able to use his influence to carry other

DSA members and progressives to victory in Congressional primaries. The *New York Times* reported that “Socialists Have Momentum in Urban America,” explaining that “Democratic socialists, harnessing generational frustration over affordability, lead New York and Seattle and are knocking on the door in Los Angeles and Washington.”

Polls show that Trump has lost support, especially from his white working-class base. The social protests and Democratic election victories suggest that many, perhaps a majority want to end Trump’s reign. Many Americans, however, distrust the Democrats who have proven so gutless during the Trump decade. So many will vote for Democrats but through protests fight for something better.

In this issue we have seven articles focusing on the United States. Dan La Botz gives an overview of the political situation as we head toward the November elections. Elizabeth Rapoport interviews historian Ellen Schrecker to help us understand how the current threats to civil liberties compare with those of the McCarthy era. Ben Silverman takes up the debate over whether Trump is a fascist. And Samuel Farber asks, “Is Free Speech a Dangerous Idea?”

Samuel Barney looks at rural prison economies as exemplars of false consciousness. Two articles focus on the war on immigrants. Raoul Cansino provides a report from Los Angeles on the fightback against the repression, while Bill Kelly examines “The Political Economy of Nativism.”

We turn next to look at imperialism and the world. Lisbeth Moya González assesses the current situation in Cuba, asking whether this is the end of Cuban state communism. Sudan went from high hopes a decade ago to one of the world’s worst humanitarian disasters. Husam Mahjoub writes about the international responsibility for this tragedy. Siyavash Shahabi criticizes those anti-imperialists who ignore

the working class living under authoritarian regimes. And Matt Benson draws attention to the struggle of the Mapuche people in Chile who “refuse to disappear.”

We take up many of the issues confronting workers and their unions in an interview with labor organizer and former labor lawyer Daniel Gross by Kevin Van Meter. And Suzi Weissman interviews Simon Pirani and Aleksandra Zapolskaa, two writers who have championed Russian political prisoners. Two courtroom speeches — final statements by defendants before sentencing — are included here.

Andrew Stone Higgins has edited a new history of the important U.S. political organization, International Socialists. We reprint two memoirs from that book—by Thomas Harrison on the Berkeley Independent Socialist Club and Anne Mackie on organizing UPS workers—and a review of the book by Alan Wald.

The issue includes several review essays. Frieda Afary reviews two books on AI and the issues it poses. Javier Sethness offers a sharp rebuttal to Rockhill’s *Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?* And Peter Drucker considers Molly Crabapple’s *Here Where We Live Is Our Country: The Story of the Jewish Bund*. In addition, we have other reviews: David Finkel on the new edition of *Medea Benjamin* and Nicholas Davies’ volume on Ukraine; Andrew Sernatinger on Sam Friedman’s analysis of Teamsters for a Democratic Union; Fran Shor on the Bernard Goetz case and its context; Amna Latif on the partition of South Asia; and Farooq Sulehria on the media and Afghanistan. We end with a letter from an Afghan feminist on the condition of women under the Taliban.

We hope you find this issue interesting and helpful for the current struggles. We will continue to be part of the resistance to Trump as well as to the barbarism of capitalism. More than ever we need a liberatory socialism.

A Referendum on Democracy? A Chance for a New Direction?

DAN LA BOTZ

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP, CONFLATING his own 80th birthday and the nation's 250th, organized a \$60 million circus-like celebration at the White House with a 92-foot-tall cage called "the claw" for a "human cock-fight" and motorcycles flying through the air. All plastered with corporate advertising. The event perfectly symbolized Trump's "*l'état c'est moi*" mentality, his corruption, and the decadence of American culture under his quasi-monarchical reign. At the same time he announced the end of the war on Iran, which was not yet over. There, they were all smiles. Not so much elsewhere.

There is a profound malaise in America. There is a widespread feeling that things have gone wrong. That we as a country have gone off track. That the government is not doing what it should. That one doesn't know what to expect tomorrow. There is much disappointment, broad vague feelings of disorientation. The new imperial adventure in Venezuela and the wars in the Middle East worry us. The deployment in our cities of troops and of thousands of violent, masked agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in our streets represents an unaccustomed menace, a new threat. So, we have anxiety and fear. And

now we are going to have an election.

The electorate is uneasy, doubtful. Democrats, Independents, and Republicans too are dissatisfied. A plurality now considers themselves to be Independents, 45 percent, while 27 percent consider themselves to be Democrats and 27 percent Republicans. And among Independents, a majority lean toward the Democrats. The rising number of Independents suggests that given the right circumstances and some political initiative our political system might be capable of change.

The November 3 midterm election will be a referendum on democracy. President Donald Trump has concentrated in his hands enormous power over the Republican Party and therefore over Congress, and he has by and large been supported by the Supreme Court. He has ignored the Constitution and the country's laws, creating the most authoritarian government in our nation's modern history. He has broken with traditions and attacked governmental and private institutions that protected us, enhanced our lives, and provided us with economic security, from the Centers for Disease Control and National Institutes of Health to the Department of Education and Social Security, the National Labor Relations Board, and others. He has ripped up government policies that protected racial and gender minorities and that worked to create a more equal society. At the

Dan La Botz is an editor of New Politics.

same time, he has used his power to force universities to change their policies and curricula and attacked the independence of the media.

His government is rife with nepotism and cronyism. He has engaged in an orgy of corruption, accepting bribes, engaging in graft, extorting money, and using his office to expand his and his family's business interests. He has lowered the taxes for himself and his billionaire class, the "Epstein class" as some now call it, while cutting the health and education programs of working people and the poor. He has sent U.S. troops and ICE agents into U.S. cities, with the ICE agents violently attacking and murdering immigrants and U.S. citizens alike. His dealings with our country's people are callous and cruel, as are his interventions abroad.

Trump has engaged in imperial adventures aimed at expanding control over the Western Hemisphere, from his seizure of Nicolás Maduro, the president of Venezuela, to his strangulation of Cuba by cutting off its oil supplies. At the same time, he has threatened to take Greenland from Denmark and even to incorporate Canada into the United States. He tacitly supports Vladimir Putin in his war with Ukraine, cutting off U.S. funds and arms for the besieged victim of Russian imperialism. Like former president Joe Biden, Trump has remained aligned with Israel in its genocidal war in Gaza and its ethnic cleansing in the West Bank and permits Israel's continuing war on Lebanon and attacks on Syria. Finally, there is his joint war with Israel on Iran, killing thousands and violating international law. Trump, who said he would be "the president of peace," has become the president of wars, taking the lives of tens of thousands, many civilians, including many children.

The Iran war, which led to the blocking of the Strait of Hormuz, has not only

brought death and destruction to Iranians, Americans, and people of other nations in the Middle East, but by cutting off the shipping of 20 percent of the world's petroleum, along with much of its fertilizer, it has disrupted economies around the world. Several nations of the region have been drawn into the war and military aid to Iran from Russia and China raises the risk of wider war.

The election will be the culmination of two years of mass protest in the form of the No Kings demonstrations, this year's May Day, and the Fighting Oligarchy rallies of senator Bernie Sanders, which altogether saw millions of Americans marching in over 3,500 locations. No Kings became omnibus protests against every aspect of Trump's policies, from his undermining of democracy to his tax cuts for the rich and benefit cuts for the rest of us, from his support for Israel's genocide in Gaza to his joint war with Israel against Iran, from his violent and inhumane attacks on immigrants to his support for oil and coal when they are causing global warming and leading to violent weather events.

Most of those protesting at No Kings and joining the "Fighting Oligarchy" rallies have been looking forward to this November as the opportunity to elect a majority of Democrats to Congress and hopefully begin to put the brakes on Trump and the Republicans. And this is so even though many view the Democrats as weak and ineffective and devoid of useful, much less inspiring, ideas. There is now a broad, active resistance to Trump throughout the country.

Is Trump Losing his Grip on the Republican Party?

There are at the same time signs that Trump—despite his ability to take vengeance on his opponents in the Republican primary elections—is losing his hold

on both the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement and the Republican Party. The America First, no-more-endless-wars wing of the movement and its influencers—former Fox News host Tucker Carlson and former congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene (both of whom have actually left the Republican Party), to media personality Candace Owens, and podcaster Megyn Kelly—didn’t like the Iran war from the beginning. Vice president J.D. Vance can be considered a silent partner in this company. And these people, as well as others like senator Ted Cruz and *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens, are obviously not happy that despite the war’s enormous cost, now estimated at more than \$132 billion, the United States has clearly lost the war, achieving none of its objectives.

People didn’t like the war and they don’t like the so-called peace either. Democrats hate Trump’s “peace deal” and Republican politicians don’t like it either, the latter saying the deal gives too much to Iran: ending all sanctions and agreeing to pay \$300 billion to Iran, while postponing the negotiation of an agreement to end Iran’s nuclear program. Republican senator Bill Cassidy called the deal the “worst foreign policy blunder in decades.”

At the same time, some Republican senators are breaking with Trump over his White House ballroom, first estimated at \$200 million to be paid for by private donors and then priced at \$400 million to be paid for by taxpayers. Senate Republicans removed from the immigration enforcement funding bill the \$1 billion Secret Service funding request that would help pay for his ballroom, a rare GOP break with him.

And they also dislike Trump’s Justice Department’s creation of a so-called anti-weaponization fund to pay people—Trump’s people—who were supposedly persecuted by the DOJ under Biden. Mon-

ey from this deal could go to the January 6 insurrectionists who violently attacked Congress to prevent the election of Biden, that is, to overthrow the elected government. A would-be coup.

How did this fund get established? In January 2026, Trump sued the IRS and the Treasury Department for \$10 billion because his tax reports were released. The Justice Department, headed by his appointee, in a settlement gave Trump control of almost \$1.8 billion that will apparently be handed out to his allies and friends. “So the nation’s top law enforcement official is asking for a slush fund to pay people who assault cops? Utterly stupid, morally wrong—Take your pick,” said Republican senator Mitch McConnell. For the moment, it has been stopped by the courts.

Perhaps most important, several polls indicate that white working-class voters are now breaking with Trump. As the *New York Times* wrote:

Polls now regularly show that a majority of white voters who did not graduate from college no longer approve of Mr. Trump’s handling of the economy.

A shift in the white working class could be key to a Democratic victory in Congress, to stopping Donald Trump’s mayhem, and to building a new labor movement.

Still Trump goes into the midterms with tremendous economic and political power. The tech billionaires of Silicon Valley, many of whom were once seen as liberal idealists, have by and large gone over to Trump because of their opposition to the Democrats’ industry regulations and higher taxes. Among those now backing the president are: Elon Musk, the country’s first trillionaire, the CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, briefly the head of the Department of Government Efficiency or DOGE, who has friction with the president but remains in his camp; Peter Thiel of Palantir, founded with help from the CIA

and a provider of services to the military; Marc Andreessen, the venture capitalist and co-founder of Andreessen Horowitz; David Sacks, venture capitalist and former PayPal executive; Jeff Bezos, Amazon founder and chair; Mark Zuckerberg, Meta CEO; Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI; and Tim Cook, CEO of Apple. Almost all of these men have given Trump's campaigns millions, have participated in his major events, and have engaged positively with his administration. They are the pinnacle of the oligarchy that Sanders decries.

Meanwhile, Trump and the Republicans have consolidated their control over much of the media. Musk, of course, owns X, a major global social networking and news platform. Trump allies Larry and David Ellison acquired Paramount, which owns CBS. After the takeover, CBS News shifted its reportage to the right. CBS also canceled Stephen Colbert's *The Late Show*, which had run for eleven years and was for nine of those years the highest rated nighttime television show, clearly because of Colbert's criticism of Trump and his administration. Nexstar Media Group and Sinclair Broadcast Group, both of which control hundreds of local TV stations that push rightwing positions. And Jeff Bezos took over *The Washington Post* and directed its opinion section to emphasize "personal liberties and free markets" as well as canceling the paper's presidential endorsement. At the same time the Federal Communications Commission under Chairman Brendan Carr has used pending merger approvals to pressure networks, aiming in particular at ABC and bringing about the temporary suspension of Jimmy Kimmel's nighttime show. He also criticized Stephen Colbert and is investigating "The View," the daytime program during which women panelists discuss contemporary events, and sometimes criticize Trump.

In addition, Trump's Justice Depart-

ment is increasingly turning against activists on the left. It has indicted 15 members of Direct Action Minnesota involved in anti-ICE protests. Another group of anti-ICE protestors in Texas, where a policeman was shot, were accused of being antifa domestic terrorists, charged with conspiracy—some for being members of a reading group and others who were not present at the protest—and sentenced to 30 to 100 years in prison. There is now an FBI investigation into a grassroots voter registration group in Ohio, allegedly for election fraud. And a group of eight pro-Palestinian activists at the University of Michigan have been indicted for conspiracy to threaten campus leaders to get them to sever ties to Israel. The Southern Poverty Law Center is the subject of a DOJ criminal investigation regarding past use of paid informants in Klan and neo-Nazi groups. We increasingly live in a police-state.

A Desire for Change

In any case, the electorate is restive. Americans whether they are Republicans, Democrats, or Independents are looking for a new political direction. Trump's tariffs and then the Iran war have dispelled any economic optimism. Rising gas and food prices as a result of the war, the astronomical cost of housing in many cities, expensive health care, and the instability of the economy have led to a widespread realization that there is a need for a new political program to deal with what many ordinary people perceive as an economic crisis. In California, both governor Gavin Newsom and representative Ro Khanna, who represents Silicon Valley, have talked about emulating FDR who during the Great Depression of the 1930s created a new social pact that improved the lives of workers and the elderly—and saved capitalism.

Yet it is clear that both California politicians live in fear of offending the "donor

class,” especially the tech billionaires in their own state. Both Newsom and Khanna talk about taxing the billionaires but also about how much they love entrepreneurs like those in Silicon Valley. Less cautious, perhaps because he can afford to be, is Tom Steyer, an American billionaire businessman, philanthropist, and environmental advocate, who ran as a Democrat for governor with a platform calling for single-payer health care, the abolition of ICE, challenging the utilities to reduce energy costs, and other progressive measures.

Many voters will vote for the Democrats in November to stop Trump, but they have little hope that that party, led by moderates such as senator Chuck Schumer and representative Hakeem Jeffries, both of whom are deeply committed to the existing system, will be able to chart a new course. But for voters, exhausted, angry, and frightened, Democrats are at this moment the only alternative since we unfortunately live in a country with two conservative capitalist parties, one much worse than the other. And now, with congressional redistricting, it will be made more difficult for us to even choose between those two poor options.

Rigging the Elections

Demands by President Trump, Supreme Court decisions, and state legislatures' votes are redrawing the election maps to increase the number of Republican representatives and decrease the Democratic ones. At the same time this process will reduce the number of Black and Latino congressional representatives, since 82 percent of Blacks and 61 percent of Latinos favor Democrats. And when partisan redistricting takes place, because it favors incumbents, most of whom are men, it usually also reduces women's representation.

Midterm elections historically result in gains for the party that is out of power, which this November should mean a Dem-

ocratic victory, since Republican Trump is president and Republicans also control both houses of Congress. But Trump and the Republicans are working feverishly to rig the election so that their party will win and retain control of Congress. Historically, redistricting has been carried out in all states at the time of the decennial census to reflect changes in population, but now it is being done between censuses in a partisan manner to benefit one or the other party. The process began in July 2025 when Trump demanded that Texas Republican governor Greg Abbott and the Republicans, who dominated the state legislature, redraw the state's electoral districts, which they did.

In this redistricting process, Texas Republicans are likely to win three to four additional seats in Congress. After Texas, the Republican states of Missouri and North Carolina also redrew their maps, producing one additional Republican seat in each of those states. And because of litigation, Ohio and Utah both redistricted, resulting in two more Republican seats in Ohio and one more in Utah.

In response, California, with the largest congressional delegation, 52 seats, under the leadership of a Democratic governor, Gavin Newsom, conducted a statewide referendum approving redistricting. With the new map, Democrats should gain four to five new seats. Like California, Virginia passed a referendum to redistrict and add Democratic seats, but the state's Supreme Court overturned the effort with dubious legal arguments.

The second part of the story begins on April 29, 2026, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled regarding a case in Louisiana that Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act was unconstitutional racial gerrymandering because it ensured Black representation in Congress. To appreciate the significance of this, one must understand that after the U.S. Civil War (1861–65) three amendments

to the Constitution liberated the former Black slaves, made them citizens, and gave Black males the right to vote. But after the brief progressive period known as “radical Reconstruction” that ended in 1877, the 11 states of the Old South where slavery had existed denied Black people the right to vote, segregated them, and tolerated lynching to punish troublemakers. Only after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, a period of enormous protest and conflict, did Blacks win the right to vote by the Voting Rights Act. That act ensured that Black people throughout the South could vote and be represented in Congress in proportion to their population in their state.

When in April the Supreme Court negated the relevant portions of that Act, Republicans moved rapidly to redistrict in Tennessee and Florida, while Alabama and Georgia were also redistricted due to litigation. All of these actions will lead to more seats for Republicans and reduce representation for African Americans. For example, in Tennessee, the voting district of the city of Memphis and Shelby County, 63 percent Black, was divided into three separate districts, each attached to suburban or rural white areas, thus eliminating two Black, Democratic districts.

These are tremendous defeats for democracy and for Black Americans. Democrats might still win the midterm in November because of Trump’s current unpopularity, but in the future, the Democrats or other opposition parties will find all elections more difficult.

We should also remember that Trump adviser Steve Bannon has called on the president to send ICE or U.S. troops to polling places ostensibly to prevent voter fraud. Trump has also said he might invoke the insurrection act. Deploying ICE or military troops to polling places would violate federal law and many states prohibit any guns at polling places. Still, Trump may,

as he has before, simply ignore the law. It’s also possible that neo-fascist groups like the Proud Boys and rightwing militias will interfere in the elections.

So, given the two pro-business parties, what is to be done?

Is There No Alternative?

Of course, there is the Green Party, which began back in 1984, a progressive, pro-labor party, with an eco-socialist platform, but the Green Party has been unable to attract the necessary mass public support. While it has elected dozens of local officials, it has never elected anyone to Congress, nor has it elected a governor, nor the mayor of a large city, and it received only 1 to 4 percent of the vote in presidential elections. For most voters, the Greens don’t seem like a real option.

There could be another option. Les Leopold of the Labor Institute, who has a long history as a strategist and educator with progressive union activists, argues that the time has come for a working-class alternative. He sets forth his argument for a labor party in his new book *The Billionaires Have Two Parties, We Need a Party of Our Own: How working people can build independent political power*. This is not a new idea. Les, alongside his union brother Tony Mazzocchi, worked for years in an attempt to organize a workers’ party. In 1996 they succeeded in bringing together in Cleveland, Ohio, 1,400 delegates from forty-four states, representing nearly two million union members, at the founding convention of the Labor Party. Afterwards, however, the unions declined to run candidates against the Democrats, and by 2007 the party had gone out of business.

Leopold believes that now the time has come. Original polling conducted in Rust Belt states of Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin revealed that most working-class voters, whatever their

party, support progressive measures such as taxing the rich, banning mass layoffs, and capping the cost of prescription drugs. We also know from other polls that they support health care as a human right and many would like to see free trade schools, colleges, and universities. We know that millions of Americans have given up on both major parties, so that now a plurality register as Independents. So, says Leopold, it's time for a new party, and he clearly believes that the launching pad for such a new political party is the labor union movement.

Is it possible? At present, 14.7 million wage and salary workers belong to unions, which represents 10 percent of the U.S. labor force. Public-sector workers have a unionization rate of 32.9 percent compared to 5.9 percent for private sector workers, though during his second term, Trump eliminated 350,000 federal workers. The question, of course, is not simply how many workers are in unions, but will they be willing to fight for change, economic and political change? History suggests that a new party on the left, a workers' party, can only come out of a mass, militant working-class movement, like the great labor upsurges of the 1890s, 1930s, and 1970s. So the question is do we see such potential power today?

We have seen important mass strikes in the last few years, including the United Auto Workers strike against the big three, and the SAG-AFTRA writers' strike against the Hollywood studios. The Teamsters union mobilized for a strike against UPS, but they settled at the last moment, averting the shutdown. The unions' leaderships, however, don't have uniform political positions and they have internal divisions. Union president Shawn Fain and the UAW have backed the Democrats, but Teamster president Sean O'Brien has supported Trump. And despite its success in organizing a national strike just a couple of years

ago, today the UAW leadership is bitterly divided into rival caucuses and cliques. Nurses and teachers in their various unions remain the most politically progressive workers and one can imagine them adopting a labor party position—though so far, they have not.

Other social movements, if not union affiliated, have a working-class base. I already mentioned the millions in the No Kings protests, which though multi-class in character, are important measures of opposition and mobilization against Trump and the Republicans and include many workers, but they have not been militant. At the same time, however, we have seen massive, militant, civil disobedience in fights in working-class communities in Minneapolis, Chicago, and Los Angeles against the agents of ICE. Many other states and cities have anti-ICE, pro-immigrant movements that have not yet had to face the test of confrontation with these government gangsters, but surely some of them would be as militant as those in Minneapolis, Chicago, and Los Angeles.

Can these various efforts become a movement? Perhaps. UAW president Fain proposed that unions negotiate contracts with common expiration dates on May 1, 2028 with the goal of sparking the country's first general strike. But with challenges from the employers and faction fights in his own union, Fain has not been able to work to contribute to the building of such a movement. For the last two years, a group called May Day Strong, a coalition of unions, immigrant rights organizations, and pro-democracy and civil rights organizations, has been working on his proposal, partly by calling protest demonstrations.

The Twin Cities of Minneapolis–St. Paul have had several years of almost continuous mobilization ever since the police murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, followed by the rebellion that then touched

off the Black Lives Matter movement. Two years later, in March of 2022, Minneapolis teachers conducted a successful 18-day strike that improved wages and conditions. So, in the Twin Cities there have been attempts to deepen the resistance movement by organizing workers assemblies, the first attended by 400 activists and the second by just 200. So, it is not clear where this movement at the grassroots is going.

There are other new movements. The Supreme Court's overturning of a key section of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which could cause 19 Black congressional representatives to lose their seats, appears to be motivating African Americans to join in the new mass civil rights protest. Thousands of Black people joined such protests in the historic cities of Selma and Montgomery, Alabama, where their courageous forebears fought in the 1950s and 60s. So, we may be entering a new era of Black activism, perhaps picking up where the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, the largest such demonstrations in U.S. history, left off.

What about the Democrats' Progressive Wing?

If a labor party is not yet on the agenda, could something else be done? Trump's approval rating as of June 17, 2026, was only 36 percent, remarkably poor. Most polls suggest that Democrats—despite the rigging of the election through redistricting—can win back the House and perhaps also the Senate. So, this raises the question, if we don't yet have the militant mass movement needed to propel the rise of a new political party, a workers' party, might the movement be big enough and spirited enough to increase the weight of progressive Democrats?

There are three organizations whose strategy aims to do just that, to elect more progressive Democrats. There is Justice Democrats, a political action committee

formed by activists from the Bernie Sanders campaign in 2020, which has helped to elect congressional representatives Raúl Grijalva, Pramila Jayapal, Ro Khanna, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Presley, and Rashida Tlaib. Justice Democrats makes endorsements, raises money, and offers strategic advice, but it is not a political membership organization.

Two political groups working on this project are the Working Families Party (WFP) and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The WFP, founded in 1998 by labor unions, advocacy groups, and community organizations, is a political party and does run some independent candidates, though it mostly endorses Democrats. DSA is an independent socialist organization with about 100,000 members, though it is not an electoral political party, and so doesn't appear on election ballots. DSA, too, mostly endorses Democrats, focusing on DSA members such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, and Zohran Mamdani, though it also endorsed and succeeded in electing other progressives and socialists to Congress and to state and city offices. Then, too, DSA helped elect dozens of state, county, and city officials. The organization's candidates did well in the primary elections in several cities and states held in the spring.

DSA has in the past elected several of its members to Congress and there are currently two serving in the House: Ocasio-Cortez and Tlaib. The election of Mamdani to the office of mayor of New York on a progressive program calling for a freeze on rents, universal childcare, and free public buses, was a major achievement. Since being elected Mamdani has been able to get New York State funding for his early childhood and pre-kindergarten programs and, it appears, his proposal for a freeze on rents in about one million rent-stabilized apartments may be realized. Mamdani is

pushing for more public control of public housing and greater protection for tenants. DSA has, however, criticized Mamdani for supporting a plan to increase the NYC police force by 580 officers.

The strength of DSA strategy and Mamdani's influence were shown when two more New York City socialists won Democratic primary nominations for Congress on June 23, over establishment Democrats endorsed by the WFP and the labor bureaucracy. Also, Mamdani-ally Brad Lander defeated Dan Goldman, an incumbent backed by the Israel Lobby. These were stunning victories for Mamdani and DSA that will affect the national Democratic Party going forward.

Within the U.S. Congress, the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC) currently has 100 members. Some, like senator Bernie Sanders, consider themselves socialists, but most do not. The CPC has recently focused on health care and other economic issues and most recently on "the affordability crisis." Though some members of the caucus regularly vote against the military budget, the caucus as a whole does not. The majority of the caucus—and the caucus itself—did not support the Israeli military campaign in Gaza. And the CPC endorsed the *Block the Bombs Act*, which would restrict U.S. weapons transfers to the Israeli military until that country's human rights violations cease.

The Progressive Caucus, some of whose members have been endorsed by Justice Democrats, the Working Families Party, and the Democratic Socialists of America, takes important stands, helps to educate the public, and encourages mass protests such as No Kings. The Caucus has proven, however, incapable of organizing a movement to break with the current system,

with both the Republicans and Democrats who preserve the status quo. Many, including myself, will vote for their candidates, hoping to slow Trump's march toward authoritarianism, dictatorship, and some new twenty-first-century American version of fascism. Organizing that labor party that some are working for would be better, but it probably requires a mass working-class struggle and a broader social rebellion, which we do not yet have. Perhaps Trump's domestic and foreign policies will finally push enough people to fight back, but so far, though they face challenges, the billionaire class, the Republicans, and Trump have the upper hand.

We will in any case stand with Minneapolis and other cities and towns against ICE and in defense of immigrants. We will join in the No Kings protests. We will turn out for May Day 2028, hoping that the call for a general strike gets a national response.

A Democratic victory in the midterm elections could deliver a blow against Trump, his MAGA movement, and the Republicans. There is a good chance that, despite the partisan redistricting, the Democrats can take control of the House and possibly even the Senate. While this is far from an ideal alternative, such an outcome could hamper Trump's various domestic and foreign policy projects, though he would still use all of the powers of the presidency to carry out his vile policies, and the Democrats may not have the will to stop him. Nevertheless, the defeat of the Republicans in the midterms would represent a defeat for Trump, a victory for the opposition, and provide the resistance with opportunities to build the social movement, and the protests, out of which a new politics could arise.

McCarthyism Then and Now

An Interview with Ellen Schrecker

ELIZABETH RAPAPORT

Ellen Schrecker is professor emerita of American history at Yeshiva University. Her scholarship has focused on the history of McCarthyism. Among her books are Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America (1998), The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University (2010), and The Lost Promise: American Universities in the 1960s (2025). From 1998 to 2002, she edited Academe, the journal of the American Association of University Professors. She spoke with Elizabeth Rapaport, a professor of law emerita at the University of New Mexico.

Elizabeth Rapaport: *Could you share with our readers how you came to devote such a considerable part of your career to the history of McCarthyism?*

Ellen Schrecker: Sure. I was originally a European diplomatic historian. And I believed in those pre-feminist days in the early 1960s that if somebody's career gets priority, it's the husband's, and if we were going to go overseas to research our dissertations, we would go somewhere for my husband and not for me. I was married to a historian of China. So I had to find a thesis topic that involved the United States. And I selected the French debt to the United States after World War I, which was the only way I could write about the period I was interested in without having to know

German. And by the time I finished the dissertation nearly thirteen years later—I realized I was no longer interested in European diplomatic history.

Instead, I got a job at Harvard teaching freshman composition—a course you could teach as a mini-seminar on any topic you wanted as long as you were assigning a lot of papers. So, I decided I'd teach about the United States in the 1950s. It was when I grew up. And I discovered there was nothing written about McCarthyism that I could assign to my students. Nothing. And so, after about a year of flailing around, I decided that I would work on McCarthyism. I got a fellowship and a book contract for what I hoped would be *the* general book on McCarthyism that I needed for my students. But it was too broad a subject, and I had to narrow it down. So, I focused on higher education. After years of research—over 100 interviews, dozens of archives, and more—I published *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* in 1986. It won a prize and got a lot of attention. And *then* I started the bigger book on McCarthyism I had originally planned to write (*Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*, 1998).

By that point I was teaching at Yeshiva University when the World Trade Center was attacked. The Bush administration responded with repressive measures like the PATRIOT Act. And I began to be asked how that repression compared with McCarthyism. At about the same time, I also

became the editor of the AAUP [American Association of University Professors] magazine, *Academe*. So, I was following both what was going on in higher education as well as political repression and wrote a book about it: *The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Academic Freedom, Corporatization, and the Assault on the University*, 2010.

ER: *We will get to comparing McCarthyism with the present day. But first, we are long past the time when most Americans had a lived experience of the McCarthy era. As you make clear in your writings, McCarthyism was perhaps the apogee of the Second Red Scare, but only a portion or phase of the Second Red Scare on campuses or anywhere else. Can you situate McCarthy within the Second Red Scare and give us a picture of what it was all about?*

ES: Sure. The main thing about McCarthyism, and you're quite right to call it the Second Red Scare, or what I would now call it, the Cold War Red Scare, is that it is misnamed. Actually, if you wanted to name it after any single individual, you would have to name it after J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI. He was the main strategist who designed and then operated most of the machinery of the anti-Communist political repression of the late 1940s and 1950s. It's important to realize that besides being misnamed, McCarthyism was already in existence by the time Joe McCarthy entered history waving around his ever-changing lists of supposed Communists in the State Department. It was not really a conscious attack on the left, though it ended up destroying much of the left. It was much more specifically focused on eliminating the influence within the United States of Communism and all the institutions, individuals, and ideas associated with it.

What's important to understand here is that in the 1930s and 1940s the Communist Party (CP), despite its ultimately self-defeating support for the Soviet Union,

was the most dynamic organization on the left. It wasn't a paper organization, and its members were often the most committed and active individuals fighting for social justice and against fascism. They were involved in dozens of different causes and so-called front groups that dealt with single issues and were often led by people in or near the CP. The party, for example, was very active in creating the industrial union movement that became the CIO. It was the only non-civil rights organization that was promoting racial equality. It was very involved in anti-fascist activities. Because of its international connections, the party had the franchise on support for the Republican forces fighting Franco's fascism in Spain. So, people who were concerned about fascism or who wanted to get involved with organizing labor unions, or were concerned with racial justice, turned to this broader movement, including many academics.

They faced a lot of opposition. And had ever since the party was founded right after World War I as the main American socialist organization supporting the Bolshevik Revolution. That opposition intensified during the 1930s in response to the social unrest of that period, especially the growth of the labor movement. Right-wing politicians, journalists, and reactionary business leaders latched onto anti-Communism as a way to undermine the social and economic reforms of the New Deal. By the mid-1930s, there were abortive state and federal investigations and other attempts to smear the Roosevelt administration as infiltrated by Communists. A rehearsal for McCarthyism, as some historians called it. But it petered out in the early 1940s, especially once the United States entered World War II and was allied with the Soviet Union.

After the war that alliance soured. And by 1947, the United States was involved in a Cold War against the Soviet Union. At the same time, on the home front, the

Republican Party won the congressional elections of 1946. Because President Truman was afraid that this new Republican-controlled Congress might pass legislation that would undermine his administration in the name of protecting the government from Communist infiltration, he jumped the gun and created a loyalty security program to oust suspected Communists from the government. As a result, because of the Cold War, the anti-Communism that had originally begun as a partisan attack on the nation's main left-wing movement became a matter of national security. And, when the federal government decided to purge Communists from its ranks, the rest of the country followed.

Though there had been Soviet espionage during the war, especially in the Manhattan Project, there was no serious Communist threat to the United States by the late 1940s. Most of the Party members who had been in the government were gone. They resumed their pre-war lives and began to leave the Party. They learned more about Stalin's purges and realized that the CP was no longer an effective political organization. Even so, they and their former comrades became the main victims of the Cold War Red Scare. For, contrary to what many liberal opponents of McCarthyism believed at the time, it did not attack "innocent liberals," but men and women who had, or, more commonly, once had, some kind of connection to the American Communist Party.

We need to realize that the CP was vulnerable to the political repression of McCarthyism for two reasons. One, obviously, was its tie to the Soviet Union. Its leaders did follow the line from Moscow, which was not always in sync with what a successful American left-wing movement might have required. The Party's other problem was that, because it was unpopular in the United States, its members were

told to keep their membership secret. That made Communism seem like a conspiracy. It created an aura of deceit and dishonesty, even though most of its members had done nothing wrong. But, it provided its enemies with the weapon of exposure.

Truman's 1947 Loyalty-Security Program legitimated the Cold War Red Scare and can be considered the quasi-official start of McCarthyism. Because of the Party's secrecy, identifying its members became central to Truman's Program. And the FBI took on that task. It relied on its usual (and often illicit) methods of undercover informants, wiretaps, break-ins, and other sensitive operations. But it also relied on the fact that the Party expected its members to join its front organizations and so the people who belonged to those groups—which were officially listed by the attorney general—came under suspicion. "Guilt by association" it was called.

McCarthyism was a two-stage process in which the first stage was that of identification, of exposing someone as a Communist. That stage was usually handled by an official body like the FBI or a congressional investigating committee. The second stage was the application of sanctions, which could be some kind of criminal prosecution but was most often done by an employer. People lost their jobs. Thousands of them.

ER: *There were Loyalty programs on campuses, too, and I know that States had them as well.*

ES: Yes, employers throughout the country—at state and local governments, private corporations, universities, movie studios, hospitals, and more—all copied the federal government's two-stage model. Sometimes with a lot of publicity; sometimes quietly.

The most prominent instruments of exposure were the congressional committees. There were three main ones: the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC),

the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee of the Senate Judiciary Committee (SISS), and McCarthy's own Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Committee on Government Operations.

HUAC had been formed in the 1930s to investigate fascism but was soon looking for Communists in the government. Even though it was regarded as something of a loose cannon, full of reactionary Southern segregationists, it was resuscitated at the end of the war. Because of the persistence of a smart young congressman named Richard Nixon, who joined the committee in 1947 and got help from the FBI, the committee was able to pursue charges against the former State Department official Alger Hiss for being a Soviet spy. That case made Nixon's career—and HUAC's as well. It had, we now know, uncovered some real Communist espionage.

The SISS, under Senators Pat McCarran and William Jenner, was a more reputable body but carried out similar investigations, while McCarthy's erratic investigations through his Senate Permanent Subcommittee were ultimately to lead to his own downfall after he took on the Army—and so ran afoul of President Eisenhower.

But all three committees operated in the same way. They first questioned their witnesses in an executive session to see if they would cooperate. Those who did—either by convincing the committee that they were not Communists or else by naming the names of the people they had been in the party with—were usually excused from a public hearing. Those who refused to cooperate were invariably grilled in public. In the early days of McCarthyism, most of the unfriendly witnesses—like the so-called Hollywood 10—assumed that, even if they were prosecuted for contempt of Congress, the courts would acquit them on First Amendment grounds. Asking people

about their political beliefs and activities was a violation of their freedom of speech and assembly, or so those witnesses thought. But they were wrong. Instead, the federal judiciary cited national security and sent a number of those recalcitrant witnesses to prison. By the early 1950s, the only way witnesses could avoid a contempt citation for refusing to cooperate with the committee was to invoke the Fifth Amendment's privilege against testifying against themselves. But, taking the Fifth looked bad, as if the witnesses were hiding something. They were called "Fifth Amendment Communists" and, though they avoided prison, they were punished anyhow. They lost their jobs. Even in colleges and universities.

ER: *On the campuses, was it purely a question of getting rid of some professors, were students targeted or others targeted?*

ES: Not students, except for some graduate students. Though a few academics were called before the committees in the late 1940s, the investigators didn't focus on higher education until they ran out of more attention-getting targets. It's interesting, because today the Trump administration has been harassing the nation's leading universities from the start. But that was not the case during McCarthyism.

The congressional committees were looking for publicity. Certainly, McCarthy himself was eager for attention. That's how he made his career, with his lists of Communists in the government. Other investigators looked elsewhere. There was an Un-American Activities Committee in California, there was one in Ohio, and in some states, New Hampshire and Maryland, for example, local prosecutors, and government officials themselves, like state attorneys general would be ferreting out supposed Communists.

ER: *And some states have full-blown loyalty programs. California comes to mind.*

ES: Loyalty oaths were common, especially in higher education. State legislatures, after all, supported most public colleges and universities and many imposed loyalty oaths on their employees. They were usually tepid pledges to support their state and national constitutions. The most notorious one, requiring its signers to swear they did not belong to the Communist Party, was inflicted on the faculty of the University of California by its Regents in 1949. Before the California Supreme Court threw out that oath, the Regents had fired over thirty non-signers. None had ever been Communists.

Other states mounted anti-Communist investigations. The most important early one took place in Washington State in 1948 where a special legislative committee under a former sheriff named Albert Canwell called up about a dozen faculty members from the University of Washington. Three were fired. Two because they admitted that they were Communists and the third because he refused to cooperate with both the State and the university's investigations.

That case was important because it made it clear that the defining characteristic of McCarthyism was its anti-Communism. The investigators were not looking for left-wingers. They were not looking for alcoholics. They were not looking for people who might have taught about Marxism in their classes. They were only looking for people who had some kind of association, affiliation with the Communist Party. But what was even more important was that once Canwell identified the supposed Communists, the university handled the second stage of McCarthyism and fired all three professors who the Canwell Committee had exposed.

ER: *Was there pushback on the campuses?*

ES: Not really.

ER: *Defense of Academic Freedom? Freedom*

of Speech and Association?

ES: Absolutely not, no. I'll get to that, because it's interesting. Actually, most of the academic community did not collaborate with McCarthyism until the main national committees, like HUAC and the SISS, began to focus specifically on higher education in 1952 and 1953. Still, a number of faculty members had been questioned by the committees before then. Those who refused to cooperate with the investigators got fired. But they weren't called up because of their academic positions.

There was one professor, for example, at NYU who was involved with a "front group," called the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee. He was on its board of directors and along with the rest of that board refused to hand over its membership list to HUAC in 1946 and went to prison for contempt of Congress. And lost his job.

Another group of academics who were called up by HUAC were physicists.

As we now know (but the committee didn't at the time), there were spies within the Manhattan Project. And there had been a contingent, a cohort of left-wing graduate students who were in or near the CP at Berkeley, many of them, students of Robert Oppenheimer. They had worked on the bomb at Los Alamos and in Berkeley's Radiation Lab. Which was, of course, why HUAC questioned them. Most took the Fifth Amendment and lost their jobs. Oppenheimer, who had not defied any committee, was, in fact, one of the main victims of McCarthyism, but that occurred later, when the Atomic Energy Commission denied him a security clearance in 1954.

By the time the committees decided to take on higher education in 1952 and '53, university leaders were willing to collaborate with the anti-Communist inquisition and purge the uncooperative witnesses from their faculties.

Universities were different from most

other mainstream institutions. Private corporations, like TV networks or defense industries, could just fire people who took the Fifth or were secretly identified as affiliated with Communism by the FBI or a right-wing journalist. But universities claimed to support academic freedom. Its function was to protect higher education from outside intervention—usually from politicians and wealthy trustees. And in order to maintain that autonomy, academic freedom required the academic community to handle its problems by itself, ideally by independent faculty committees.

At least one hundred faculty members were fired or otherwise punished between the late 1940s and early 1960s—although because of the secrecy that surrounded so much of McCarthyism, there may have been many more cases that we don't know about. Their treatment varied. Some institutions dispensed entirely with faculty reviews and fired unfriendly witnesses and other dissidents outright. At other schools, the tainted professors faced both an official investigation and a university one, both of which asked the same questions about these people's past and present political activities. And, with almost no exceptions, all of them had to cooperate with both investigations if they were to keep their jobs. And even then, a few schools even fired witnesses who cooperated with all the investigators. At those institutions, trustees and top administrators were so afraid of bad publicity that they would not keep a former Communist who named names on their faculty. They didn't want even the slightest whiff of Communism.

What happened at the University of Michigan reveals how deeply the universities were implicated in enforcing McCarthyism. HUAC did not get around to investigating that institution until 1954 when it called up five professors and a handful of present and former graduate students.

The university's president urged them all to cooperate. Three refused. Two, Clement Markert and Mark Nickerson, took the Fifth Amendment, the third invoked the First Amendment and went to prison for contempt of Congress.

He was Chandler Davis, a mathematician and an amazingly courageous dissenter. He viewed his appearance before HUAC as an opportunity to push the Supreme Court to reconsider its earlier failure to protect free speech and the First Amendment. He failed and served six months in Danbury Federal Penitentiary. Unlike Markert and Nickerson who did tell the University of Michigan what they wouldn't tell HUAC, Davis defied the university's faculty committees as well. He did so on the grounds that since Michigan's committees were asking the same questions as the congressional one, it would be as if he was cooperating with that committee as well. And two faculty committees voted to let him go.

ER: *I find it extremely interesting in terms of the way things are now that these committees and officials, whether state or federal, were not really interested in what people were doing in their classrooms. They were not interested in what people were doing in their research. They were not interested in the campuses. They were simply interested in...*

ES: Yes. Current or prior membership in the Communist Party. "Are you now, or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" That was what they wanted, and by then it was choreographed. Everybody knew the script. The only variation was that a few professors were willing to talk about themselves, but not about others and managed to avoid prison. It wasn't a sure thing, but by the mid-1950s, the federal judiciary had begun to find technical ways to acquit those people of contempt of Congress—but they still had to cooperate with their institutions.

ER: *Right. And of course, it did cast a pall over everything on the left. Partly because Communists had been so prominent in left-wing causes that people who may have supported those causes without joining the Party felt—and often were—threatened by the witch hunt.*

ES: Exactly, exactly. And, significantly, there was no effective pushback within the university. People always ask me, “What can we learn from the resistance against McCarthyism?” Now, I teach this stuff. And, when I get up to the Korean War, which took place between 1950 and 1953 and was just as unpopular as Vietnam, I ask my students, “What can you tell me about the anti-war movement against the Korean War?” And I get silence. And so, like a good teacher, I wait for somebody to speak, and, of course, nobody speaks, and I say, “Yep, that’s the right answer. There was no anti-war movement during the Korean War.” None.

ER: *Talk about a chill. It was pretty thorough.*

ES: Especially because there was a blacklist as well. Almost everybody who was fired for political reasons, especially if their cases were public, was unable to find a new job at a mainstream American college or university. So, professors, who had been targeted or were afraid they might be, refrained from political controversies.

Students also became apolitical. They were afraid. Often they were told by their faculty advisors, including faculty advisors on the left, don’t get involved in any kind of political activity to the left of the Democratic Party. Just don’t do it. The academy was not unique here.

Other advocacy groups like the NAACP did the same thing. They pruned their own ranks. They got rid of the people who they suspected were Communists.

ER: *Oh.*

ES: The ACLU did the same thing.

ER: *Wow!*

ES: And the AAUP did nothing between 1947 and 1956. Nothing. There were no AAUP investigations and censures of institutions that had violated their faculty members’ academic freedom. I got into the AAUP’s archives, and it was just shocking. People on campuses where there had been a case were desperate. I remember Temple University had fired a very popular full professor and didn’t even give him a hearing. His colleagues were writing to the AAUP, “When are you coming down to investigate? When are you going to censure Temple?” But it did nothing. Temple’s administrators had acted out of a combination of their own anti-Communism and the fear of being targeted themselves or facing some kind of state sanctions against the school—which never happened, by the way. The universities themselves were never punished, even though they thought something bad would happen to them, it never did. Nor, to my knowledge, were more than one or two professors fired for opposing the political dismissals of their colleagues—and they usually had other issues as well.

There were other sanctions besides dismissals. Some people lost passports and couldn’t go abroad for research or to take jobs. Some scientists were refused security clearances and couldn’t do certain types of research. One of the most important cases was that of Robert Oppenheimer who lost his role as a key advisor to the American government when his security clearance was withdrawn.

Another victim whose case had serious consequences, though he didn’t actually lose his job, was Owen Lattimore, a prominent China scholar at Johns Hopkins who had been falsely accused by McCarthy of being the country’s “top Russian espionage agent.” McCarthy’s charges were part of a broader campaign by the Republican Party and the supporters of the corrupt and incom-

petent Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek to smear the Truman administration for the so-called loss of China to the Communists in 1949. While McCarthy's charges against Lattimore didn't stick, he was targeted again, this time by the supposedly more respectable SISS when it investigated a scholarly organization called the Institute of Pacific Relations that Lattimore and a number of actual Communists were active in. Harassed by two completely unwarranted perjury indictments that were thrown out in court after several stressful years, Lattimore kept his job. But Hopkins abolished the center he headed, and he lost his influence as one of the country's top China experts. He ultimately left the United States for Great Britain. And the field of China Studies took a major hit, as did the State Department, most of whose experienced China hands were fired for not supporting Chiang Kai-shek's lost cause.

Since so much of what happened within the academic community during McCarthyism was secret, we'll never have a full accounting of the damage it did. Nor will we ever know about all the theses that weren't written, the research that wasn't pursued, the job offers not made, the courses that weren't taught, etc., etc.

But what has always amazed me is that McCarthyism occurred just as what has been called the "Golden Age of American Higher Education" was getting under way. Even as they were ousting their politically tainted faculty members, colleges and universities were expanding enormously to accommodate the expected tidal wave of baby boomers. Higher education was prestigious and popular—attracting new types of students, raising its standards, and, after Sputnik, getting increasing amounts of funding from the federal government—especially in science. And by the end of the 1950s—even though people were still being fired for their politics into the 1960s—Mc-

Carthyism was clearly running down. This is when John F. Kennedy brought dozens of "the best and the brightest" academics into the government. I was in graduate school at Harvard then and it felt as if our professors were running the country.

ER: *Wow. So, this Golden Age, how long did it last? I know I personally benefited from this expansion of higher education.*

ES: Oh, so did I! The government and the foundations were almost throwing money at people. They were so eager for future college teachers that, I remember one memo noted, they were even trying to recruit women!

ER: *Ha!*

ES: And that was the case.

ER: *Yes, it was the case to an extent.*

ES: Yes, they may not have treated us well, but they hired us.

ER: *Yes, that's true. So this Golden Age, how long did it last? Did it have much in the way of legs?*

ES: Yes, because these schools expanded. Schools that up until the Second World War had been either small teachers' colleges, or religious colleges, or flagship institutions that were essentially agricultural schools with football teams were transformed into liberal arts colleges and then into regional universities and then even serious Research I universities. And so schools are upgrading, they're becoming more competitive, intellectually ambitious. You know, it's no longer okay at top universities to get a gentleman's C.

So by the early 1960s, the culture's changing on American campuses. And we were definitely the beneficiaries of this. No other generation of academics ever had it so good before—nor did they have it so good after.

ER: *One of your books is called The Lost Promise of Higher Education. What was the promise that was lost?*

ES: The promise was the one that was behind this expansion, that the United States would be able to create a system of public higher education that would be readily accessible to anybody who wanted it and was qualified for it. That notion, it's a very democratizing mission. And it was aborted for a whole bunch of reasons. The main, but not the only, one was a backlash against the reforms within higher education during the 1960s. Especially a backlash against the increased access to higher education by marginalized groups like previously excluded Black students. And a backlash against the anti-war movement, against the student movement.

It's important to realize that a lot of what powered the social movements of the sixties—especially the civil rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the anti-war movement—began on American campuses. First there was the intensification of the civil rights movement with the sit-ins by students from HBCUs in 1960 in the Upper South. Then, there was the Free Speech Movement in 1964, which marked the beginning of the student movement at traditionally white institutions and was directed against the Berkeley administration, because Berkeley had given its students *less* political freedom than any comparable school in the country. There was an active civil rights movement in the Bay Area, and students were very involved in it, sitting in at businesses that didn't hire Black workers and so forth. And the university, which was under pressure from local elites and politicians, was harassing the student activists for their off-campus protests.

So, by the 1960s, students began to demand more political freedom, a more democratic university. And, along with some faculty members, they began to real-

ize that their own institutions had been anything but the bastions of freedom and democracy they claimed to be.

Now, here I need to stress that one of the main findings in my book on the sixties was how important the universities were to the origins of the anti-war movement. That was because they were full of scholars who knew how to do research about public issues. And in the 1950s and 1960s, just as the U.S. was beginning to intervene in Vietnam, Americans were essentially ignorant about that part of the world. It had been a French colony and there may have been a tiny handful of people, if that, in the United States who knew anything about Vietnam or could speak the language. It was really unknown. So, when Johnson escalated the war by bombing North Vietnam in the spring of 1965, which was right after the student movement began at Berkeley, a group of faculty members at Michigan planned to protest by canceling their classes and teaching about the war. But they ran into opposition to interfering with their classes from both the president of the university and the governor of Michigan, so they decided to hold what they called a "teach-in" at night instead. They boned up on Vietnam, brought in a few outside experts, and educated their students and colleagues about what was happening in Vietnam and why people should oppose it.

The idea caught on immediately. Though they contacted colleagues at other schools, the people who organized the original teach-in did not expect that the movement would spread as quickly as it did. At least a hundred such events took place that first spring. And they sparked all kinds of other anti-war activities—demonstrations, publications, and protests against the draft and the universities' complicity with the war. And, as the war continued, some of these protests also involved nonviolent direct action—sit-ins and other disruptions

of campus activities. Both students and faculty members were active in this movement. But it's not by any means a majority. Most people on campuses were apolitical. But then, as Nixon escalated the war, the protests escalated, especially when academic administrators tried to suppress them by sending in the police and provoking more unrest. And in the aftermath of the killings at Kent State and Jackson State in particular, what happened is that Nixon realized that the unrest on American campuses was not going to end no matter how much police and public officials and universities tried to clamp down on it. That repression was not going to protect universities from disruption, unless the war ended. And so he began to end the war, he ended the draft, and he began to pull troops out of Vietnam.

ER: *Wow.*

ES: There are other things pushing Nixon to end the war. Congress is pushing back. But the interesting thing is that these campus disruptions, which we felt were ineffective if not counter-productive at the time with things like the revolutionary violence of the Weathermen, actually had a real impact on Nixon. As some recent scholarship as shown, he felt that he had to end the war in order to save the universities—much as he disliked most of what was happening on their campuses.

ER: *And this is the way we tend to think that trouble on campus, activism on campus, takes place. Movements of students and faculty that start on some campuses and spread. And the McCarthy period looked nothing like that.*

ES: No. There was almost no support for the victims of McCarthyism on their campuses. Many of the people I interviewed felt abandoned by their colleagues. Several talked about seeing old friends cross the street to avoid them. It was really unpleasant. And many of the faculty committees that the AAUP touted as necessary for academic

freedom went along with the witch hunt.

ER: *So we've talked about the Golden Age. And we've talked about the free speech movement which, you know, was much like so many other campus movements, even if they weren't quite as dramatic or disruptive. Let's turn our attention to the current scene.*

ES: Okay.

ER: *The pro-Palestinian movement has persistently been treated as outside the pale on campuses. This was well before the second Trump administration, or even the first Trump administration. But the second Trump administration, flying the banner of defending Jewish students against antisemitism and combating terrorism, has made suppressing the Palestinian movement the tip of the spear of an assault on the universities. Scrubbing signs of DEI, or wokeness, or mea culpas about antisemitism, seems to have just whetted their appetite for coming after the campuses. Trump II has threatened large public and private universities with catastrophic loss of funds. To give a couple of examples—UCLA, more than a billion dollars a year; Columbia, more than a billion dollars. Having done so much to bring us the history of the McCarthy period and of the universities after that period, how would you compare suppression in this period, particularly on the Israel-Palestine question with McCarthyism on campus?*

ES: Okay. Well, I'm a historian, so let me begin by telling you how Trump's assault on higher education developed. Because it just didn't start with Mr. Trump. It didn't even start in the twenty-first century. We can go back to the 1960s. As I've already pointed out, there was a backlash against the sixties.

Much of the public opposed the student movement. People had never seen that much student unrest before. And the media played it up big—especially when the police were called in to crack down on the students. State legislatures began to take measures against campus activists and

reduce their previously generous financial support of their states' public colleges and universities. Ambitious politicians like Ronald Reagan took advantage of the backlash. At the same time wealthy business-people and reactionary intellectual elites, who were pushing a neoliberal agenda that sought to shrink the state and reward the private sector, also turned against American higher education, which they claimed was indoctrinating the future leaders of the U.S. with left-wing ideas.

It's important to realize that this backlash against higher education is happening at exactly the same time as the American economy is being transformed. There's inflation, there's an oil embargo by the Arab countries, and the United States is facing new competition within the world economy. Competition from Germany and Japan is encouraging American corporations to move their factories out of the United States. It's the beginning of the deindustrialization of the American economy. The kinds of jobs that once had made it possible for one breadwinner to support an entire family are disappearing. Unionized blue collar jobs are being shipped overseas to save money.

And all of this impacts higher education. Why? Because it seems as if it's necessary to get a college education in order to afford a middle-class style of life. And so, colleges and universities are playing a bigger role in American society as the vehicle not just for upward mobility, but also for the economic stability of the middle classes. By the 1970s higher education has become increasingly more important in people's lives—even as its traditional state support is declining. Whereas once state legislatures had accounted for maybe 40 percent of their colleges' operating budgets, it's now down to single digits at some schools.

ER: *Wow.*

ES: So, how do the institutions make up for that? They raise tuitions. And they also rely much more heavily on the federal government, both for the student loans that pay those tuitions (and create today's \$1.8 trillion of student debt) as well as the money that covers the university's scientific research. And that research is not cheap. I was just writing a piece about the growth of the government's role in higher education and I realized how much of that change has to do with the increasing cost of scientific research. New fields, in electronics, biomedical science.

ER: *Even if you take your dog or cat to the veterinarian today, the veterinarian has remarkable equipment.*

ES: Yes! And not just the veterinarian. Because universities have a bigger role in American society, attacking them as elitist—especially for conservative politicians who won't challenge the economic status quo—is a way to appeal to ordinary people who are having trouble making ends meet. There's also a network of right-wing activists and billionaires, like the Koch brothers, who helped sell neoliberalism to American political elites and has been pouring millions of dollars into a massive propaganda campaign against mainstream universities and mainstream academic knowledge. It's a campaign that relies on counter-institutions—think tanks, subsidized programs and professors, as a sort of counter-intelligentsia. It promoted the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s that attacked so-called tenured radicals for indoctrinating their students with Marxism and “political correctness.” Although that demonized portrayal of the nation's faculties was wildly exaggerated, the universities did not respond to it. As a result, fifty years of un rebutted propaganda has convinced much of the public that American higher education is run by extreme leftists and

weak-willed administrators who capitulate to the demands of the “snowflake” students, even though today’s snowflakes are more likely to be conservatives who complain about their professors’ treating gender as a fluid term.

By the end of Trump’s first term in office, the Republican Party had adopted the campaign against higher education as one of its main programs. Red State legislatures pushed measures to ban teaching about racism, sexism, or the truth about the less-than-perfect American past. They’re also purging DEI from the universities, as well as creating a moral panic about trans students. And on another front, there’s a simultaneous attack on campus support for Palestine coming from the politically powerful Zionist movement that views all criticism of Israel as antisemitism. That so-called Palestine Exception had been roiling some campuses since the early twenty-first century, but it really took off after the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, and Israel’s genocidal war on Gaza. Trump and his MAGA warriors simply added the right-wing Zionists’ unfounded charges of antisemitism to their campaign against higher education and withheld millions of dollars in federal funding from major universities.

So, what you’re currently seeing is a convergence of a number of forces all directed against higher education. And the leaders of the academic community—administrators and trustees—are not seriously pushing back against them.

Those leaders are, in part, responsible for their current dilemma. They responded to the loss of state funding and the diminution of their public support by adopting the competitive values of the business community that was largely responsible for imposing neoliberalism’s austerity on their campuses in the first place. They prioritized growth rather than the quality of their

students’ educations. And they centralized decision-making, increasingly excluding faculties from control over their own work. And in the process, they undermined their own institutions’ ability to resist the current assault on their autonomy.

Probably the most deleterious effect of the university’s feeble response to the challenges it faced is the transformation of the faculty from one that was staffed almost entirely by full-time tenured and tenure-track professors to one where about 70 percent of all instruction is in the hands of insecure and often poorly paid people who are either part-time or temporary employees.

ER: *Contingent faculty.*

ES: Contingent faculty, yes. They are gig workers who are so economically insecure that they essentially have no academic freedom. Given that they can be fired for almost anything unless they have a strong union contract, how can they resist the mandates of a state law that requires them to give both sides on every controversial issue? What do you do with the Holocaust? What do you do with climate change? And how do you teach about slavery? All-too-many administrators, facing the prospect of political interventions, are already engaging in what we call “anticipatory obedience” and enforcing those outrageous measures even before they become laws. It’s no wonder that self-censorship flourishes. Just as it did during McCarthyism.

And fear.

ER: *When I was a college student at City College in the early and mid-1960s, except for a few very young professors, the social sciences in particular were devoid of any sense of there ever being any conflict in the United States of America.*

And what you are describing sounds like it’s in some ways, very like that.

ES: Yes. In certain places.

ER: *The free speech and other 60s campus movements emerged on very quiet campuses.*

ES: Yes, I think so, but there was also a very quick change. That's what the Golden Age facilitated—there was economic security within academia, and the civil rights movement brought people into universities who weren't afraid to be much more politically active. It was a sellers' market and they weren't risking as much as they would have in the fifties.

ER: *I think you've laid the groundwork for this next question already, but let's bring it to a head. Many people have described the current scene as the new McCarthyism. You have said that it is worse than McCarthyism. So perhaps you could elaborate on why you came to that conclusion?*

ES: Of course. Well, the one thing that people don't realize about McCarthyism and universities is that it never dealt with people's teaching and research. People were not asked what they did in class. The president of the University of Washington, who ousted three tenured professors in the first big academic freedom case of the Cold War Red Scare, said about the people he fired something on the order of, "Well, we're not going to ask them about their teaching and research, because we know it's fine."

Today, one of the biggest differences is that people are being asked about their teaching; they're being videotaped by their right-wing students and their syllabi are being censored. States are now dictating curricula, censoring library books, meddling in just about everything. Another big change is that the most serious attacks are now coming from Washington. The federal government is playing a much bigger role in higher education than it had in the 1950s. When the Soviet Union beat the United States into outer space in 1957, it jump-started a lot of the federal spending on higher education that now funds most

of the country's scientific research. Those are the two biggest changes. But one thing that hasn't changed is the capitulation of the universities. They did not stand up against McCarthyism and they aren't standing up against what's happening today either.

The academy has been completely blindsided. Colleges and universities are dropping their DEI programs, often before they're ordered to. They're getting rid of trans students in their athletic programs. They're firing people, simply because they've criticized Israel on their social media. And they're redoing their disciplinary codes to crack down on the student movement and its legitimate protests against what's happening in Gaza.

And, as in the 1950s, with the exception of the encampments in the spring of 2024, the campuses are quiet.

ER: *Was there pro-Palestinian activity at Yeshiva to be involved in?*

ES: No, no, no. Yeshiva's institutional culture is religious Zionism. Its AAUP chapter had to dissolve itself after October 7, 2023, because it couldn't find three people to serve as its officers as the AAUP required.

ER: *Oy. Let me ask you one more thing about pro-Palestinian campus activism or teaching. Or simply being pro-Palestinian and the charge of antisemitism, which the Trump people have latched onto. I guess what I want to ask you is what is that about? I mean, I think it's becoming clearer, but it may be much less than clear, especially in mainstream media, how riven Jews in the United States are on Gaza, about settlements, about Israeli expansion, about Netanyahu's government. About Zionism itself. And yet antisemitism seems to be the charge of choice by the Trump administration. Even when dealing with Jewish college presidents! So, you know, what's that all about? Why have they latched onto this?*

ES: Because I was at Yeshiva, I did not get involved with Palestinian issues until re-

cently. Now, of course, I'm retired and active in the AAUP and cannot avoid becoming concerned about Palestine. Palestine is what's fueling the main violations of academic freedom today. Faculty members get into trouble and may lose their jobs because they criticize Israel on their social media or simply go to a peaceful demonstration. Students are also being repressed. And what we're seeing is an almost obscene desire to punish dissenters, especially kids.

Foreign students are particularly vulnerable, not only because of their politics but also because banning them is a way for the government to punish universities economically, because many schools have relied heavily on the tuitions of wealthy foreign students who pay the full freight.

ER: *The final topic I wanted to ask you about is student and faculty pushback in light of your long association with the AAUP, not to mention being on campuses. What about pushback now?*

ES: There is pushback now. I'm always asked to compare McCarthyism to today. What's interesting is that in the 1950s, when we were in the middle of McCarthyism, not only was there no student protest, but we never heard anything about earlier student activism, although it had existed. People now know about the civil rights movement, the anti-[Vietnam] war movement, the anti-apartheid movement, even if they don't really know much about them, even the successful ones. The drive for divestment from South Africa, for example, eventually influenced universities and major corporations to pull back. So campus student movements can work. They don't always. It can take years. And there can be repression, as there is today.

What we've seen recently, however, is that the attacks on student activism are worse than in the 1960s. Yes, in the 1960s they would bring in the police if the stu-

dents took over a building. That happened, but most student protests were much quieter. Today, although the situation is worse, there's much less activism. People are scared, foreign students in particular. Campuses are quieter. There are more security guards, more surveillance, and beefed-up regulations against gatherings.

But—and this is important—for the first time, there's a considerable amount of faculty opposition against the government and against the institution's administrators. Scientists are protesting the cancellation of their grants, and they're organizing against it. As are other academics. Unlike in the 1950s, professors are pushing back, organizing. The AAUP is growing. Two years ago it had about 40,000 members, now it's up to 55,000. And the AAUP isn't just getting bigger, it's also organizing new chapters and becoming more active, and more democratic.

And, as we're seeing today, the more outrageously an administration behaves the more it inspires faculty members to collective action, and that's one thing we're seeing a lot of. Professors are also organizing unions and organizing coalitions of unions. There's a group called HELU—Higher Education Labor United—that is trying to bring together all the unions on a single campus with the goal of creating one big movement within higher education.

Even alumni are organizing. Last year was my sixty-fifth reunion at Harvard, and I thought I'd go, so I poked around, and sure enough: there was a group of alumni just forming called Crimson Courage. And they were already reaching out to other schools and now have similar groups at sixteen or seventeen schools, mostly big-name Research I and Ivy League schools. The Harvard group, it turns out, was originally sparked by former activists from the classes of '68, '69. But now they're alumni, and they can go in a group and meet with Harvard's

president, Alan Garber.

Did their actions encourage Garber to say “no” to Trump? Who knows. But that action was incredibly important. That had never happened before. Before Harvard said “no,” the only college president who spoke out, besides Patricia McGuire, the feisty president of the small, minority-serving Trinity-Washington University in the District of Columbia, was Michael Roth of Wesleyan, and he was quoted all the time because he was the only one at an elite institution refusing to capitulate to Trump.

ER: *And doesn't have a vast scientific suite of labs to support.*

ES: Yes, exactly. But last fall Trump proposed a Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education under which you would sign away your first-born son, and then his Majesty might consider not taking all your money. And seven out of the nine schools that were invited said “no” right away. So there is pushback. It's not great, and it takes time. But I think about the anti-war movement in the 1960s. It began with the teach-ins in 1965, when most schools and most students and most of the country supported the war. And within two years, that had already changed.

When I was researching my book about the sixties, I ran across a document in the Harvard archives in the papers of a leading conservative professor. It was a letter to Lyndon Johnson that had been written in the summer of 1967, but not publicized, by about ten incredibly eminent professors, Nobel Prize winners, major economists, and scientists. And what it said—and I'm paraphrasing it, enormously—“We are extremely eminent professors and have never taken a public stand on the war in Vietnam. And now we would like to help

as you withdraw from the war.” What that meant was that the most elite of the elite within the academic community, who were very conservative about these things and had supported the war in the beginning, had turned against it after two years—even if they weren't going to do so in public.

And then Nixon—I talked about this earlier—just decides that the war has to end because otherwise the colleges are going to blow up. And somehow he feels that is insupportable.

ER: *And would hurt him, presumably?*

ES: Exactly, exactly.

ER: *Do you see any other signs of resistance?*

ES: Well, it's now April 2026 and things are happening so fast that it's impossible for anybody except our current president to predict the future.

ER: *We'll see.*

ES: We'll see. The Trump administration's attack on democratic higher education was so sudden, so severe, so beyond anybody's wildest expectations that nobody could have prepared for it. Especially since so many major institutions of American life—including the Supreme Court, Congress, the mainstream media, the big law firms, and the universities facilitate whatever Trump does. So, it's not necessarily the case that we can claw back our democracy. You know, up through the 1960s, you could say the system worked. Nixon was forced out of the government after Watergate. And there were even some positive reforms. Can that happen today? Not without major changes. But things are so unsettled these days, who knows? Maybe there will be major changes....

The Name of the Beast

Trump and the “Fascism” Debate

BEN SILVERMAN

FOR THE LAST DECADE THERE HAS been a debate on the left on how to characterize Trump, the political movement around him, and the rise of a new wave of far-right politicians globally. Is this “Fascism” or is Trump a more typical far-right politician, buffoonish oftentimes, but operating within a traditional conservative framework of the existing political system? As we get deeper into the second year of the second Trump presidency it is worth assessing the Fascism debate.

His first year back in power was a politically momentous one in the United States in ways that are familiar, long, and expanding by the day. For their part, the *New York Times* editorial board outlined 12 “red-flag” warning signs of democratic erosion as Trump moves the United States toward autocratic rule. According to the list, Trump has routinely sought to bypass the legislature, defy court orders, declared fictitious national emergencies, used the military for domestic control, prosecuted political enemies, attacked free speech in the universities, press, and among dissenters, carried out purges within the Federal administration, and used the presidency to enrich himself and his cronies at our expense.¹

On top of this list, it is worth empha-

sizing Trump’s sending his personal secret police to put a major American city under military occupation, with the ICE siege of Minneapolis, and his pivot to a bellicose American Imperialism shorn of any ideological pretense, just straight gangsteristic imperialist misadventures. Proudly and openly pillaging or threatening to pillage other countries for their resources from Iran, to Cuba, to Venezuela, to Greenland. All of this has led those such as the centrist *The Atlantic* to publish an article straightforwardly titled, “Yes, It’s Fascism,” pointing to Trump’s leader cult self-aggrandizement, his police state tactics, his affinity for white Christian nationalism, and his work to undermine elections, now with the aid of the Supreme Court’s decision to gut the Voting Rights Act.²

I think it can be argued that this is both true and not true. It is true to the extent that “fascism” is a useful descriptor of Trump’s own politics, his desired political end goals, and a solid portion of the MAGA mass movement that supports him more broadly. But it is untrue to the extent that we try to use it to describe the American state, at least at this time. Similar to how you can differentiate between lowercase-d and uppercase-D Democrat, we can differentiate between broadly two types of “fascism”; uppercase-F and lowercase-f. Uppercase-F Fascism is the historical fascist states in Germany, Italy, Spain, and elsewhere, and the movements that sup-

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ported them historically or wish to recreate them presently. They are fully realized police states, the “merger of state and corporate power” to use Mussolini’s terminology,³ and the systemic suppression of dissidents and scapegoat minorities. Lowercase-f fascism, however, is more flexible. It represents similar kinds of political forces as historic fascism, with similar authoritarian intent, but altered, reflected, and refracted into a different time and place. It is this lowercase-f fascism that I believe Trump embodies, and understanding what differentiates his present rule from uppercase-F Fascism is critical for understanding this political moment. For as Richard Seymour reminds us, “whatever emerges” from the present far-right movements in power “will not be cosplay of the 1920s and the 1930s.”⁴ It is an analog, not a copy.

Historic uppercase-F Fascism’s appeal to its downwardly mobile middle-class base was that it appeared outside of the status quo of mainstream politics to masses of people, as something new and insurgent to shake the political system in often nebulously defined terms. Fascism claims to attack “elites,” but the truth was its mission was always to maintain the capitalist system, even as it shook up the status quo. As Trotsky explained:

German fascism, like Italian fascism, raised itself to power on the backs of the petty bourgeoisie, which it turned into a battering ram against the organizations of the working class and the institutions of democracy. But fascism in power is least of all the rule of the petty bourgeoisie. On the contrary, it is the most ruthless dictatorship of monopoly capital.⁵

Palmiro Togliatti, writing in the 1920s, warned against labeling all forms of reaction “fascism,” saying, “Fascism was not simply capitalist reaction. It embraced many other elements. It comprised a movement of the petty-bourgeois masses.”⁶ This mass movement element is a key piece in any

definition of Fascism as it sets it apart from purely top-down reaction. Fascism mobilizes some segments of the masses, mostly centered in the traditional middle classes or “petty bourgeoisie”—small business owners, landlords, certain professionals—against other segments of society, namely, the workers and minorities. David Renton in his work on modern authoritarianism sees fascism as a “specific form of reactionary mass movement. The specificity is fascism’s leadership cult, its party form, its ideology of anti-socialism and anti-liberalism,” and it being absolutely “saturated in violence.”⁷

On a number of levels Trump would meet many of these criteria. He leads a reactionary mass movement in the form of his MAGA followers with a strong base within the traditional middle classes. This MAGA base is the congealed representation of what Mike Davis warned of when he referred to the “deeply reactionary...petty bourgeoisie and middle strata” in America that “has been protofascist forever”⁸ and therefore most susceptible to these kinds of politics.

Trump has organized this reactionary petty bourgeoisie and has built a leadership cult around himself, motivated by an ideology of anti-socialism and anti-liberal democracy and its institutions. His politics are the “anti-emancipatory politics of crisis.” For Trump and his loyal followers of goose-stepping used-car dealership owners and incels, they are, in Theodor Adorno’s terms,

[m]otivated by a profound sense of grievance and victimhood. The ingroups are conceived of as superior in morality, ability, and general development; they ought also to be superior in power and status, and when their status is lowered or threatened the ethnocentrist tends to feel persecuted and victimized. Attempts by subordinate groups to improve their status are regarded as threats; he cannot imagine that they are struggling for equality.⁹

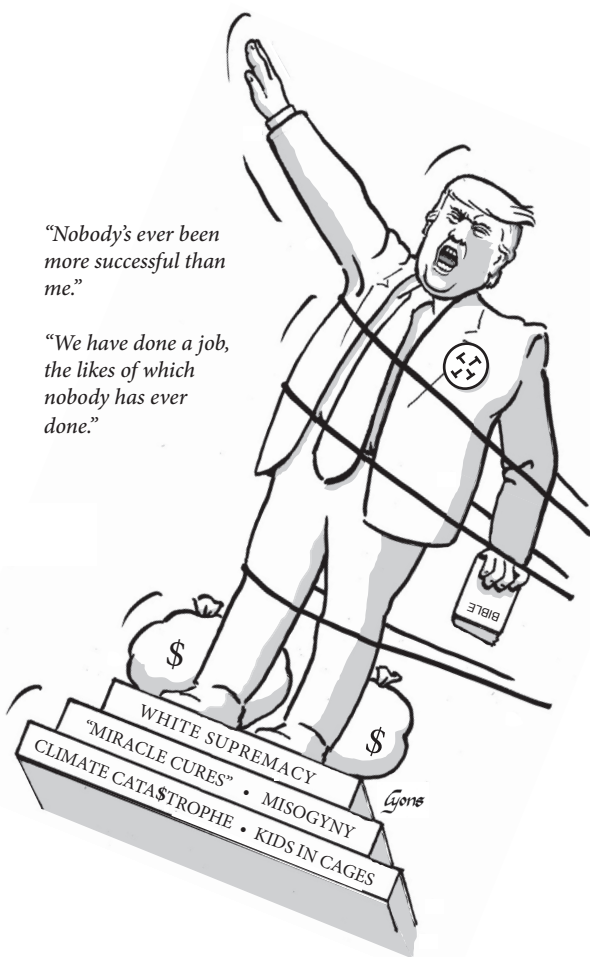
Trump and his followers have become obsessed with destroying “the woke mind virus” or the very conception of equality across races and genders, all to shore up the ego of an increasingly irrational white supremacist movement.

The modern racist conspiracy theory of the “Great Replacement”—that is, white “western civilization” being replaced by people of color through demographic changes, birth rates, and immigration—is an animating paranoia for the authoritarian right. “Race and especially the nebulous and all-potential idea of whiteness is...a pulsing void at the heart of the mythological machine of the right.”¹⁰ Fear of too many brown people, as well as fear of minorities and nonconformity in gender more broadly, is what animates fascism today. Throughout his time in and out of office Trump has played relentlessly with these psychological and demagogic “classical-fascist tropes” of “apocalyptic and hyper-masculine language of nation, race, action, strength, power, authority, and violence,”¹¹ making white nationalism a persistent theme of his speeches and even official government social media.

In sum, what Trump offers his mass movement base through the “bullying rhetoric, the hatred of racial and ethnic minorities, the xenophobia, the violence, the hostility to dissent, and for a time, the invocation of American workers humiliated and mangled by the workings of a global capitalism that did not have their interests

“Nobody’s ever been more successful than me.”

“We have done a job, the likes of which nobody has ever done.”



at heart,”¹² is an opportunity to punch down. In her discussion of the appeal of the alt-right to (mostly white) women like January 6th “martyr” Ashli Babbitt, Robyn Marasco described the attraction of “a semblance of power that substitutes for the real thing.”¹³ Beyond far-right women, this intoxication with a “semblance” of power is emblematic of all fascist foot soldiers, and the MAGA movement overall. They will never be the Führer, never be the tech billionaire, never wield any sort of real power, but they can gain license from the hierarchy above to bully, harass, oppress, and kill the “other” below. The cruelty is the whole selling point for MAGA and now for ICE

recruitment in particular.

Trump and his MAGA movement have openly embraced an ever more violent far right, including the fascist Proud Boys. This same violent far right is now being actively courted and recruited by ICE, with Proud Boys founder Enrique Tarrio revealed to be an ICE employee. A welding of street militia thugs and the state apparatus is underway. The Republican Party has been transformed over the last decade into Trump's personal political organization with a sizable and openly white nationalist core motivated by absurd conspiracy theories and paranoia. Simultaneously, Trump has been actively purging the state of any dissent or disloyalty and using mass deportations to purge the United States of immigrants and non-white immigrants specifically.

Trump's second term has further seen aggressive melding of corporate and state interests. His Federal government has taken a direct stake in companies and he is openly taking bribes from major corporations and billionaires in exchange for sweetheart deals, appointments, and pardons. At the same time, Trump has made massive slash-and-burn austerity cuts to healthcare, public services, the environment, scientific research, and just about anything else worthwhile the Federal government does for us that isn't war and funding his ICE gestapo. Fascism doesn't necessarily have to be "big government," though arguably Trump has done more to intervene in the economy than any other president in the neoliberal era. Fascism is about the terroristic, counter-revolutionary rule of capital. That rule can take different forms and require different things from the state, including austerity.

No less a figure than Ludwig von Mises, a founder of the Austrian school of economics and with it neoliberal economic theory, welcomed the rise of Fascism say-

ing, "let the State give us a police force, to save gentlemen from scoundrels, an army ready for any eventuality, a foreign policy attuned to national necessities. Everything else...belongs to the private activity of the individual."¹⁴ This recipe of the state only being there to secure the safety of property shows the close affinity between so-called anarcho-capitalists and authoritarian fascists that is being embodied by the Silicon Valley tech oligarchs. As Toscano summarizes, "Today's far right melds a cynically selective anti-statism with a revanchist ethno-nationalism passionately attached to the symbolism and reality of the repressive state."¹⁵ These oligarch tech "libertarians" like Peter Thiel are highly supportive of the authoritarian iron fist of the state, so long as the state is still working at their behest economically.

We should temper our analysis of Trump though. During Trump's first term, Corey Robin observed,

if fascism's achievement was to mobilize a mass base of the nation or race, consolidate the state apparatus, clear the political field of opposition and dissent through terror from above and violence from below, and thereby pursue its program with maximal leverage and authority, it's plain that Trump has fallen short of the ideal.¹⁶

Despite everything we can still largely agree with this assessment, though the gap between Trump in his second term and this ideal version of uppercase-F Fascism is getting smaller and smaller. We are still at a transition point toward a new form of authoritarianism. Trump may be part of, as Seymour says, the "pathfinders for a new type of fascism" though "not yet Fascism"¹⁷ in the historic uppercase-F sense itself.

But there are forces that are pushing for Trump to close the remaining gap between what I consider his lowercase-f fascist impulses and the goal of uppercase-F Fascism of full police state and dictatorial rule. Constitutional restraints are not prin-

ciples the administration has been shown to believe in and oftentimes seem to be adhered to only to keep up appearances or avoid conflict with allies.

Stephen Miller has said it himself: he considers Trump to have “plenary authority,” that is, effectively limitless executive powers. Trump’s political instincts have shown themselves to always side with the most authoritarian option, demanding obedience from subordinates and the general population alike. He believes the only limit on his power to be his own morality and he muses openly about his desire to somehow cancel the 2026 midterm elections, send ICE to intimidate people at the polls, or otherwise serve an unconstitutional third term. He wants to be a Fascist tyrant, he wants to make the final step over the Rubicon into an end-run constitutional crisis, but he does not (yet) have the full freedom of action and support to do so. He is held back—by a number of factors and forces.

He has been held back by the consistent and wide-ranging resistance of the American left and everyday people which have checked and countered his authoritarian moves step by step. We saw this with grassroots movements that stopped the Muslim Ban in his first term, and we are seeing it in the upsurge of resistance against ICE raids in his second. This resistance has turned the tide of popular sentiment against Trump and his draconian immigration policies, has successfully made being an ICE agent a badge of shame, and has probably done more to check Trump’s unconstitutional moves than the courts have.

But the limits on his lurches toward authoritarianism are more multilayered than that. Beyond the opposition from below, there are also cracks in the edifice of his support occurring from above. The American capitalist establishment has been largely supportive of Trump’s second term and policies. They have provided Trump

many overt and indirect bribes and have been rewarded for their investment with tax cuts, handouts, and pardons. Trump has arguably been one of the friendliest, if not *the* friendliest administration to the billionaire elite in U.S. history. But there are limits to that support.

In severe enough political and economic crises, and with revolution knocking at the gate, even the most modest of democratic norms and social reforms “appear to the capitalist class as obstacles to the ‘normal’ process of production. Democratic institutions prevent it from doing this; so it turns against them.”¹⁸ But such a revolutionary crisis is nowhere to be seen at this moment. The ruling elite in society doesn’t turn to counter-revolutionary violence like uppercase-F Fascism lightly. As Renton observes, “counterrevolutionary movements cannot go further than the interests of the ruling class.”¹⁹ On the institutional level by the American capitalist establishment, Trump is held back due to the lack of a real need for a fully formed uppercase-F Fascist police state from the capitalist class.

There are key goals that the different segments of the American capitalist class are after from Trump: the tech oligarchy wants a friendly regulatory environment for their AI and crypto scams; the fossil fuel industry wants a Federal administration willing to work with them to kill the renewable industry as competition; domestic manufacturers want lower wages and a weaker dollar that can compete in exports internationally; and every capitalist wants lower taxes for themselves. But these goals are perfectly achievable for them within the existing constitutional political system. There is no need for them to resort to any desperate measures like a fully formed Fascist police state to get what they want. Some billionaires are clearly ready to support Trump in his most authoritarian and fascist endeavors—notably Elon Musk,

Peter Thiel, and their fraternity of tech bro oligarchs—but this sentiment is far from universal among their class.

If anything, the American capitalist order and its position as global hegemon has been shown to be more at risk from Trump's disastrous actions than from other threats. For 80 years the United States has been able to assert its domination through a network of both soft and hard power, both trade agreements and military bases. This has been exerted through its many alliances, but Trump's alienation of these key allies, especially in Europe, is undermining these global power structures. This risk to global American hegemony is creating splits in the ruling class on Trump's foreign and domestic policy, from the disaster in the Iran War to opposition to Trump's tariffs.

If we wanted to pinpoint the single most critical aspect of the difference between Trump's present political project and the original Fascist movements, it is the present lack of a real mission. There is no mass working-class upsurge to combat like in the 1930s. Trump is a counter-revolutionary looking for a revolution to counter. A virulent anti-communist without a real communist threat to squash. While the last decade has provided many examples of left-wing resurgence and heroic resistance—most spectacularly in the George Floyd Uprising in 2020—at no point could anyone claim the capitalist system was at real risk. That risk of imminent revolution is what historically galvanized the ruling classes in Italy and Germany to throw out their constitutions and support the Fascist usurpation of their preferred status quo. Without that threat, the critical support from the majority of the American elite is lacking for Trump's more authoritarian desires.

The MAGA movement seeks to counter not the imminent overthrow of the capitalist order, but at best mild reformism.

Slightly higher taxes for the rich, fewer persons of color murdered by the police, trans inclusive spaces, cultural changes they object to like more minority representation in media, a pathway for citizenship to immigrants, more empathy to people in general. An “end of western civilization” these do not make, no matter how much the Nazi-saluting Elon Musk says they do. This is why Trump and his movement must project overwhelming paranoia in regards to their enemies on the left. The “globalist” “woke mind virus” “cultural Marxist” “gender ideological” “terroristic” threat must be all-powerful, all-pervasive—a literal “anti-Christ” in Peter Thiel's imagining—to justify the fascists' sense of victimhood and their desire for violence. It is politics by overcompensation and scapegoating, inventing an enemy to get mad about.

The ideals that motivate the MAGA movement when not outright nihilistic—the “pillaging [of] what future exists to live out their revenge fantasy”²⁰ here in the present—are often banal. At best they can be a watered-down version of what motivated Fascism in the past. “To the extent that we can speak of fascism today, it is a fascism largely emptied of...utopia.... [I]t is not reacting to an imminent threat of revolutionary politics, but which retains the racial fantasy of national rebirth.”²¹ For today's fascists, the mythological “utopia” they desire is not some glorious, purified empire of their earlier counterparts, but the images created by Madison Avenue advertisers of the 1950s regurgitated by AI bots on Twitter: white picket fence, racially segregated suburbia, post-war abundance, heteronormative male-dominated households. Without a utopian/dystopian vision for what the MAGA right is fighting for, and a non-imaginary enemy to fight against, it is hard to see them crystallizing the cohesion to go on a counter-revolutionary assault against the whole of society. At least not yet.

Trump is also held back now by the fact that he is supremely unpopular. His approval rating is as of this writing hovering in the mid-thirties. His popularity among young men, which was key to his 2024 victory, has largely collapsed. The proportion of Republican Party members who identify as MAGA is rapidly decreasing, showing that the core of his base and movement is losing momentum. With this weakening of his mass movement base, thin cracks are emerging in his hold over the Republican Party, though his dominance within the party is still a long way from slipping. As Trump's actions continue to undermine American imperial hegemony, and his popularity continues to fall, we can expect the cracks in the ruling class to grow ever larger as different sections of capitalists with different immediate interests come to blows.

Trump is old, possibly senile, directly and extensively implicated in the Epstein files, losing popular and ruling-class support, and beset with real political weaknesses. But we shouldn't mistake having weaknesses for being politically weak. As the mainstream center-right *Financial Times* warns us:

Anyone who assumes that Trump will quietly slide into lame duck status would be misguided. His recent targeting of Somali immigrants is a reminder that there are few limits on what he will consider doing. In Trump's mind and according to Project 2025 there are no restraints on a president's power.

Trump's fascist desires face real restraints from popular resistance and establishment impediments, but he can do a lot of damage nonetheless as he tries to push beyond those impediments. As we get closer to the midterms and the likelihood of a major defeat for the GOP grows, we should expect Trump's authoritarianism to increase and become more dangerous, not less. The mass racist redistricting in the

Southern United States is a direct assault on our democracy. Trump's ICE gestapo is already kidnapping our neighbors, occupying our cities, and murdering us in the streets. His FBI has been ordered to launch a new Red Scare by targeting those who believe in "anti-fascism, anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism, and anti-Christianity; support for the overthrow of the United States Government; extremism on migration, race, and gender; and hostility towards those who hold traditional American views on family, religion, and morality."²² In other words, a McCarthyite attack and suppression of the whole left.

This isn't a Fascist police state, but the seeds of that kind of police state are present and the tools of mass political repression are being laid out. As Trump continues to blunder from crisis to crisis, and communities and movements across the country continue to rise up against his rule, we can expect Trump to try to increase repression. Which one wins out, the people or the regime, can only be determined in struggle.

So where does this leave the "Is it Fascism" debate? On a certain practical level the distinctions aren't of critical importance. The MAGA GOP is not insulted or deterred by the "fascist" label at all. Fox News hosts joke about appropriating "Nazi" as an ironic greeting to each other. Trump himself is fine with the label. The taboo against fascism in American politics is alas no longer an effective tool against it. Liberals and the left might have been mobilized by fears of "Fascism" in the abstract, but it's the real-world oppression and repression of Trump that is galvanizing the opposition now.

In terms of left-wing strategy, the differences on whether we call it "Fascist" (whether "neo," "pseudo," "proto," "late-stage," "end times," "semi," or otherwise), "new authoritarianism," "disaster nationalism," "authoritarian right," just "far right," or (God forbid) "the populist right," the

starting point is still building an effective united front mass movement to counter it. Oppose Trump wherever we can, push every movement to do more to throw wrenches into his machine, demonstrate the unpopularity of MAGA in the streets, assist the creation of as many fissures in the ruling class as possible, demoralize and disperse his base. Unite the left, win over the middle, isolate and defeat the MAGA right. Calling Trump a fascist or not won't change the need to build movements that can oppose and defeat him.

For what it's worth, my own take is that to whatever extent Trump possesses a coherent political ideology outside of personal self-enrichment and narcissism, he is aligned with enough features and processes of fascism, at least in the lowercase-f sense, to warrant the label. If, "on the level of individuals and civilizations, personality predates ideology. Meaning, before you were a fascist, you were a bully and an asshole,"²³ then Trump is the bully par excellence. His chief demand is that everyone obey him, and his chief complaint is when they don't. His politics, such as they are, are deeply contradictory but so was historical Fascism. His MAGA movement base has strong fascist leanings in outlook, ideology, makeup, and components, but is also heterogeneous in composition overall, creating opportunities for fissures to emerge. There are fully self-described Fascist grouplets and individuals actively working within the MAGA movement, and through it the wider GOP and Trump administration, but even then MAGA is more of a lowercase-f fascist movement than the disciplined stormtroopers of the 1930s. And the Federal state Trump rules over like one of his personal companies is not a Fascist police state, at least not yet. At best it is a flawed bourgeois democracy in the process of being transformed into a so-called competitive authoritarianism state.

Trump, his inner circle, and his movement are a reflection of analogous political forces that birthed historic uppercase-F Fascism—downwardly mobile middle classes energized by racist demagoguery of national renewal into a mass movement of reaction, a tottering crisis-ridden status quo that isn't meeting people's needs, a left that has failed to provide a real alternative—but in a far different context that lacks the key ingredient of an intense revolutionary crisis that it seeks to combat. But all of these things are in flux as the crisis continues. It is small-f fascism with the potential to evolve as the moment itself evolves.

We are in a fraught and fragile situation where the enemy has a lot of power, is attempting to consolidate that power, but has little popular support outside of certain segments of the oligarchic elite and a shrinking mass movement of diehard loyalists. The "F" label—whether we agree with its use or not—should not lead us into despair as if he has already won, but steel ourselves for the fights to come that are needed to defeat him. There is still much room for political maneuver and we have to make the most of all of it while we can.

In this, the common everyday solidarity and resistance we saw from the heroic people in Minneapolis showed us the way forward. This broad, popular, organized popular mass resistance is the real check on Trump's creep toward authoritarian rule; not the courts, not the institutions, and not the Democratic Party.

One of the most common lessons talked about from the rise of Nazism in Germany was that the left was not united against the common enemy and ended up being defeated without a fight. The lesson is to not let the fascists entrench themselves. Resistance must be united, generalized, and start early to prevent the uppercase-F Fascist state from being consolidated. This lesson I believe has been internalized.

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Is Free Speech a Dangerous Idea?

SAMUEL FARBER

FARA DABHOIWALA, A SENIOR RESEARCH scholar at Princeton University, delivers in this book a sharp criticism of the doctrine and practice of free speech, particularly as it has developed in the United States. This main focus is framed by a lengthy historical background, in which he shows that the growth of manuscript and printed news and commentary as early as the Middle Ages were signs of the vitality of popular political opinion and of the expansion of the public sphere. In the western hemisphere this included the talk of slaves, about which their owners obsessed since they could never completely control it and feared its power to bind and inspire. A proverb of the Akan people, an ethnolinguistic group in West Africa, proclaimed that “to be prevented from speaking...was akin to being murdered: to silence another unjustly was a grievous crime” (78).

Nevertheless, Dabhoiwala contends that the overwhelming currency of popular political discourse in past times was not reasoned debate but hateful lies and con-

spiracy theories, inflammatory misinformation, crazy rumors, and outright fakery (25). These were, in his view, the numerous problems caused by free speech that have not disappeared. Dabhoiwala argues that

words can be at least as damaging as physical blows and can leave deep and lasting scars not just on individuals, but on society. Moreover, as he relates it, speech can perpetuate sexual and racial discrimination, fuel religious persecution, sow

social and political division, undermine legitimate political and scientific authority, and pave the way for violence (18). With this outlook, he joins a number of liberal and leftist critics of free speech, with some supporting its restriction, such as Stanley Fish, Catherine A. MacKinnon, and Herbert Marcuse.

Most importantly, Dabhoiwala insists that a responsible freedom of speech requires the establishment of different constraints in different contexts to balance its negative effects. According to him, if the purpose of speech is “to establish truth, it requires one set of conditions; if justice a different set; if political legitimacy, yet another; if to create art or generate amusement, still others, and so on” (178–9). Therefore, it is clear that Dabhoiwala objects to the free speech tradition especially in the U.S. not because of its limitations, or because it has been betrayed or abandoned by

What is Free Speech?

The History of a Dangerous Idea

FARA DABHOIWALA
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some of its well-known previous supporters, but because its absolutism ignores the conditions and especially the constraints that may make it relevant and valid—or not—under differing circumstances. Unfortunately, although this book extends to 343 pages of text with an additional 98 pages of notes, the author does not give us any clue as to who would determine the appropriate circumstances and establish the pertinent constraints for free speech, or how they would do so. Neither does he provide a single example of what would constitute, according to his contextual rules, a violation of the right of free speech in any of these areas of human endeavor.

Although the author ignores it, there is in fact an extensive U.S. jurisprudence that addresses many of these matters, although it has not been firmly committed to the protection of free speech, and certainly not before the twentieth century. Moreover, as Kwame Anthony Appiah argued in his review of this book (“Watch What You Say,” *New York Review of Books*, Sept. 25, 2025), while Dabhoiwala seems to think that the American tradition of free speech lacks a crucial balancing of liberty rights against public interests, it has in fact “always been in the balancing business.” As Appiah explained, the Supreme Court has for several decades sorted speech into tiered categories. Political speech generally receives the highest protection, i.e., strict scrutiny that requires that any restriction has to serve a compelling government interest and be narrowly tailored to it, while commercial speech receives less. Other types of speech (obscenity, speech integral to crime) may get no protection at all (65).

On the other hand, the balancing approach adopted by the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights, which Dabhoiwala favors, although not uncritically, emphasizes that free speech carries with it duties and responsibilities and that

it is legitimately subject to legal restrictions that are necessary in a democratic society, including national security, public safety and order, the protection of health and morals, the authority and impartiality of the judiciary, and the protection of the reputation and rights of others. Moreover, broadcasting, television, and cinema enterprises could be subject to state licensing. In sum, according to this European approach, the rights of any speaker must always be balanced against their responsibilities to the public (327).

In fact, the European approach to free speech has turned out to be less defensible than the American one. As Appiah pointed out in his review (64), after the British Race Relations Act of 1965 prohibited the incitement of racial or ethnic hatred, most of those convicted of the offense in the first five years were people of color, beginning with Michael X, who was among the Black nationalists convicted in 1967 of stirring up hatred of white people. The German government’s recent penalties and severe restrictions on public criticisms of the Israeli government’s ruthless attacks on the people of Gaza are comparable to the attacks carried out by the second Trump administration on critics of Zionism, although without Trump’s hateful rhetoric. As Jacob Mchangama, executive director of The Future of Free Speech, has argued, the European approach has

neither eliminated intolerance nor produced a public square free of falsehoods. Instead, they have expanded the state’s discretionary power over dissent. Peaceful protests against Israel’s war in Gaza, insults aimed at politicians, critiques of immigration policy, and irreverent attacks on religion have all led to investigations, arrests, and convictions—and minorities have been among those targeted by laws ostensibly adopted to protect them. (“Who Has Free Speech? The Global Fight Over a Powerful Idea” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov./Dec. 2025, p. 170.)

While claiming to oppose dictatorial governments and support democracy, Dabhoiwala has in several instances availed himself of unoriginal arguments that have been part of the armory of the authoritarian right (and, unfortunately, of the “campist” anti-democratic left as well). Thus, according to him, if one thinks of freedom of expression not as a means to an end, but as an end, then speech would be elevated to the supreme ideal and would be “more important than truth, justice, equity or any other value” (179). Following this mode of thinking, we could ask whether gasoline and/or electricity are more important to automobiles than, say, the car’s engine. Or is it rather that cars, and their engines, cannot generate movement without an indispensable source of energy just as free speech is indispensable to democracy, justice, equity, and truth?

Similarly, Dabhoiwala, in his efforts to challenge or at least diminish the singular importance of free speech, objects to the very concept of free speech with the hackneyed argument that there is no difference between speech and action since speech constitutes action (325). This is certainly true, but hardly strengthens his position, because he fails to follow up on this point by addressing the more important question of *what kind* of action is speech. He alludes to this issue in passing (226, 234), but he does not examine it. Verbal or written speech action is often a form of advocacy that can be countered *in time* by other forms of speech actions. Particularly in cases such as racist and sexist speech actions, opponents can mobilize to counter the effects of the original speech action, particularly in connection with the broader issue of reducing the influence of hate speech in shaping public opinion. Most of all, the effects of speech actions are generally reversible while that is not generally the case with what could be called immediate executive actions. Viewed

on the individual level, there are obviously great differences between the following actions, speech and executive, even though they may all be repulsive. For example, a very chauvinist male teacher may engage in various distinct actions such as thinking or fantasizing about rape, advocating it in a public park, advocating it in a classroom where students are obliged to attend and be subject to the discipline and the teacher’s power to grade exams, and actually trying to engage in the (executive) act of rape.

Individual Rights and Individualism as a Legal and Political Ideology

Dabhoiwala is surely right in pointing to the individualist politics and ideology underlying much of the original development of the U.S. doctrine of free speech. Of course, that ideology and politics have been pervasive in the U.S.’s legal doctrine and tradition well beyond the issue of free speech. Take the legal doctrine of standing, for example. Unlike in other legal traditions, a U.S. citizen does not have the right just by virtue of being a citizen to challenge a law that might be unconstitutional. She must very concretely show that she has been injured as an individual by the law in question. This is why the NAACP and other civil rights organizations have historically had to find specific Black individuals who could make a credible claim to have individually been injured by discriminatory racist laws to be able to challenge them in a court of law. The notion that whatever constitutionally affects my neighbor, also inevitably affects me, is completely absent from the Anglo-American common law tradition.

To take another example, labor law has also historically been subject to the reign of individualist assumptions and precedents. The philosophy and politics of individualism specifically underlined relations between workers and employers under the

fictional notion of freedom of contract, as if workers and employers had equal power and really free choice in the marketplace. This notion was especially powerful in the United States during what has been referred to as the *Lochner* era, from the 1890s to the 1930s. (The name *Lochner* derived from the 1905 Supreme Court decision in *Lochner v. New York*, striking down a New York state law limiting bakers' work hours.) At that time, the Court considered "liberty of contract" to be one of the liberty rights protected by the 14th Amendment.

It is entirely true as Dabhoiwala argues that the free speech doctrine was, especially at its beginning in the age of Enlightenment, based on certain questionable assumptions. These assumptions often seemed to be animated by a kind of optimistic, if not naïve, consequentialism. As Dabhoiwala tells us, the nineteenth-century philosopher James Mill asserted that truth always won out over falsehood and was irresistible to the human mind. His son, John Stuart Mill, disagreed, arguing with the more reasonable but still questionable assumption that over time, truths have advanced and become established and that this was a mark of progress. He also argued that as humanity improves, the number of doctrines that are no longer disputed or doubted will constantly increase. The dramatic growth of religious-based fundamentalism in the last several decades and the open rejection of science in the contemporary United States, especially during the present Trump administration, lead us to at least replace Stuart Mill's apparently linear development of progress with a more skeptical nonlinear view (219). We could also modify Stuart Mill's expectations with the assertion that although we cannot expect free speech and free inquiry to guarantee progress, the absence of those democratic advances is far more likely to guarantee its absence.

Perhaps more modest in its claim was Justice Louis Brandeis's legal position in the early twentieth century that, as related by Dabhoiwala, in the face of bad or dangerous speech (often falsely based on the farfetched notion that Communism constituted a clear and present danger in the United States of the 1920s) "the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence." While allowing and encouraging more speech is obviously a good idea, Brandeis's proposal is also implicitly reductionist in narrowing social and economic reality and the question of how to change it to the realms of communication and persuasion by groups and individuals, ignoring broader forces in society that may stand not only in the way of "more speech," but more generally as obstacles to any kind of human progress. Even in those realms, the views of such Supreme Court justices as Brandeis were wholly inadequate to fully address, let alone remedy, problems such as the lack of an ample and fair production and dissemination of

The author does not give us any clue as to who would determine the appropriate circumstances and establish the pertinent constraints for free speech.

news in contemporary capitalist society. At the time, the influential columnist Walter Lippmann cited by Dabhoiwala argued that the opinions of these Justices were simply "misleading"—"too feeble and unreal...to protect the purpose of liberty, which is the furnishing of a healthy envi-

ronment in which human judgment and inquiry can most successfully organize human life.” Since the most important issue in this context was the development of public opinion, “the protection of the sources of its opinion is the basic problem of democracy. Everything else depends on it.” (Walter Lippmann, *Liberty and the News*, Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920, pp. 35, 63). In other words, Brandeis was attempting to establish some free-speech rules for the delivery and dissemination of opinions without looking into how those opinions were formed and shaped in the first place in an economically-advanced capitalist society (285–7).

Central to this issue was that notion of the “free market” of ideas that was in reality an oligopolistic market when in fact publishing and the press were in the hands of and controlled by a small group of companies. During this period (approximately 1900 to 1930) the lion’s share of newspapers were already in the hands of companies and individuals like the Hearst and Scripps-Howard chains plus the influential major newspapers owned by Joseph Pulitzer, and the *Chicago Tribune*, which belonged to the Medill/McCormick family. At the same time, other newspaper chains, such as those owned and controlled by Gannett and Knight-Ridder, were rising. As far as book publishing was concerned, it was highly concentrated, controlled to a very large degree by the following companies: Doubleday, Page and Company, Harper, Macmillan, J.B. Lippincott, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, Charles Scribner’s Sons, Simon and Schuster, and the McGraw-Hill Book Company.

In sum, what even the more liberal defenders of free speech on the Supreme Court were unable and unwilling to argue for in their decisions was how corporate capitalism by its very nature made it impossible to provide equal access to the highly

concentrated media and how the absence of such access constituted a major obstacle to democracy.

The Internet and Social Media

Today, while the number of social media companies is smaller than the newspaper and book publishers of Lippmann’s epoch, the number of users is immensely greater both in the United States and abroad. As Jacob Mchangama has reminded us, in the mid-nineties only 40 million people worldwide had access to an internet that was radically different from the increasingly centralized and commercialized internet of 2021 with its 4.66 billion active users, 4.2 billion of whom also used social media. In 2019, 43 percent of the world’s internet traffic ran through the same six giants and their intermediaries (*Free Speech. A History from Socrates to Social Media*, Basic Books, p. 354). The internet has often helped the development of mass mobilization and protests in many countries with political and social systems as diverse as those of the United States and Cuba. However, it does appear that the Chinese government, among other authoritarian political regimes, has been able, with the help of U.S. companies, to achieve a substantial degree of political control of the internet.

Critical in the present context is section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, approved in 1996, that provides immunity for hosting third-party content to “interactive computer services” companies such as Facebook. These companies have on the one hand been able through the use of algorithms to manipulate what users can see or not see, affecting both the reception and dissemination of content. Thus, these algorithms silently but effectively limit and manipulate the exercise of free speech. At the same time, these companies evade the responsibilities involved in the dissemination of content. Thus, for example, newspa-

pers and magazines generally employ fact-checkers that lead them to reject content that may expose them to libel suits and at the same time protect their credibility and trust as dispensers of news and opinions. Of course, this does not make these news and opinion organs truly democratic since only people with substantial amounts of capital at their disposal are able and willing to acquire businesses that must be made profitable if they are to survive. This is even truer in the era of the transformation of media that has prominently included a sharp decline in the number of newspapers and magazines.

For business and political reasons, particularly in the era of Trump, the big social media companies have been unwilling to curtail the dissemination of the grossest lies, blatantly erroneous medical information, and straight factual errors such as falsely announcing the death of some prominent people. Facebook has not even bothered to erase the names and pictures of “friends” who are no longer alive, which means that eventually there will be more “friends” who are dead than part of our living world. Obviously, this could only be avoided by hiring a considerable number of people who would keep abreast of these mortal developments. In line with their critical importance, these companies have become public utilities like telephone and electricity companies that badly need lawful regulation of their activities.

In sum, Dabhoiwala is correct when he claims that social media acts as publishers of content and not just neutral conduits for it. As he puts it, they “purposefully arrange the information on their websites, algorithmically targeting each viewer in order to boost certain communications and demote others. And they also all have standards about permissible and impermissible speech, which they enforce (or not) as they please, free from

external oversight” (321).

Individualism and Individual Rights

Still, the philosophy and politics of individualism that has backed and provided essential support to the so-called free enterprise economic system in the United States as it applies to the media, should not be confused with the related but very distinct issue of individual rights. By this, I am referring to rights like those contained in the Bill of Rights establishing free speech and freedom of religion, the right of peaceful assembly, the protection against arbitrary search and seizure, and the right to a public trial among others.

Habeas corpus is also explicitly enshrined in the Constitution: “The Privilege of the Writ of Habeas Corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety may require it.” (Article I, Section 9, paragraph 2.) Contrary to the brutishly ignorant Kristi Noem, the former head of Homeland Security, who publicly claimed that Habeas Corpus referred to President Trump’s power to essentially do what he wished, Habeas Corpus (meaning “you have the body” in Latin) refers to the prohibition to hold a detained person beyond a certain number of hours (generally from 48 to 72) without the police authorities and the accused person having to appear before a judge to decide whether there is sufficient reason for that person to be held in prison, or be freed (if not entirely discharged) with or without bail.

Moreover, as important as the individualist tradition has been in the United States, what Dabhoiwala plays down if not entirely ignores is that popular struggles by workers, Black people and other racial minorities, as well as women and other oppressed groups, have dealt major defeats to individualism as a reigning political and ideological philosophy in the country.

Laws like the Wagner Act in the 1930s, the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Act in the 1960s, and numerous other laws have dealt serious blows to individualism, affirming what could be called democratic collectivist rights. Moreover, the vigorous exercise of the right of free speech has been essential to all such collective struggles. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the radical socialist union active in the first decades of the twentieth century, organized numerous “free speech fights” to support strike action and disseminate their political views. The socialist leader Eugene Debs repeatedly invoked his First Amendment right to voice and propagate his political opinions as well as those of the then very significant Socialist Party

The Left and Free Speech in the United States

Civil liberties groups such as the ACLU defend the free speech rights of individuals and groups on a daily basis, and so should the left. But the left is also engaged in a political and social struggle to change society, which is not usually part of the agenda of civil liberties organizations. As part of this struggle, the left also fights against the authoritarian and anti-democratic politics of many of the groups and organizations, usually on the right of the political spectrum, that are trying to advance and gain popular support for their thoroughly anti-democratic and often racist, sexist, and antisemitic agendas.

This is especially true today when a massive offensive is taking place against the left, liberals, and many universities to eliminate affirmative action and change even the content of academic courses themselves, often under the specious excuse of antisemitism as a convenient disguise for a clear and blatant right-wing ideological agenda.

The governmental violation of free

speech has had a particularly negative impact on students and faculty opposing Israel’s barbaric acts in Gaza and increasingly in the West Bank. Among its victims are first of all Arab and Palestinian students such as Mahmood Khalil, a recent graduate of Columbia University who may have been deported as this issue of *New Politics* appears, for playing a leading role in the protests that took place on that campus against the Israeli invasion of Gaza. Elsewhere, repression has been unleashed against tenured professors such as Tom Alter in Texas, who was fired for the “crime” of stating his opinions as an American citizen to an off-campus socialist audience.

But how can the left fight these often-extreme right-wing actions and organizations while at the same time respecting the right to free speech of all Americans, two commitments that sometimes may appear to be irreconcilable?

In a period of relative social peace, by which I mean the absence of civil war or revolution, the radical and socialist democratic left should distinguish between what I have chosen to call racist and anti-democratic persuaders from racist and anti-democratic intimidators. People like Arthur Jensen, Richard Herrnstein, and Charles Murray among others that have propagated offensive racist myths under the guise of social science, are racist persuaders, as well as other right-wing spokespeople who ideologically oppose liberals and the left. However, their pronouncements take place entirely within the realm of discourse, to which opponents, some of them well-known such as the late Stephen Jay Gould and many other commentators have vigorously responded through rational discussions and careful refutation.

Mass protests can and should be organized against racist and anti-democratic persuaders. These protesters can use other free speech rights, including the venerable

traditions of picketing and heckling against such people, but stop short of using force to stop figures like them from speaking. Even the sharpest ideological and political struggles ought to abide by implicit rules that social movements have occasionally violated when they have replaced persuasion with the use of force. This not only violates the speakers' fundamental rights, but more importantly, the rights of the audience, which may at least in part consist of people who are undecided, confused, or with mixed consciousness, as well as who just wish to preserve the right to free speech.

This differs from racist, sexist or anti-semitic acts of *intimidation* perpetrated by organized groups with a history of physical violence, such as, for example, the various right-wing groups that organized and participated in the violent acts carried out at the nation's Capitol building on January 6, 2021, to prevent Congress from certifying the electoral victory of Biden over Trump in the 2020 election. With such groups, which include open neo-Nazis, as well as other groups such as the KKK, the left is not just in ideological struggle, but also in a state of open belligerence. Violent intimidators are not trying to persuade, but to intimidate. Their language is the language of violence. As far as the social movements are concerned, the otherwise reasonable rule that speech is protected until violence is imminent should not apply to these violent intimidators. Instead, that principle allows these extreme right-wing groups to select the time, place and manner most favorable

for their violent actions.

Therefore, the question of forcefully stopping such intimidators from demonstrating or marching altogether should not be regarded as a question of principle but rather as a question of strategy and tactics. Several considerations are relevant here, including the relation of forces in the streets, whether most protesting groups would support preventing the intimidators' actions from taking place, and whether significant sections of the public would recognize that in these cases forceful actions are fair and justified instead of perceiving the intimidators as victims.

However, in no case should the radical and leftist democratic forces call on the state to stop or illegalize marches or other forms of political actions by the intimidators. As we discussed above, what happened in Britain after the Race Relations Act was approved in 1965 demonstrates that the state cannot be trusted to consistently act in the defense of free speech and other civil liberties. To call on the state to ban, for example, right-wing political demonstrations is to provide the state with political legitimacy and legal weapons that can be used against the public actions of other citizens, including the left. Thus, in many such cases, the left should oppose governmental bans on, for example, demonstrations, while at the same time working to organize the broadest opposition in the streets to such right-wing racist and anti-democratic activities.

Rural Prisons and False Consciousness

SAMUEL BARNEY

IN RECENT DECADES, TWO COLD, HARD realities have afflicted the northeastern United States: job loss and depopulation. For most of the people who live in what was once a humming industrial region, the story is the same: the factories have closed, the manufacturers have fled elsewhere for greener pastures, the old infrastructure and storefronts have decayed, and working people are left wondering how to pick up the pieces. In this context of capital flight and abandonment, it becomes more important than ever to ask the question, “why should working people tolerate capital?” The short answer is, they shouldn’t.

Many of the areas affected by job loss and depopulation have turned to prisons to try to revitalize their economies, thus amplifying mass incarceration and expanding the nationwide “carceral state.” The northernmost tip of New York State, affectionately dubbed “the North Country” by those who belong to it, is one such area; it forms part of the nationwide trend. Unlike Buffalo and Rochester in that it is not formally part of the Rust Belt, the North Country is roughly what remains of the state beyond Syracuse and Albany but before Canada. Between 1982 and 1998, around a dozen correctional facilities went

into operation in the North Country, a remarkable sample size for an area with such a small population. Between 1982 and 2000, 38 new prisons opened across the state, more than doubling the number of prisons that had existed statewide prior to 1982.¹

I argue that class contradictions are crucial to understanding this expansion of the prison system in the North Country and beyond. Elsewhere I have outlined the role of Upstate New York’s prisons in the suppression of the most politically advanced parts of the U.S. working class historically.² In several ways that go beyond the outright suppression of political radicals, the new, post-1970s prison construction initiative has served capital in its war against working people.

Let us be clear, rural decline and increasing poverty in rural areas are symptoms of a capitalist disease. But after capital flees a community, accelerating decline, prison building is a (not wholly unsuccessful) sort of damage control. It benefits capital by allowing for

1. The temporary placation of (generally) white, immiserated working-class communities that were once rightfully angry and confused over their worsening economic prospects, through particular manifestations of false consciousness.

2. The incorporation of a considerable part of the rural working class into corrections, one of the more important coercive/repressive institutions of the

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state apparatus.

3. The extraction of low-paid or unpaid labor from convict work forces.

The rural prison-building initiative is in large part an attempt to postpone the explosion of class contradictions and maintain the structural subordination of U.S. labor to capital, regardless of whether capital's individual representatives in the state apparatus consciously recognize this or not.

As the Marxist concept of "false consciousness" is the starting point for the first proposition, we would do well to define it. Though not explicitly theorized by either Marx or Engels (Engels only once used the term in passing, in a letter to Franz Mehring), the notion is implicit in their thought. For example, in *The German Ideology* they write that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas...the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it."³ This passage hints at the essence of false consciousness without revealing it outright.

Jost defines false consciousness as "the holding of false or inaccurate beliefs that are contrary to one's own social interest and which thereby contribute to the maintenance of the disadvantaged position of the self or group."⁴ Notably, this definition extends the use of the term beyond class horizons but remains essentially accurate. False consciousness is the sum of the ideas and beliefs present in the minds of the exploited that prevent them from recognizing their exploitation and actively struggling against their exploiters.

In proportion as the particular manifestations of false consciousness come to ensnare working people's minds, they become so many interwoven barriers, a spiderweb of almost physical impediments to self-emancipation. I call the constituent

parts of false consciousness "hegemonic illusions." These ideas and beliefs are illusions in that they are false. They are hegemonic in that they perpetuate exploitative social relations and the dominance of certain groups of people over others (in this case, the dominance of the capitalist class over the working class). Hegemonic illusions can be impositions when they are introduced into the worldview of the oppressed from without by existing social structures, but as we will see, the term "imposition" can be limited in that it sometimes overlooks the agency of working people in reproducing false consciousness.

Antonio Gramsci believed that intellectuals articulate the worldview of particular social classes, homogenizing and guiding them. As Martha E. Gimenez notes, "while it is true, as it could not be otherwise, that all members of a given society are simultaneously located in a number of structures which...shape their experiences and opportunity structures, structural location does

These findings, considered collectively, dispel the notion that prisons are economic saviors of any sort.

not necessarily entail awareness of being thus located or the automatic development of identities corresponding to those locations."⁵ The influence of intellectual work on others can either aid or hinder the process of coming to identify oneself with a particular social class.

So, while ruling-class intellectuals perpetuate the existing order through the elaboration of their theories and through their practical activity, the role of working-

class intellectuals is to challenge that order and to transform working-class identity into class consciousness—which implies not only recognition of one’s status as a laborer, but also of the irreconcilable antagonism between capital and labor and of humanity’s dire need to construct a new, more humane social order in which the majority of humankind is no longer alienated from decision-making processes.

How are working-class intellectuals to help realize this transformation? In part, by identifying, exposing, and undermining the hegemonic illusions that currently shackle proletarian minds.

With a theoretical framework presented, we can now proceed to our discussion of how rural prison construction births false consciousness. In his detailed study of two rural prison towns (Beeville, TX, and Florence, CO), Eric Williams identified a “prevailing myth” around the communities’ prison discourse. Emanating from the state and federal governments, “the myth is that the prisons have saved these communities from economic ruin and possibly extinc-

Prisons are unhealthy for prisoners and guards alike.

tion.... This myth seems to be taken as fact by many of my respondents, and the state and federal governments are dependent on this myth to continue to find communities that are willing to ‘give away the store’ to land a new prison facility.”⁶

To what extent have the various rural communities of Upstate New York swallowed Williams’s myth? Tracy Huling, among the leaders in rural prison research, offers a pair of examples: “In the all-out contest spurred by New York governor

George Pataki’s 1996 proposal to build three new maximum-security state prisons, the rural town of Altamont set aside 100 acres of land to entice the state to locate a prison there. Antwerp, another small community in northern New York, applied for a \$600,000 federal grant to rebuild their water supply system to increase their chances of winning a state prison.”⁷

What is so inaccurate about the idea that prisons save rural economies? Tracy Huling, Ryan King, and Marc Mauer have judged the tall tales told by the state against the realities of prison performance in the “economic savior” role. Singling out New York State’s government as being “among the leaders in rural prison construction,” they studied fourteen counties in New York State, seven with new (post-1970s) prisons and seven without them, and contrasted their economic well-being.⁸

They found, among other things, that counties with new prisons “did not gain significant employment advantages compared to counties without prisons,” that between 1988 and 1992 unemployment increased more in counties with prisons than in those without them, and that the “counties that hosted new prisons received no economic advantage as measured by per capita income.”⁹ Between North Country counties that hosted new prisons and those that did not, there was “no demonstrable pattern of differing economic performance....”¹⁰

And we’ve not yet mentioned the fact that most new prison jobs don’t actually go to the people who live in the community. Instead, many commuters pick up new positions. The “higher paying management and correctional officer jobs in public prisons come with educational and experience requirements that many rural residents do not have...the distances people drive to work at prisons are quite great, in most cases nearly double the average commuter range.”¹¹

As Huling states, “the 750 jobs that a state prison opened in 1999 brought to the tiny rural town of Malone, NY, went mostly to people outside the town.” Scarcely a hundred of those jobs went to native residents of Malone or people who live in the immediate vicinity of the town. Nor, I would argue, are correctional jobs desirable in the first place, as they stunt—not contribute to—the free and full development of human beings. These findings, considered collectively, dispel the notion that prisons are economic saviors of any sort.

Instead of being made to answer for the inability of the existing economic system to keep jobs in rural areas, politicians point to prisons as a solution for rural economic decline, thereby generating Williams’s “prevailing myth.” The myth is swallowed, the prisons are built, and as people come to believe that the new facilities have saved their communities, they are less likely to point out that, first, poverty still reigns, and, second, that they need not have lost their original industrial jobs in the first place. What is this myth identified by Williams if not a hegemonic illusion, *a particular manifestation of false consciousness?*

Socialism is a new, deeply democratic system in which ordinary people reclaim control of their decision-making power, their resources, their communities, and their lives. When working people control resources and production under socialism, *the community itself* will decide when and if certain jobs should be phased out—and members of the community won’t need to abide by the decisions of profit-chasing elites.

Though prisons do not benefit the community in any meaningful sense, one reason why the particular “economic savior” hegemonic illusion can take root in the first place is that prisons do offer some jobs to individuals—and at the end of the day, most people are just looking for stable

work. Who wants to be exposed to the vicissitudes of the capitalist job market? The high wages, job stability, and solid benefits that are advertised as compensation for joining the repressive apparatus are all attractive lures to working people, but taking the bait comes with a cost.

As Engels and Lenin rightly acknowledge, the modern state is in large part a “special coercive force” for the suppression of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie.”¹² Joining the repressive wings of the state apparatus (police, military, corrections, etc.) and carrying out the repressive functions of these groups as members of them ultimately compromises the working-class people who enlist in such organizations. Hence, the manifold television shows, shooter video games, and war films that glorify the repressive professions, pumped out year after year by mass media companies. The air of respectability that surrounds police and military personnel plays a major role in winning over working-class recruits to these groups and is actively cultivated by the bourgeois media and state.

Veterans’ Day, which glorifies veterans without regard to personal merits or flaws, is an example of this. Such an approach necessarily eschews allocating praise or criticism based on case-by-case examinations of veterans’ individual conduct. Rather, present and former military personnel are presented as universally virtuous and worthy of respect. This perspective—the unconditional veneration of the military—has taken root culturally in the United States, principally to the benefit of ruling capitalist elites.

The illegal 2025 New York corrections officers’ strike illustrates that many officers feel cheated out of the comparatively easy living they are supposed to receive from their incorporation into the repressive apparatus. The socialist response to these grievances must be to point out that repressive personnel are mere tools for the

established order, easily discarded, while discouraging such men and women from remaining long in their current profession, which is ultimately predicated on so much human suffering. Prisons are unhealthy for prisoners and guards alike. The effects they have on prisoners are well documented, but less frequently considered are the effects prisons have on the correctional officers,

The conspicuous exception to the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery “except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted,” is well known.

who begin to see in prisoners not human beings, but savages. Suggesting that these officers change careers might lead one to ask what they can do instead, a question I address below, which is also relevant due to certain yet-unmentioned historical developments.

Do North Country prisons employ prison labor? Yes. Convict labor has been employed in New York State “since the opening of Clinton State Prison at Dannemora in 1845,” and from that date on there has been an “extensive deployment of incarcerated workers on public works, conservation, and infrastructure projects in towns and villages across the North Country.”¹³ Prisoners have “built roads, blazed hiking trails, constructed ski runs, fought forest fires, controlled flooding, and renovated [many] public spaces including churches, libraries, schools, and government offices.”¹⁴

It should not be forgotten that the inmates in these facilities constitute something resembling a slave labor force, easily

exploitable and made to work for laughable compensation (often less than a dollar an hour in wages). The conspicuous exception to the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery “except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted,” is well known. New York State’s laws do not counteract this exception, nor do they impact it in any meaningful way. As of 2025, prison reform groups remained active in pushing for more humane conditions and real workers’ rights in New York prisons.¹⁵

We have thus far ignored the fact that many rural prisons, particularly those in Upstate New York, are now closing. Both the number of prisoners in these facilities and the corrections staff assigned to oversee them are trending down in number. Obviously, the socialist left should not support the efforts of rural communities to retain the prisons they already have. Such advocacy is unthinkable. Rather, socialist organizers should consider how the new wave of prison closures can be made to aid in the emergence of *class*, rather than *false*, consciousness.

People in rural America must look to the future, not the past, leaving the deeply problematic carceral system behind them. A key task of rural leftist organizers is to try to help mold what the future of these communities might look like. This means firmly rejecting not only prison expansion but also the array of already existing prisons, and being able to answer when asked, “but what will we do when they’re gone?” It means supplementing a negative critique of the prison system with new, positive alternatives for the future, with proposals for new jobs and unalienated forms of work.

In the North Country, some groups are already thinking about the impact of climate change and how new jobs might emerge from efforts to expand the area’s renewable energy capacity.¹⁶ Many climate-

friendly avenues remain open to exploration and could bring sustainability and opportunity to rural regions in decline. Such undertakings will certainly be of increasing importance as the century progresses and as climate catastrophe draws ever nearer.

Committing more resources to local schools and healthcare instead of prisons would also greatly benefit the North Country population. In my view, the rejuvenation of the North Country might be achieved by placing emphasis on some combination of the three factors described above—but this is hardly possible under capitalism. Whatever the solutions to the region's woes, the people of the North Country can (and must) find and realize them.

The “economic savior” myth that surrounds rural prisons is one of the hegemonic illusions that must be dispelled if we are to advance long-term social change.

NOTES

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Fighting Nativist Immigration Policy

A Report from the Los Angeles Battlefield

RAOUL CANSINO

ON FRIDAY, JUNE 6, 2025, FEDERAL agents descended on four businesses in Los Angeles and arrested dozens of workers on suspicion of violation of U.S. immigration laws. In response, hundreds of people gathered around federal buildings in downtown Los Angeles to protest the raids, and there were clashes between some demonstrators and the police department (the LAPD), who ruled the protest an unlawful assembly. On June 7, the protests continued. As on Friday, the demonstrations were largely peaceful, but some protesters threw objects at the police, and three self-driving cars were set on fire. Even though the unrest encompassed only about eight city blocks, on which Mayor Bass imposed a nightly curfew, Trump declared that Los Angeles was “under siege” and, ignoring the objections of Gavin Newsom, governor of California, and the mayor, ordered 2,000 federalized National Guard troops to deploy to the city. On June 8, 300 members of the National Guard arrived in Los Angeles, and the first of a series of federal “takeovers” of major American cities had begun.

Neither the vehement reaction to federal immigration raids nor the deployment of National Guard troops to quell the protests should have been a surprise. After all, these

events had been ten years in the making. On June 16, 2015, Donald Trump descended on the golden escalator in the Trump Tower in New York City to declare his candidacy for president of the United States and to say, in justification of his candidacy, that “When Mexico sends its people [into the United States], they’re not sending their best.... They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime, they’re rapists....”

Ever since that day, anti-immigration proposals, the Muslim Ban, the border wall, or, most insistently, Mass Deportation, have been among the most popular elements in Trump’s nativist America First agenda. However, during Trump’s first term, the steps taken to implement these proposals were abject failures. He managed to build only 69 new miles of border wall, failed to deport as many undocumented immigrants as either Biden or Obama, and, despite a lengthy court battle over the Muslim Ban and a replacement Executive Order that was intended to address the problems with the original ban, he didn’t succeed in showing any plausible gains in national security from the measure.

What Is New About the Trump 2.0 ICE Raids and How Are Los Angeles Grassroots Activists Responding?

Trump 2.0 has taken advantage of its dominance in all three branches of the federal government to renew its anti-immigration efforts. The Department of Homeland Se-

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curity (DHS) claims that the construction of the border wall, which was largely halted under Biden, will be completed by January of 2028. On June 9, 2025, Trump issued a new travel ban, restricting entry to the United States of nationals from nineteen countries (up from the original seven in the 2017 order). In December 2025, Trump issued a revised order barring entry to nationals of 39 countries (and the Palestinian Authority). However, Trump's regime has devoted its greatest efforts to an impossible goal—deporting every last “illegal” from the United States.

Los Angeles was a natural first target for Trump's mass deportation campaign. It has the largest undocumented population of any American city (over 1.1 million, according to the Migration Policy Institute), and it is a sanctuary city, making it the object of Trump's anger for defying his authority. It is a deeply blue city, and, more to the point, it is rabidly anti-Trump (he lost Los Angeles County to Kamala Harris by more than 1.2 million votes). Finally, Stephen Miller, Trump's homeland security adviser and the chief anti-immigrant ideologue in the Trump regime, is a Los Angeles native and bears a special animus toward his home city's immigrant population—perhaps because he was forced to attend a majority-minority public high school instead of his older brother's pricey private school after his family suffered an economic downturn.

Raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) (and Customs and Border Protection [CBP] and Homeland Security Investigations) in Los Angeles began in earnest on June 6, 2025, and, between that date and July 8, a bare month later, 2,719 allegedly illegal immigrants had been detained. The methods of ICE and other anti-immigrant agencies (“*la migra*”) were brutal, effective, and themselves illegal. Federal agents swarmed places frequented by immigrants (Home Depot parking lots,

car washes, open-air markets) and seized anyone with brown skin and a Spanish accent. Agents grabbed gardeners trimming bushes, vendors selling *birria*, shoppers at Target, people walking home or driving to work, and they even swept MacArthur Park with armored vehicles, disrupting a children's summer camp. In the eleven months since the raids began, Home Depot parking lots have become human hunting grounds, with over 700 day laborers abducted while they were looking for work there.

Fear stalked the streets of Los Angeles, and the local and state authorities that had promised “sanctuary” complained about ICE but did little else and failed even to rein in the LAPD, which made a practice of brutalizing protesters and facilitating ICE kidnappings by establishing “safety

ICE was not merely a
mechanism of immigration
enforcement. It was a secret
police force akin to the Gestapo,
free to violate central rights.

perimeters” to keep observers and neighbors at bay during arrests.

This “surge” of ICE agents into Los Angeles, followed by sustained immigration campaigns in Chicago, North Carolina, Washington, DC, and Minneapolis–Saint Paul (not to mention raids in many other cities), aroused courageous and creative resistance in the communities under attack.

The first attempts to protect people from ICE raids in Los Angeles were spontaneous efforts by community members to sound the alarm and even intervene when agents suddenly appeared in their neighborhoods. Online chats exploded with videos of masked, armed men seiz-

ing people (almost always Latinos) on the streets, smashing car windows and dragging people away, chasing people through an open-air market, a car wash, or a Home Depot parking lot, and, on one occasion,

The methods of ICE and other anti-immigrant agencies (“la migra”) were brutal, effective, and themselves illegal.

even blowing a door down to grab a father at home with his family.

Elizabeth Castillo, a mother of five and an American citizen, is married to a man who had been deported in 2012. She exemplifies the response of ordinary citizens in Los Angeles. Soon after the raids began, she began patrolling Pasadena, her hometown, located northeast of downtown Los Angeles. Whenever she spotted ICE activity, she warned the neighborhood with her megaphone. Neighbors joined her, and they partnered with NDLO (the National Day Laborers Organizing Network) to set up an ICE Watch on a corner in their town. The idea spread quickly and “adopt-a-corners” appeared on many of the major streets in Los Angeles’s Latino neighborhoods. Sometimes these were organized by established groups, like the Los Angeles Tenants Union (LATU) or the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), but often people just called up friends and started a local ICE Watch. For example, in El Sereno, a long-established Latino community just northeast of downtown Los Angeles, a group of friends founded the “Community Care Collective,” which recruited dozens of neighbors to patrol the streets and to watch over a local food distribution and a weekly night market. Community organizations

with a long history of service, like Union del Barrio (UDB) and Centro CSO, stood up a Community Self-Defense Coalition (CSDC) and began to offer “Know Your Rights” trainings and to organize their own patrols, involving hundreds of volunteers.

Protests against ICE started almost immediately as well. CLUE Justice (*Clergy and Laity United for Equity and Justice*) initiated a “freedom cruise” of dozens of vehicles, slowing traffic on major roads leading to City Hall, where the drivers gathered to protest the raids. NDLO coordinated an “ICE scraper” action in Monrovia, where a day laborer had been struck and killed by a vehicle on the 210 freeway while trying to escape an ICE raid in the Home Depot parking lot. Hundreds of protesters clogged the cash registers in the Home Depot store by buying and returning ICE scrapers repeatedly. The video of this action went viral and was viewed nearly two million times, inspiring copycat “ICE scrapers” at Home Depot stores in many cities across the country.

Resistance to mass deportation also became a central theme in the national mobilization of opposition to Trump’s agenda. The public seemed to be waking up to the realization that ICE was not merely a mechanism of immigration enforcement. It was a secret police force akin to the Gestapo, free to violate central rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights with “absolute immunity” (according to J. D. Vance) from any court supervision. Fatal ICE shootings of American citizens soon made it clear that, while the agency was focused on “illegals” now, anyone their agents saw as obstructing their mission was subject to arrest or even lethal force. From the early “Hands Off” marches to the series of massive “No Kings” rallies that brought millions of Trump regime opponents onto the streets, the anti-ICE sentiment was evident. In cities like Los

Angeles, where the raids wrought havoc in immigrant communities—tearing families apart and causing hundreds of thousands of workers to stop doing their jobs—the ICE terror was accompanied by widespread impoverishment.

Dozens of organizations have joined the Home Depot Boycott Coalition, including the Northeast Los Angeles Alliance for Democracy, a local anti-fascist group, which had started its own boycott campaign. Many actions followed: vigils for day laborers who had died in ICE custody, Day of the Dead celebrations, anti-ICE caroling, mutual aid for families affected by the raids, and an ongoing attempt to encourage the buying public to shun Home Depot. Although Home Depot hasn't given in to the pressure of these campaigns, its complicity with ICE has been exposed, and its stores have become a rallying point for activists everywhere.

Los Angeles, Chicago, Minneapolis Learning from Each Other How to Fight Back

It's difficult to capture the diversity and complexity of this effort to protect Los Angeles neighborhoods from ICE and the devastating effects of the raids or to assess its efficacy. Once ICE agents had stopped a community member, it was nearly impossible to prevent that person's arrest, but groups like the Harbor Area Peace Patrol, which stood watch outside the ICE center at Terminal Island every morning and circulated photos of agents' vehicles leaving for their raids, and numerous Rapid Response and Watch teams throughout the city formed an almost seamless network that was often able to warn communities in advance that ICE was coming. Undoubtedly, many kidnappings were foiled by this system, but just as important, ICE was not able simply to disappear people. Observers reported the names and birth-

dates of detainees to CHIRLA (Coalition for Humane Immigration Rights of Los Angeles), Union del Barrio, and other rapid-response hotlines, while spreading the word throughout their own networks, informing family members of the kidnap victims, and initiating legal and mutual aid. It seems clear that the resistance to ICE kidnappings, whether in Los Angeles, Chicago, Minneapolis, or any of the other cities where ICE conducted major raids, had an effect by arousing public opposition and forcing *la migra* to change its approach to mass deportation.

The Los Angeles ICE surge reached its peak during its first month, June 2025, but raids continued throughout the year, diminishing in frequency and size as ICE reduced its reliance on mass raids in Los Angeles and pursued less public detention tactics, often involving people already under supervision by immigration, such as those enrolled in the Intensive Supervision for Asylum Seekers or DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients. Also, ICE and CBP turned their attention to other cities, whether out of the calculation that they wouldn't fight back or simply to punish Democratic-leaning communities, it is hard to say. In any case, resistance to mass deportation had only grown stronger in reaction to *la migra's* brutal and indiscriminate attack on Los Angeles's communities. When "Operation Midway Blitz"—the assault on Chicago's immigrants—began in early September 2025, the anti-fascist movement had learned many valuable lessons about how to throw sand in the gears of mass deportation. By the time the attack on Minneapolis–St. Paul ("Metro Surge") took place in December 2025, despite the enormous force mustered by DHS, this relatively small city pushed back with such tenacity and demonstrated such a depth of neighborly love for its immigrant community that national public

opinion turned against Trump's brutal immigration policy, and "Metro Surge" ended abruptly with the firing of DHS secretary Kristi Noem and the retirement of CBP chief Greg Bovino.

The changes in leadership do not, of course, mean that the Trump regime has abandoned its mass deportation policy. Stephen Miller, Trump's Heinrich Himmler, hasn't yet lost influence with Trump because of popular resistance, and DHS has vast resources—approximately \$191 billion—to hire new agents, complete the border wall, and expand its system of detention centers. Furthermore, Republicans in Congress are now planning to use "reconciliation" to circumvent any Democratic move to hold up ICE funding while reforms in ICE tactics are debated.

Nevertheless, the resistance has only grown. It has become nearly impossible for Trump to build new detention centers because of local pushback. Nationwide, a protest movement has been building against the network of established private and state-funded concentration camps where detainees are held in advance of deportation. The next big battle against mass deportation is likely to take place over these camps. As I write, in California, a

new anti-camp coalition (NO Camps CA) has formed and carried out its first action on May 4, 2026—a coordinated, statewide protest at every detention center in California. Fittingly, this effort was led by two Angeleno organizers. Several of the actions were impressively large—involving hundreds of protesters who traveled to remote concentration camps (in the High Mojave Desert, for example) to voice their opposition and let the detainees know that they are not forgotten. Detainees report abusive and inhumane conditions at the detention centers, including overcrowding, lack of basic hygiene, food infested by maggots, and extreme medical neglect (sometimes resulting in the death of detainees). ICE plans to expand the capacity of its detention centers to 92,600 beds by November of this year (from a current capacity of about 60,000).

It will take all the passion and creativity of the resistance to slow down this juggernaut and to turn public sentiment against it. Just as in the past year, we can't expect politicians to help us in this fight, even if Democrats win the midterm elections. This is the people's struggle—for their democracy and for their communities.

Solo el pueblo salva al pueblo!

The Political Economy of Nativism

BILL KELLY

Livin' in a city of immigrants
I don't need to go travelin'
Open my door and the world walks in
Livin' in a city of immigrants
Livin' in a city that never sleeps
My heart keepin' time to a thousand beats
Singin' in languages I don't speak
Livin' in a city of immigrants

From the 2007 song "City of Immigrants," by Steve Earle

IN JUNE OF 2025, HEAVILY ARMED and masked federal agents appeared on the streets of metropolitan Los Angeles, terrorizing businesses and workplaces, in order to detain people of Latin American heritage without due process. Asylum seekers, workers with green cards, young dreamers who came as children, and even citizens based on their physical appearance were swept off the streets and whisked away to federal detention centers where they were held or quickly deported. They weren't allowed to seek legal representation or call family members. The food they were given and the water, sanitation, and health services were all inadequate. The cruel treatment has killed 46 detainees in federal custody since President Donald Trump took office in January of 2025.¹

Today, many still sit in privately-run detention facilities increasingly viewed as concentration camps. The camps are run

by multi-billion-dollar corporations like Core Civic and the Geo Group, which won no-bid contracts from the Department of Homeland Security after sidling up to Trump and providing him with lavish campaign contributions. Moreover, each day, more people are picked up off the streets and out of their homes and are brought to these politically connected hell holes.

It's no accident that Trump, who has repeatedly characterized Mexican immigrants as rapists and criminals, unleashed his war against immigrants in Los Angeles, a Democratic stronghold with a huge county-wide population of 10 million, including 3.5 million immigrants, 55 percent of whom hail from Latin America and about 800,000 of whom are undocumented.² After all, Los Angeles is a place where, as city Mayor Karen Bass notes,³ 52 percent of residents speak one or more of 224 languages, in a state where immigrants have long formed the backbone of the economy, but that MAGA loves to hate. From Silicon Valley engineers to farm workers, both documented and undocumented immigrants bolster the productivity of California, which if a nation would be the fourth largest economy in the world. The state stands

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Federal enforcement agents arrive in a rented truck to round up day laborers at Home Depot in the Westlake area of Los Angeles in June of 2025.

behind only the nation as a whole, China, and Germany as an economic powerhouse, yet it remains in Trump's crosshairs.⁴

Trump's made-for-TV spectacle in Los Angeles included an armed march through MacArthur Park, a prominent center for the Latin American immigrant community lined with open air markets. After the march, ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and CBP (Customs and Border Patrol) agents fanned out across much of southern California and conducted heavily publicized raids in restaurants in San Diego, on farms in Ventura County, and in businesses and neighborhoods across a state of more than 39 million people, 28 percent of whom are foreign born.⁵

And the sad truth is that the spectacle marked how little is really new in a nation that for most of its existence has exploited immigrants, particularly from Mexico and Latin America. Indeed, most of the Southwest was part of Mexico before it was part of the United States, showing how the nation still refuses to reconcile itself to its fraught history of racial prejudice, brutal territorial expansion, and slavery.

Tracing the History of the U.S. Vilification/Exploitation of Latino Migrants, 1942-2015

It was not that long ago, for instance, that a 17-year-old Texan murdered a 13-year-old Mexican boy, thinking he'd stolen the

family's car. The 17-year-old was convicted and sentenced to three years in prison before a Texas appeals court overturned his conviction.⁶

That teenager, Harlon B. Carter, would later go on to head the federal Border Patrol program and direct a mass deportation campaign against Mexican farmworkers. The farmworkers had been brought in under the federal Bracero Program to work the fields in 1942 when the nation suffered a labor shortage as it fought World War II. In a career that no doubt must truly inspire today's MAGAs and immigrant haters, Carter headed the heavy-handed Operation Wetback drive that has deported an estimated 1.3 million Mexican workers since it began in 1954. The workers were dubbed Wetbacks because many came to work in Texas outside of the Bracero Program by fording the Rio Grande. The mass deportation was driven in large part by the ire of Texas sharecroppers and small farmers whose produce prices were undercut by the large farm operators who employed Mexican laborers and often underpaid them. After serving in the Border Patrol, the gun-loving Carter later went on to head the National Rifle Association. Mexican immigrants and advocates saw the deportation program Carter directed as a repeat of "The Mexican Repatriation" that President



A young Harlon B. Carter early in his career as a U.S. Border Patrol agent in 1938.

Herbert Hoover carried out in the early 1930s in response to the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression. Meanwhile, the federal government folded the Bracero Program in 1964 as large farms increasingly mechanized and as the last of the sharecroppers deserted farms in the face of unbeatable price competition.⁷

In sharp contrast to what was happening in the U.S. farm economy, Mexico in 1962 formed CONASUPO, the National Company for People's Subsistence, a state-owned enterprise that bought crops produced locally by small farmers, processed the foodstuffs into 20,000 different products, and sold them on the retail market to 50 million customers through some 17,000 supermarkets, 80 percent of which were located in poor urban areas. These markets typically sold food for 15 to 30 percent less than the price of comparable products sold in privately owned markets. The state-owned enterprise earned about \$2 billion in 1986, representing about 2 percent of the nation's federal budget. CONASUPO not only helped feed the poor, it helped preserve small-scale farming and the domestic production of staple crops, like corn, beans, and rice, at a time when Mexico needed to import a growing amount of food due to its burgeoning population of 80 million in the mid-1980s. Today, the nation has 130 million people.⁸

Certainly, CONASUPO ameliorated the plight of the poor in a nation where the gulf between wealth and destitution remained after 50 years of socialist economic aspirations. But it could not stop the country from becoming increasingly reliant on loans from big U.S. and European banks. By 1982, the weight of that mounting debt became unbearable. The price of oil, a key Mexican export, had collapsed as Alaskan Prudhoe Bay and European North Sea oil came online. Meanwhile the cost of the loans rose as the Federal Reserve Board

and other Western central banks jacked up interest rates to record levels to break the grip of inflation stemming from the Vietnam War and the Arab and Iranian oil embargoes of the 1970s. Unable to make payments on \$80 billion of foreign debt, Mexico declared bankruptcy. The rest of Latin America was not far behind.

In response, the United States and the International Monetary Fund brokered what became known as the Mexican Deal, a series of new loans to bail out Mexico (and other Latin American nations) in exchange for austerity and opening markets to foreign trade and investment.⁹ It was the dawn of neoliberal economics championed by British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and soon by U.S. president Ronald Reagan to allow an unlimited flow of money and goods across borders. The effect of the new economic paradigm was exacerbated by the dirty wars in Central America, in which Reagan supported the right-wing Contras in a war against the leftist Sandinistas in Nicaragua and also supported right-wingers in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Immediately, the combination of austerity and political repression in Central America set off a wave of immigration as people fled poverty and armed conflict.¹⁰

By 1986, the United States overcame the remnants of political opposition to the emerging neoliberal order in Mexico as its southern neighbor joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, a precursor to the World Trade Organization. By the late 1980s, Mexican president Carlos Salinas already was laying the groundwork for eventual negotiation and ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which took force in President Bill Clinton's first term in 1994. Other Latin American nations followed suit.

Along the way in the march of neoliberalism, it seemed that the hard-hearted Reagan found at least a shred of compassion

in his heart as he championed the last comprehensive overhaul of U.S. immigration law to date, paving the way for 3 million undocumented immigrants to become permanent U.S. residents or citizens.¹¹ In fact, Reagan promoted this bill because it was advantageous to U.S. capitalism.

Yet, bailouts, fostering right-wing governments in Central America, and the acceptance of neoliberal economics in Mexico did not end widespread poverty and inequality in Mexico and Latin America. Throughout the 1990s, Mexico continued to struggle financially as NAFTA uprooted small Mexican farmers, forcing them off the land to head north to work in the *maquiladoras* of the Mexican border states or to cross the border in search of economic opportunity in the United States. They left their farms because NAFTA allowed U.S. agribusiness to export corn and food products into Mexico, undercutting domestic producers on price. By 1999, the Mexican government folded CONASUPO and resigned itself to importing food and opening its agricultural sector to foreign investment in large-scale mechanized and irrigated agriculture.¹²

On the U.S. side of the border, NAFTA allowed carmakers, appliance manufacturers, and other factory businesses to open shop in Mexico where labor costs were a fraction of those in the United States, whipping up fury against immigrants and free trade in the United States. In the Republican Party, 1992 and 1996 presidential primary candidate Pat Buchanan went on the war path against immigrants. “America needs to take what some have called a ‘time out’ on immigration,” he said, “closing of our southern frontier to invading illegals, by troops if necessary, a toughening of our asylum laws, a cutback on legal immigration to spouses and minor children of those already here.”¹³ In California, Governor Pete Wilson backed the racist Proposition

187, which state voters passed in 1994 to take away public services from immigrants amid a deep economic downturn that shuttered much of the state’s defense weapon-making capacity after the Cold War ended. “They keep coming,” said Wilson in a televised gubernatorial race debate against Democrat Kathleen Brown. “Two million illegal immigrants in California. The federal government won’t stop them, yet requires us to pay billions to take care of them.” The proposition, eventually overturned in court, prompted the largest immigrant rights demonstration in U.S. history in Los Angeles.¹⁴

By 2008 with the election of President Barack Obama, the Tea Party emerged along with the proponents of the birther myth, which falsely claimed that Obama



Immigrants march in Los Angeles on October 16, 1994, in opposition to Proposition 187, which aimed to take away public services, including school, for the undocumented.

was born abroad and not a U.S. citizen and therefore not eligible to be elected president. The Tea Party, which mostly focused on reducing taxes and other traditional conservative and libertarian ideas, took a populist approach to politics and absorbed many anti-immigrant groups that helped block comprehensive immigration legislation that President George Bush Jr. sought in the early 2000s. By 2016, Tea Party politics had come to dominate the Republican Party and create a fertile playing field for Trump.¹⁵

The New York impresario could see

the potential as he latched onto the birther myth and became its leading proponent while exploring a run for president again in 2012. He found that talking about the birther myth boosted his standing in early polls regarding exploratory and declared candidates from fifth place to tied for first among Republican voters.¹⁶ By the time he decided to run in 2015, he rode down the golden escalator in Trump Tower to proclaim:

When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best.... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. But I speak to border guards and they tell us what we're getting. And it only makes common sense.... They're sending us not the right people. It's coming from more than Mexico. It's coming from all over South and Latin America, and it's coming probably—probably—from the Middle East.

Upon being elected in 2016, Trump initiated a hardline policy against immigrants, but was stymied by the courts and public outcry. In his second term since 2025, however, he has consolidated his political power through a shock-and-awe blitz of the federal bureaucracy, the press, and institutions throughout society to launch the ICE paramilitary-style raids on immigrant workers and neighborhoods. The raids were met by ordinary people of moral conscience with immediate opposition in the streets, the courts, and halls of local and state governments.

Conclusion

By tracing this history from 1942, we can see the role that U.S. government policies and U.S. capitalism have played in uprooting and displacing people in Latin America. Indeed, U.S. economic and foreign policies have pushed millions of Latin Americans to leave their homes and families for the United States in search of a better life. Even

though the mass movement of people came largely in response to U.S. actions, U.S. politicians and many members of the public have vilified migrant laborers despite the immense benefits they have provided to the nation as inexpensive and skilled laborers.

More recently, internal crises of authoritarian governments in Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Honduras, including a massive climate-change-driven hurricane there in 2020, have fueled a continuing immigration crisis. The unfortunate bottom line is that without major political and economic changes in the United States, more people will be uprooted, which will fuel growing volatility in the Western Hemisphere.

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Cuba: The End of an Era?

LISBETH MOYA GONZÁLEZ

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I LEARNED how to shoot. There were shooting ranges in my school and on street corners where, for a few coins, you could unload your problems onto a target. For Cubans of my generation, we watched wars from afar. Although the discourse of preparing to defend the homeland against a possible military invasion shaped our lives, military drills were just another subject in the school curriculum. Sure, Cubans fought in Angola and Ethiopia, but since the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, we have not experienced a large-scale armed conflict on our own territory.

Yet Cuba today looks like a country emerging from war, a war that has been economically and psychologically exhausting. The Cubans whom the government now calls upon to defend the country from a possible U.S. invasion are survivors of hunger, precarity, and the authoritarianism of the island's own government.

After the latest U.S. sanctions, the Cuban government now finds itself forced to negotiate with Washington. But there is one negotiation it postponed indefinitely: negotiation with the Cuban people themselves, with civil society on the island, which has spent years protesting for political rights and, above all, against hunger. The government also delayed urgent economic reforms that could have allowed Cubans

some agency to revitalize the economy. It divorced itself from its people, and today the widespread feeling is that there is nothing left to defend.

“What would you do if the United States invaded Cuba tomorrow?” I have asked this question repeatedly over the past few days to friends, acquaintances, and relatives on the island. The answer is always the same: “Stay home and let them figure it out, because nobody has ever counted on us for anything.”

The Cuban crisis—seemingly endless since the “Special Period” of the 1990s—is now experiencing its most critical moment. According to data from ECLAC’s *2025 Statistical Yearbook*, Cuba ended 2025 with the lowest GDP per capita in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Cuban economy also registered two consecutive years of contraction while the rest of Latin America grew by an average of 4.7 percent. The island’s total GDP reached just \$12.1 billion, barely 0.2 percent of the regional economy, placing it even below Haiti in current value terms.

Cuba’s structural deterioration includes prolonged blackouts, fuel shortages, paralysis of public transportation, rising violence and insecurity in the streets, a growing use of high-risk drugs, collapsing infrastructure, falling external revenues, sustained migration, and increasing social unrest expressed through protests and subsequent criminalization by the State.

At the same time, following Donald Trump’s return to the U.S. presidency in

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2025, economic and diplomatic sanctions have intensified. However, Cuba's situation cannot be understood solely as an economic crisis. Today, Cuba has once again become a key point in regional geopolitical disputes and in the broader U.S. strategy toward Latin America.

The Trump administration has promoted the narrative that overthrowing the Cuban government is a matter of national security due to Cuba's relationship with China, Russia, and Iran, as well as the growing migration flow of Cubans toward the United States.

The Hammer in Havana

The main promoter of the current negotiations is U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio. The speech Rubio delivered on May 20 marked a significant shift in Washington's official narrative toward Cuba. Rubio constructed a message based on separating the Cuban State from the "Cuban people." He described the political system as a structure controlled by a military and economic elite organized around the military conglomerate GAESA (Grupo de Administración Empresarial S.A.)—the target of future sanctions. Rubio insisted that sanctions were not aimed at ordinary people but at the military business elite, presenting the United States as an ally of Cuban citizens. The speech also outlined a future Cuba rebuilt economically through Cuban-American investment.

The choice of May 20 as the date of the speech carried strong symbolic meaning. The date commemorates the establishment of the Republic of Cuba in 1902—in other words, the beginning of Cuba's neocolonial era, when the island passed from Spanish domination into U.S. hands. Rubio revived the republican narrative to frame the current Cuban crisis as a direct consequence of the political model established after 1959, rather than as a result of the U.S. embargo.

He also insisted that the current crisis stems from military control of the economy and state corruption, while downplaying the role of U.S. pressure.

But Rubio's speech is merely the continuation of a policy that emerges in subtler forms. Since his arrival on the island in November 2024, Mike Hammer—appointed chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Havana—has increased public contact with dissidents, independent journalists, civil organizations, and relatives of political prisoners, in a dynamic denounced by the Cuban government as "interventionist." From that moment on, U.S. diplomacy began combining external economic pressure with a more active political presence inside Cuba's internal landscape.

Sanctioning to "Liberate"?

One of the main pillars of U.S. strategy has been to put pressure on Cuba's energy supply. Cuba depends heavily on fuel imports to sustain electricity generation, transportation, industry, and much of its internal supply system. Throughout 2025 and 2026, Washington increased threats of sanctions against companies, shipping firms, and countries involved in supplying oil to the island.

While Rubio insists that sanctions are not intended to affect ordinary Cubans but rather the military elite, deterioration is visible in everyday life. Five epidemics are spreading simultaneously due to lack of fuel to collect garbage from the streets, people are living for days without electricity or water and surviving on barely enough not to starve—this is hardly a context that speaks of "surgical intervention" or sanctions designed to liberate the Cuban people.

Another element normalized within this crisis—one that nobody, not even independent media, talks about—is the business of poverty. While Cubans lack electricity and food, proposals from Miami

arrive offering shipments of food, electric generators, and basic goods to the island. Shipments paid for by the diaspora for their relatives in Cuba.

Some of the best-known companies in this circuit are remittance and shipping agencies such as Cubamax, VaCuba, Kata-pulk, Alawao, and Supermarket23, though many smaller operators also exist. Most of these companies are owned by Cuban-Americans, but the phenomenon also involves the Cuban State itself, since many hard-currency stores, import platforms, and internal commercial circuits are linked to state or military structures such as GAESA, the business conglomerate controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces.

At the same time, the Trump administration hardened sanctions against GAESA. GAESA manages strategic sectors of the Cuban economy, including tourism, hotels, ports, banks, foreign trade, and infrastructure. There is very little institutional transparency surrounding GAESA. Cuba's former comptroller general, Gladys Bejerano, even admitted that the conglomerate cannot be audited.

In May 2026, Washington expanded sanctions against companies linked to the Cuban military apparatus and against foreign actors that maintain commercial relations with those entities. Marco Rubio publicly described GAESA as "the economic heart" of the Cuban system. The measures have included financial restrictions, asset freezes, and tighter controls on international operations involving companies connected to the conglomerate.

Within this scenario, the case of Sherritt International gained relevance. The Canadian company had for decades been one of Cuba's main foreign economic partners. Sherritt operates in strategic sectors such as nickel and cobalt mining, oil, and electricity generation. The company mainly works in Moa, eastern Cuba, through joint ventures

with the Cuban State.

Sherritt's importance lies in the fact that Cuba possesses significant nickel and cobalt reserves—minerals essential for electric batteries, industrial technology, and military applications. The company consolidated its position during the 1990s, when Cuba sought foreign investment after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The conflict emerged when Washington began extending pressure not only onto the Cuban government but also onto foreign companies linked to strategic sectors of the island's economy.

Nevertheless, in recent days, despite rumors of negotiations between the U.S. government and the Castro family, U.S. pressure acquired a more aggressive political and symbolic dimension. During Trump's first administration, personal sanctions had been imposed on Raúl Castro and other high-ranking Cuban officials. In 2026, Trump once again placed the historic leadership of the Cuban Revolution at the center of the confrontation.

The U.S. government even pushed forward a legal accusation against Raúl Castro related to the 1996 shootdown of the Brothers to the Rescue planes, a move that triggered pro-government mobilizations in Havana and renewed diplomatic tensions between the two countries.

Simultaneously, in May 2026, CIA director John Ratcliffe made an official visit to Cuba and held meetings with officials from the Ministry of the Interior and representatives of the Cuban intelligence apparatus. Ratcliffe discussed issues related to regional security, intelligence cooperation, economic stability, and bilateral relations amid Cuba's ongoing energy crisis.

American Imperialism and Cuba

The U.S. offensive against Cuba cannot be understood solely as an ideological conflict inherited from the Cold War or as a policy

exclusively aimed at the island's "democratization." Relations between Washington and Havana are shaped by geopolitical, economic, electoral, and regional security factors that explain why Cuba continues to occupy a central place in U.S. foreign policy more than six decades after the 1959 Revolution. For example, during the Cold War, Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union turned the island into one of the world's greatest flashpoints, especially after the 1962 Missile Crisis.

One of the central elements is the weight of the Cuban-American lobby based mainly in Miami. Since the 1960s, sectors of the Cuban exile community have built a political, business, and media structure with enormous influence inside the U.S. political system, especially within the Republican Party. Organizations such as the Cuban American National Foundation have played a key role in consolidating the economic embargo and in passing laws like the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, which legally reinforced sanctions against Cuba.

Over time, this influence has also become a strategic electoral force. Florida has turned into one of the decisive states in U.S. politics, and the Cuban-American vote has acquired significant weight in presidential and legislative elections. Republican figures such as Marco Rubio and María Elvira Salazar have built much of their political careers around a hardline stance toward the Cuban government. In this context, policy toward Cuba also functions as domestic U.S. politics: hardening sanctions and maintaining anti-Castro rhetoric strengthens electoral alliances within Florida and consolidates support among conservative exile sectors.

However, Cuba's centrality for Washington goes beyond electoral calculations. The island occupies a strategic geographic position in the Caribbean, barely 150 kilometers from Florida and along one of

the Western Hemisphere's main maritime routes. Since the nineteenth century, the United States has considered Cuba a key piece for controlling the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean, and trade corridors toward Latin America. That logic has never disappeared.

In the current scenario, these concerns have reemerged under new geopolitical coordinates. Sectors of the U.S. government argue that Cuba functions as a projection point for Chinese and Russian interests in Latin America. Washington has expressed concern over technological agreements, telecommunications cooperation, diplomatic presence, and military or intelligence links between Havana and both countries. In this narrative, Cuba ceases to be merely a regional ideological adversary and becomes part of the global strategic competition between the United States and its principal international rivals.

Although the Cuban economy is small on a global scale, the island possesses important strategic resources. Cuba has reserves of nickel and cobalt, minerals fundamental for electric batteries, technological industries, electronic devices, and military equipment. In a context marked by the energy transition and global competition over critical minerals, these resources have acquired growing geopolitical importance.

The case of Sherritt International demonstrates precisely that strategic dimension. The Canadian company, associated for decades with the Cuban State in mining and energy projects, became exposed to new U.S. sanctions because of its links to sectors Washington considers strategic. Pressure against Sherritt showed that U.S. policy no longer aims solely at Cuba's diplomatic isolation but also at obstructing any international economic structure capable of financially sustaining the Cuban State.

This is compounded by the island's historic economic potential. Before the 1959

Revolution, much of Cuba's economy—tourism, sugar, infrastructure, banking, and services—was linked to U.S. capital. Various business sectors still regard Cuba as a potentially important market for investments in tourism, telecommunications, energy, agriculture, and construction, especially given its geographic proximity to the United States and its strategic Caribbean location.

The confrontation with Cuba also possesses a strong symbolic component. For conservative U.S. sectors and parts of the Cuban exile community, the Cuban government continues to represent one of the principal historical symbols of anti-American resistance in Latin America. Therefore, an eventual political transformation on the island would be presented not merely as a regime change but as a regional ideological victory over the Latin American left and over political projects historically associated with the legacy of the Cuban Revolution.

In this context, Washington's current strategy combines economic pressure, financial sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and internal political division. More than a traditional military invasion, the objective appears aimed at generating conditions that accelerate fractures within the Cuban state apparatus that facilitate a political transition favorable to U.S. interests.

And the Cuban people?

Recently, independent Cuban media launched a digital survey to measure the island's political climate. The poll gathered more than 42,000 valid responses from residents in Cuba and members of the diaspora. One of the most widely discussed findings was that a large majority of participants identified the lack of civil and political liberties as one of the country's principal problems. According to results published by e!TOQUE, more than 80 percent of respondents identified this issue among the nation's main concerns, while a much

smaller proportion pointed to the U.S. embargo as the principal cause of the crisis.

The survey also showed very high levels of support for structural changes within Cuba's political and economic system. José Jasán Nieves, director of e!TOQUE, stated that participants "overwhelmingly" demanded systemic change in Cuba.

Nevertheless, the results generated intense debate over methodology and representativeness. Due to political and technological restrictions inside Cuba, the survey was conducted digitally and openly, implying significant statistical limitations: it was not a traditional probabilistic national sample, and participation depended on internet access, social networks, and VPNs, especially after the Cuban government blocked access to the website from the island shortly after its launch. Beyond the statistical validity of the survey, the results still offer insights into the opinions of an important sector of Cubans.

"The situation in Cuba is critical: blackouts lasting more than 22 hours, lack of water, gas, and food, extreme stress, and generalized mental deterioration. Life is reduced to day-to-day survival, leaving no space for thought or activism. The Cuban government bears the main responsibility, but U.S. policy also worsens the crisis in a cruel and incomprehensible way. The social fabric is so damaged that neither a change of government nor immediate external aid would resolve the profound social, psychological, and cultural deterioration," says Cuban historian Alexander Hall from Havana.

The Cuban people survive today detached from politics. They learn about possible invasions days after the threats are made, and probably are not even fully aware of the constant stream of news arriving amid this psychological and economic war of attrition. People in Cuba live on the razor's edge and want change because

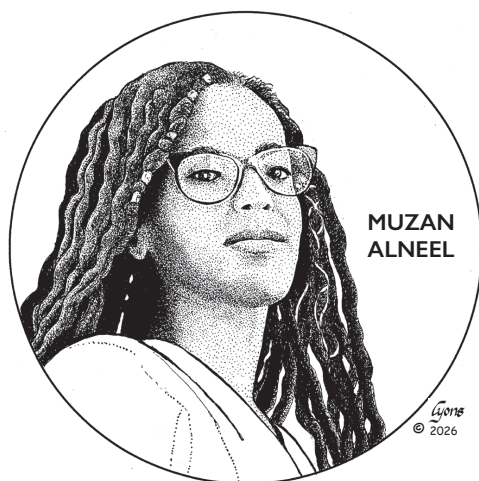
right now their lives themselves are at stake—and when life becomes impossible, neither homeland nor dignity remain possible. Ordinary Cubans are the great losers in this war of exhaustion.

Meanwhile, evangelical influencers emerge on social media calling for a libertarian Cuba “like Milei’s, but for Christ”; activists travel to the European Union asking for more sanctions that will ultimately deepen the poverty of the Cuban people; anti-Castro figures in Miami describe

transitional governments where the most reactionary right should take power and restore the 1940 Constitution; and Romantic leftists make their final tourist pilgrimage to the fading lighthouse of dignity, while defenders of the Revolution attack Cubans who speak openly about Cuba, calling them *gusanos* (“worms”) and demanding sacrifice.

Religious fundamentalism grows among the ruins of what was once an attempt at socialist revolution. History returns as farce—and it is cruel.

CHAMPIONS OF JUSTICE



Muzan Alneel, *Sudanese revolutionary, engineer, feminist, political analyst, and prolific writer*

“Muzan was ubiquitous during the Sudanese revolution, from delivering valuable teach-ins, trainings and workshops (even during dangerous times); actively organising initiatives and events; public speaking and analysing; chanting in protest as well as writing and analysing in both Arabic and English. With some of her friends and comrades, she quickly realised that scientific knowledge must be democratised and used for the service of liberating her people... She was one of the cofounders and the managing director of ISTinaD Center –Sudan, a research centre that works in the field of innovation, science and technology for people-centred development.”

— *Miriyam Aouragh, Hamza Hamouchene, TNI*

Muzan Alneel died of medical complications at 39.

“My political stance is that people should not be killed.”

“The struggles of Sudan, Palestine and other oppressed populations must be addressed by revolutionaries using tools and language that are aligned with revolutionary principles, not those imposed by oppressors. Revolutionary frameworks reject hierarchies of struggles and competition for global attention, and emphasise that freedom and dignity are universal rights, and that the existence of any oppressive regime threatens the success of all revolutionary movements.”

“Professional, revolutionary, people-centred journalism is a necessary foundation for discussions and actions that can significantly advance revolutionary projects. This holds true for both the liberation of Palestine and the pursuit of justice-driven peace in Sudan.”

“Real revolutionaries don’t punch down.”

— *Muzan Alneel*

“... Perhaps Muzan’s most enduring contribution was to the Sudanese feminist project. Against its liberalization and underrepresentation, she relentlessly advanced analyses grounded in class, region, ethnicity and, more recently, the implications of war-induced destitution on the most vulnerable, continually refining her tools to bring feminism closer to women’s lives.”

— *Walaa Salab, Rania Aziz, Raga Makawi, MERIP*

Sudan: Liberal Peacebuilding and the Price of Impunity

HUSAM MAHJOUB

MANY A SUDANESE WHO FLED Sudan to Egypt after the war erupted in the capital, Khartoum, on April 15, 2023, told a similar version of the following story. They met Syrians living there, and the Sudanese told them: we are here for a few months until the war ends. The Syrians responded: right, this is exactly what we said twelve years ago.

The weight of that exchange is not merely anecdotal. The war that entered its fourth year on April 15, 2026, is not Sudan's first conflict, but the latest eruption in a pattern so consistent across seven decades that its recurrence should surprise no one, and yet each generation of Sudanese and each iteration of the so-called international community approaches every new catastrophe as though the previous ones produced no lessons worth learning, when in fact those lessons are abundant and precise, only inconvenient for the actors with the power to apply them.

When this war erupted, many Sudanese expected it to end quickly. The two warring factions knew each other intimately. The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) was practically a creation of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF); its commander, Mohamed Hameed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, had been nurtured and institutionalized by the very

military establishment he was now fighting. Two forces that know each other's tactics, commanders, and supply lines, people reasoned, do not need to fight a prolonged war. That logic collapsed within weeks as the conflict evolved into something that does not resemble any of Sudan's previous wars in its scale, geography, or depth of external entanglement.

Now, as the war has turned Sudan into the world's largest humanitarian and displacement crisis,¹ Sudanese civilians are confronting a harder truth, that they have very little say in how this war develops or how it ends, with its trajectory determined by those who hold the guns and by those who supply them. Yet the options available to civilians are real and center on two demands that have been evaded in every previous Sudanese peace process. The first is genuine accountability for those responsible for the war and the atrocities committed in it. The second is a serious commitment to the conditions of a dignified life, including development, services, and economic opportunity for the communities that have borne the cost of every war and received almost nothing from any of the agreements that ended them. Organizing around these demands is what will determine whether civilians can affect the survival of millions of people now and shape the terms on which Sudan eventually rebuilds.

The Pattern the International Community Refuses to Learn From
Sudan's civil wars began as a result of the

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deliberate policies of a colonial administration and a post-colonial elite that chose extraction over development, exclusion over citizenship, and armed pacification over the provision of the roads, schools, hospitals, and political representation that might have made a different history possible.

The British administered different regions of Sudan according to varying degrees of interest and exploitation. The country's center received investment, education, basic services, and administrative infrastructure. The peripheries, the south, the west (Darfur and Kordofan), the east, and the Blue Nile region were administered with the thinnest possible apparatus, their resources extracted and their populations left with no pathway

The UAE's role is best understood through the framework of sub-imperialism; it behaves as an imperialist power within its own region while remaining aligned with U.S. interests.

into the national elite and no expectation of services from a state that treated them as a source of revenue rather than as citizens with rights and needs. The late colonial decision that merged the separately administered south into a unified state on the eve of independence, without genuine political negotiation or compact, handed the Sudanese state a structural contradiction it has never resolved.

The First Civil War, ignited by a military mutiny in Torit in August 1955 and burning through the country for seventeen years, was rooted in the absence of development, the lack of basic services,

the monopoly of power by northern elites, and the imposition of an Arab-Islamic cultural framework on populations that were neither. The Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972 ended that war by granting the south regional autonomy. That held until 1983 when Nimeiry redivided the south, breaking the agreement he had signed and prompting the emergence of the SPLM/A under John Garang, whose concept of a "New Sudan" carried an internal tension between creating a secular federal Sudan for all its people and separating from it all the way to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005,² which deferred that tension into a referendum. The south voted for independence in 2011 and South Sudan descended into its own civil war within two years, while the SPLM-North returned to fighting Khartoum in South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

The Darfur war, which erupted in 2003, was treated throughout the CPA process as a distraction rather than the same structural logic operating in a different region. Khartoum's response to the Darfur insurgency, conducted through the Janjaweed militias, produced the instrument that would eventually turn on its creators, an armed militia loyal to a commander, answerable to personal and familial authority, financed through gold, and sustained by impunity. The Janjaweed were later institutionalized into the Rapid Support Forces. The international response produced the Abuja Agreement in 2006 and the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur in 2011, both following the same template of negotiating among armed factions, distributing cabinet positions and military ranks, promising development funds that never reached the communities that needed them, and declaring peace without enforcement and without any accountability for those who had ordered and conducted mass killing. The International Criminal Court (ICC) issued an arrest

warrant for Omar al-Bashir in 2009³ and charged him with genocide in 2010, yet he remained president until 2019 and traveled freely to signatory states without arrest. The warrant became a symbol of international impotence in the face of political convenience rather than of international justice.

Far from a series of accidental failures, this approach represents a consistent pattern with entirely predictable results. Wars rooted in resource deprivation, the denial of a dignified life, and exclusion are fundamentally unresolvable through elite bargains that leave structural conditions intact. Rewarding belligerents with power and wealth simply incentivizes new factions to emerge. Ultimately, deferring justice is an act of complicity that directly cultivates the next conflict.

The Revolution and Its Betrayal

To comprehend the current war, it is necessary to grasp the moment that preceded it, for that moment constitutes, in a fundamental sense, what the war is designed to destroy.

In December 2018, protests sparked by rising bread prices became a nationwide movement led by youth, women, professional bodies, political parties, and neighborhood-based resistance committees. What began as a demand for economic relief by a population that could no longer afford to eat quickly became something larger, a demand for the transformation of a state that had never delivered development, services, or basic security to the majority of its people. In April 2019, the military bowed to popular pressure and removed Bashir from power. The slogans of that revolution, freedom, peace, and justice, were not rhetorical aspirations but a precise diagnosis of what Sudanese people had been denied across generations and a clear demand for civilian governance, accountability for decades of military rule

and atrocity, and the material conditions of human dignity for all Sudanese.

Then came June 3, 2019, when forces from the RSF and the Sudanese army dispersed a peaceful sit-in camp outside the military headquarters where protesters had gathered for months demanding a democratic transition. Hundreds were killed, bodies were thrown into the Nile, and women were raped in what was an ordered massacre whose perpetrators, General Burhan of SAF and General Hemedti of RSF as president and vice president of the Transitional Military Council, were known to everyone in Sudan. The international community's response was to push for a power-sharing arrangement between the civilian political forces and the very military leaders responsible instead of demanding accountability, producing a transitional government that preserved military control over security and economic assets while international actors praised the process and focused their energies on integrating Sudan into IMF and World Bank programs and on the Abraham Accords normalization track with Israel. The aspirations of the revolution were subordinated to the priorities of external actors for whom stability and financial integration mattered more than justice or dignity.

As a direct result of this power-sharing agreement, an official committee was formed to investigate the June massacre. Given a six-month mandate, the committee produced no conclusions after more than two years, and at most could have indicted lower- and mid-ranking officers, since the men who ordered the massacre were simultaneously partners of the civilian political forces in the transitional government. The coup of October 25, 2021, removed the civilian components entirely, protesters again were shot, and the international community responded again by pushing for a framework agreement granting effective

amnesty for both the June 2019 massacre and the coup killings, an agreement approaching signature when the war began in April 2023.

This War and the Forces Behind It

Sudan's previous civil wars were driven by movements with ideological content, territorial bases, and genuine links to the communities in whose name they fought. The SPLM/A had a political program. Darfuri rebel movements like the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) articulated demands for inclusion, development, and accountability that reflected real community grievances despite anything that can be said about their narrow ethnic composition. One could negotiate with them because they had something beyond military victory to negotiate toward.

The RSF has none of these characteristics,⁴ functioning instead as a feudal enterprise organized around the Dagalo family with Hemedti at its head and his brother Abdel Rahim as his deputy. It operates as a militia of militias, constructed by aggregating armed formations that developed across western Sudan for varied reasons, including remnant Janjaweed structures from the Darfur genocide, tribal mobilization units, armed gangs active in weapons and drug smuggling or human trafficking, and locally recruited forces that various Khartoum governments had armed for their own purposes over decades. As an institution, it is dependent on its leadership in a way the SPLM/A never was, such that without the Dagalo brothers it is likely to fragment into the regional configurations from which it was assembled. This could send Sudan back into the kind of frozen regional conflicts the state has learned to manage. Rebel movements have long controlled small pockets, such as the SLM in Jebel Marra or the SPLM-North in South

Kordofan, and Sudanese governments and army have historically accommodated such configurations. This accommodation persists partly because a permanent, low-intensity conflict justifies emergency rule and relieves the state of any obligation to provide services or development.

Most of the men fighting in the RSF's ranks are young men from Darfur and Kordofan and from the African Sahel region who joined because there was no other viable economic option, enlistment offering a wage or access to spoils in regions that decades of deliberate underdevelopment have left without schools, hospitals, or economic opportunity, the same calculus that drives migration across the Sahara toward Europe, where dignified work disappears and rights are empty promises and young men choose between forms of risk rather than between futures. The distinction between the RSF's leadership and its fighters therefore matters enormously for any post-war framework, and the recent defections of some RSF commanders to the SAF side, received by communities with a complex and pragmatic openness rooted in the survival imperative of weakening the RSF rather than in forgetting what those commanders did, illustrates how that complexity must inform any honest discussion of accountability and reintegration.

The SAF represents the continuation of the Sudanese deep state with its Islamist ideological residue and its fundamental interest in maintaining unaccountable military rule, its commanders fighting to preserve an institutional order in which the military sits above civilian authority and above any obligation to deliver services, development, or dignity to the populations it nominally defends. The SAF's recapture of territory from the RSF, welcome as it is for communities living under RSF occupation and atrocity, carries no commitment to the democratic transition the 2019 revolution

demanding or to the material transformation of the relationship between the Sudanese state and its peripheral populations that would make that transition meaningful.

The UAE, the External Actors, and the War That Was Prepared

The most significant structural difference between this war and every previous Sudanese conflict is the nature and depth of UAE involvement. Sudan's earlier wars had external dimensions: neighboring states, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Libya, Chad, the Central African Republic, Egypt, Uganda, Kenya, and further afield Israel, the United Kingdom, the United States, Russia, France, Italy, Norway, Sweden, and others, intervened, supplied, mediated, and complicated those conflicts in various ways. What the UAE is doing in Sudan is something qualitatively different.

The UAE prepared for this war rather than merely responding to it. In the months before April 2023, Emirati-linked networks were building the RSF's media and information infrastructure and establishing networks of fake accounts and coordinated inauthentic behavior designed to shape international perceptions of the conflict. When the war began, the UAE facilitated weapons and logistical supplies to the RSF through the Wagner Group and to Haftar militia networks through Libya; established a hospital in Amdjarass in eastern Chad as cover for weapons transfers⁵ and treatment of wounded RSF fighters; set up a similar facility in Aweil in South Sudan near the Sudanese border; and diversified supply routes through Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya, Somaliland, the Central African Republic, and Cameroon. Ethiopia established a secret training camp⁶ near the Sudanese border to prepare thousands of RSF fighters, with the UAE financing the facility and providing trainers and logistical support. The UAE also recruited Colombian merce-

naries to fight alongside the RSF, a fact the international community has acknowledged by sanctioning the Colombian nationals and companies involved while declining to impose any measures on the Emirati officials who recruited them. A *Le Monde* investigation⁷ published in March 2026 documented cargo flights from Fujairah in the UAE to the Central African Republic that continued after the outbreak of the U.S.–Israel war on Iran and amidst direct Iranian attacks on the UAE. This suggests that Abu Dhabi may be reading the conflict with Iran as a confirmation of its strategic logic, namely, that extending influence deep into Africa, beyond its volatile immediate geography, is precisely the right response to an insecure regional environment in which Iran and a potentially rival Saudi Arabia represent its primary threats.

The UAE's role is best understood through the framework of sub-imperialism,⁸ whereby it behaves as an imperialist power within its own region while remaining aligned with the interests of the United States as the dominant imperial power, seeking political leverage and economic

The aspirations of the revolution were subordinated to the priorities of external actors for whom stability and financial integration mattered more than justice or dignity.

capture while using militia patronage to suppress regional democratic transformations across fragmented, institution-weak countries. The roots of this role go back to 2011, when the Arab Spring confronted Abu Dhabi with an existential threat⁹ to its model of governance, prompting it to

become an organized counterrevolutionary force that bankrolled the coup that brought Sisi to power in Egypt, backed Haftar's war in Libya, and deepened ties with non-state armed actors that could contain democratic mobilization. The Sudanese revolution of December 2018 posed that threat again, and the RSF became its instrument for containing it, with Sudan's gold, its vast fertile lands, its Red Sea position, and its size making it a central laboratory for this project, the RSF's hold on gold mining producing a flow of conflict gold to Dubai that converts atrocity into capital.

The other external actors present a more complex and less committed picture. Egypt has moved from political and logistical support for the SAF to direct military intervention, operating Turkish-made combat drones from a covert airbase near the Sudanese border,¹⁰ driven by alarm at RSF advances toward the Nile corridor, though Egypt remains financially dependent on the UAE in ways that constrain how far it can press against Emirati interests. Saudi Arabia, the one regional power with the weight

The conflict evolved into something that does not resemble any of Sudan's previous wars in its scale, geography, or depth of external entanglement.

to seriously challenge the UAE's role, has grown increasingly concerned about RSF dominance near the Red Sea, but carries its own complex agenda and unresolved tensions with Abu Dhabi that have so far prevented it from acting decisively. Iran has sold weapons to the SAF but cannot fully trust the Sudanese military establishment,

given that al-Bashir severed relations with Tehran in late 2014 to align with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Turkey has also supplied weapons without deeper engagement. None of these actors matches the UAE's strategic commitment or operational depth, and none of the international community's diplomatic frameworks has been willing to name that asymmetry plainly, let alone act on it.

How This War Might End, and Why That Matters

Understanding how this war might end is necessary for understanding what the international community must do and what civilians must prepare for.

The war could end through military victory, with a decisive SAF advance removing or neutralizing the RSF leadership and causing the force to fall into disarray. The conflict would then likely revert to the kind of frozen, low-intensity warfare Sudan has historically absorbed. It could end through a negotiated settlement distributing power and resources among the belligerents and their preferred civilian allies, which based on the history reviewed above would extend the cycle of violence rather than break it. It could produce a de facto frozen partition, with the RSF controlling parts of Darfur and other western regions and the SAF controlling the center and east, both sides relieved of accountability and of any obligation to govern effectively. Or it could produce state collapse, fragmentation into zones of armed control with no authority capable of governing or providing services, a trajectory toward something resembling Libya. Or some combination of these trajectories may materialize differently in various parts of the country.

What matters is that none of these possible endings produces the conditions of a dignified life for Sudanese communities unless accompanied by accountability for

those who conducted the war and a binding commitment to development, services, and economic opportunity in the regions that have borne its cost. A military victory that restores SAF dominance without accountability is a return to the conditions that produced the revolution of 2018. A negotiated settlement that rewards the RSF's leadership with political survival is an invitation to the next war. A frozen conflict leaves millions without services, rights, or futures. The question of how the war ends cannot be separated from the question of what it ends toward.

Peace Processes Built to Reproduce the Problem

What the international community has applied to Sudan, repeatedly and with remarkable consistency, is what scholars of conflict call the liberal peacebuilding model, whose assumptions are roughly as follows: wars end when belligerents reach a mutually hurting stalemate; peace agreements distribute power and wealth, which create incentives for elites to stop fighting; internationally supervised transitions can build legitimate institutions. In this case, accountability, if it must come at all, can wait until after stability is achieved.

Sudan's wars do not begin as elite competitions for power, though they become that. They begin as conflicts over land, water, services, and development, over whether communities in the periphery will be left to subsist without roads, schools, hospitals, or political representation while the center extracts their resources. These material grievances are then politicized and ethnicized by elites on all sides, who find that identity is a more effective mobilizing tool than class interest. By the time the international community arrives with its peace process, it is negotiating with the ethnic and political leaders who have risen to prominence through the conflict, not with

the communities that began it. The resulting agreements distribute power among those leaders and promise development funds that rarely materialize in the communities that need them, leaving the structural conditions that produced the war entirely untouched. When perpetrators of mass violence are incorporated into transitional governments, as Sudanese military leaders have been repeatedly, they bring with them both the incentive and the capacity to reverse any transition that threatens their freedom or their assets, and the international community's preferred solution to this problem, the truth commission, the reconciliation committee, the investigative body with a mandate broad enough to look credible and powers narrow enough to threaten no one, has resolved nothing.

The Juba Peace Agreement of 2020 between the transitional government and several armed movements is the most recent illustration of this model in practice. It distributed ministerial positions and military ranks, promised development for war-affected regions, and rewarded those with guns while marginalizing those without. Ultimately, by addressing neither land rights nor accountability for atrocities, it produced no peace for the refugees or the displaced.

Against this background, the Quartet framework of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the United States, formed in September 2025, contained as a core member the primary external sponsor of one of the warring parties, making it less a peace process than a management exercise designed to give the appearance of international engagement while protecting the UAE from consequences. The Quintet framework of the African Union, the Arab League, the European Union, IGAD (the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, an African trade bloc), and the United Nations is broader but not

more effective, since none of its members has been willing to confront the UAE's role or center the Sudanese civilian forces that represent the actual social fabric of Sudanese life, elevating instead the political factions that external powers find familiar and manageable and replicating exactly the elite-capture dynamic that has destroyed every previous Sudanese peace process. The gap between the international community's analysis of this pattern and its willingness to act on it is a political choice rather than a failure of understanding, a choice rooted in the calculus that disrupting the existing arrangement would require subordinating the interests of powerful external actors to the rights and dignity of Sudanese civilians.

The Accountability That Cannot Be Deferred, and the Dignity That Must Be Built

The question that every discussion of Sudan's peace process dances around and must stop dancing around is this: how do you end this war without holding its perpetrators accountable and without committing seriously to the conditions of a dignified life for the communities that have borne the cost of every war Sudan has fought? The answer that Sudan's history makes inescapable is that you cannot, not durably, not justly, and not without simply setting the conditions for the next cycle of violence. Impunity has functioned throughout this history as the engine of recurrence, and the absence of development has operated as one of the primary mechanisms through which the cycle reproduces itself, generating the poverty, the displacement, and the absence of alternatives that fill the ranks of every new armed movement.

No end to this war is conceivable while the RSF exists in any form with its current leadership intact. Its leaders, and the leaders of the SAF and other armed factions who have committed crimes, must be held

accountable and must have no place in any future political or security arrangement. No militias should exist in a post-war Sudan. The leaders of both military and political factions suspected of crimes must face trial in a court with genuine authority and genuine independence, whether the ICC itself, a hybrid court built on ICC standards, or a domestic tribunal modeled on those standards and conducted in Arabic and/or local Sudanese languages with Sudanese judges and lawyers embedded in all its functions, as close as possible to the Sudanese people and the communities that suffered the crimes.

The examples of South Africa, Rwanda, Morocco, Chile, and Argentina are often invoked as models of transitional justice that allowed societies to move forward without full accountability. The record of those experiments, examined honestly, does not support the optimism. South Africa's inequality has deepened and for the majority of Black South Africans little has changed economically or socially. Rwanda has become a dictatorship. Morocco's democratic reforms have remained minimal. Chile and Argentina are swinging back toward political forces loyal to the dictators of the 1970s. Transitional justice mechanisms that absorb accountability into process while leaving power structures intact do not produce justice, and Sudan has no reason to expect different results from the same approach.

For lower-ranking soldiers and fighters below the command level, particularly the young men who joined because militia membership was the only available livelihood in regions left without development investment for decades, a different framework is required, one that draws on Sudanese traditions of community reconciliation through an open, nationwide process of accountability design, including the Judiya and Galid mediation processes conducted by community elders, combined with truth

and documentation mechanisms that create public, recorded acknowledgment of what happened and to whom. Accountability at

What began as a demand for economic relief quickly became something larger, a demand for the transformation of a state.

the community level cannot be separated from the material question of what comes after. Former fighters, victims, and displaced communities all require pathways to a dignified life. This demands economic development programs in war-affected regions, alongside healthcare, education, housing, and employment opportunities, making militia membership and dangerous migration unnecessary rather than the only available choices.

Financial reparation is essential and must be substantial, with the primary source being the seized assets of the RSF leadership and compensation from its international backers, primarily the UAE government, since the reconstruction of every community destroyed in this war should be financed by those who destroyed it. Land rights, which are at the root of conflicts across Darfur and Kordofan and which represent for many communities the most concrete dimension of the dignified life the revolution demanded, must be addressed directly. Traditional reconciliation mechanisms deserve serious engagement at the community level as complements to formal accountability, provided they are not used, as they have been used in the past, to distribute money and vehicles, to promise militia recruitment as economic relief, or to manipulate local governance structures in

ways that divide communities and undermine social integration.

The slogans of the December 2018 revolution — freedom, peace, and justice — were always a demand for human dignity in its fullest sense encompassing not only the political freedoms and legal protections that the word dignity can be reduced to, but the material foundation that makes those freedoms real, the schools, the hospitals, the economic opportunities, the services, and the security of knowing that the state exists to serve its people rather than to extract from them. Every peace process that addresses the political arrangement without addressing that material foundation is one that will not hold, because the communities whose underdevelopment fueled the conflict will remain underdeveloped, and the next generation of young men will face the same choices their fathers faced.

What Must Be Demanded

The international community is complicit in Sudan. Western governments have the economic and diplomatic leverage to make Emirati support for the RSF costly, the assets of the UAE government and Emirati companies involved in sustaining the RSF are traceable and present in the banking systems and real estate markets of every major Western city, and sanctions on those networks have simply not been imposed. The same governments that sanctioned Colombian nationals for recruiting mercenaries¹¹ to fight with the RSF have refused to impose any measures on the Emirati officials who recruited them. If the international community is serious about ending this war, the minimum it must do is confront the UAE's role directly and stop constructing peace frameworks that exclude Sudanese civilian forces, reward belligerents with power and wealth without accountability conditions, and treat development funding as a reward for signing rather than

as a binding commitment to the communities whose dispossession helped start the war. Beyond that, it must engage seriously with the question of how accountability is actually achieved. It must also stop treating Sudanese refugees and citizens seeking safety and education abroad as a burden to be managed¹² rather than as people with rights to be protected.

Sudanese civilian forces are doing what the conditions of war make possible, and that work matters enormously. The emergency response rooms that organized neighborhood-level survival in besieged cities, the resistance committees that have maintained organizational coherence through displacement and violence, the women's organizations operating across borders and displacement camps are the legitimate political representatives of the people whose future is being decided without them. In addition to this survival work, they can begin now, under war conditions and without waiting for a peace process that may not come soon, to think through what accountability must look like at the community level, to document crimes and perpetrators, to debate among victims and displaced communities what justice and reintegration require, and to build the frameworks that a serious post-war accountability process will need to draw on.

Sudan's struggle is not isolated, and Sudanese civilians cannot win it alone. The same powers that protect the UAE from accountability in Sudan enable the assault on Gaza and look away from Congo. Building solidarity across these struggles is a political necessity, because the international community will not be moved by Sudanese suffering alone but can be pressed by a

broad coalition of people who recognize in Sudan's catastrophe the same logic they are fighting in their own contexts. That pressure, focused specifically on accountability for the perpetrators of this war and on the material conditions of a dignified life for its survivors, is what the moment requires.

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Anti-Imperialism without the Working Class

Campism, the Defeat of the Western Left, and Inverted Orientalism

SIYAVASH SHAHABI

CAMPISM BEGINS THE MOMENT anti-imperialism loses its subject. Some current accounts of Gaza, Iran, and Syria show this moment clearly. Defense of a society under attack slides into political defense of the targeted state. The state replaces the working class. A geopolitical map replaces social struggle. A media-ready expert replaces the worker, the woman, and the local activist in the fight. In this shift, Iran, Syria, Palestine, and Afghanistan stop being societies. They become a stage. Their people no longer produce politics. They turn into raw material for other people's narratives.

Campism separates the critique of imperialism from class and hands it to a geography of false camps. The world splits into two sides. On one side stand the United States, NATO, Israel, and allied Western states. On the other side stands any force in opposition to them. This map quickly erases something decisive: the class relation inside each society. The Iranian worker, the Afghan woman, the Syrian teacher, and the Palestinian political prisoner stay vis-

ible only as long as they do not disturb the camp narrative.

In this logic, a state's hostility to U.S. foreign policy replaces the whole society. National sovereignty replaces social emancipation. Resistance gets consumed in place of class organization. The critique of imperialism should reach an understanding of the global mechanics of capital, war, energy, and media. Instead it stalls at the level of loyalty to one camp. The result is clear. Forces who call themselves anti-imperialist sometimes slide into defending a state at the exact moment that they should stand with the workers and the poor of the society under attack. The state they defend has repressed the same society.

This slide comes from a deeper crisis. Some currents no longer know how to turn anti-imperialism into a social force. When the fight against the imperialist state at home grows weak, external states and movements become the stage for compensating defeat. The defeated left in London, Paris, Berlin, and New York stares from a distance at states in conflict with Washington. Its real targets sit at home: the war machine, the arms industry, the pro-war media, and its own ruling party. Anti-imperialism falls from class politics into geopolitical spectatorship.

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The Priority Is Anti-Imperialism, Not the Target State

The priority of the fight against imperialism comes from the nature of the aggression. It does not come from the nature of the target state. A target state might be reactionary, anti-worker, misogynist, and capitalist. None of this gives imperialism the right to attack, sanction, bomb, or forcibly reshape a society.

Imperialism does not act on morality. Imperialist states do not attack weaker, peripheral states out of concern for the freedom of women, the rights of workers, democracy, or local religion and culture. These are the language of legitimation. The material cause lies elsewhere: control of the regional order, energy routes, credit and debt, the arms industry, profitable reconstruction after ruin, and the consolidation of the global hierarchy of capital. An imperialist attack comes from the structure of the political economy of imperialism. It does not come from a moral assessment of the target state.

For this reason, the critique of the political economy of the attack must stay fixed on imperialism. If the target state is repressive, this repression holds an independent truth. It needs examination and critique from the standpoint of the working class, women, and the poor of the society itself. This repression does not explain a right to foreign attack. The imperialist state uses internal oppression as moral evidence for intervention. Its intervention does not get organized for the emancipation of those same people. A foreign attack does not free a society. It places the society in a new order of dependency, ruin, debt, and securitization.

The Marxist formula must stay clear. The aim is the defeat of the imperialist project, not the political victory of the reactionary state. The aim is the defense of the society under attack, not the defense

of the domestic ruling class. The aim is resistance to foreign domination, not a class truce at home. Resistance to imperialism is the name for defending a society's right to determine its own fate. It is not the name for whitewashing a despotic state.

The foreign bomb creates the anti-imperialist urgency. The domestic baton creates the need for class independence. The first denies the right of foreign aggression. The second denies the domestic state's right to seize resistance. Socialist politics takes the society back from both sides: from the imperialism seeking to reshape it from outside and from the domestic state seeking to keep it subdued from within.

The Leninist Reading and Class Independence

The Leninist reading of the anti-imperialist struggle turns into a caricature of itself once it splits from class independence. Lenin did not understand imperialism as the bad foreign policy of one particular state. He saw it as a stage of capitalism. At this stage, monopoly, finance capital, the export of capital, and competition for spheres of influence appear as war, occupation, and the repression of weaker nations. From this angle, an imperialist attack needs understanding through the logic of global capital, not through the moral claims of the attacking state.

This same tradition gives no license to glorify the bourgeoisie or the states ruling over oppressed societies. The national bourgeoisie and peripheral states use the language of independence, national sovereignty, and resistance to deceive workers and silence social struggle. A state under pressure from imperialism does not for this reason become the representative of its people's emancipation. It is at once a target of foreign domination and an agent of domestic domination.

Inside the imperialist country, the main

task for those who claim solidarity with the oppressed is to weaken their own state, the war machine, NATO, the arms industry, and their own border regime. This task does not permit them to treat the despotic state under attack as the representative of its people's emancipation. The fight against imperialism in the West must organize against the West's own imperialist structures, not in defense of the Revolutionary Guards, Assad, Putin, or any other repressive state in conflict with Washington.

In a society under oppression or attack, the fight against foreign domination does not mean a class truce with the domestic bourgeoisie. Workers, women, teachers, and political prisoners hold no right to give up the right to organize, to strike, to criticize the state, and to fight security capital in the name of national unity. Class independence means defeating imperialism without glorifying the target state. It means fighting domestic repression without becoming the infantry of imperialism.

This is the point campism runs from. Campism fails to distinguish between resistance to imperialism and political defense of the target state. It either whitewashes the target state for its hostility to the United States or reduces the state's domestic critics to tools of imperialism. In both cases, the working class and independent social forces get erased.

From Class to Camp

Campism is the product of the left's defeat in the West. It failed to organize the working class against finance capital and the war industry. It failed to build combative unions against NATO and sanctions. It failed to link the anti-war struggle with the struggle against poverty and privatization. It failed to hold the relation between anti-imperialism and socialism.

A large part of the anti-imperialist language in the West broke away from the

workplace, the union, and the factory and moved to the seminar, the journal, and the podcast. This move is not in itself a problem. The problem began when language took the place of power. A theory unable to connect to strikes, organizing, union pressure, and a shift in the social balance starts to need external symbols to preserve its sense of radicalism. Campism is one form of this need. Instead of building power against imperialism in the West, it borrows the power of external states.

Organizing the working class is hard. It demands organizing, losing, and fighting union bureaucracy. It demands building a balance of forces in the workplace, the hospital, the school, and the street. It demands turning the different languages of suffering, labor, gender, and migration into a shared project. The camp is easier. It splits the world map into two sides and gives a feeling of power from a distance. A state has a flag, an army, a spokesperson, and a show of power. The working class is more scattered, more difficult, and in need of real political work.

On the camp map, the anti-U.S. state replaces the horizon of socialist struggle, and geopolitical position replaces the class relation. What the state does to its own workers fades to the margin: how it turns temporary and blank contracts into the norm, how it builds gender discrimination into the economy, how it destroys independent organizing, how it controls women, how it concentrates public resources in the hands of security capital. The main question is no longer which class commands and which class pays. The question becomes where this state stands against the United States.

Anti-imperialism becomes classless here. The working class stays in the slogan but disappears from the analysis. People speak about the workers of Iran, Syria, or Palestine. When those same workers

speak against their own state, against privatization, against unpaid wages, against compulsory hijab, against subcontracting, and against the repression of independent organizing, they become a nuisance to the camp map.

Internationalism or Substitution?

Internationalism is a division of emancipatory labor. It is not the handing of emancipation to someone else. Workers, students, and political activists in the West must target their own imperialist machine. Workers, women, and social activists in Iran must take back the right to resist foreign domination from the repressive domestic state, and at the same time keep their independence from interventionist projects. These two struggles must connect. One must not replace the other.

Campism inverts this relation. It turns the people of Iran, Syria, Afghanistan, or Palestine into a field for compensating the weakness of the left in the West. It expects them to carry the historical weight of a struggle the Western left abandoned half-finished at home. In this view, the society under attack must remain endlessly resistant, heroic, ready for sacrifice, and ready to pay the price. Its right to exhaustion, its right to criticize, its right to disagree, and its right to demand bread and freedom get taken away.

This substitution speaks the language of solidarity, yet it builds an unequal relation. The left in the West defines and interprets the struggle, and the people of the oppressed society are supposed to be symbols. If they oppose their own state, they fall under suspicion. If they speak of war and sanctions alongside domestic repression, they become complicated and illegible. If they speak in one breath of religious despotism and compulsory hijab, of sanctions and privatization, of the foreign bomb and the domestic prison, they disturb

the camp map.

Class internationalism begins from this complexity. Instead of choosing between imperialism and the local despot, it targets the chain of domination in each concrete situation. In the West, it targets the imperialist state and its own war capital. In Iran, it targets the Islamic Republic and domestic security capital, without granting legitimacy to foreign war and sanctions. In Palestine, it targets settler colonialism and Israeli apartheid, without turning Palestinian society into a classless symbol or a tool of regional states.

Inverted Orientalism and the Symbolic Consumption of Resistance

Classical Orientalism saw the people of the East as children, backward, and in need of Western rescue. Inverted Orientalism reproduces the same power relation with admiring words. The East is no longer a child. It is a hero. It no longer needs rescue. It is obligated to resist. Still it holds no right to define itself from inside its own real contradictions.

In this image, resistant Iran, resistant Syria, resistant Palestine, and the Global South turn into classless wholes. Worker and capitalist, the subordinated woman and patriarchy, prisoner and jailer, commander and soldier, the state and the repressed society all dissolve into a single image. This image might be anti-Western, but it is not necessarily anti-capitalist. It might speak against the United States, but it does not necessarily stand with the working class.

The imperialist liberal wants the people of the region to be victims for the West to rescue. The campist wants the same people to be heroes who fight imperialism in place of the Western left. One turns them into children, the other into myth. Both strip them of the right to complexity, contradiction, exhaustion, criticism of their own state,

and political independence.

Here solidarity turns into symbolic consumption. People's suffering is not heard for its own sake. It gets consumed to give meaning to someone else's moral and political crisis. The Iranian woman is supposed to be seen only when she is useful in the Western debate on Islamophobia. The Iranian worker is supposed to be seen only when he speaks against sanctions. The Palestinian is supposed to be seen only while playing the role of the perfect victim or the perfect fighter. The Syrian is supposed to be either a supporter of the state or a hireling of the West. These are different forms of one erasure.

An anti-imperialism failing to break inverted Orientalism ends up serving exactly what it claims to fight: the denial of the subjecthood of oppressed people.

Iran: Resistance to Imperialism, Independence from the Islamic Republic

Iran is one of the clearest fields of this crisis. The Islamic Republic stands under pressure from the imperialism of the United States and Israel. War, sanctions, sabotage, and economic blockade are real, and they demand unambiguous opposition. At the same time, the Islamic Republic has built a capitalist order: security-based, religious, anti-woman, and anti-worker. These two statements are not contradictory. The truth of Iran today lies in the simultaneity of both pressures.

For the different currents of the left in the West, the task is clear: to fight their own states, NATO, sanctions, the arms industry, and the policies turning Iranian society into a field of pressure and poverty. This task needs no looking toward the Islamic Republic and no attempt to justify it. Defending the people of Iran against foreign attack is not a defense of the Revolutionary Guards and not indifference to compulsory

hijab, political prison, subcontracting, and execution.

For Iranian forces abroad, the same distinction is vital. Opposition to war and sanctions must not turn into silence about domestic repression. Criticism of the Islamic Republic must not get translated into the moral language of the Western war machine. A class choice is never standing beside the despot and the repressor of the working class. This same choice is also never closing one's eyes to the imperialist structure using the suffering of the Iranian people to rearrange its own power.

The main question in Iran is not where the Iranian state stands against the United States. The question is which class pays the cost of this confrontation. Who endures the sanctions? Who pays for the inflation? On whose bodies does the security economy settle? Whose work, bread, and future would a possible war destroy? Who must stay silent in the name of national sovereignty? Who is stripped of organization, strikes, and freedom in the name of national security?

The Islamic Republic wants to turn resistance to foreign domination into its own political property. Imperialism wants to turn internal oppression into a license for its own intervention. Emancipatory politics must break both seizures. Resistance to imperialism must be taken back from the state and returned to society. Criticism of the Islamic Republic must break from the language of the Western bombers and sanctioners and return to the language of labor, women, freedom, organization, and daily life.

Iran is not only a state and not only a geopolitical field. Iran is a society of oil and petrochemical workers, teachers, pensioners, protesting women, justice-seeking families, and millions of people living between foreign pressure and domestic repression. Any anti-imperialism failing to

see this society is not emancipatory, even when it speaks against the United States.

Palestine, Syria, and the Limits of Real Solidarity

Palestine needs understanding with double care. Defending Palestine is defending the right of the Palestinian people to emancipation from settler colonialism, apartheid, occupation, and slaughter. This defense must not collapse into a symmetry between the colonizer and the colonized. Israel is an occupying and killing power. The Palestinians are a colonized people.

This truth must not turn Palestine into a classless symbol. Palestinian society holds the right not to be only a victim or only a fighter. It holds the right to be a worker, a woman, a refugee, a feminist, a critic, secular, religious, and a seeker of social justice. Real solidarity with Palestine means material struggle against the states, companies, universities, arms factories, and media in the West backing the occupation, the blockade, and the killing. Defending Palestine needs no defense of Hamas, Hezbollah, or the Islamic Republic.

Syria was another example of the failure of the campist method. A part of the Western left failed to see Syrian society in its real complexity: the Assad state, imperialist intervention, armed fundamentalism, Russian bombing, the role of the Islamic Republic, Turkish intervention, the defeat of the councils, and the destruction of popular forces. Everything was reduced to one simple formula: the West against Syria. In this formula, the real people of Syria fell to the margin: the prisoners, the refugees, the women, the workers, the local councils, and the forces opposed both to jihadism and to Assad.

The lesson of Syria and Palestine for the discussion of Iran is clear. Anti-imperialism must hold several repressive powers in view at once, without flattening their analysis

onto one moral level. It must stand against colonialism, occupation, sanctions, war, and intervention, and at the same time take the oppressed society seriously inside its own class, gender, and political contradictions. Real solidarity does not reduce a society to a state, resistance to a leader, and a people to a symbol.

Rebuilding Anti-Imperialism from Below

The way out of campism is not a return to interventionist liberalism. Criticism of despotic states must not be handed to the language of Western rescue, sanctions, bombing, and regime change from above. In the same way, the fight against imperialism must not collapse into a defense of local despots. Both paths erase society. One in the name of freedom, the other in the name of resistance.

Rebuilding anti-imperialism from below means a return to the real subjects of struggle. In the West, this means organizing against NATO, the war industry, sanctions, the militarized university, and the war media. It means turning moral anger into material pressure: strikes, work refusal, exposure, campus occupation, union pressure, the cutting of institutional cooperation, and direct links with the labor and social forces of the societies under attack.

In the society under attack, rebuilding anti-imperialism means taking the right to resist back from the state. It means saying the foreign bomb holds no right to decide our future, and the domestic state holds no right to shut our mouths in the name of security and national sovereignty. It means defending the worker, the woman, the teacher, the prisoner, and the migrant against both pressures. It means being anti-war from within life, not from within loyalty to a state.

Campism is not a disease of anti-imperialism. It is a sign of the loss of its class

base. When the fight against the imperialist state inside the West grows weak, external despotic states become a substitute for social power. The answer to this deadlock is not a defense of the liberal bombers. The answer is rebuilding anti-imperialism from below. The Western left must disrupt its

own imperialist machine. The forces of the society under attack must take the right to resist back from the repressive domestic state. Resistance to imperialism is the name for defending the people. It is not the name for whitewashing the rulers.

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The Silence of the State Kills

Chile and the Mapuche Who Refuse to Disappear

MATT BENSON

BEFORE CHILE AND ARGENTINA existed, before the Spanish Empire even knew there was anything across the ocean and eventually drew its first breath in the Americas, there was Wallmapu.

Wallmapu Exists

The land of the Mapuche, the “people of the land,” stretches across what colonial maps now call southern Chile and Argentina, divided by the Andes into Gulumapu in the west and Puelmapu in the east. The Mapuche were never conquered by the Spanish. For over three centuries, from the first incursion in 1536 until the wars of independence, they held the Bío Bío River as a border no empire could cross. They negotiated parliaments and treaty-like agreements with the Spanish Crown, the Parliament of Quillín in 1641 and subsequent accords, that involved mutual recognition and the fixing of the frontier. Historians debate the nature of that recognition, but what’s undisputed is the Mapuche maintained political autonomy for over 300 years. They later signed treaties with the Republic of Chile, including the Treaty of Tapiwe in 1825, which established terms for relations between the two peoples,

terms Chile would ignore.

The invasion came not from Europe, but from the new Chilean state. In the late nineteenth century, the military campaign euphemistically named the “Pacification of Araucanía,” a term that encodes the denial of Mapuche sovereignty, did what Spain couldn’t, not pacification, occupation. The Chilean army swept through Wallmapu, killing, displacing, and confining the Mapuche to “*reducciones*,” reservations, that amounted to 5 percent of their ancestral territory. Over 475,000 hectares were documented, in roughly three thousand Títulos de Merced, the land titles granted to Mapuche families between 1884 and 1929. These documents, as Mapuche claimants and scholars have repeatedly argued, “are not enough.” They don’t represent the land the Mapuche held before expropriation, their “*tierras antiguas*,” the ancestral lands. They aren’t records of restitution, but records of reduction, designed to legitimize dispossession while providing a documentary basis for future claims that would be tightly constrained by the very boundaries the state drew.

On the other side of the Andes, the same logic operated under a different name. Between 1878 and 1885, the Argentine state’s “Conquest of the Desert,” led by General Julio Roca, dispossessed Mapuche communities of their territory in what’s now commonly called Patagonia. This campaign mirrored the Chilean invasion

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in its brutality and its framing: both new republics cast the Mapuche as savages standing in the way of civilisation. Today, Argentina doesn't even recognize the Mapuche as a pre-existing nation, framing them as Chilean immigrants, a position only hardened under President Javier Milei, which explicitly denies Mapuche territorial claims and has declared Mapuche organizations "terrorist groups." Mapuche communities in Neuquén and Río Negro face extractive pressure from fracking in the Vaca Muerta formation and lithium exploration, as well as violent repression. The binational character of the occupation isn't incidental: extractive capital operates across the border; and Mapuche communities on both sides maintain kinship and political ties.

Mapuche land was transferred to Chilean (European) settlers, some of whom remain powerful in the region today. The modern forestry industry that dominates the Chilean side of Wallmapu is primarily the product of specific policies: the military dictatorship's privatizations; subsidy regimes that fueled the plantation boom; and the ongoing partnership between the Chilean state and extractive capital. The results are visible. By the 1990s, forestry companies owned approximately three times more Mapuche territory than the Mapuche themselves. The industry's monoculture plantations, radiata pine and eucalyptus, now cover vast areas of what was once native forest.

Today the Mapuche number over 1.7 million people, roughly 12 percent of Chile's population, according to the 2017 national census, forming the country's largest indigenous group. Their language, Mapudungun, survives despite centuries of repression. Their flag still flies, its colors and symbols representing the sun, moon, morning star, and cosmological order that binds the Mapuche to their territory. Their

communities still govern themselves through the Lof, the extended family unit, and the authority of the Lonko, the community head. Their collective memory is being documented and defended by autonomous Mapuche media collectives like Adkimvn, which produces documentary work focused on territorial defense, ancestral memory, and the philosophy of Kyme Mongen, the "good life," the balanced existence.

Readers encountering the Mapuche struggle may come across references to the Kingdom of Araucanía and Patagonia, a symbolic monarchy led by a European-based "Prince," with its own chancellery, coronation ceremonies, and diplomatic statements. This institution traces its origins to Orélie-Antoine de Tounens, a French lawyer who in 1860 declared himself King of Araucanía and who was then expelled by Chilean authorities. The modern Kingdom presents itself as an advocate for Mapuche sovereignty, issuing statements on treaty rights, making submissions to international bodies, and commemorating Mapuche martyrs. Its relationship to Mapuche communities on the ground in Wallmapu is, however, contested. Many Mapuche organizations don't recognize a European monarchy as a legitimate vehicle for their self-determination. The Kingdom is noted here, not because it's representative, but because it isn't. Its presence in the international conversation about the Mapuche is itself a form of displacement: a European voice speaking over indigenous ones. The Mapuche have their own governance structures that make decisions through collective deliberation, and it's these institutions, not any monarchy, that lead the resistance described in this article. Readers seeking to understand the Mapuche struggle should look to Mapuche communities, organizations, and media directly.

Wallmapu isn't a memory, it's a

living political reality and its people have never ceded their sovereignty. This matters because the international community consistently misrecognizes what's happening in southern Chile and Argentina. The Mapuche aren't an "ethnic minority" seeking cultural recognition within a unified state, but a dispossessed nation under occupation, and their struggle isn't for inclusion, but for restitution. This isn't a conflict of "ethnic violence," it's resistance to illegal occupation.

Camilo, Julia and the Faces of Resistance

The resistance has faces that the Chilean state has spent decades trying to erase, smear, or bury, but the names persist, carried by families and communities who refuse to let the dead be forgotten.

Camilo Catrillanca was 24 years old. He came from a line of Lonko, his grandfather, a respected leader of the Temicucui community, a place long regarded as a symbol of Mapuche resilience. So much so that in May 2026, the state raided it with 400 heavily armed personnel, tanks, and helicopters, detaining a pregnant woman and a four-year-old child, then omitting to include their detention in official records. Camilo's father called him a *weichafe*, a "warrior," but also a wise man, a protector, a term that signifies not merely combat, but the bearing of communal responsibility. Camilo had a six-year-old daughter and a pregnant wife. He was building them a house, but was killed before he could finish it.

On November 14, 2018, an "anti-terrorist" unit of the Chilean police, known as Comando Jungla, trained in Colombia and the United States and equipped with drones and high-tech communications, entered Temicucui near the town of Ercilla. They claimed to be pursuing car thieves. The operation involved hundreds of officers and

two helicopters. Camilo had gone out with a 15-year-old relative to pick coriander; he was riding his tractor, unarmed.

The police shot him multiple times, with the kill shot entering through the back of his neck. The autopsy would later raise a question the state couldn't answer: how does an unarmed assailant get shot from behind in the neck while supposedly threatening officers? The 15-year-old with him witnessed an officer remove the memory card from the video camera that recorded everything. The minister of the Interior was eventually forced to confirm this in a press conference. The government spent days insisting Camilo had a criminal record; he didn't, it was a lie that was disproven, but the smear had already circulated. These facts were established not only by advocacy outlets, but by mainstream Chilean and international press, and they led to the resignation of several officials, including the head of the *carabineros*.

Camilo was one of at least 15 Mapuche activists who have been killed since 2001, according to the indigenous newspaper *Werkén.cl*. More than 40 Mapuche children have been mistreated by police, some suffering gunshot wounds, as documented by the Network for the Defense of Childhood Wallmapu. The numbers accumulate, but each is a specific, irreplaceable life.

The face of resistance is also profoundly female. It wears the weathered features of Julia Chuñil, a 70-year-old elder and president of the indigenous community of Putreguel. On November 8, 2024, she left her home to check on her cows. Her dog, Cholito, went with her by her side. Before she walked out, she told her relatives something that reads as both warning and prophecy: "If I do not return, you know who did this."

She never returned; she vanished into the wilderness she had spent her life defending. Her family has faced police harassment

and media misinformation ever since. The Public Prosecutor's Office investigation has been marred by irregularities: the family kept in the dark; evidence lost; critical protocols ignored. In September 2025, the family's lawyer, Karina Riquelme, disclosed that intercepted phone calls from the main suspect, forestry businessman Juan Carlos Morstadt Anwandter, the "legal" owner of the land recovered by Chuñil's community, contained claims she had been burned. These claims haven't been independently verified by any public authority, and Morstadt hasn't publicly responded. They remain a lead, not a finding, but the state's failure to pursue this lead with urgency has deepened the family's conviction that the investigation isn't impartial.

Morstadt comes from a family with a documented history of landownership and exploitation in the region. A 1935 local newspaper article titled "The Latifundistas Continue Their Abuses" described his grandfather, a local judge and landowner, as an exploiter of workers. Morstadt filed to evict Chuñil after she resisted selling her land. She refused, then disappeared.

The agency supposedly responsible for indigenous rights, the National Corporation for Indigenous Development (CONADI), acquired the contested land and offered it to a different community. When they refused, the land was left in legal limbo, a state-created vacuum that left Chuñil exposed. In 2011, CONADI's only two Mapuche board members were removed by government decision after they vetoed a hydropower project that affected Mapuche land, a veto they were legally entitled to exercise under CONADI's founding legislation. With their removal came the elimination of any indigenous representation from the body charged with protecting indigenous land rights. Scholars of the occupation, including Kelly Bauer and María Montenegro, documented the

restructuring that turned CONADI from a potential vehicle for restitution into an instrument of managed dispossession. The body charged with protecting Julia Chuñil's land rights was stripped of its capacity to represent communities like hers. Julia's daughter, Jeanette Troncoso Chuñil, speaks for the movement when she says: "This isn't just a problem for our mother, it's for the whole community struggling to recover its rights and territory. It's an attempt to silence the Mapuche struggle."

Julia Chuñil's case follows a devastating pattern. In recent decades, several Mapuche women land defenders have been killed or disappeared in circumstances their families and communities regard as suspicious. Macarena Valdés, an environmental activist opposing a hydroelectric project, was found dead in her home in 2016; her family contested the suicide ruling and a second autopsy indicated she had been killed. Nicolasa Quintremán, a leader in the resistance to the Pangué dam, died in 2013. Emilia Bau, a Mapuche land defender, was killed in 2021. In August 2020, both Iris Rosales and her daughter, Rosa Quintana Rosales, members of the Juan Pinoleo community, which had been caught up in a wave of violence, were both found hanged in their home shortly after a far-right mob, aided by police, violently evicted Mapuche protesters from a council building in Curacautin. The coroner ruled the deaths suicides; the family and community contested this.

Efforts to arrest Mapuche resistance fighters have not relented. As this article goes to press, four Mapuche from the Resistencia Mapuche Lafkenche (RML) are in preventive detention following a June 9, 2026, raid by 150 police and naval personnel in Cañete.

Each case has specific circumstances, and the legal processes have varied, but the accumulation of deaths and the pattern of

initial rulings that families reject has fueled the conviction among Mapuche organizers and human rights groups that the state's indifference to violence against Mapuche women is structural.

At the protests, demonstrators carried signs that read: “¿Dónde están Julia Chuil y Cholito?” “*El Silencio del Estado Mata*,” the silence of the state kills. “*Sabemos quienes fueron*,” we know who it was.

The Original Violence Is Land Theft

When international media covers the “Mapuche conflict,” which should actually be referred to as occupation under international law, the frame is invariably violence: burning trucks, blocked roads, sabotaged machinery. The Chilean state calls it terrorism; the forestry industry calls it criminality.

These events are real, and they require honest engagement. The Coordinadora Arauco Malleco (CAM), one of the most prominent Mapuche organizations demanding territorial restitution, advocates armed resistance and sabotage as legitimate tactics of territorial recovery. Its leader, Héctor Llaitul, was sentenced in 2024 to 23 years in prison on charges including incitement to violence, firearms use, and timber theft, charges his supporters regard as political persecution. There are now over 100 Mapuche prisoners in Chilean jails, according to Radio Kurru.

These tactics aren't without cost, and they're not universally supported by the Mapuche. Arson attacks on forestry equipment have sometimes spread to affect neighbouring small holdings. The burning of churches and rural schools, actions that some Mapuche groups have claimed, while other Mapuche organizations condemn, has alienated potential allies. Some Mapuche organizations have publicly distanced themselves from armed actions, arguing the struggle for territorial restitution must be

waged through legal and political means. The strategic debate within the Mapuche movement is real, and it's not the purpose of this article to resolve it. What matters is this debate takes place in the shadow of structural violence that preceded it and continues regardless of which tactics the Mapuche employ.

The category “political prisoner” covers a range of cases. Some Mapuche prisoners have been held under anti-terrorism laws for actions that would, in other contexts, be treated as ordinary protest or land occupation. Others have been convicted of offenses involving arson, possession of firearms, or sabotage of machinery. The cases in which the law has been used to penalize nonviolent protest are the clearest violations of international standards. The cases involving violent offenses are more contested, but the systematic use of anti-terrorism legislation, with its anonymous witnesses, extended detention, and higher sentences, rather than ordinary criminal law, raises due-process concerns that human rights bodies have repeatedly flagged, including the UN special rapporteur on counter-terrorism in 2013.

The question isn't whether violence exists, but where the violence began.

To understand the current political moment, it's necessary to grasp the relationship between the Mapuche and the broader Chilean left, a relationship of embrace followed by abandonment. During the 2019 Social Uprising, the largest mobilization in Chile since the dictatorship, the Mapuche flag became a central symbol of the protests. In Plaza Dignidad, the epicenter of the movement in Santiago, demonstrators raised a huge Mapuche star and chanted *afafanes*, Mapuche protest slogans. The demands of the uprising, an end to the neoliberal constitution, dignity, and the recognition of collective rights, all echoed the Mapuche struggle. This wasn't

an indigenous movement joining a separate protest; the Mapuche and their symbols were at the heart of the *estallido* from the beginning.

That solidarity found institutional expression in the 2021–22 Constitutional Convention, which included 17 reserved seats for indigenous delegates, a historic first. Mapuche linguist and activist Elisa Loncon was elected president of the Convention, and her opening address, delivered in Mapudungun, called for Chile to be “refounded” as a plurinational state that recognized indigenous territorial rights and self-governance. The draft constitution, for the first time, declared Chile a plurinational state and proposed articles recognizing indigenous autonomy. The draft was rejected by 62 percent of voters in September 2022, following a well-funded right-wing campaign that framed plurinationalism as a threat to national unity and private property.

The rejection was devastating for the Mapuche, closing the institutional path to recognition. Gabriel Boric, the center-left Chilean president who had campaigned on the promise of a new constitution, accepted the result and abandoned the project. The state of emergency, declared by the former right-wing government of Sebastián Piñera in October 2021 during the final months of the Convention, wasn’t just maintained, but extended. The same left that had marched under the Mapuche flag now governed over its repression.

The original violence is the land theft. Under the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, the state targeted forestry as a key sector of development, implementing policies that favored the expansion of large tree plantations, the effects of which scholars have documented in detail. State-owned forests were sold to large corporations at negligible cost, with Mapuche land titles terminated and labor

protections gutted. Between 1985 and 1995, nearly two million hectares of native forests were eradicated and replaced with industrial tree plantations. That’s why today Chile hosts the world’s largest expanse of radiata pine, but also why half of the country’s 15.4 million hectares of forests are degraded, with its native forests among the most endangered on earth. While the severity of these effects depends on management practices, as well-regulated plantation forestry can mitigate impacts through buffer zones and selective harvesting, in the Araucanía, where regulation is weak and profit pressure high, the pattern is one of intensive extraction with minimal mitigation, which has drawn criticism from Chilean environmental scientists and Mapuche communities.

The Mapuche lost 95 percent of their ancestral lands, with companies like Mininco and Arauco operating on

The Mapuche aren’t an “ethnic minority” seeking cultural recognition within a unified state, but a dispossessed nation under occupation, and their struggle isn’t for inclusion, but for restitution.

territory Mapuche communities claim. The monoculture plantations drain the water table, erode the soil, contaminate livestock feed, and, through the proliferation of highly flammable eucalyptus, intensify wildfires that have devastated central and southern Chile. In Argentina, the same extractive logic operates, with the expansion of fracking in the Vaca Muerta formation and lithium exploration and

land acquisitions by international investors. This includes, in 2024, the takeover by the owner of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club of thousands of hectares of ancestral Mapuche land in Patagonia, which places further pressure on Mapuche territory. The binational character of the conflict is material, not symbolic: extractive capital crosses borders and Mapuche communities on both sides of the Andes face structural pressures that differ in legal form but share a common logic.

This is the structural violence. It's not a conflict between equal parties with legitimate grievances, it's an occupation by industry and state united in dispossession, facing a people who refuse to leave, some of whom pursue that refusal through direct action that the state labels terrorism.

The state's response to resistance isn't justice, but militarization. The 1984 Anti-Terrorism Law, drafted under the Pinochet dictatorship to crush political dissent, has been deployed against the Mapuche for decades. It allows anonymous witnesses, extended pre-trial detention, and sentences far beyond normal criminal proceedings. In 2013, the UN special rapporteur on counter-terrorism called on Chile to reform the law, citing its discriminatory application against the Mapuche. Amnesty International condemned its use in Mapuche cases. Chile has ratified ILO Convention 169, which requires consultation with indigenous peoples on matters affecting their lands and resources, an obligation successive governments have honored only in rhetoric not practice.

The Comando Jungla occupy the Araucanía with armored vehicles, drones, and body cameras, the footage from which has a habit of disappearing when it incriminates the police. Wallmapu had been under a state of emergency since October 2021, declared first by Piñera's government and extended without interruption by

Boric's. This enabled militarization that now includes thousands of troops, checkpoints, and intelligence operations across Mapuche territory. In cities like Temuco, the streets empty after nine at night, driven by both the state of emergency's restrictions and the atmosphere of militarization; an undeclared, *de facto* curfew has become normal. Boric increased security spending by \$1.5 billion and provided police with specialized surveillance drones. His government declared CAM an "illicit terrorist organization" and oversaw Llaitul's prosecution.

The continuity is striking. Boric came to power promising a "path of dialogue" and reconciliation with indigenous peoples. In office, he reauthorized the same militarization he once criticized. What explains this? The answer is likely not monolithic. Public opinion in Chile has shifted rightward on security issues. The electoral cost of appearing "soft" on rural violence is high. Forestry capital exerts structural pressure on the state regardless of who governs. Boric may well have concluded that maintaining the status quo was politically necessary, while betraying his campaign commitments. None of this excuses the outcome, but it helps explain why the militarization has been bipartisan, and why it will not end simply with a change of government.

Boric's repression didn't go uncontested within his own coalition, as left-wing deputies and parties, including elements of the Frente Amplio, the coalition he helped build, criticized the extension of the state of emergency, the application of the Anti-Terrorism Law to Mapuche prisoners, and the prosecution of community leaders. Social movements that mobilized for Boric during his campaign publicly broke with him over the Mapuche question. The internal criticism mattered because it demonstrated that militarization was a

political choice, not a structural inevitability. Boric had alternatives, and he chose repression.

In December 2025, Chile elected as president José Antonio Kast with 58 percent of the vote, a far-right politician with a long history of defending the Pinochet dictatorship. His victory represents an escalation in violence and oppression. Where Boric maintained the state of emergency, Kast intensified it, deploying a “hermetic” new security plan, tightening the military cordon around Mapuche communities. His administration discussed blockades of supplies in order to starve communities, like in Temuicui, and it has already dismantled the government’s indigenous rights unit. The infrastructure of repression that both right and left constructed is now weaponized by a president who denies the Mapuche are a people at all. What Boric demonstrated was the machine of militarization, once built, wouldn’t be dismantled by those who claimed to oppose it. What the Kast era confirms is who was always waiting to take control of it. The left allows and sustains, the right utilizes and cleanses.

The state’s land restitution program, run by CONADI, is itself a mechanism of containment. It requires Mapuche claimants to prove historic land dispossession using *Títulos de Merced*, the very documents designed to legitimize their reduction to 5 percent of their territory. The program ignores *tierras antiguas* that fall outside the *reducciones*. It disregards *territorialidad*: the living, ongoing cultural, economic, and spiritual practices through which Mapuche communities express their relationship to the land, the rivers crossed, the medicinal plants harvested, the ceremonial sites maintained, and the names spoken in Mapudungun, which all still mark the landscape. As scholar María Montenegro argues, the *Títulos de Merced* function as

instruments of ongoing dispossession. This form of colonial violence forces Mapuche claimants to validate their ancestral claims through documents designed to legitimize their dispossession.

CONADI’s program involves 32 procedures in four phases. The backlog for land recognition has been estimated to take decades to clear, by some calculations, over 80 years. In Julia Chuñil’s case, CONADI’s mismanagement of the land title created the legal confusion that left her vulnerable. The institutions designed to provide justice serve instead to manage dispossession. This isn’t mere bureaucracy, it’s an intentional state policy of attrition.

Kast announced a reform to the Indigenous Law on June 1, 2026, eliminating the restrictions on the use of Mapuche territory, allowing leasing and mortgaging of ancestral lands. Mapuche organizations, including Ad Mapu and the National Mapuche Assembly, condemned the reform as “a new dispossession” and “a retreat of 150 years.” Ana Llao from Ad Mapu said “Mapuche land is not for sale... this is how they invaded us and wanted to exterminate us and today the Mapuche people are present, with the few lands we have left.” No consultation with Mapuche communities was conducted, in direct violation of ILO Convention 169, which Chile has ratified and is legally bound to honor.

On June 3, 2026, Aucán Huilcamán, spokesperson for the Consejo de Todas las Tierras (Council of All Lands), called on president Kast to end the military deployment in Malleco and Cautín provinces and to initiate “sincere and good faith dialogue.” Huilcamán added, “there seems to be more personal interest than genuine commitment to finding solutions.” The Consejo’s demand distinguishes between the state of emergency and the militarization it enables, a framing the

Chilean press has rarely adopted.

“We Know Who Did This”

The Mapuche don't regard their land simply as property, but as *mapu*, a living entity from which the people, the *che*, have emerged. Their bond is ontological. The Mapuche word for territory is also the word for identity, body, memory, and spirituality. Their relationship to the land is expressed through territorialidad: not a deed, but a practice; not a boundary, but a belonging. What the Chilean state calls a conflict over property is, for the Mapuche, a defense of existence itself.

The Mapuche resistance doesn't represent a fleeting news cycle, but a 500-year refusal of oppression, dispossession, and supremacist domination. The Mapuche have survived the Spanish Empire, the Chilean invasion, the Pinochet dictatorship, and false promises of democratic and “progressive” governments alike. They survive now in communities that occupy ancestral land, in women who block the logging trucks, in hunger strikers in Chilean prisons, in media collectives that document their stories in their language, in families who hold the names of their dead and disappeared, and by those who refuse to let the world look away.

Camilo Catrillanca was building a house. Julia Chuñil went to check on her cows. The ordinariness of their lives is the exact point, for they weren't soldiers, they were people defending the ground beneath their feet, as their ancestors had done before them, as their children will after them.

The sign at the Santiago protest said everything the world needs to hear: *El Silencio del Estado Mata*, the silence of the state kills. But the silence of the international community is complicity, and complicity can be broken by specific acts. International human rights bodies can investigate the Escazú Protocol, which

Chile ratified and guarantees protection for environmental defenders, and see that it is implemented in full. ILO Convention 169 can be honored, not only gestured toward. Consumers and investors can scrutinize supply chains of the forestry industry that profit from occupied land. Solidarity movements can amplify Mapuche voices rather than speaking over them.

The urgency is intensifying; for every month Kast remains in office, the legal architecture of dispossession is being extended. The Mapuche are not asking for sympathy, they are asking for the international community to stop looking away.

I recognize that these demands sit in tension with the article's own analysis. Implementing ILO 169 and reforming CONADI are improvements to a state system that some currents of the Mapuche movement regard as structurally illegitimate. The demand for restitution of *tierras antiguas* points beyond reform toward a territorial settlement that the Chilean state has shown no willingness to contemplate. This tension isn't a contradiction to be resolved here, but it is the political reality within which the Mapuche struggle operates. Some Mapuche organizations pursue both tracks simultaneously, engaging the state's mechanisms while refusing to recognize their ultimate authority, as a matter of strategy. Others reject any engagement with the state as collaboration.

This article's refusal to choose between these paths reflects the diversity of the movement it describes, as it is not my place to tell the Mapuche how to defend their lands, and neither is it anyone else's.

The Mapuche have been telling their story for centuries, and it's time the rest of us listened.

Sourcing

This article draws on the scholarship of

María Montenegro, Martín Correa, Kelly Bauer, José Bengoa, Patricia Richards, and Fernando Pairican; reporting from NACLA, Green Left, the PRIF Blog, Resumen Latinoamericano, El Clarín de Chile, the Human Rights Defenders Memorial, and Byline Times; the autonomous media work of Adkimvn; statements from the Mapuche International Link, Amnesty International, and the UN special rapporteur on counter-terrorism; and the words of Mapuche community members and their families.

All sources are politically aligned to varying degrees. Readers are encouraged to consult them directly and to seek out the voices of Mapuche communities themselves.

FURTHER READING

This list is a starting point for a conversation the reader is invited to continue. It includes Mapuche advocacy sources, scholarly literature, state and industry perspectives, and international human rights documentation. Readers are encouraged to engage with the strongest arguments on all sides of this dispute. Advocacy gains credibility when it seeks out and honestly characterizes the positions it opposes. This list isn't comprehensive, it's a starting point for a conversation the reader is invited to continue.

MAPUCHE ADVOCACY AND MEDIA

Adkimvn Cine y Comunicación Mapuche
Mapuche International Link
Radio Kurruf

Werkén.cl

SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

José Bengoa, *Historia del pueblo mapuche: Siglo XIX y XX*

Martín Correa, *La reforma agraria y las tierras mapuches: Chile 1962–1975*

Kelly Bauer, *Negotiating Autonomy: Mapuche Territorial Demands and Chilean Land Policy*

Patricia Richards, *Race and the Chilean Miracle: Neoliberalism, Democracy, and Indigenous Rights*

Fernando Pairican, *Malón: La rebelión del pueblo mapuche, 1990–2020*

María Montenegro, articles on Títulos de Merced, *territorialidad*, and archival dispossession

STATE AND INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVES

Corporación Chilena de la Madera (Corma), *Reporte de Sostenibilidad* (annual sustainability reports)

Centro de Estudios Públicos (CEP), *Puntos de Referencia* series on the Mapuche conflict and rural violence

Chilean government submissions to UN human rights bodies regarding the Anti-Terrorism Law

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS

DOCUMENTATION

UN special rapporteur on counter-terrorism, 2013 report on Chile

Amnesty International, reports on the Anti-Terrorism Law and Mapuche prisoners

ILO Convention 169 compliance reports for Chile

Escazú Agreement implementation documentation

Class Struggle of Our Own

An Interview with Daniel Gross

KEVIN VAN METER

*It is no secret that the labor movement in the United States is in trouble. The past few decades have been marked by a decline in overall union density coupled with aggressive anti-union employer campaigns in the private sector and recent attacks on federal workers. But the uprisings in Minneapolis and militant organizing by autoworkers, baristas, nurses, and education workers have opened new paths for class struggles of our own. Recently released by Haymarket Books, *Unions of Our Own: Eight Building Blocks to Change Work... and the World*, written by labor organizer, former labor lawyer, collaborator with the late Staughton Lynd, and close friend Daniel Gross provides an additional path forward for the labor movement—a framework for workers to design and refine their own unions.¹ In this conversation with author and labor educator Kevin Van Meter, Daniel assesses the labor movements strategies and organizing approaches, provides eight building blocks for building power, and looks toward the horizon of future class struggle and the 2028 General Strike.*

Kevin Van Meter: *What is your assessment of the current state of the labor movement, labor organizing, and the larger class struggle in the United States?*

Daniel Gross: Workers over the last ten, fifteen years in the United States have been in undeniable motion. Not all of that motion has been successful and it's not all union activity, but there have been breakthrough victories and a definite turn

toward unionism. Industry after industry, the “unorganizable” are organizing, and in many cases winning. It's very different and much better than when I came of age around the turn of the century. There's so much to celebrate.

You knew the “but” was coming, unfortunately. The vast, vast majority of workers remain badly screwed at work and, therefore, in life and in society. A tiny percentage of private sector workers are part of a union; including the public sector takes that percentage up just a bit. The oligarchs are extracting from us unfathomable sums, controlling us, and destroying the planet.

So, the undeniable and courageous motion of the working class has not yet translated into the collective power and organization to make the job and the world as they should be.

Every day I get to speak with—and I'm talking deep conversations—with workers who are beyond fed up with what they're putting up with on the job. Many wonder if it's possible to form a union through which they can really meet their needs and honor their values too. Values like member control of the union, racial justice, gender justice. Some of these folks are in geographies or industries where unionism has never had much scale.

The reality is, and I know there are those who don't agree, but there is no cookie-cutter method one can just carry out really well and “bam,” after some super hard fights, we'll have the workplaces and the labor movement many of us envision,

across industries and geographies at the scale needed. Methods and techniques are great and important; we must draw from them and do so well; I have a few key ones in the book and there are many great resources out there.

But on a deeper level, it is workers, era after era, who make the forms that will work for their context and time.

I wrote *Unions of Our Own* precisely because it is coworkers in a workplace, at a company, and in an industry, who are best positioned to design their own union and who have the collective power to make good on it. But to try to do that from a blank slate is ill-advised because you can waste precious time and energy banging your head against the wall on dead ends and you can make unforced errors that suck. You benefit greatly from a framework to do your design and to test which parts are working and which parts need to change. You also need a channel to working-class wisdom that has come before; stuff that has been validated often across many generations.

No one can guarantee victory, but the goal of all this is maximize the chance of winning; and if you have to lose, to lose as quickly and painlessly as possible so you can take your learning and your energy to give it another go down the line.

I'm optimistic about people who work in a wide variety of industries and geographies taking the undeniable energy out there and the undeniable disgust with the economy so many are feeling to successfully build sustainable unions to meet their needs, honor their values, and advance the vision they have for their city and world.

KVM: *As a founding organizer of the IWW Starbucks Workers Union and with a long history in the independent wing of the labor movement, what is your appraisal of the Starbucks Workers United campaign?*

DG: Having worn the green apron and

knowing firsthand how incredibly exploitative Starbucks is, when the baristas of this generation started organizing, I was deeply moved and remain so now. The level of leadership and participation of trans, queer, and other marginalized baristas in the campaign inspires me greatly. The viral nature of their strategy is a must to understand, and I address it in *Unions of Our Own*.

I say without any exaggeration that the fact that baristas are still successfully organizing store after store after years of high-quality and immense union busting by Starbucks is one of the most remarkable things I've seen in twenty-five years in the labor movement.

The baristas I've spoken with are super committed to seeing through the fight to victory and clear-eyed on the challenges to get there. The strategic milestone they're focused on now is getting a contract. How to assert enough power to get there is no easy feat, to state the obvious. Once you get a contract you have to avoid the fate of the courageous baristas in Canada who did obtain union contracts at Starbucks, only to have the company give those gains at nonunion stores as well and to continue the union busting until the union was sadly dismantled. There's also the question of how the ethos of many of the baristas: member control and direct action minded; queer liberation and pro-Palestine; how the governance structures of Workers United and SEIU and the types of union contracts those unions seek could impact expressing those values over time.

In any event, Starbucks baristas have gained incredible ground and they're clear that there's much to navigate to get to a victory where they meet their needs as they define them, honor their values, and advance their vision of Starbucks, the coffee industry, and the world. I believe in them wholeheartedly.

I feel really happy—*Unions of Our Own*

is only just out—but the first Starbucks baristas who have engaged it have been enthusiastic about the material.

KVM: *Reform caucuses and the rank-and-file strategy are all the rage in the left labor movement today. How do they compare to your own strategy?*

DG: The union model framework is as applicable to those struggles as it is to form a new union. Why is our union the way it is? The good, the bad, and the ugly. That's not just a question of who is in leadership as tempting as that diagnosis might be. Nor is it just a question of how broad the rank-and-file solidarity structure is, as important as that obviously is. It's a question of union model.

For hard, material reasons of funding systems, representational dynamics, and the push from the legal and institutional framework for unions, labor history has shown consistently that without more member involvement, even the most amazing, visionary, and ethical leaders of unions will not be able to avoid the pull of a model that drags against the values and goals of members.

What type of union are we in? What provisions are in our union agreements, and what are the implications? What's the union governance structure? What are the strategies of our union? What metrics are prioritized? Those are a few of the questions of union building that the book helps workers work through via principles, examples, and labor history. We have to align as coworkers on what the current union model is and then prioritize taking on the parts of it we don't like in order to find something that works better.

Nine out of ten workers are not in a union, but for those who are, making those unions better so that members can meet their needs in full, honor their values, and advance their vision is profound work.

Again, the book is just out, but I was thrilled that at the launch workers contemplating forming unions or in the process of doing so were joined in the audience by workers in unions looking to revitalize them.

One other thing, Kevin, and I know how you meant it in your question but just to say, I don't have *a* strategy. In fact, I would be skeptical of anyone, writers most of all, who says here is the *thing* or *things* that labor needs to do and then all the good stuff we want will then happen. Strategy is one of the eight building blocks of a complete union, and as I point out in the book there's no doubt it's a major, major one. Strategy moves the immovable, I've seen it countless times, and it never gets old.

In the chapter on strategy, instead of offering one up that would be far less powerful, I provide coworkers with a strategy formulation framework so they can make their own. Strategy is like learning a language, it's learnable and it's doable, but it's kind of weird and it's helpful to have guidance. In the chapter, I also make a pitch to check out research methodologies because that's a prerequisite for a fleshed-out strategy, though not for a first draft.

Only after the framework to stimulate original thinking do I offer up what I call the labor strategy canon. These are tried and true categories of asserting power that campaigns can benefit from, real powerhouses, like adjacency, movement integration, choke point, secondary targeting, direct action at work, and others. It's there that I explain the dynamism of the breakthrough United Autoworkers (UAW) strike victory in 2023; it's there that I show how—many decades apart—supermarket clerks and minor league baseball players used the same strategy to break down the opposition and dramatically transform their jobs.

But even the strategies in the canon, I don't say 'hey, just take these off the shelf, plug them into your campaign and your off

to the races.' The idea is to take them off the shelf and consider using them or maybe they inspire you to do something else. But it's always after and in addition to original thinking.

KVM: *Similarly, thousands of militants have taken Organizing for Power or are engaged in Workers Centers and Non-Profit Advocacy Models. Do you think these can build worker power and a class struggle of our own?*

DG: So, for the first part, I love that there are much more training opportunities today than when I got involved in labor when I was searching for support while I was working at Borders Book and Music. Method and technique which are what most of the trainings out there deal with are super important. Because there's good books and good trainings on them is one of the reasons that *Unions of Our Own* is about designing and testing a complete union and not about the method and technique of organizing, except some methods and techniques that are so important that I would have been remiss to leave them out, namely organizing committees, one-on-one meetings, and workplace charting.

So yeah, I'm thrilled that folks are getting trained up and gaining confidence to meet with coworkers, identify who highly respected coworkers are, and build toward strikes. For me Jane McAlevey who created Organizing for Power, may she rest in peace and power, her great, great contribution was breaking some of these skill sets out of the union hall and putting them out there more broadly. I'm an alum of the Industrial Workers of the World, and those folks have trained many thousands of workers going back I believe to the late 1990s, super valuable work.

My direct experience in my own jobs, accompanying workers in diverse industries at their workplaces, and through studying many contemporary and historical

campaigns is that method and technique is necessary but not enough, there is no cookie-cutter approach that will work in all eras, in all geographies, in all industries, and for each vision that coworkers have. Again, that doesn't mean to start with a blank slate either, that's its own problem. The approach I recommend is a middle way between blank slate and cookie-cutter recipe: using an intentional framework to help you discuss and make the key decisions and systematically test those decisions out. Plus, as I mentioned, a pathway to working-class wisdom that has come before including but not limited to methods and techniques.

Solidarity Union Network (SUN) where I work and am member does tons of training in method and technique; organizer trainings, research trainings, etc. both in group and one-on-one settings. But we supplement those method and technique trainings with awesome facilitated processes to design your own union model, with trainings on how to formulate new strategies, and with training on union building through experimentation, along with other subjects that go beyond the important but sort of technocratic craft part of union organizing.

To the second part of your question, as I say in the book, we must honor the broader eco-system of worker organizations that struggle alongside unions. You name the worker center form and that's a vital form; it's where in many cases some of the absolute most marginalized workers wage and sometimes win survival fights. When Amazon wanted to dominate Western Queens with a new headquarters and destroy affordability for deeply rooted immigrant and African-American residents across the borough, unions' opposition only went so far as wanting a neutrality deal. It was worker centers and other grassroots base-building groups that said 'no' full stop to allowing Amazon in, and it was

those groups in the end who did succeed in keeping their communities from being wiped out by Bezos.

The other form you mention, non-profit advocacy groups, if they can be accountable and helpful to base-building groups, that's great. I've seen that and benefited from that in union campaigns I've been part of. Nutrition groups, health and safety groups, advocacy orgs around formerly incarcerated people, reproductive justice orgs, international labor rights groups, immigrant advocacy groups. There are also non-profit advocacy organizations that are email harvesting, fundraising, and mobilization machines, and even outright grifts. I'm skeptical of those obviously and caution worker groups about ceding space to those organizations.

All this being said, I say in *Unions of Our Own* that the labor union, while not the only useful form, is a uniquely powerful form. It's uniquely powerful because unions are where workers organize themselves based on their role producing, caring for, creating, servicing, maintaining, and designing what society needs. In other words, it's the form best suited to delivering or withholding the labor on which the world, and corporate profits, turns. I elaborate in an early chapter on what the tangible advantages of that unique power are, and the book while it can be used for other forms effectively, is about building unions.

KVM: *Staughton Lynd—one of your mentors and a guiding light of the labor movement for me and many others—offered that “at moments of social crisis, working-class self-activity would take on new organizational forms, outside the trade union movement.” What is the importance of self-activity and self-organization in the emergence of a new front in the class struggle?*

DG: Staughton was my great friend and a preeminent mentor; to me and to many

other rank and filers. He not only believed deeply in rank-and-file agency, but he was also a dogged opponent of institutional restraints, or any restraints, on that agency. He was deeply concerned with the move toward unions that used heavily bureaucratic models instead of ones led and operated by workers. He was endlessly frustrated by union contracts that gave up the right for workers to vie for control over jobs and industries. His experience in the Youngstown steel layoffs helped fuel an opposition to management prerogatives clauses that never cooled. He was deeply opposed to no-strike clauses as well. His heartbreak about unions and a labor movement that had taken the road away from socialism was matched only by his optimism that workers sitting together in rooms across the country and world could change that. Staughton was a believer that small seeds of solidarity, of direct action, of conversation could sprout big.

The importance of self-activity and self-organization is central to new fronts of class struggle. Staughton's thinking and mine are 100 percent aligned on that. Still, as Alice Lynd another great friend and mentor said to me, and I share this in the book, is that if I had written this one with Staughton as I had with *Solidarity Unionism at Starbucks* and *Labor Law for the Rank and Filer* it would have been a very different book. I agree with her.

Staughton was very big on what might be called generative or emergent strategies. Ones that bubble up, workers sitting in a circle in a room and talking. I am too. But the fires of union building (and the union busting it occasions) have led me to an approach a bit more deliberate or intentional might be a way to put it. So, I'm really passionate about say how do workers structure the conversation they're going to have in that room? What framework will they use to advance the conversation and to experiment? What channels do they have

to rooms that have come before?

Worker self-activity and self-organization is paramount; it's the most powerful and effective way. But it's not easy and we need to make the path less murky. I had an image in mind throughout the time I was writing *Unions of Our Own*. Could I hand this book to someone thinking about forming a union where they work and believe, honestly and truly, that it would help them maximize their chance of victory? Whether in the end the book delivers, that will be for coworkers to decide.

KVM: *In the introduction to Unions of Our Own you argue, "[a]mong the most important lessons, if not the most important: it is workers who can best develop and refine unions until they succeed; it takes a complete union model to win for real; and a complete model has eight fundamental building blocks." Can you provide a brief overview for our readers?*

DG: Yes! Four foundational building blocks and four structure and growth building blocks. I give step by step processes to work through them, plus copious examples, and labor history for each. It all starts with Constituency, who your union is of, by, and for. Plus, secondary constituents you'll need to win; folks or groups that can help you come together and amplify your power when you do. I show how fiery this question has been in labor history and remains today. We start there because we design the rest of the model around the coworker constituency we define. Problem comes next, the stuff that's grinding on us most. I show how to identify them well and also offer up a key related tool, the AEIOU (Agitate, Educate, Inoculate, Organize, Union) organizing meeting.

Solution is an exciting chapter in part because it restores to workers the decisions often kept from them; which type of union to form, I cover the traditional type of union which is more widely known but

also solidarity unionism, a very dynamic form which has been kind of hidden and is often misunderstood. That chapter also assists workers in navigating union affiliation choices. Finally, and critically, it helps you design the benefits of being a member of your union. The foundational building blocks wraps with Strategy, asserting the awesome power that it takes to win, which I spoke to already.

Once you have the foundation you have a good problem which is protecting and growing that foundation. That starts with Mechanism, the agreements we use to codify our gains or other processes we use to hold our gains. I help you have solid discussions about traditional collective bargaining agreements and their alternatives. Mechanism is deeply impactful on how your union will perform at work day-to-day but also on the overall character of your union. I then go to Union Structure, the governance type, decision-making method, and other elements. Here we visit the union which fought fascism and operated large swaths of the Spanish economy without capitalists and then across the ocean to workers at Columbia University, among other examples. I also weigh in to the debate of whether unions will inevitably end up with oligarchic governance.

Next comes Funding—seed funding at the beginning and sustainable funding at scale—critical to win and critical to having a union which is your own. You can fund your union, and you can fund it in a way that keeps it in your hands. Dues are the best and the type of dues system matters, how you talk about dues matters. The last building block is Metrics, and if used ethically and wisely, they help you supercharge your learning about your choices in the prior blocks, do wonders for your focus, and are a very powerful vehicle for sticking with your values.

KVM: *Throughout the book you clearly distin-*

guish between “union organizing” and “union building.” Why are these often conflated in the contemporary labor movement and how does this distinction aid us in furthering the class struggle?

DG: Yup, so union organizing is the beautiful beating heart of union building, but it’s not the whole story and we need the whole story to really win—needs fully met, values honored and vision advanced, in a sustainable union. Union organizing in practice is generally understood something like creating a solidarity structure of coworkers, prepping a plan to win together, and fighting until you accomplish your demands. Awesome.

Union building on the other had is the full mission of creating a sustainable union. A big part of that is getting to make the incredibly key decisions which make up the eight building blocks I outlined.

For example, as I say in the book, union organizing is about organizing your coworkers. Union building asks which coworkers? Let’s say you work at a store in a multinational chain. Is your union going to consist of workers from that one store? All the stores in that city? In that region? Is it everyone in a store or just the occupation you find yourself in? How about the folks who bring products to the store in trucks every day; where do they fit into the model? What about app-based workers who deliver the product to customers? How about workers at other chains selling the same category of products?

There is a chart on this in the book, and I won’t go on and on, but one more example. Union organizing is about getting into a union, forming one. It’s not, how it’s mostly practiced, about what the structure of that union will be. That’s above the pay grade of the organizer we’re told. Other people above us worry about that. In rank-and-file union building, workers work through how they’ll control their own union.

I think union building frankly is something that is wrongly kept away from many workers, folks just aren’t given access to it. In some cases, it’s because union officials think it’s too cumbersome for the rank and file too do it, or even maybe unknowingly, have lost faith that the rank and file can do it. In other cases, choices workers might make might be scary to those officials. In still other cases, the traditional labor movement has made some of the key choices, like what provisions should or shouldn’t go in a collective bargaining agreement, literally in the 1930s and 1940s! The model they chose became the hegemonic, dominant model by 1950. As I show in the book, that model, simplifying here a bit, has gone downhill since.

If there’s no union officials in the picture, it’s still hard to access the full spectrum of unionism because there’s not many training resources there. There’s a ton of resources on union organizing thank goodness, there’s a ton of manifestos on what unions should be or labor should do. There are resources here and there, some really good and cited in my book, on one piece or the other of union-building. But in general, and I’ve asked many workers straight up, for the most part it’s very difficult to connect with this stuff in terms of guidance, tools, resources, trainings. That gave me a lot of validation to go ahead and write the book.

Now I could have argued, hey organizing is really all the other things like the type of dues system you use, whether you do solidarity unionism or traditional unionism, which union you affiliate with, your organizing strategy but also your union’s overall strategy, etc. Then I wouldn’t have had to coin a term, union building. But I just felt frankly it would be too easy to hide the other things if there wasn’t a term associated with them. Because organizing is just used so often to mean organize your workplace, go public, win an agreement.

I could have used an old term, “Organization.” From the famous, if you’re a labor nerd, trilogy, “Education. Organization. Emancipation,” as the IWW put it. Organization meant what I mean by union building. Frankly, I just felt “organization” sounded too inert, too old-timey, and again because it sounds like organizing it might confuse the issue of the big, fundamental decisions that go to the performance and character of your union that are beyond union organizing— that pieces that safeguard organizing, that hold and grow its gains.

I went with union building, and leaving aside this term or that, what’s exciting is that for a while now a community of workers doing that full spectrum of unionism has been growing. *Unions of Our Own* is an invitation to join that community if you haven’t yet and unionsofourown.org has great resources to do so. You can get the book of course, but also access free, ready-to-use tools from the book like the Union Model Canvas. You can request trainings, also without charge, including the companion training to the book which is called Intro to Union Model Design. Through a partnership with SUN you can also get confidential, one-on-one support to talk through problems you might be experiencing at work and options to solve them.

KVM: *As a solution to the myriads of “problems” at work you offer “solutions”—types of unions workers can build, choosing to affiliate with an established union or going independent, and the benefits of solidarity. How do workers make decisions about these three parts as they seek to “solve problems with solidarity”?*

DG: Yup, we do unionism not only to challenge what we’re facing at work but to overcome it. In the union model framework, the solution to our problems is, quite simply, a union; our job in the Solution chapter is to define our union. For example, do you

and your coworkers lean toward member control in unions and a willingness to participate at a higher level that member control entails, or are you ok with less control which requires a lower level of participation? That will influence the union type you choose. In the chapter, I also explain my strong recommendation to workers to do their utmost to find an existing union, whether it’s independent or established, to affiliate with and organize through and I outline the landscape out there to facilitate that process. But also, I affirm clearly that if there’s simply not a vision fit you can access, it’s your right to start something from scratch and that’s an honorable choice too.

For defining the benefits of membership in your union, I share how to use different categories of value like material value, community value, and ideological value to come up with them. I illustrate using diverse examples from the immigrant food delivery workers of New York City to the Black sanitation workers of Memphis.

If there’s something in the chapter that might be controversial— and let me say first, I acknowledge there are many “unionisms” people have come up with. You pick an adjective and you put it in front of unionism, and they do refer to real tendencies, good ones and bad ones. The controversial part perhaps is let’s say you think of choosing union type as a series of decisions: I argue the first big decision to make is traditional unionism versus solidarity unionism. One can parse those down more but that’s the first question of union type, the threshold question if you like. Because that’s decision that will lay out the hard material and structural elements that will shape whichever other flavor choices you make down the line.

Traditional unionism is a representational model; solidarity unionism is predominantly carried out directly by workers. The holy grail of traditional unionism is a

certain type of agreement with the employer, in solidarity unionism the agreements with employers are significantly different, and in some cases, workers even choose to hold their gains without agreements. Solidarity unions use a variety of pressure tools but have a strong preference for direct action. Finally, we all know that it's important to follow the money to understand things. In non-“right to work” states, which is where most union members are, traditional unions are funded by dues which are mandatory because of a contract between the union and the employer. In solidarity unions, dues can be mandatory too but only by virtue of workers self-activity, which doesn't require the boss signing on the dotted line. The solution chapter gets into the implications of all this.

I and the book honor whichever path workers want to take, fully. What I don't accept is taking away the choice from workers or hiding that one exists. Neither though do I hide the ball of what I believe in or the unionism I personally prefer.

In places I offer critique, it's always comradely, based in the empirical record, and to help workers have the context to make decisions that are right for them, not to persuade. As I write, surely many readers of the book will pursue or are in unions that use traditional collective bargaining agreements; still, by unpacking those agreements I hope to facilitate conversations among workers about how to mitigate or avoid parts of those agreements they might not like.

KVM: *One of the challenges facing unions and workers organizations is maintaining gains through building power on the shop floor as well as building the capacities of workers and the class. Legacy labor focuses on maintaining gains through collective bargaining agreements, legislation, and cozy relationships with the political class. How do the mechanisms you provide seek to overcome this divide while*

moving the class struggle forward?

DG: *Unions of Our Own* doesn't offer a particular vision for a labor union or the labor movement aside from this: workers have the right to dream up their own visions and have space to design and test union models that will help those visions flourish, rather than constrict them. The mechanism chapter in the book on holding gains starts with the traditional collective bargaining agreement, as it's the hegemon and has a major impact on the character, vision, and values of traditional unions. If the traditional collective bargaining agreement (CBA) is your way forward, there's still tons to be done in terms of limiting the bad parts. For example, is your no-strike clause so broad that you can't even lawfully strike when your coworker who works next to you is in on strike and picketing but they are in a different union? Will you have cool provisions like the west coast longshore workers do where you can kind of, sorta strike for a bit by invoking the “stop work meeting” provision in their contract? Will you push like the UAW did in their last strike to at least shave down a bit the management prerogatives clause to be able to use strike power against plant closings?

I then go beyond the traditional CBA, including the option to outright invent your own mechanism to hold gains. I nod at other mechanisms, but the ones I cover with some depth besides the traditional CBA is the non-traditional collective bargaining agreement, the cease-fire agreement, and the issue-by-issue mechanism. In a nutshell, the non-traditional CBA which was a giant mechanism but is hidden to most people now, is an “exclusive representation” contract with a time duration but, at a minimum, is different from the traditional variety because it doesn't have what are known as the pro-capital or pro-management clauses.

The cease-fire agreement, which was

also a giant before labor, capital, and the State decided on a different road, wins your biggest picture demands and ensures freedom of association protection to stay organized to meet other needs; it doesn't have a specific time duration. You upgrade once you're well rested up and conditions are favorable to win an upgrade. Finally, the issue-by-issue agreement unlike all of the previous ones has no overall framework that has been accepted by the employer: you hold the gains you win strictly by staying organized and promising to be a credible threat in the event of take backs. It's a really popular option in giant corporations where a framework agreement is a way's away but even smaller shops may prefer it for its flexibility.

KVM: *The call for a 2028 general strike by the UAW has been picked up by left labor over the last year and is even more plausible following the uprisings in Minneapolis. In a forthcoming book chapter "Fifteen Theses on the US Labor Movement," my coauthor Robert Ovetz and I argue that a "general strike must seek to abolish and transcend all hitherto existing political institutions or it is doomed to be coopted, de-escalated, or defeated."* What is your vision of the 2028 general strike? How could it build the capacities of the working class? What would it seek to accomplish?

DG: Kevin, if I knew how to organize a general strike I probably would have done that instead of spending five years writing the book. I'll say my pay grade is, what are the union models that are more compatible with general strikes, rather than highly incompatible, and how do we get more of them. So let me start there. One of the most important concepts in the book is the back-and-forth relationship between union visions and union models.

It's really common in union organizing for folks to realize they're starting to, "think like an organizer." It's awesome. With the

book, for those coworkers so inclined, I'm inspired imagining more folks also starting to, "think like a union builder." Does our union strategy include participating in a general strike as part of our definition of victory? If so, how to be successful? What spaces, popular education, narratives, and cross union, cross working-class conversation channels are needed? Let's start experimenting. Finally, what are the pieces of our mechanism building block, funding building block, and other elements that are likely to hold us back, and how can we change those? So that's my jam. You want a general strike? Form or transform a union so that it is general-strike friendly.

That being said, the eight building blocks and the union model framework with teeny adjustments is also fully usable for designing other types of worker forms like a general strike initiative, a worker center, a coalition, a collective, and so forth. The experimental nature of the framework would be useful for getting to a general strike in that there's a lot of uncertainty in what will work and we can test things out well in advance.

Let me give an example. In the 2006 general strike in the U.S., the Day Without Immigrants, I got to participate. A major channel—channel is a key part of the strategy building block—was Spanish-language radio DJs. Radio today, though still a big channel, is nowhere near as significant as it was in 2006. So, we need other channels and those can be systematically tested well in advance of any strike date. There's a simple, free tool at unionsofourtown.org to help you run labor experiments of all kinds.

I've been fortunate over the last few years to participate in national stoppages in Ecuador and Colombia. A *paro nacional* is not a general strike but it's a cousin to the general strike. There's much to say here, but just one point I'll make. These actions are preceded by extensive assemblies or related

bodies where ample conversation flows, and in the assembly form in particular, decisions are made. They happen in neighborhoods, they happen in unions and union federations, they happen in sector-based organizations (student, farmworker, Afro-Latinx, etc.), and they happen in indigenous base and confederated organizations—the latter being extremely pronounced in Ecuador. The national stoppage is a social process; it's not strictly a mobilization call for a single day.

This is not to say hey, let's just copy Latin America and it's not to brush over the contradictions and complexities in the struggles there. But there's a lot to learn and be inspired by there and many other regions. Workers connecting in assemblies across industries and across unions was vital to the large actions you mentioned in Minnesota and a great example to be inspired by. Our general strike muscle is a bit rusty in the United States although we've had many great ones. They were knee capped once the traditional model became the hegemon here.

I don't know enough yet about the 2028 call to say anything definitively though I'd like to learn more. I'll give you some thoughts for any general strike call that emerges from a union institution or its principal officer, the UAW or whomever and for any year.

To be honest, and again, I just don't know what the UAW approach is yet, but if any union were to just say, hey we have this contract expiration date. If we don't have progress on the contract by that time, if we decide to hold a strike vote, and if members authorize the strike, and finally, if union leadership calls for the strike, we might strike on the general strike day or days until we get a contract. That leaves me cold. I'm not excited to participate in years of work under those circumstances, just to risk the institutions who called for

the general strike not giving members a meaningful up or down vote on whether to actually do it.

Instead, I would propose some minimum requirements for any union to expect the broad working class, again mostly non-union, to consider participating and contributing leadership to a general strike project. I think the union would have to commit well in advance to specific spaces and funding, ample spaces and funding, for rank-and-file members to discuss the prospect of going on general strike, and if interested, explore building one. Really participatory, free-flowing spaces. Small ones, medium ones, big ones.

I think the minimum requirement should be a commitment to holding a meaningful membership vote where members get the chance to decide whether to go out on a general strike. That any decision to accept a contract and the no-strike clause which traditional union contracts have, will be subordinate too and separate from the general strike vote. Now we're in member well-being territory where we want to be, but we're also in working class well-being territory where we need to be too. In other words, I'm not wanting workers' agency and right to decide to withhold their labor as part of a general strike to be trumped by the union institution and the company making a tentative deal, or by some other maneuver

Speaking only for myself, if a union or unions credibly offered up real discussion and building spaces for a general strike and credibly offered members a chance to democratically decide to go on a general strike without getting side-swiped by the next contract resolution; I would be excited about that, fully throw my hat in the ring, and would invite the workers I move with day to day to consider doing the same.

Either way, I'm going to put the lion's share of my energy and care toward the aspiration of more working people meeting

their needs as they define them through sustainable, victorious, and liberatory unions. For whomever that resonates, my email and Bluesky along with the free resources I've mentioned are at unionsofourown.org.

Appreciation Kevin for your great work; I know you've earned the respect, and even affection, of many outstanding shop floor fighters. And thank you for your thoughtful questions, this was a great conversation.

NOTES

1. Daniel Gross, *Unions of Our Own: Eight Building Blocks to Change Work...and the World* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2026).
2. Robert Ovetz and Kevin Van Meter, "Fifteen Theses on the U.S. Labor Movement," in Gabriel Kuhn, *Workers' Power from Below: Syndicalism in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Pluto Books, 2026).

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“Being Loud Helps”

Russia’s Political Prisoners and the People Who Speak for Them

An Interview with Simon Pirani and Aleksandra Zapolskaia

SUZI WEISSMAN

RUSSIA TODAY HOLDS MORE POLITICAL prisoners than at any time since the post-Stalin thaw of the 1950s. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian state has systematically prosecuted antiwar critics on charges ranging from “discrediting the military” to “justifying terrorism”—a legal arsenal that echoes Stalinist methods while deploying them against a new generation of dissenters. Seven political prisoners died in Russian custody in just the first four months of 2026. Beyond Russia’s own citizens, an estimated sixteen thousand or more Ukrainian civilians are held in Russian captivity—many in unregistered facilities,

incommunicado, without access to lawyers or family contact.

This interview, conducted by Suzi Weissman for Jacobin Radio on May 19, 2026, brings together two people working at the center of this crisis. Simon Pirani is the editor of *Voices Against Putin’s War: Protesters’ Defiant Speeches in Russia’s Courts* (Resistance Books), a collection of final statements delivered by antiwar defendants before sentencing — a tradition of dissident speech stretching back to the nineteenth century. The book became the basis for the documentary film “Try Me for Treason,” available free at trymefortreason.org. Aleksandra (Sasha) Zapolskaia is coordinator and editor of *Posle*, a bilingual Russian-language left journal in exile, and leads Solidarité Free Azat, the international campaign for imprisoned mathematician Azat Miftakhov.

Two of the courtroom speeches featured in the film — by Igor Paskar and Andrei Trofimov — appear below in the form they take in the film, read aloud by volunteer British actors. They stand as the moral and political center of everything discussed in this conversation.

SIMON PIRANI is the author and editor of *Voices Against Putin’s War: Protesters’ Defiant Speeches in Russia’s Courts* (Resistance Books). He is an honorary professor at the University of Durham and a longtime Russia-Ukraine specialist. He writes at the *Substack People and Nature*.

ALEKSANDRA (SASHA) ZAPOLSKAIA is a sociologist and Russian antiwar activist living in exile in France. She is coordinator and editor of *Posle*, a bilingual left journal, a member of Solidarité Free Azat, and a member of Radical Democracy.

SUZI WEISSMAN is a professor of politics at Saint Mary’s College of California and host of *Beneath the Surface* on KPFK 90.7 FM Los Angeles and of Jacobin Radio, and the author of *Victor Serge: A Political Biography*.

Suzi Weissman: *Simon, the final word — poslednee slovo — is one of the few constitutional rights still available to defendants in*

Russian courts: a chance to speak on the record before sentencing. You spent years collecting these speeches, translating them, turning them into a book, and now a film. How did this project come together?

Simon Pirani: The story starts pretty soon after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In those first weeks I was in London—shocked by the invasion, not completely surprised, but shocked. There were big demonstrations in Russia that very rapidly became impossible; dissent was driven off the streets by mass arrests, many people left the country, and the forms of protest became limited. What we then saw was a spate of young people throwing firebombs at military recruitment centers when they were closed—not with the aim of hurting anybody, but as a protest against the war.

The very first person to do this, Kirill Butulin, is featured in the book. He nearly got away, but was brought to trial. We don't have a speech from him because this was right at the start, before dissident Russian media had organized reporters to get into courtrooms and record these statements. The first speech I really knew about was by Igor Paskar.

He was a young man who had not been a political activist—he'd been on a few demonstrations like a lot of young people. One day he made a public protest against the Z banners, the militarist symbols, and nobody took any notice. So he decided he had to try harder. He went and threw a firebomb at a closed office—the local office of the FSB, Russia's principal security agency and the main successor to the Soviet Union's KGB—and stood there and waited to be arrested. I'm sitting in my comfortable home in London reading about this, and I think: is this crazy? And the answer is no. This man had thought very, very hard about what he wanted to do. He knew what was going to happen. He was taken into the

FSB office he had just thrown the firebomb at and was badly tortured. When he came to trial, he spoke about conscience: "my conscience would not allow me to stay quiet." He asked what will we tell our children and grandchildren many years from now about these troubled times?

From the film "Try Me for Treason": Igor Paskar's Final Statement

Igor Paskar, then 28, was arrested in June 2022. He painted his face the colors of the Ukrainian flag and threw an improvised Molotov cocktail at the porch of the Federal Security Service office in Krasnodar, southern Russia. He was charged with vandalism and terrorism. In May 2023 he was tried in the Southern District Military Court. The following is his final statement in court.

Almost a year has gone by since I carried out this action. During that year, I pictured this moment time and again, the moment when I would be given the opportunity to make my final statement. I agonized over the words I would say and the motives that drove me. During the last sitting, Your Honor, you asked me whether I regretted my actions. Well, I understood that the extent of my professed regret would influence the severity of the sentence. But if I renounce my beliefs, I would be acting against my conscience. On the contrary, during the time I've been in prison, I've seen firsthand the injustices perpetrated against the people who we call our brothers—both prisoners of war who have served in the Ukrainian armed forces and ordinary Ukrainian citizens. The war, or whatever term we use to label it, came to their homes, destroying their lives as they knew them. No matter what slogans and geopolitical interests we use to varnish this, in my eyes it cannot be justified. Do I regret what happened? Yes. Perhaps I'd wanted my life to turn out differently. But I acted according to my conscience. And my conscience remains clear.

Rather than reflecting on who is right and who is guilty, I'd like to pose this question: What did each of us do to

stop this nightmare? What, ten or fifteen years from now, will we tell our children and grandchildren about these troubled times? Unfortunately, God has not granted me the joy of fatherhood. The people who are closest to me have gone and I am left alone. It was easy for me to do what I did, even though I was well aware of the consequences. There was no one to agonize about my fate, no one to worry about me or to cheer me on.

But what I really did not expect was the huge number of letters and messages of support that I've received. People have written to me from every corner of Russia and not only Russia. Many were grateful for my position, so completely at odds with the notion of unanimous national support for what is being perpetrated. So many warm words. So much sympathy. This is from one letter: "There is very little left of everyday life. It turns out that we can't live everyday lives anymore."

I'm listening to the memoirs of prisoners from the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Right now I'm on the breathtaking biography of the actress Tamara Pietkiewicz, who spent seven years in a prison camp. She was arrested in 1943 and lived until 2017. When they came for her, she was only 22, just a girl half the age I am now. I have not read Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* and I have not got round to Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* either. But listening to Pietkiewicz, it made me realize that this is exactly what we must listen to, what we must read at school. As a country, we're obsessed with the past, but we hardly ever think about the present or future. The Americans have their American dream, something to strive for. We have nothing but a fixation on that which happened long ago—that which cannot return. But time and time again, we try to bring back what has passed. And these attempts are absolutely pointless. It's as though the whole country is stuck in the mud.

Reading these and other words sent to me in prison really touched me and pushed me to write this final statement to the court.

Igor was sentenced to eight and a half years imprisonment.

What then followed was more and more of these statements. With friends who were translating this material for various reasons, we had a group working with Solidarity Zone—a small, flexible, grassroots organization set up to support these cases rapidly, providing lawyers and getting parcels to pretrial detention centers. My friend who writes the Russian Reader blog had translated some of the speeches, and we got together and thought: this is not a new literary genre, but one that has existed in Russia since the nineteenth century, and unfortunately it's reappearing and taking shape again. We got support from the European Network for Solidarity with Ukraine for printing and design—a beautiful design by a Russian designer in exile in Germany. When we organized an event in London to launch the book, we asked actor friends to read parts of the speeches aloud. Why have people like me talking when you can hear the words of people who have thought so hard and suffered so much? That worked. From there we found Tony Aldous, a videographer active in the Palestine solidarity movement here, who said: I'll make a film out of this. And so we made it.

Suzi Weissman: *Were these people newly activated by the war, or had they been politically active before? And is there any pattern to who gets picked up, who gets put in jail, who gets tortured?*

Simon Pirani: There's a whole range. Anyone who wants to research this in depth should look at the website *Posledneye Slovo* ("Last Word"), set up by Russians outside Russia, which has collected all the speeches it could find starting from the 1950s—including those of Crimean Tatar activists jailed before the full invasion, when Crimea was already under occupation and there was a real racist and Islamophobic clampdown

on the Crimean Tatar organizations.

In terms of antiwar activists from 2022 onward: at one end of the scale there's Sergei Dudchenko, a biker in Stavropol who was in a small Telegram group that the FSB had under surveillance. The security services broke in by arresting members and essentially torturing passwords out of them, and ended up rounding up the whole group. What Dudchenko said in court was incredible. He told the court that shortly after the invasion he had made a solo protest, driving his motorbike with a Ukrainian flag streaming behind him. He said: "When I sped along with the banner of the oppressed streaming behind me, past an astonished crowd of militarists, I felt the human in me come into bloom." He said Russia's political prisoners had become outcasts in their own land. Born in 1987, he referred back to the seven protesters who went to Red Square in 1968 to protest the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia—nearly twenty years before he was born—and called them brave people. He said: "There will always be people like us, who will keep emerging to pick up the fallen banner of good and reason."

At the other end of the scale there's Alexei Gorinov, a municipal councilor who turned up to a council meeting in May 2022, where they were planning a festival for children, and said: "I'm sorry, I don't feel like organizing a festival for children while we're bombing children in Ukraine." He's now serving ten years.

And then there's Alexander Popov—an experienced politician, a socialist, a veteran dissident who had opposed the war in Chechnya in the 1990s. His friends were pleading with him to leave the country, which he had the resources to do. He explained in a letter to his wife, which he asked her to publish, why he chose to stay: "I belong to the Soviet generation of dissident political prisoners. Although its

numbers were small, it became a significant historical phenomenon. Most of them have gone. They've passed away." He was, in fact, a dissident among dissidents in the sense that he was a socialist, whereas the dissidents were predominantly liberals. He said, "I want the young people to know that the last guy standing stood with them."

So the full spectrum is there. One more thing, from a Western perspective: at the end of 2023, we were seeing huge demonstrations in London against Israeli aggression in Gaza, alongside government attempts to classify Palestine Action as a terrorist organization. We thought, with friends who have paid close attention to Ukraine, that these struggles are not separate. Whether against a settler-colonial state supported by Western imperial powers or against Russian imperial aggression against Ukraine, the protesters are being dismissed and denounced as terrorist sympathizers by governments in ways that have a great deal in common. I would take this book to any of my friends in the pro-Palestinian movement and say: look, these people are saying, thinking, and struggling for ultimately the same things.

Suzi Weissman: *The producer of the film, Maya Wilcox, drew that same parallel explicitly—occupation is a crime, whether in Palestine or Ukraine. And Dudchenko's words remind me of something Victor Serge said—because you've drawn a line in your introduction, Simon, tracing this history of opposition from the 1870s through the Sinyavsky–Daniel trial of 1965, to the Red Square protesters of 1968 and since. Serge, writing in the 1930s from internal deportation, lamenting that they were dying, that Stalin was killing them, said: "The prophecy of a repressed revolutionary who perished in Stalin's Gulag will come to pass... we shall serve as manure to fertilize the earth in which, after us, new human harvests of the revolution will spring up." That spirit seems to live on. Let's turn to Sasha. Can you address*

some of what Simon has described, and in particular the case of Azat Miftakhov?

Aleksandra (Sasha) Zapolskaia: Let me start with something slightly abstract, to explain why it matters to talk about political prisoners in an authoritarian country that many people have never visited and probably never will.

What my homeland has been doing for a long time is showing the world a very possible future. It's important to understand how these machines of state violence work—which mechanisms are being used—so that people in countries that are somewhat freer from this kind of state violence can be very alert to what might be coming. Because it changes very slowly. And then it happens very fast.

After four years of invasion, we say that prisons have gotten worse, that censorship has gotten worse, that there is no independent media and no one can say anything against the regime. But if you look at discussions among the same people ten years ago, they were saying exactly the same things—that prisons were awful, that people were being tortured. You can remember the notorious “Network” case of 2018, when anarchists were accused of plotting a coup, sentenced to sixteen, eighteen, twenty years, their confessions extracted under electric shock. In 2018 we were saying things had never been worse. And yet here we are in 2026 saying again that things have never been this bad. What have we lost in between? Perhaps there were islands of freedom in 2018 that we didn't quite cherish. Today, in 2026, we should pay attention to those remaining islands of possibility—so that we don't become someone who in 2030 will say: things were so nice in 2026, we were able to do so many things.

The final word is one such island—a tribune where people can declare their beliefs on the record. Not that we should be grateful to the regime for permitting it. But

since it exists, we should make as much as possible of it. Another possibility is writing letters to political prisoners. We have digital tools that allow letters to be sent to any prisoner. Yes, there is censorship, but you can still give them hope—describe nature, a forest—that matters to a prisoner, it is a little bit of support. In Belarus, political prisoners don't receive letters at all. So until the moment that becomes true in Russia, we must use every avenue.

In the case of Azat Miftakhov, the ability to send a lawyer to him is crucial—it allows us to physically protect him. And we have reached a situation where political prisoners face not only the suffering of lost freedom but a very concrete threat of being murdered. At least seven political prisoners died in Russian custody in 2026. Four cases happened in April alone. May was pretty dark as well. People are now dying. We should use every opportunity to gather attention, because we are still in a situation where attention helps—where publicity helps, where international declarations still work, even if Russia calls those organizations terrorists or foreign agents. So in our quest to protect and defend people, people who say these precious words, who do these acts of radical protest show radical resilience, that they are still human beings. We can still use these tools. That is what the case of Azat shows us.

Suzi Weissman: *Let me ask about letter writing as an act of solidarity. The Russian prison mail system is actually quite efficient, and letter writing has become an organized activity around the world. Freedom Zone, organized by Kseniia Kagarlitskaia, holds events from California to the Caucasus where people gather to write to prisoners. You can have a letter translated into Russian through the prison mail system for a minimal fee, and the prisoner can write back—something unthinkable in earlier periods, and still not allowed in Belarus. Simon, which organizations should*

people know about?

Simon Pirani: First, a group we haven't spoken about enough: the very large number of Ukrainian civilian prisoners in the Russian prison system. We have one represented in the book—**Bohdan Ziza** from Crimea, who threw blue and yellow paint at a municipal administration building, the Town Hall, and is now serving fifteen years. The Crimean Tatar activists have very strong organizations even under Russian occupation, and their speeches have been documented. But Ukrainian prisoners tried in the Donetsk and Luhansk territories—tinpot dictatorships incorporated into the Russian Federation—are in a far worse legal wasteland: there are no journalists or human rights monitors able to sit in those courtrooms. We simply don't know where many of those people are. Fortunately for Ziza, his family has been able to establish contact with him.

There are two absolutely heroic Ukrainian human rights organizations. First, the Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group—based in Kharkiv, close to where much of this is happening, essentially the continuation of the local Memorial branch. The other is ZMINA, based in Kyiv. Both track human rights violations in occupied territory, where the vast majority of cases occur.

For non-Russian speakers, the best sources are: *Memorial*, which maintains a register of political prisoners both formally documented and in a gray area. (The security services comb through social media chats constantly; if you are in any country with a dictatorship, do not discuss politics on social media—they find a group, and if they need additional evidence to secure a conviction, they fabricate it.) OVD-Info (ovdinfo.org)—they need donations; their overview reports on how the system of repression is changing are excellent. And Mediazona—a brilliant team of reporters,

many still inside Russia, with much of their material available in English. Everything I know about Sergei Dudchenko came from their reporting.

Suzi Weissman: *Thank you. Sasha, let's turn to Azat Miftakhov. Simon has written that Russia holds more political prisoners now than at any time since the post-Stalin thaw, or certainly since the Brezhnev period. Beyond Russia's own citizens, there are at least 90,000 Ukrainians officially listed as missing, at least 16,000 of them civilians, and hundreds of thousands held at unknown locations in what we should call a twenty-first-century Gulag. But Azat's case is now receiving wider attention, partly because of reporting in The Insider on his brutal transfer and treatment. He's an anarchist and a mathematician whose sentence has been systematically extended—the Stalinist tactic of doubling and tripling sentences. Tell us about him.*

Aleksandra (Sasha) Zapolskaia: OVD-Info is indeed a very reliable source, and I want to say something more about what it represents. It started as a hotline you called when you were arrested at a demonstration and taken to a police precinct. You might be held for only three hours, maybe nine hours—not sent to a prison camp immediately—but you needed one call to make sure a lawyer would come and that someone would bring you food and water. It was built to solve a very practical, immediate problem, not to make a great analysis of the repressions, not to make some sort of abstract, analytical database. It was made to, to solve what people actually needed. I've found that Western countries don't have anything like it—no single number to call if someone is taken to a police station. It's high time to think about creating something similar.

Suzi Weissman: *We're starting to see that now in the United States. When ICE detains people, there are networks where witnesses*

can text a number and report it—and also to call out neighbors to protect people where they live and where they work. A tool of solidarity developed under one form of repression is appropriated and adapted elsewhere, adding to the arsenal of organizing against repression. It's always been that way.

Aleksandra (Sasha) Zapolskaia: It's now or never, in terms of self-organization.

Now, Azat. He is one of many political prisoners—estimates range from 1,000 to 11,000, depending on how you count, and those figures cover only Russian citizens. There are also the Ukrainian civilians Simon described: the lowest figure I've seen is 16,000; the highest I've heard is 40,000. These are people who never carried arms. They were captured in occupied territories, often randomly—perceived as community leaders, or picked out because of a tattoo, or because of a chat message. Many are held incommunicado, without access to lawyers or family, in unregistered buildings on occupied territory. When people discuss ceasefire and territorial concessions as if what's at stake is only square kilometers, they need to understand that giving up territory means giving up these people—people being held and tortured, with no mechanism for exchange, since Ukraine holds no Russian civilians as an equivalent.

The system of torture now operating in Russian prisons was developed and tested earlier—and it was specifically anarchists who were used as a test group to build the system of terror in prisons. You can trace it through the Network case of 2018 and then through what happened to Azat, whose case began in 2019.

Azat was subjected to severe torture at a Moscow precinct, during which he was pressured to confess to building a bomb. And despite extreme torture, he refused to say anything against himself or other people. No confession came—there was no evidence connecting him to any bomb

whatsoever. So the authorities fabricated a different case: they accused him of breaking a window in the middle of the night at a small local office of Putin's United Russia party office on the outskirts of Moscow. The window cost 50,000 rubles. The only evidence they had was a witness who said he recognized Azat because he had "very expressive eyebrows." On that basis, Azat was sentenced to seven years.

When he finished serving that sentence and stepped out of the colony, he was arrested again two minutes later. This is the second technique that was first developed and tested on anarchists and is now used more broadly: when your first sentence ends, you are immediately given a second. What could Azat possibly have done while in prison—the very institution designed to prevent any action? They accused him of watching the news on a colony television, seeing a report about a terrorist act, and saying it was a good thing. That's how he received four additional years for "justifying terrorism."

Suzi Weissman: *"Justifying terrorism" has become an all-purpose accusation. We should also note that people are often placed in so-called solitary confinement with a non-political cellmate—a businessman or an ordinary criminal—whose role is to draw them into conversation that can then be used against them. They tried this with Boris Kagarlitsky, but he didn't take the bait.*

Aleksandra (Sasha) Zapolskaia: Exactly. Azat's second conviction rested entirely on the testimony of a cellmate who received his own freedom in exchange for that testimony.

Because Azat was now classified as a doubly dangerous person, he was transferred to a penal colony near the Arctic settlement where Alexei Navalny was assassinated, murdered with a poison. There are two colonies in that area: Navalny was in

Polar Wolf; Azat was placed in Polar Owl, where those serving life sentences are held, and he is treated accordingly. The day he arrived, the extreme torture began. I won't enumerate everything that was done to him, but electricity and a hammer were involved. He managed to get word out several days later, and that's how *The Insider* obtained and published the full account. They were also able to identify the torturers from Azat's descriptions.

What happened next shows that being loud helps. Our organization in France—Solidarité Free Azat—issued a communiqué signed by trade unions in Brazil, Spain, and Africa. Brazil and Africa matter because Putin pays close attention to what is said from those countries. After the press release circulated, Azat was called to the prison officials' office. They very kindly and very politely asked him to stop talking and to ask his friends to stop talking to the media and international organizations, and promised to treat him "respectfully," to not torture him anymore in return. That shows being loud helps.

Being Silent Doesn't Help. Being Loud Helps.

Suzi Weissman: *You work with Posle media, and there is also Rabkor and many other exile media channels. How much of this reaches people inside Russia? How do you see using these channels as an effective means to build support? There is organizing going on in Europe and elsewhere with Russian leftists in exile. How do you see the connections between the exile left and people inside?*

Aleksandra (Sasha) Zapolskaia: It's genuinely difficult to measure, because readers in Russia access our content through VPNs. We also create "mirrors"—separate website versions for individual articles, so Russian readers can access them without a VPN—but this makes readership tracking

even harder. The last figure I heard is that 60 million Russians use VPN every day. The source is the original creator of Telegram, who may have exaggerated. But even at half that, 30 million people is not bad.

More important than content, though, is connection. The primary way of keeping bridges between the exile left and comrades inside Russia is not through articles but through doing things together—organizing jointly, getting on Zoom, dividing tasks. You do what you can from France; I do what I can from Moscow; we check in on a Zoom call and see how it's going. That's what we try to do in the Radical Democracy network.

Having content creators with large audiences inside Russia also matters. Evgeny Stupin, who holds a seat in the Moscow Duma, (parliament), continues from exile in Germany to speak directly to his voters. He's very popular—nearly a million people watch him from inside Russia. That helps. But it's not the main thing.

Suzi Weissman: *Given how war-weary both populations are—in Ukraine and in Russia—and the news that Putin is digging in, how long do you think this can go on? And what can people around the world do? How do you see the longevity of the war and this regime?*

Simon Pirani: I don't know, and I don't think anybody does. In April, Russia lost more territory than it gained on the front for the first time in years. Ukrainian drone technology has advanced to the point where they are hitting oil refineries and airfields far inside Russia, much further than they could a year or two ago. But we can't assume that the Russian war effort is about to collapse—that's ultimately a political question. Putin appears to have concluded that the Trump presidency creates more room for maneuver, and may be waiting to see what happens in Washington. I think much of what is said in Western media about peace

talks is nonsense. Ukrainian and Russian people alike are sick of the war. But I see no serious wish on the Kremlin's part.

What I'd add is this: we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking the Russian regime is secure or strong. It is not. The wave of right-wing populism and authoritarianism we see globally is itself a reaction to a massive series of struggles—a series of regimes being overthrown, the Arab Spring, even Maidan. However politically confused, those movements frightened states and capital. This is what has triggered much of the extreme reaction. History works this way. Even when things appear very dark, they can change very, very quickly. But if you're asking when that might happen, I have not got a clue.

Suzi Weissman: *Sasha, you work in the broad Russian exile community and in European left circles. What are the discussions there and how do people see or relate to what's happening inside Russia?*

Aleksandra (Sasha) Zapolskaia: It's been a long time since I've joked that if you went anywhere in Russia carrying a placard with only one word written on it—"when?" with a question mark—everyone would immediately understand what you were asking. We've been asking that question for a very long time. Which also means the answer might be: a very long time.

I would separate two questions: when the war will end, and when the regime will end. Unless the regime changes drastically, there is no real ending of the war—only a pause. The regime is running short of resources, money, people. But it is a large country. There is still oil, there is still gas, and there are right-wing governments in other countries who are happy to buy it. So yes, the war can be put on pause. That could happen soon. But unless the regime changes dramatically, the war will come again—perhaps worse. Of that I am quite

certain.

Suzi Weissman: *Do you see political prisoners being freed if the war ends? What happens to the people already in penal colonies, in places like the Arctic where Azat is being held in a freezing, torturous prison?*

Aleksandra (Sasha) Zapolskaia: Freeing political prisoners would be the most meaningful indicator that something has actually changed—more meaningful than a ceasefire. A ceasefire is temporary. If political prisoners start walking free, that tells you something structural has shifted.

From the film "Try Me for Treason": Andrei Trofimov's Final Statement

Andrei Trofimov, 58, was arrested in May 2022 in Konakovo, northwest of Moscow, charged with attempting to join a volunteer force fighting on Ukraine's side, supporting extremism, and discrediting the armed forces. In October 2023 he was tried at a closed hearing; the evidence consisted entirely of copies of his social media posts. He managed to communicate the following statement to opposition media based outside Russia.

Andre Trofimov: Honorable court. I certainly did write on the internet everything referred to in the indictment, and I was right to do all that I did. I admit no guilt and do not repent. I publicly approve, heartily endorse and support the explosions on the Crimea Bridge in the autumn of 2022 and the attacks by Ukrainian drones on the Kremlin and other targets in Moscow and the Moscow region in May 2023. Because Ukraine is a victim of aggression. And for myself, I demand the maximum possible prison sentence, because I despise you. I will not share the same space with you or live in the same country as you. If I cannot go to Ukraine, then shut me up in prison forever. Victory will come all the same to those who are now arms in hand, destroying Putin's scumbags. Glory to Ukraine. Putin is a dickhead.

I was living quietly at the dacha with my

cat and was a bother to no one. My life changed drastically on the 24th of February 2022. The reason for both the first criminal case and the current criminal case against me was Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I'll explain why I regarded this event in this way. After all, it is for what I have said that I am imprisoned—I took no action in either the first or the second case.

This has been my way of being involved in events, because it was physically impossible for me to leave the country, and I had no desire to stay silent in this situation. I mean, it is my life. Why have I done this? I must respond to your remarks yesterday, to the effect that my statements, including in court, could harm my own interests. Your honor, I have no interest in a shorter sentence. What is the purpose of what I am doing? Writ large, it is a matter of self-preservation. It is just that I understand the instincts of self-preservation, not as the preservation of the body per se of its physical health, because I am not the not my body alone. I want to preserve my conscience in this difficult situation. My ability to tell black from white and lies from truth. And quite importantly, my ability to say out loud what I believe to be true. I have not just acted this way since 2022—I have always tried to live this way. It's just that my desire to remain like this in such situations that is, being able to tell the truth, to keep my conscience clear, is what causes such actions. In what has occurred since 24th of February, we see concrete evidence of a violation of Criminal Code article 353. That is the planning, preparation, unleashing of a war of aggression.

What have I done in this situation? Publicly, by staging solo pickets, I have demonstrated the Russian state's insanity. Look, the prosecution is asking for fifteen years in total—the sentence given for murder, although even for murder, sentences are often shorter. And yet my deeds harmed no one, nor caused any damage. I believe this is an example of the state's insanity. The state happily displays this quality, using me as an example.

What have I done in response? I've shown fortitude. This is vital because I hope that Ukrainians can see what I do.

Look at this. They arrested him. He was convicted and given a dozen years of maximum security. Did they do a good job of convincing him of the error of his ways? That is, have I stopped doing what I was doing? Has my voice become less audible? No, it has not.

How should my actions correctly be characterized? I am involved in the war on the Ukrainian side. It is just that this involvement takes place without weapons because war is such an extraordinarily multidimensional event. In addition to the fighting in the steppes of Donbas, in the Black Sea and in the skies above Ukraine, the war is fiercely fought in the information space by state entities, by Russian bodies and by the Ukrainian side.

I am an information warrior. In what sense? On the 9th of October 2022, I wrote and sent an email to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Oleksandrovych Zelensky asking him to grant me Ukrainian citizenship. I am entitled to it because of my ancestry—my grandparents hailed from Ukraine. Ukrainian law says that I have the right to Ukrainian citizenship. On 14th of April this year, the Council on Political Prisoners of Memorial International designated me a political prisoner. As part of my work, I have used the criminal cases against me as publicity opportunities. The information war is a real thing. I am involved in it and I'm trying to prove that now. Informationally, I support Ukraine and the armed forces of Ukraine. In fact, I have defected to the enemy side in an armed conflict involving the Russian Federation. This is the essence of the crime defined in article 275 of the Russian Federal Criminal Code. High treason. I asked the court to send my criminal case back to the prosecutor, as the factual circumstances indicate that there are grounds for charging me with a more serious crime.

Try me for treason. I betrayed your de-ranked state.

Suzi Weissman: *Simon, do you have any final words on the book *Voices Against Putin's War*? On the film "Try Me For Treason"?*

Simon Pirani: Trymefortreason.org is where people should go—it will take them to YouTube. It was put together on a zero budget by volunteers. We hope people will use it. Watch the film, get out there, show it to your friends, organize something. If you have an antiwar group, if you have a book club, if you meet with people to discuss things—get together, watch it, and talk about it. Make these cases, which sit on the other side of a geopolitical divide, as well-known as support for people victimized by ICE or Palestine Action activists targeted for opposing Israeli genocide and aggression. These are causes that ultimately run alongside each other, against similar or even the same enemies.

Suzi Weissman: *I can't thank you both enough. Simon Pirani and Sasha Zapolskaia. Political prisoners are not only a Russian story—they are a global one. And for those of us here in the United States, watching the Trump administration announce plans to charge more people who belong to Antifa—which isn't really an organization—the lesson from what Sasha*

told us is worth remembering: the regimes that went after anarchists first, to test their instruments of repression, are regimes that are weak and frightened. Perhaps we can end on that slightly hopeful note.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Film: "Try Me for Treason" (50 minutes, free)—trymefortreason.org

Book: Simon Pirani, ed., *Voices Against Putin's War: Protesters' Defiant Speeches in Russia's Courts*. Resistance Books.

Posle (Russian/English bilingual left journal)—posle.media

OVD-Info (political prisoner tracking and support)—ovdinfo.org

Mediazona (independent Russian journalism)—en.zona.media

Posledneye Slovo ("Last Word"—archive of Russian courtroom speeches)—poslednee-slovo.com

Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group—khpg.org

ZMINA (Ukrainian human rights center)—zmina.info

Freedom Zone (letter-writing network and events organized by Kseniia Kagarlitskaia) <https://freeboris.info/politicalprisoners>

A HISTORY OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIALISTS

The International Socialists (IS), an American revolutionary socialist organization of the 1960s and 70s, was the most successful of the many left groups involved in labor organizing in that era. The IS helped to organize and found Teamsters for a Democratic Union and was active in the auto, steel, and telephone workers unions. And the IS created Labor Notes. Its members were also involved in supporting the Black liberation struggles, the anti-colonial movements, and in broader international solidarity. The IS advocated independent political action to the left of the Democrats, helping to create the Peace and Freedom Party. Now Andrew Stone Higgins has written a history of this group—*From the Free Speech Movement to the Factory Floor: A Collective History of the International Socialists*—by assembling short memoirs of many of its members. With the kind permission of the publisher, Haymarket Books, two of those memoirs are included here. These are followed by a review of Higgins' book by Alan Wald.

The Berkeley Independent Socialist Club

A Remembrance

THOMAS HARRISON

BERKELEY IN THE 1960s, BOTH THE university and the community, was an exciting combination of bohemian culture and leftist politics. When I enrolled in the fall of 1966, an escapee from the ultra-bland suburbs of San Jose, I instantly fell in love with the place—its bookstores, coffee houses, the free rock concerts and “happenings” in the parks. As a frequent patron of the city’s three art-house cinemas—for which Pauline Kael wrote the program

notes—I acquired an extensive education in film history. Like almost everyone else, it seemed, I read Berkeley’s alternative weekly paper, *The Barb*, and listened to KPFA, the local listener-supported radio station founded by pacifists right after World War II. KPFA featured jazz and classical music, poetry, political commentary (Hal Draper, along with his wife, Anne Draper, had a monthly program throughout the ’60s), and thorough on-the-ground reporting of protests and demonstrations on and off campus.

The university’s stellar faculty—including such outstanding figures as Carl Schorske, Larry Levine, and Reggie Zelnik in history, and Sheldon Wolin, Mike Rogin, Hanna Pitkin, and John Schaar in political science, all of them allies of the student movement—attracted high-caliber graduate students from all over the country and

THOMAS HARRISON is a retired high school history teacher and a member of the New Politics editorial board and the Tempest Collective. For many years he was codirector, with Joanne Landy, of the Campaign for Peace and Democracy. He has contributed essays to books and left periodicals, including *New Politics*, *The Nation*, *Against the Current*, and others. He joined the ISC in 1966 while a college freshman at UC Berkeley.

the world. UC was tuition-free to state residents, although there were “incidental fees” of \$120 per semester, a bit less than \$1,000 in today’s dollars. Since I got no financial assistance from my parents, Berkeley was still hard to afford even with a scholarship. I had to take out sizeable National Defense loans and hold 15-hours-a-week Work-Study jobs, plus full-time work in the summers—including 12-hour shifts at two local canneries, Hunts in Hayward and Del Monte in Emeryville.

Sproul Plaza, a broad square in front of the administration building was like the Agora in ancient Athens. At midday there was a long row of folding tables belonging to political (mostly left-wing) groups, where members distributed leaflets, sold literature, buttons, and bumper stickers, and recruited. Every weekday, the ISC table was there. Our literature always included a series of pamphlets introducing the ideas of independent Third Camp socialism, including Hal Draper’s seminal *Two Souls of Socialism*, in which Draper put forward the concept of “socialism from below,” as distinct from and opposed to putative versions of socialism imposed “from above.” We also sold “clipping books,” reprinting selected articles from the Workers Party and Independent Socialist League press in the ’40s and ’50s. The ISC table regularly carried issues of *International Socialism*, the journal of the British International Socialist group led by Tony Cliff, and *New Politics*, published in New York by Julius and Phyllis Jacobson, who like Draper were veterans of the WP and ISL. Comrades, sympathizers, and passers-by would hang around the table for hours talking politics. After it was taken down in the afternoon, people would move to The Terrace, behind Sproul Plaza, and continue discussions over coffee for hours more.

In September 1966, right after I arrived on campus, I was attending a rally

at Sproul Plaza, when a young woman came up to me with a piece of cardboard that was filled with political buttons. One of the buttons said, “I Wouldn’t Vote for Brown even if He Ran against Reagan,” referring to the upcoming California gubernatorial contest between Reagan and the Democratic incumbent, Edmund (Pat) Brown. She asked me if I’d like to buy this button, and I said, “No, but I’d like to buy the button with a picture of Karl Marx,” which she had. We then proceeded to have a conversation that lasted several hours on the steps of Sproul Plaza. We covered many issues, among them Stalinism and communism—she argued that there was nothing progressive about any of the so-called socialist states, including Cuba. Regarding the Democratic Party she argued that the struggle for socialism required as a first step “independent political action” by the left, and a break with the Democrats. I was already close to these positions, but after our conversation I began to understand what consistently democratic, revolutionary politics looked like, and I was persuaded to join the ISC. This was Joanne Landy, the ISC’s star recruiter. We became the closest of friends and comrades for fifty years, until her untimely death in 2017.

As my interest in the Karl Marx button indicates, I was already a socialist when I arrived at Berkeley. Like most sixties leftists, I was radicalized by the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. But I was also prepared, in a way, by my family background. My father was a career army officer, and when I became an adolescent we had bitter fights about politics, especially the war. My mother, on the other hand, was a staunch labor liberal. Her brother, my Uncle Arnold, voted for Henry Wallace in 1948. My brothers and I were taught never to cross a picket line, and whenever my mother would drive by one, she would honk and wave. She was always a New Deal

Democrat (Franklin Roosevelt was her idol), and I am sure that had she lived she would have been an enthusiastic supporter of Bernie Sanders.

Because my father was in the army, we moved around a lot. But both my parents were from Seattle, and we lived there off and on when I was growing up. Seattle had a fabulous history of militant labor activity like the Industrial Workers of the World and the 1919 General Strike, of which I was very much aware even at an early age. I used to do odd jobs for a neighbor, an elderly widow named Betty, who told me how she and her husband would join the mass pickets, thousands of them, in support of the 1934 waterfront strike.

We moved to San Jose in my senior year of high school. I used to spend time with my best friend (who later joined the ISC) at a bookstore downtown that had lots of Marxist and left-wing books and was owned by two friendly older women who must have been current or former members of the Communist Party. And my high school library happened to have Isaac Deutscher's anthology of Trotsky's writings, which I checked out. As a result, I started to think of myself as a Trotskyist. It was only after joining the ISC that I read Max Shachtman on the "Russian Question" and was convinced that Trotsky had been wrong to characterize the USSR under Stalin as a "degenerated workers' state." I thus ceased to be an "orthodox Trotskyist," as we called the members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and other groups with a relationship to the Fourth International.

As a newcomer to Berkeley, I was extremely eager to get involved in a mass protest, and at the end of November 1966 I finally got my chance. UC Chancellor Roger Heyns had permitted the Navy to set up an ROTC recruiting table in the basement of the Student Union, by the entrance to the bookstore—a privilege denied

to student and nonstudent political groups. A protest sit-in gathered around the Navy table, and I rushed to join it. Cops were called and waded in, arresting six people, including Mario Savio, but not me. Upstairs at an impromptu rally, Draper and Joel Geier, a leading ISCer, spoke, and a vote was taken in favor of a strike. About twelve thousand students joined the strike, holding out against the hostility of the faculty (in contrast with the FSM) and threats from the UC Regents. Although the strike was only recessed because of exams, it failed to revive after winter break. Still, coming two years after the Free Speech Movement in the fall of 1964, and with its demands for "student power" rather than simply free speech, the 1966 strike was an indication that campus radicalism was alive and on the rise. I was excited and encouraged.

The ISC played an active role in the strike, working not only to build but also further radicalize it. We criticized strategies that emphasized "good faith dialogue," arguing instead that the interests of protesting students and liberal administrators were irreconcilably opposed. In line with this analysis, we advocated the creation of a radical mass organization on campus. Such an organization never did come into being. A possible candidate, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), which was rapidly growing on other college campuses, never amounted to much at Berkeley. So, while massive protests continued to erupt until the end of the decade, the two largest being the 1969 strike in favor of open admissions for students of color and the formation of a Third World college, and the struggle around People's Park, both of which saw the deployment of National Guard troops, none of them left an organizational legacy.

The ISC produced high-quality leaflets. We frequently distributed thousands of them: on campus, at meetings, and at marches and demonstrations. Leaflets

aimed at a campus audience were not only about the movement at UC Berkeley, but also U.S. politics and world events. In the fall of '66, for example, I helped pass out a leaflet on the Cultural Revolution in China, which was being celebrated by many on the left as an antiauthoritarian uprising, part of the worldwide youth revolt. The ISC leaflet, on the contrary, analyzed the Cultural Revolution as a mass purge instigated by Mao Zedong to destroy his rivals in the party bureaucracy and tighten totalitarian control over Chinese society, and highlighted violent confrontations between Red Guards and workers. A few years later, we put out a leaflet exposing Mark Zborowski, a guest lecturer in the Anthropology Department. Before becoming an academic, Zborowski had been an agent in Stalin's 1930s secret police; he infiltrated the circle around Leon Trotsky's son, Leon Sedov, in Paris, where he arranged for Sedov to be murdered, and was involved in the assassination of Trotsky himself in Mexico in 1944.

While it was not a "vanguard party" in the Leninist sense, the ISC did play the role of a vanguard among the campus left. We held classes, many conducted by Hal Draper, and held big meetings addressing everything from the nature of the Castro regime in Cuba to free speech in the U.S., how to fight fascism, the Paris Commune, and the origins of anarchism. We commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1967 with a well-attended meeting at the YMCA. What we called our "periphery," those who were educated by our meetings and leaflets and attracted to our politics, numbered several hundred, far more than our membership. ISC speakers were prominent at rallies and demonstrations, forcefully articulate, and persuasive. Among the best were Draper, of course, Joanne Landy, Joel Geier, Mike Parker, Charlie Capper, and Lois Weiner. The organization was

thoroughly democratic, and internal debate was always on a very high level. Our membership meetings, for me at least, were hardly ever boring.

Beyond the campus, a rising tide of protest in 1967 inspired hope that the country was headed toward a crisis that might provide a breakthrough for the radical left. April saw mass marches against the war—four hundred thousand in New York, one hundred thousand in San Francisco. The San Francisco mobilization was so huge that the front of the march reached its destination—Kezar Stadium in Golden Gate Park—while the rear was still waiting to start on Market Street downtown, four to five miles away. That summer, Black ghettos in several major cities exploded in armed uprisings. The Black Power movement, launched the previous year, had produced the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland. The Panthers advocated a radical alternative to the tactics and program of the civil rights movement, calling for armed self-defense of the Black community against police aggression and for Black liberation rather than simply desegregation and legal equality. They were moving in an anticapitalist direction and were open to alliances with white radicals. Even the conservative bureaucracy of the labor movement was being confronted by rank-and-file revolts in some important unions.

The ISC argued that to effectively challenge the establishment, these struggles needed a political party. In 1966, groups called Communities for New Politics (CNPs) sprang up throughout California.¹ Many grew out of antiwar primary challenges to Democratic incumbents, but because they were organizationally independent of the Democratic Party, ISCers worked within local CNPs to promote a clean break with the Democrats. As a first step, we proposed a third ticket of Martin Luther King and Benjamin Spock to run against President

Lyndon Johnson in the 1968 election.

The formation of New Politics groups in other parts of the country and the strong performance of peace candidates in the 1966 elections led to the convening of the National Conference for New Politics (NCNP) in 1967. In July, I squeezed into a Volkswagen Beetle with some other comrades for a cross-country trip to Chicago and New York. In New York, we joined a meeting to form a national federation of ISCs—groups had been springing up in several places outside the Bay Area under the banner of Independent Socialist Clubs of America (ISCA). But before that was the NCNP at the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago. Our goal there was to get the conference to initiate the process of building a radical third party, beginning with an aggressive national campaign in favor of a third ticket in 1968. The conference was chaotic and proved a big disappointment, passing only a weak motion allowing local CNPs to run presidential candidates if they chose. Shortly afterward, we were compelled to abandon the idea of pushing Martin Luther King Jr. to run for president. His opposition to the ghetto uprisings and the Black Power movement had made his leadership untenable with most of the left.

In the fall of 1967, the antiwar movement reached a new, more radical stage. Stop the Draft Week was a series of militant confrontations aimed at closing the Oakland Induction Center. At its height, ten thousand protesters descended on the center to block the buses carrying inductees. We expected violence, and many of us were prepared for combat, or at least prepared to be brutalized by the cops. I wore a pith helmet, though I can't imagine where I found one. The police responded with clubs, tear gas, and, for the first time, mace. We put up barricades of park benches, garbage cans, and cars with deflated tires. Downtown Oakland was totally disrupted, and the

governor, Ronald Reagan, threatened to deploy the National Guard. Stop the Draft Week did not halt the induction process, but it did raise the social costs of the war.

Meanwhile, after the debacle of the Chicago New Politics Conference, the ISC decided to take the initiative by launching a vehicle for a third party in California. There were others involved, but the campaign was initiated and led by ISCers. To meet the legal requirement for ballot access, a new party had to reregister at least 1 percent of the vote in the last election, which meant 66,059 people. The reregistration drive was a tremendous success. An incredible 105,000 people were registered out of the Democratic Party and into the new Peace and Freedom Party (PFP). An alliance was formed with the Black Panthers, and to make the PFP broad enough to attract left liberals alienated by the Johnson administration, it had a minimal radical program of immediate withdrawal from Vietnam and support for Black liberation, rather than explicitly socialist politics.

To the extent that the PFP acquired a mass base, the ISC perspective was to relinquish organizational responsibility and become a left wing within it. But soon after the party was launched, Eugene McCarthy and Bobby Kennedy's candidacies reabsorbed the bulk of the antiwar movement. Once Hubert Humphrey won the Democratic nomination, as expected it seemed possible that PFP could attract masses of disgruntled Kennedy and McCarthy supporters. Unfortunately, in most states, PFP ran Eldridge Cleaver, a leader of the Panthers, for president. Cleaver, along with his chosen running mate Jerry Rubin, the Yippee prankster, ran a farcical, narcissistic campaign full of misguided mockery ("Erection Day") and "revolutionary" rhetoric. Consequently, whatever opportunity there was for mass independent political action in 1968 was lost.

After the '68 election, antiwar sentiment increased exponentially; millions marched in the October 1969 Moratorium. But at the same time, much of the New Left and the radical wing of the antiwar movement was gravitating increasingly toward extremely antidemocratic regimes and movements—notably Maoist China and the Vietnamese National Liberation Front (NLF). For the ISC, these had nothing in common with real socialism, which is all about popular rule, but were rather cases of Stalinist totalitarianism. Marxists have traditionally supported national liberation movements, not only based on the right of national self-determination, but also because they unleashed domestic class struggle. We foresaw, however, that an NLF victory would not only drive out U.S. forces but also impose Communist Party rule on South Vietnam and crush all existing and potential opposition.

Antiwar rallies were now filled with NLF and Chinese flags and chants of “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh.” Some of us were concerned that the ISC was accommodating itself to this trend. While never wavering on the issue of immediate withdrawal, it had always opposed both the NLF and the U.S., along with Washington’s puppet regime in Saigon, and supported a third force in Vietnam. This third force was a real contender for power until the Johnson administration massively escalated U.S. intervention. In 1963 and again in 1966, the South Vietnamese government was challenged by a Buddhist peace movement that organized mass actions calling for democracy and neutralism, and demanding U.S. withdrawal. The peace movement was at that time equally opposed to the NLF. A manifesto issued in 1965 declared, “The Vietnamese people do not wish this nation to become one of the Sino-Soviet satellites or a colony of Western imperialism.” In support of the movement, the ISC put out a pamphlet in 1966, *The Fight for*

Independence in Vietnam, with essays on the Buddhist revolt by Draper and the NLF by Kim Moody.

But in 1968, the ISC adopted a new position of “military support,” though still not “political support,” for the NLF. Military support meant, in a practical sense, urging all Vietnamese who were fighting to expel U.S. imperialism to join the ranks of the Viet Cong. Hal Draper produced a lengthy document, *The ABC of National Liberation Movements*, justifying the change. Draper argued that the Viet Cong’s assault on South Vietnam’s cities that winter, the Tet Offensive, showed that the NLF had overwhelming popular support and that it had become the only alternative to U.S. imperialism and the military dictatorship in Saigon.

Despite the organization’s continuing formal stance of political opposition to the NLF, this part of its policy was now rarely if ever mentioned in the leaflets that were handed out at antiwar events. I was part of an informal group that coalesced around Joanne Landy, Mike Shute, and Charlie Capper, and included Lois Weiner, Nelson Lichtenstein, Cheri Stevenson, and Bruce and Cynthia Novack. The ISC had always defined its politics as “Third Camp Socialism,” based on an understanding of the simultaneous antagonism and symbiosis between two reactionary social systems, capitalism and bureaucratic collectivism, both deadly enemies of workers’ revolution and workers’ democracy. Our little group, the Third Camp Tendency (TCT), argued that, with the new position on the NLF, the ISC’s commitment to the Third Camp was becoming pro forma. In response, we were labeled “Stalinophobes” and compared to Max Shachtman, whose increasing support for U.S. foreign policy and establishment liberalism in the 1950s and ’60s allegedly stemmed from his obsession with Stalinism. We replied that Shachtman and his followers went to the right not because

they were “phobic” about Stalinism, but because they had lost confidence in the possibility of Third Camp struggle from below and believed that only the U.S. state could counter advances by Communism. Likewise, we said, the ISC’s position on Vietnam denied the continuing *possibility* of independent popular struggle against both sides, even if such an opposition was harder to discern after Tet.

In November 1971, TCT distributed an internal discussion document written by Joanne Landy, “The NLF and the Third Camp,” which argued against the military support position. Citing demonstrations in Vietnam by Buddhists, students, veterans, and trade unionists against President Nguyen Van Thieu, Joanne argued, contrary to Draper, that a Third Camp still existed.²

It was in 1969 that the national ISC changed its name to the International Socialists and began to remodel itself on what it considered Leninist lines—a centralized revolutionary organization rather than a federation of clubs, aspiring to a working-class rather than a primarily student base. “Discipline” was introduced, meaning that after a position was debated and adopted by a vote, members were forbidden to publicly organize against it. Comrades were urged to pull up stakes, move to the Midwest, and get jobs in auto factories, telephone, trucking, steel, and the Post Office. Our criticism of all this was that the IS was not yet developed enough to reinvent itself as a quasi-vanguard party. Because it was still mainly a youth group, it lacked a substantial, experienced, and politically sophisticated cadre. By trying to force the process of building such a tendency, we predicted, the IS would abort it and eventually disintegrate. We didn’t object to “industrialization,” but insisted on the importance of work in nonindustrial sectors such as teaching and argued that we could still make substantial gains on college campuses.

We needed more time and development before forming a revolutionary pre-party that would be realistic.

Since the Third Camp Tendency insisted that fighting for unilateral U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam should not entail supporting the NLF, and because we refused to accept the organization’s restrictions on the expression of minority opinions, we went ahead and distributed a leaflet with our position at an antiwar demonstration in 1971, knowing this was a violation of discipline. So, in January 1972, the TCT was expelled from the IS. The previous year, I had moved to Seattle, where I was active in the local IS and also passed out an antiwar leaflet calling for opposition to the NLF as well as U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. The Seattle IS did not try to expel me, but I resigned in solidarity with my Berkeley comrades. So ended my formal association with the International Socialists. Despite the expulsion of the Third Camp Tendency, there was very little rancor, and I remained friendly, both personally and politically, with many ISers, including those who supported our ouster, and remain so to this day.

Following the expulsion, the TCT reconstituted itself as a small, informal group called Socialists for Independent Politics (SIP). Within a few years, several of us moved, for different reasons, to New York City, to attend grad school at Columbia. There, I became active in, and eventually a codirector of the Campaign for Peace and Democracy East and West (CPDEW), founded by Joanne Landy and Gail Daneker in 1982. Joanne and I had remained revolutionary Third Camp socialists, and those politics clearly inspired the work of the campaign. CPD (the name was shortened after the end of the Cold War) promoted a new, progressive, and nonmilitaristic foreign policy aimed at dismantling the U.S. empire and supporting movements for democracy and social justice throughout

the world. Organizing conferences and rallies, protest demonstrations and visits to embassies and consulates, and sign-on letters in the left press and *The New York Times*, we built support for movements and dissidents in the Soviet Bloc; Greece; the Middle East and greater Arab world; China and Tibet; and South Africa. We built opposition to U.S. invasions of Haiti, Panama, Grenada, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as Russian aggression in Syria, Georgia, and Ukraine.

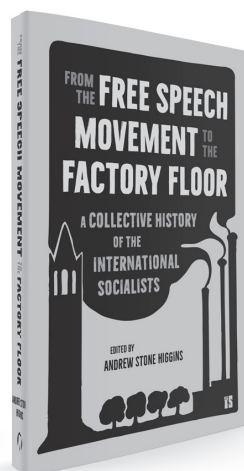
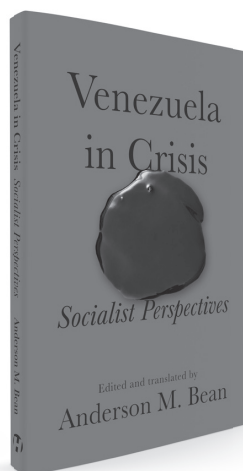
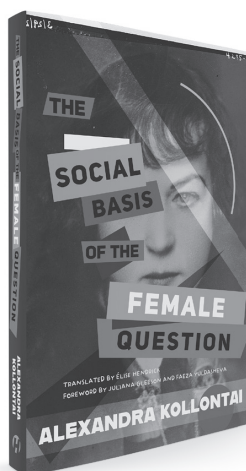
The Campaign was inspired initially by Polish Solidarity and the European Nuclear Disarmament movement (END). END was a real embodiment of the Third Camp ideal, with its commitment to forging links with independent peace activists in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in a common struggle across the Cold War divide. In addition to the Campaign's links with END and Solidarity, CPD had friendly relations with unofficial Soviet peace groups, Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, the then-radical Green Party in West Germany, and the

great historian and antinuclear activist E. P. Thompson, who coined the term “détente from below.” After the 1989 revolutions and the fall of Communism in Europe, we focused on opposing “shock therapy” economic policies, which were designed to impose a savage form of neoliberal capitalism on the former Soviet Bloc.

I joined the editorial board of *New Politics* in 1986 and wrote frequently for the journal. A major preoccupation of mine was the breakup of Yugoslavia and the war in Bosnia, about which I spoke often for the Campaign and contributed a considerable amount of writing to *New Politics* and other publications. My emphasis, and that of the Campaign, was on lifting the international arms embargo on Bosnia to enable it to defend itself against vicious Serbian aggression.

To conclude, I consider myself highly fortunate to have been a member of the Berkeley Independent Socialist Club. The politics and values I acquired in the ISC have guided me ever since I joined in 1966.

NEW BOOKS FOR CHANGING THE WORLD



Breaking into Brown

ANNE MACKIE

This is the story of the rise of a rank-and-file movement called UPSurge at United Parcel Service (UPS) during the mid- to late 1970s. It addresses the role of women as UPS workers in the early days of the Teamster reform movement, explains UPS working conditions, personal stories of struggle, and the “red-baiting” campaign against socialists. Converging in this story are rank-and-file activists, corrupt Teamsters Union officers and their goons, and revolutionary socialists working shoulder to shoulder with shop floor organizers. UPS workers fought against the “Big Brown Machine” in the 1970s and have been at the center of the Teamster reform movement since. This historical legacy is shared from my perspective as one of the first women UPS drivers hired nationally in the early 1970s and from my position as the editor of UPSurge, a national rank-and-file newspaper for UPS workers published from 1975 to 1979. (Note: I refer to the union officials as the IBT—International Brotherhood of Teamsters—not to be confused with the rank-and-file Teamsters Union members.)

THURSDAY NIGHTS WERE check-cashing nights at the Lamplighter Bar on East Seventy-First Street, a block from Cleveland’s United Parcel Service metro hub.

ANNE MACKIE, a founding member of the IS, was active in the 1960s movements for civil rights, women’s liberation, and an end to the Vietnam War. One of the first women United Parcel Service drivers in the country, she was the editor of the rank-and-file employee newspaper, UPSurge, and a founding member of Teamsters for a Democratic Union.

Every UPS facility had its nearby watering holes where workers gathered after their shifts to let off steam. Drivers showed up one by one as their ten-, eleven-, or twelve-hour days ended. Overtime was mandatory. The eight-hour day meant nothing at UPS. While sharing beers and camaraderie, we’d talk about how to get the job done without being a “runner,” without skipping lunch breaks, and without drawing too much heat from the “stupidvisors”—our nickname for the guys in ties who had given up their browns to join management. We were a tight-knit group.

On one of those Thursday nights in July 1975, we hung on the edge of our barstools watching the breaking TV news: Jimmy Hoffa had disappeared in Detroit. An ominous mood fell over the bar. Despite Hoffa’s thuggery, prison incarceration, and mob connections, many saw him as a hero of organized labor, having served as president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) from 1957 to 1971. Hoffa’s disappearance was huge and spawned an array of conspiracy theories, books, and movies as America became fascinated with the mystery. For Teamsters Union rank-and-file activists, one thing was no mystery: Anyone who dared challenge the increasingly corrupt IBT leadership might come in harm’s way. To be a fighter in the union at that time was to accept the threat of violence. Many of us were willing to take that chance.

In August 1975, just weeks after Hoffa’s disappearance, a rank-and-file group of

Teamsters met in Chicago to launch Teamsters for a Decent Contract (TDC). I was there as a UPS driver, along with members of the Alliance of Concerned Teamsters (Local 136, Indianapolis); Concerned Rank and File Teamsters (Local 249, Pittsburgh); Teamsters for Democracy (Local 695, Madison); and others from Memphis, Little Rock, New York, and Rochester.

TDC's immediate goal in 1975 was to get one hundred thousand signatures on a petition to reject the upcoming 1976 Master Freight Agreement if the contract proposal did not include job protections, safety improvements, and decent wage increases. The majority of the Chicago meeting attendees were freight workers, and for them these demands made sense; but UPS workers had a uniquely different and intensely oppressive work environment. Like our fellow freight workers, contract negotiations and union reforms were important; but unlike freight, our fight was dead centered on one company. UPS was a work environment unlike the rest of the freight industry. UPS drivers were often disparaged by freight drivers in the industry for being "runners" and "Under Paid Slaves." It was clear that organizing, focused specifically on UPS workers, was essential. In September, the first edition of the *UPSurge* newspaper was published to help lead the fight.

Today, it's hard to imagine life before the internet, which provides instant communications and organizing tools. Historically, political movements had used "the underground press" to organize, and during the 1970s rank-and-file Teamsters Union papers included the *Seattle Semi*; *The Grapevine* (Los Angeles); *From the Horse's Mouth* (Pittsburgh); and *Fifth Wheel* (Bay Area). Following the Chicago TDC meeting in August 1975, two newspapers were added to the list from Cleveland: *Teamster Power* (later to become TDU's *Convoy-Dispatch*)

and *UPSurge*.

A Personal Turn to Labor Organization

My path toward *UPSurge* began with the Vietnam War and the massive struggle to end it. As a student at the University of Washington in Seattle, I joined Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and was present at the organization's 1969 national convention in Chicago, which turned into a chaotic, sectarian battle between the Maoist group, Progressive Labor Party, and the Revolutionary Youth Movement. It was during those crazy convention debates of dead-end ideologies—either blindly following China or promoting violent domestic "Weather Underground" bombings—that I met members of a "third alternative" organization that seemed amazingly sane with a world vision. This group later formed the International Socialists (IS), of which I became a founding member.

When thousands of protesters shut down Seattle's Interstate 5 on May 5, 1970, to protest the killings of four students at Kent State University, I joined in. Hundreds of thousands of people across the country took similar action. This experience shaped my thinking and drove me deeper into political activism. As a student activist I had organized in support of the civil rights movement, the United Farm Workers, and the Black liberation movement. By 1970, I had joined the feminist movement for an abortion rights referendum in Washington state that passed by popular vote in November 1970, making Washington the first state to adopt abortion rights. I had marched in downtown Seattle with coat hangers around my neck carrying a sign that read: "Never Again."

My activism continued after graduation when I moved to Portland, Oregon, and landed a teaching job, where I was active in the American Federation of Teachers

(AFT). Soon after, however, when a local school levy failed, I was laid off and found a job at UPS. Momentum in 1972 for the Equal Rights Amendment, with congressional support and just three states short of ratification, had impacted hiring policies: Doors were opening for women into many male-dominated industries. I got a UPS driving job in Portland, and a year later moved to Cleveland and was rehired. As a member of the International Socialists (IS), I was part of an organizing drive in specific cities, strategic unions, and industries. As socialists we aspired far beyond union contract fights. We envisioned a long-term movement that could link up with other industries and be part of a larger workers' movement to fight capitalism.

Three of us from the IS—myself, Celia (Dunlap) Petty, and Christina Bergmark—got jobs in the Cleveland UPS hub. With the help of a few male comrades, Doug Passey and Dan Petty, we began publishing the *UPSurge* newspaper in 1975. As additional IS women were hired at UPS hubs in Detroit, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Los Angeles, we established ourselves as rank-and-file union fighters and encouraged the other women working at UPS to get involved. Many of these women played important leadership roles in the early days of the Teamster reform movement.

A Revolving Door

UPS's hiring policy for women was a "revolving door." Women were hired, but many did not pass their probation period. UPS's tactic was to get women to quit by piling on extra workloads, sending us out in shoddy trucks, and adding to the sexist harassment by fellow male workers who resented that women were taking jobs away from men. On a particularly cold and snowy Cleveland morning, I was sent on the road in a 1948 package delivery van with no functioning heat. The truck was sparkling

clean on the outside when I drove it to the local hospital emergency department complaining of possible frostbite. The next day I was issued a truck with a heater. These daily skirmishes grew into legal battles against discrimination that worked in my favor, helping to solidify respect from male coworkers. They saw that women wouldn't buckle under management's boot. They watched women declare, "Don't mess with us."

Wives Joined The Fight

In the tightly regimented, overwhelmingly male workplace that was UPS in the 1970s, wives often played a key role. A group of Louisville, Kentucky, Teamster Local 89 wives picketed the hub in support of their husbands' fight against UPS's ridiculous appearance standards. If a driver's hair was one-eighth of an inch too long, he was given a warning letter. Mustaches could be no longer than the corner of the mouth. Sideburns could not go below the ear lobe. The back of the hair could not touch the collar. One morning a TV news crew showed up at the Louisville wives' picket line to film; the report later aired on CBS's Walter Cronkite news show. As one of the wives reported, "When the cameras started rolling, UPS had hemorrhage fits. Of course, we were very brazen, and we knew they couldn't do a thing to us. So, we had ourselves a ball."

Bringing wives and families into the *UPSurge* movement fostered unity at home and at work. Phyllis Davis, a Cleveland feeder driver's wife, helped with administrative duties in the *UPSurge* office, and like the wives in other cities, Davis joined in at meetings and on the picket lines. *UPSurge* published her comments: "When my husband got involved in *UPSurge* I was kind of nervous and scared about what was going on down there at the office. We had heard from supervisors that it was a socialist group and that they were out to ruin the country.

Now that I've been at the office every day helping, I think it's a good group, and I'm going to stay down there and fight because I think they're helping every UPS worker." Davis handled billing, answered phones, typed, and mailed out UPSurge T-shirts. She learned how to run our new headliner machine.

"I was one of the wives down at the picket line," Davis wrote. "I was down there fighting for a good contract just like the rest of them." The UPSurge fan mail flowed in. There were poems, cartoons, letters, and tirades from UPS workers venting their pent-up rage. One poem printed in the March 1976 edition spoke to many through the newspaper:

"The Man from UPS"

Who is 30 years young but looks old enough to retire?

Who is clothed in obsolete Eisenhower attire?

Who freezes his butt, garbed in glorious brown?

As he delivers customers' packages all over town.

Who works beyond his cut-off time each and every day?

Who has splits on his truck which are out of his way?

Who makes an effort to get his work done?
By calling for cover and seldom gets one.

Who works hard and when he gets home
Has his pick of seats at the table, for he eats all alone.

Who gets his meals that are served cut and dried

With choices of reheated, rebaked or refried?

Who sees his children maybe once during the week?

The rest of the time they're in bed fast asleep.
Who lays down just to rest his eyes,
The next thing he knows it's time to rise.

Who writes grievances to get action once in a while?

Who gets their grievance tossed in a wastepa-

per file?

Who tries to get changes only for the better?
And receives his thanks in a Warning Letter.

Who is too tired to go out with his wife?

Who has little or no social life?

Whose company forces him to work 10-hours a day?

No wonder the man is living this way!

Who needs a wife understanding and kind?

Who has a wife who is losing her mind?

Who works for these people, the Sons-of-Pups?

Yes, he's my husband, the Man from UPS.

Signed, J.M.N.—a wife who has been down ever since
UPS. Buffalo, New York

Shifting Into High Gear

With no inventions like the internet, Facebook, or Twitter, we used mimeograph machines, a printing press, snail mail, land-line phone calls, and face-to-face meetings. *UPSurge's* first edition, September 1975, published four thousand copies. Papers were snuck into the back of UPS tractor trailer rigs leaving Cleveland. Within days we heard back from drivers in Columbus and Cincinnati wanting to sign up. We printed six thousand copies the next month. By now we were receiving paid subscriptions from all over the Midwest. Within a few months we went from being a rag-tag newspaper in a few Midwest cities to having a press run of fifteen thousand and a national following. It snowballed.

A few times we shipped newspaper bundles across UPS's receiving counter, but these were mysteriously "lost." I filed a claim and, when the \$118.18 UPS reimbursement check arrived, printed a copy in *UPSurge*. Members in IS helped distribute the paper while selling their *Workers' Power* newspapers at UPS hubs, helping our network grow.

Kentucky Signs Up

After *UPSurge* copies made it south across

the Ohio River, a check for \$650 arrived in our office with the attached note: “Everyone at the Louisville HUB is signed up for a subscription.” Vince Meredith, Local 89 chief shop steward, had sent the check on behalf of the 130 full-time employees in Louisville. Today, there are twenty-five thousand workers at the Louisville UPS Worldport with working conditions not unlike 1975.

Upon receiving Vince Meredith’s check, I hightailed it down from Cleveland to meet him and his group of shop stewards. Pitchers of whiskey sours were shared into the wee hours. He wanted to know the “who, what, and why” about UPSurge. I explained that our funding came from subscriptions and the sales of T-shirts, buttons, and bumper stickers. His group later added UPSurge license plate brackets to our merchandise.

I explained my socialist beliefs, my anti-war activism, and women’s liberation stance. He was unshaken by my “big reveal.” I learned that being up front about my socialist politics was essential to maintain credibility with him and others down the road. Before we’d sipped the last drink, Meredith indicated his approval of UPSurge. Moving forward, his leadership would be key in the contract battles ahead and for the upcoming reform movement in the Teamsters. For me, meeting him was like theory coming to life. His deep commitment to justice and workers’ rights, coupled with amazing organizing skills, were the embodiment of working-class leadership that I had only read about.

Meredith wrote for *UPSurge*: “The only way you’re going to have support is to show the men you’re going to fight for them and do what’s right.” He shared key strategies for building solidarity at work through organizing self-managed funds: a sick fund that was collected every time someone got sick, and an employee’s fund that was used

to pay employees if they were unjustly fired or to pay attorney fees if needed. Meredith explained how full-timers and part-timers should work in unity: “If we don’t all get together and fight this thing, then the company’s going to split us up and shove down our throat what they want to. There’s no doubt about it. Part-timers and full-timers must stick together. If we could all get together in the 13-State Contract Agreement, we can make this company do anything we want. We’d give this company hell! We have to start somewhere, and I’m not too old to see it happen.” By 1979, his dream of a national UPS contract was realized.

As our friendship and comradery grew, Meredith was frequently confronted about the question of socialists behind UPSurge: “They’re not *behind* UPSurge, they are *in* UPSurge, just like you and me.” His message of unity never wavered. At this time the Louisville UPS hub had only white drivers. It was a city of extremes, with Ku Klux Klan demonstrations against court-ordered school desegregation. At one point the National Guard was activated, school buses were damaged, one was burned. Within the UPSurge organization, racism was actively opposed; Louisville’s leader Meredith was outspoken about not allowing divisive tactics of racism, sexism, or antisocialist red-baiting. As the big Midwestern cities converged to form the UPSurge organization, there was strong leadership and involvement by Black workers—both fulltime and part-time. After years of cultivating a network of shop stewards throughout the lower Midwest and working toward his long-held vision to win one national UPS contract, Meredith was intolerant of anything that would interfere with that fight. That goal was coming into focus for him under the banner of UPSurge.

Membership Growth Explodes

During the 1976 contract fights, UPSurge

meeting attendance exploded: 250 UPS workers showed up in Chicago; 100 in Cincinnati; 100 in St. Louis; 175 in Kansas City; 225 in Minneapolis; 450 in Detroit; and many other cities throughout the UPS 13-states' Midwest region. For the Eastern UPS, 10-state contract region meetings were held in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, New York, Baltimore, and Boston. West Coast meetings were held in Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, Portland, and Seattle. I traveled to many of these meetings while keeping my full-time driver job and catching a red-eye flight home so I could punch in at 8:00 a.m. on Mondays. Meredith hit the road with his cadre of shop stewards to lead several meetings, as well. Often our meetings were coupled with TDC meetings as the two organizations were on the same path to build the growing union reform movement.

Turning Point

UPSurge officially formed as a national organization, not just a newspaper, when 650 UPSers rallied in Indianapolis, January 31, 1976. The meeting was a turning point for UPS workers. We had planned for 200, but turnout was successful beyond our imagination. Two chartered buses came down from Detroit. Caravans of cars traveled from around the Midwest. People flew in from both coasts. Earlier that afternoon a TDC meeting held at the same location was broken up by a squad of IBT goons. Strong-arm tactics worked then, but later that night when 650 UPSers showed up there were no goons willing to take on the huge crowd. We were beginning to "Use the Union's Power," our slogan. The enthusiasm, solidarity, and militancy of the Indianapolis meeting lit a fire. We called ourselves "UP-Surge Country USA." Meredith spoke to the crowd: "If a strike is necessary to do this, then we're ready to strike. The question is not can we afford to strike? The question

is, can we afford *not* to strike?"

UPSurge had hit a nerve and uncovered UPS's common management practices across the country. Workers who dared to speak up or fight back were harassed, as were Blacks and women. Our newspaper reported the story of a Black Cleveland driver who had been fired for "stealing" \$30. That's \$30 he forgot to turn in at day's end but later found at home in his shirt pocket and turned in the next day. He was singled out and fired, although white drivers had frequently made similar mistakes and had not been fired.

An example of ongoing harassment was shared in a published letter from a worker's seven-year fight in Pinehurst, Massachusetts: "The company has screwed me as a pre-loader, package car driver, feeder driver, and car washer. In the past year I had just about given up hope. After reading *UPSurge* I feel like a rejuvenated warrior. Your (our) paper is just what we need to force these people to come back to the realistic world of working conditions. Just in case you didn't notice, this letter is written on the back of a grievance form. I may as well use it as stationary. When I fill out the front of it, my BA (union business agent) gets it and I think he uses it for scratch paper. The last thing this company wants to see in print is the real truth and that is exactly what you people are printing." As the letters and donations poured in, it became clear that UPS was a hellhole everywhere.

1976 Contract Issues

The 1976 union contracts were still regionally based, which gave the company the upper hand. UPSurge's contract demands in all regions were: equal pay for part-time workers; protect full-time jobs; no new part-timers to be hired; jobs should be phased back into full-time; and at the very least, part-time employees should be first in line to bid on fulltime openings over

outside new hires. The loss of full-time employment was the biggest issue in 1976. Many UPS hubs still had full-time jobs for the pre-load shifts. The corrupt IBT leadership sat by and allowed full-time jobs to disappear while raking in more union dues from newly hired part-timers.

Another key contract issue was the grievance procedure. UPSurge proposed a rehaul: innocent until proven guilty, no disciplinary action until the entire grievance process had been exhausted, and institute the right to strike over grievances; all overtime to be voluntary and paid at double time; and no supervisors doing union work—a common contract violation. Additional demands addressed health, welfare, and maternity leave; unsafe working conditions and shoddy equipment; an increase in paid sick days; and additional holidays. We wanted no restrictions on use of CB radios or personal radios in company trucks. Finally, our demand for the elimination of UPS's archaic appearance standards about hair, mustache, and sideburn lengths hit the nail on the head to win rank-and-file support.

Finally, UPSurge called for one national master UPS contract. Regional contracts allowed the company to do workarounds of striking facilities. An example from Pittsburgh in 1973 had taught the lesson of how regional contracts weakened UPS workers' power. When Pittsburgh workers went on strike, supervisors drove truckloads of packages to Cleveland (covered by a different contract) for sorting and loading. Cleveland workers refused to handle the "scab" packages and set up a picket line at the gates before the trucks arrived from Pittsburgh. At first the Cleveland IBT Local 407 officials—all nonelected appointees—tried to force us back to work, but we shamed them into supporting our refusal to handle Pittsburgh's scab packages. We faced off in a show of unity with Pittsburgh workers

and against UPS's strike-breaking tactics.

Militaristic Management

It was well-known that UPS hired former law enforcement and FBI agents to oversee their loss prevention program, which went far beyond the prevention of lost packages. They spied on drivers by following them on their routes, took pictures of trucks parked together for breaks, quibbled over petty appearance standards, and wrote workers up for small infractions, like unpolished shoes. They followed loaders around doing time studies. One day I had three supervisors on a "ride along"—each had their own clipboard and stopwatch. They kept bumping into each other in the small cab of my truck while I tried to drive and deliver. Pure harassment!

One summer weekend I attended a socialist conference in rural Ohio where a UPS supervisor from Dayton was spotted in his van using a telephoto camera. A few days before the conference, the supervisor had visited the site and shared a list of names with the office personnel, telling them he was concerned that these people might attend the conference to organize a strike at UPS. In addition to his behavior being flat-out nutty, he also was violating National Labor Relations Board laws that protect workers' rights to attend meetings without being harassed by management.

A typical day in a UPS hub had supervisors pacing back and forth along overhead catwalks, shouting out orders like drill sergeants. Many workers had served in Vietnam—a war that had just ended in April 1975—and now they were subjected to a militaristic management style, performance time studies, petty harassment, a grueling work pace, and mandatory overtime. UPSurge members confronted this Gestapo management style with a militant, back-in-your-face attitude that appealed to many veterans who were fed up

with disrespectful, tyrannical supervisors. The UPSurge movement was a workplace expression of the rebellion that had swept the country.

Confrontations with Goons

The 1976 Midwest UPS strike ended after two weeks when the union bureaucrats ordered strikers back to work without a signed contract. UPSurge supporters then organized an unsanctioned “wildcat” strike in eight cities.

In Cleveland the wildcat picket line was met with carloads of union goons carrying baseball bats ready to beat some heads. As their cars pulled up at 11:00 p.m., our picketers went “live” on the TV news. As soon as the goons saw the TV cameras, they jumped back in their cars and drove away. When physical intimidation didn’t work to end the wildcat, UPS got an injunction and threatened to fire striking workers. The union said it would not defend fired strikers, police were brought in to break up picket lines, and the wildcat strike collapsed.

Later that year the Eastern states went on strike for thirteen weeks. UPS took a hard line, trying to disappear full-time inside jobs, and proposed to manage all part-time health and welfare benefits as a company plan, not as part of a union contract. UPS dug its heels in to lower the Eastern contract standards because it anticipated a national contract coming soon. It wanted to lower the bar in the East in preparation. The next year in New York City, UPS offered full-time warehouse workers buy-outs to quit their jobs. Some did.

Retaliation

UPSurge continued to grow after these contract fights, but now, UPS began to wreak havoc on key organizers while IBT officials looked the other way. In the pamphlet *The Big Brown Machine*, by Mary Deaton, a UPS driver and IS member in Los

Angeles, the retaliation was documented. Eleven New Jersey drivers were fired for hair length and beards. A Cleveland Black driver was fired for failing to report a minor truckyard accident until the day after. He got his pink slip the same day the company featured him for excellent customer service in the company magazine, *The Big Idea*. Company hypocrisy was rampant.

A Harrisburg, Pennsylvania sorter was fired for repackaging merchandise from a split-open box. He was accused of stealing. St. Louis workers were fired when boxes on a jammed belt fell on a catwalk. A woman part-timer in Detroit was fired for filing too many grievances against harassment. She was found to have returned from a break one one-hundredth of a second late. The list of fired activists went on and on with no protection by the IBT.

The Big Brown Machine pamphlet also documented personal testimonies. For instance, one Indianapolis UPS maintenance mechanic heard someone calling for help and raced over to find a worker trapped in the conveyor belt. As the mechanic reached for his knife to cut the man free, a supervisor ordered: “Don’t, don’t. You can’t cut the belt. We won’t be able to run if you do that.” The Indianapolis building plans had originally called for safety guards on those conveyor belts; but as a contractor later explained to the mechanic, instead of installing the safety guards UPS had cut corners to save money. After that accident, guard rails were installed.

Another report explained that when UPS introduced its fiberglass cabs on feeder tractors it was to cut down on weight, to allow more packages to be loaded. A Chicago feeder driver, after inspecting his tractor one rainy night in 1975, thought the tires looked unsafe. He notified his supervisor who refused to pull the rig out of service for repairs. The driver was forced to drive his double trailers onto the highway where

winds were gusting up to fifty miles per hour. He hit a pool of water, his trailers jackknifed, and he was crushed and killed in the fiberglass cab.

UPS workers were paying the price with preventable tragedies, arms caught in conveyor belts, falling packages that break bones, slips on wet floors, hands injured while greasing moving belts, concussions sustained while jumping out of package cars with loaded arms, and thousands upon thousands of back injuries.

In 1977, UPS tried to declare distribution of the *UPSurge* newspaper illegal. We fought back, claiming it was protected activity under National Labor Relations Board laws. We hired a lawyer and filed a lawsuit. Our evidence proved a pattern of illegal activity by the company against *UPSurge* supporters: interrogation, threats of discharge, surveillance, and forcing warehouse employees to remove *UPSurge* buttons. When we won the lawsuit, UPS was forced to post notices stating that protected union activity was allowed: distribution of the paper and wearing buttons inside; we had won.

(An interesting historical footnote: The UPS center manager in Cleveland, Ray Srp, who violated NLRB law by not allowing *UPSurge* to be distributed, was the Ohio National Guard captain at Kent State in 1970 when four students were killed. This odd coincidence was discussed by *UPSurge*'s attorney while working on our NLRB case. When this UPS manager's name came up, our attorney recognized it because his law firm had handled lawsuits filed by parents of the murdered Kent State students.)

Red-Baiting Campaign

By May 1976, the IBT leadership and UPS management had joined hands to try discrediting *UPSurge* and TDU (TDC was now Teamsters for a Democratic

Union). Anonymous letters were handed out in UPS hubs in Baltimore, Cleveland, Indianapolis, and other cities with horror stories about communists trying to take over the union. (This was just one year after the end of the war "against communism" in Vietnam.)

The IBT hired a public relations firm and launched a national "red-baiting" campaign. Fred Schwarz of the Christian Anti-Communism Crusade was one of their "investigators," who served up a tossed salad of misinformation. What his report did get right was that *UPSurge* was focused on union officials for "lack of action," and *UPSurge* described UPS's working conditions "as a concentration camp type of environment."

At the founding convention of TDU in Kent, Ohio, in September 1976, IBT officials arrived in a chartered bus with their own "rank-and-file" group, setting up a picket line against TDU. They called themselves BLAST (Brotherhood of Loyal Americans and Strong Teamsters). TDU remained undeterred by the goon squad.

Later that year, a mysterious fire caused damage to the office building in Cleveland where *UPSurge* and TDU shared an office. Going forward we took shifts sleeping in the office with fire extinguishers, a garden hose attached to the sink, and a loaded shotgun. In 1976, Cleveland had earned the nickname "Bomb City USA" because thirty-six bombings had taken place in the city that year. Assassinations of known mobsters was a normal occurrence. Even Cleveland's then mayor, Dennis Kucinich, had attempts on his life and began to wear a bulletproof vest.

One day that year, I was greeted at a shipping dock on my route by a very large, intimidating man called "Mouse." He made it clear to me that my union activism needed to end. A few weeks later, my Teamster Local 407 business agent called me

aside at a union meeting, gave me a pinch on my cheek, and said, “You don’t want me to be putting a wreath on your door, now do ya?” I don’t think he was talking about a Christmas wreath.

Despite the gooned-up style of the IBT and physical attacks against key TDU leaders, the organization continued to grow. That year, Pete Camarata (a friend and longtime Detroit rank-and-file leader who had joined the IS) and Steve Kindred (a friend from the student movement, longtime TDU organizer, and member of the IS) were attacked in Las Vegas at the IBT convention and sent to the hospital. They were lucky to have not been killed. At UPSurge meetings we had bodyguards and strict security to keep our leaders safe; but the atmosphere of violence in Cleveland, coupled with the intense red-baiting campaign, made organizing there more and more difficult. Ultimately, TDU moved its national office to Detroit, where it had deeper local rank-and-file support. At its November 1979 convention, it merged with PROD (the Professional Drivers Council), a longtime reform organization with similar strategies and goals to TDU.

In 1979, UPSurge also left Cleveland. I had quit my job at UPS in late 1977 to start a family but continued publishing the newspaper for two more years. I had discovered that it was difficult to manage a national publication and travel to meetings with two small children in tow, so I transferred the organization to Meredith in Louisville. Ultimately, UPSurge merged into TDU.

Different Directions

At its core UPSurge was a shop floor organization in a fight against a monolith, not a reform movement in the Teamsters.

While IS members in UPSurge participated in the IS national Teamster faction, the tidal wave of UPSurge activism from 1975 to 1979 seemed to perplex the IS leaders who remained focused on freight workers, internal union reform, and legal actions. UPSurge did not fit the mold of a union reform movement. Blacks and women were still uncommon in the freight industry, but at UPS issues of harassment and discrimination mandated a response. UPSurge championed the cause to integrate the trucking industry.

Looking back, I believe a direct line can be drawn from the early days of UPSurge and its national shop-steward network that through the years led to victories at UPS. The 1991 election of Ron Carey, a former UPS driver from Local 804 in New York City, to become president of the IBT was the result of massive numbers of UPS workers who had his back in the fight against union corruption and mob rule within. The 1997 national UPS strike furthered that power, and in 2023 the UPS workers’ contract win is testament to a deep sense of rank-and-file power that TDU has bolstered.

The 2023 UPS contract gains are an inspiration to a resurgence of an American labor movement witnessed at Amazon, Starbucks, and other nonunion shops. Many of the lessons learned through UPSurge in the 1970s are instructive for organizers today. Together, the socialists within the Teamsters reform movement planted a flag for rank-and-file control of the union, about which all participants can be proud.

Special thanks to Celia (Dunlap) Petty, Mary Deaton, and Duncan West for their contributions to this story.

An Organization of Organizers

ALAN WALD

COLLECTIVE ORAL HISTORIES OF THE late-twentieth-century Marxist Left are having a moment. In 2018 there was *You Say You Want a Revolution: SDS, PL, and Adventures in Building a Worker-Student Alliance*, a compilation of 404 pages. Now, in 2026, we have two more hefty tomes: *Red Lives: Our Years in the US Communist Party (1950–2000)*, coming in at 412 pages, and this Haymarket Books volume topping them all at 458 pages. The last, about a political tendency aptly described as “an organization of organizers” (2), is the focus of this review essay. Its subject is a bit more demanding to grasp than the others and likely to be read differently by different generations.

The principal reason for the difficult comprehension is that, although its first-hand accounts are polished reflections by socialist leaders and activists, they come from a sequence of four connected organizations: the Independent Socialist Club (ISC, founded in 1964), the Independent Socialist Clubs of America (ISCA, 1967), the International Socialists (IS, 1969), and Red Tide (*RT*), a high school newspaper

in 1971 and the IS youth group in 1974). Moreover, as the very clear and sober Introduction explains, behind these was an earlier sequence of small parties and leagues that evolved from orthodox Trotskyism:

From the Free Speech
Movement to the Factory
Floor: A Collective History of
the International Socialists
ANDREW STONE HIGGINS, ED.
Haymarket Books, 2026

primarily the Socialist Workers Party (SWP, 1938), the Workers Party (WP, 1940), the Independent Socialist League (ISL, 1949), the Socialist Youth League (SYL, 1954), and the Young

People’s Socialist League (YPSL, after the fusion with the SYL in 1958). The list of forty-six organizational abbreviations on pages ix and x is an essential tool for following the narrative, although a flow chart would have helped. Most germane would be an acquaintance with the ins and outs of the dissident Marxist Left, likely familiar to veteran militants of the late twentieth century, but less so to newbies of the new millennium.

Narrating a Social Movement

Putting aside the obvious dissimilarity in political programs of the Far Left currents showcased in the three book-length compilations—commonly characterized as Maoist, pro-Soviet, and “Third Camp” (i.e., “Neither Washington nor Moscow”)—appraising the genre of “collective history” can be oddly akin to watching one of the late plays of Anton Chekhov (1860–1904). As in *Uncle Vanya* (1897), for example, rather

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than featuring a single hero or protagonist, the narratives recounted by these groups about their pasts rely on an assembly of often-fascinating and even high-wattage characters whose lives intersect. Yet they

The Higgins volume is entirely convincing that the IS achievement in this era should earn a well-deserved place in any accurate history of the 1960–70s Left.

are often the individuals left out of popular accounts of the periods.

Moreover, instead of dramatizing one or several spectacular or singular events, the focus is customarily on everyday activist life with an atmosphere involving change and loss over a period. A few participants offer interpretative frameworks, but most mainly provide the texture of detail. Sometimes there are even elements of tragic-comic ambiguity and suggestions of a submerged subtext. Historian Andrew Stone Higgins' absorbing *From the Free Speech Movement to the Factory Floor* has all of these and more.

To boot, my personally reviewing the record of the IS affords a peculiar kind of voyeurism. At least half of twenty-six activists profiled were already known to me as public figures—through their external selves, mostly representing the IS to the outer world. In this volume the same people now come into view a second time—less guardedly and inside their natural habitats.¹ Curiously, I rarely had to struggle to reconcile the person I knew with what is newly revealed. Does that mean there exists an admirable consistency between public and private selves—or are the self-portraits airbrushed to put forward the best

self-image, far from an unembellished look in the mirror?

Lest anyone conclude that personal associations render my views too favorably biased, I should acknowledge that my own political history put me at odds with the IS throughout its existence—critical but not hostile. Like many of the older contributors, I passed several years in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), including Narodnik adventures in its Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) in Cleveland, Ohio. In the spring of 1968, I decided to join the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA) at Antioch College and in fall 1969 the SWP at UC Berkeley. Although “Trotskyism” (or even orthodox Marxism) never appealed to my Sartrean Existentialist sensibility, I made this choice for two main reasons that are indicative of the political problems I saw in the IS that I encountered.

The first was that the YSA/SWP was playing a leading role in organizing mass actions against the Vietnam War, for which it has received at least some recognition in histories of the era. The second was because I (mistakenly) thought the professionally run (and interracial) YSA was exiting orthodoxy and advancing toward a synthesis of a New Left/Old Left politics with an organizational stability that would replace the chaotic and politically confused SDS. Central to this misunderstanding about the direction of the YSA/SWP was my long-distance attraction to its more heterodox French and British affiliates in the Fourth International (United Secretariat). These were Alain Krivine's Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire (JCR) and Tariq Ali's International Marxist Group (IMG), not to mention my addiction to the somewhat-allied British journal *New Left Review*, edited by Perry Anderson. Moreover, in the spring of 1968 I met and held discussions at Antioch with both Ernest and Gisela [Scholtz] Mandel, who at that time bridged

European Trotskyism and the New Left.

By the early 1970s, however, I had growing doubts about the internal organizational practices of the SWP, not visible during my early YSA years. Added to this was a perplexity about the SWP's resistance to inaugurating a trade union intervention for its willing non-student members after the 1971 economic changes ("The Nixon Shock"). As a result, I was keeping an eye out for socialist groups to which I might switch. One was the IS and the other was the New American Movement (NAM).

The former was principally attractive because it seemed to have members more politically sophisticated and adventurous than the SWP and in the fall of 1969 the IS was already initiating its strategy of building rank-and-file caucuses in unions. On the other hand, there were three big obstacles: what seemed to be its all-white composition, a minimal role in helping to organize a national anti-war movement, and the view of its members that Cuba was a perfidious example of Stalinism in close company with the USSR and China.²

Ahead of Its Time

From the outset, I should say that Higgins' book does not entirely allay these concerns of fifty years ago. We *do* learn a great deal more about IS members' relationship with the early Black Panther Party than I had known and about its recruitment of African Americans when the IS connected with the RT in the mid-1970s. Yet, despite IS support for "immediate withdrawal" from Vietnam (and its role in the 1967 Oakland-Berkeley "Stop the Draft Week"), there is almost nothing substantial about building a mass anti-war movement and throughout the volume Cuba is only characterized with one-sided hostility.³ In the category of disappointments, I should also add that I find little in this volume to confirm the positive impression that I had about the

cultural life of the IS being more open to intellectual varieties of Marxism than I was experiencing in my years in the SWP.

This misreading about there being significantly more Marxist pluralism in the IS was based largely on my admiration for the journal *International Socialism*, which started in 1958. This remarkable publication was produced by the British group also called International Socialists, with which the IS was aligned from 1969 to 1976–77.⁴ While there is one mention of *International Socialism* being displayed on an ISC literature table (38), the only reference to any of its writings is to an August 1970 essay by Hal Draper (the major theorist of "socialism from below") on "Marx and Engels and Women's Liberation," and this is said to be "dismissive of the contemporary women's liberation movement" (305). Names such as Walter Benjamin, Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukács, Louis Althusser, and Bertolt Brecht are never mentioned in Higgins' doorstep text.

These caveats aside, I must go on to affirm that the Higgins volume is entirely convincing that the IS achievement in this era should earn a well-deserved place in any accurate history of the 1960–70s Left. Although the IS was but a minor player in the contested landscape of the broad anti-imperialist and anti-racist activism, scholarly and popular histories to date have been unconscionably remiss in failing to give full credit to the ISC's role in the 1964 Berkeley Free Speech Movement and the 1967 alliance between the Peace and Freedom Party (PFP) and the Black Panthers; and above all for its strategic niche as the most effective "rank-and-file" current within labor after 1970.⁵

The record in *From the Free Speech Movement to the Factory Floor* should be embraced as a unique source of information and guidance that may help create new forms of organized socialism for the new

millennium. Although working conditions have changed, the first-hand accounts tell one what to expect and what might be accomplished in rank-and-file union work and implicitly raise some of the benefits and pitfalls of being in an organized socialist group. It may not offer a compelling vision of the future, but it is necessary for those who aim to reimagine and expand our practical vision for socialist struggle.

Changing objective conditions after the 1980s were certainly critical to the ultimate failure of *all* Left groups in the late twentieth century. However, one can make the argument that the ultimate collapse of IS as an organization was due in part to its being ahead of its time, based primarily on its misreading of the pace of expected rank-and-file union rebellions but also on organizational matters that still remain unresolved. That's why ideas and many of the experiences of the IS live on through the widely admired publications of activist-writer Kim Moody and in the debates and discussions in the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and smaller Marxist groups of the present time. Above all, they exist in practice through the influence of the IS-initiated organizing project *Labor Notes* and grassroots member-led Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU).

A Luge Ride through the 1960s and 1970s

Summarizing the vast amount of descriptive material in Higgins' volume is impossible, but a selective list of topics covered indicates the flavor of the material offered. This includes the formation of the ISC and the student movement in the context of the Free Speech Movement and UC Berkeley activism (by Mike Parker and Thomas Harrison); the relation of the ISC to the Peace and Freedom Party and the Black Panthers (Marilyn Moorehead); undertakings of ISC and IS in the Bay Area, Southern Califor-

nia, Maryland, Michigan, Wisconsin, New York, and New Jersey (Sheila Jordan, Sam Friedman, Kim Moody, Nancy Holmstrom, and Robert "Gabe" Gabrielsky); labor activity in auto, steel, teamsters, and United Parcel Workers (Wendy Thompson, David McCullough, Candace Cohn, Mark Levitan, Dan La Botz, and Anne Mackie); and organizing in high school and anti-racist movements (Michael Letwin, Larry Bradshaw, Kim Anno, Arnita Dobbins, Tonya English, and Kyle Hopkins).

There are also several chronicles by IS leaders providing an overview of the history of the movement (Joel Geier, David Finkel) as well as the experience of socialist feminists (Barbra Winslow, Lois Weiner), a compelling review of the influence of the IS on academics (Nelson Lichtenstein), and a highly informative narrative about producing "A Paper for Working People" (Gay Semel). These memoirs may start by appearing to be snapshots but they accumulate into an impressively panoramic view. And they are far from yawn-inducing nostalgic tales from a bygone heroic age; for instance, Cohn's "My Experience as a Steelworker in the IS" and La Botz's "A Socialist in the Teamsters Union" are stunners, while David McCullough writes with wit and flair.

Still, some topics are only lightly touched on, partly because the form of short accounts is not amenable to them and perhaps from a reluctance to open up wounds from a painful past. What I missed most were assessments of the guiding theoretical positions of IS. No, I don't want to read a debate about "Who was the noblest Leninist of them all," but I wonder if there are elements of IS ideology that clearly have no tomorrow or should be acknowledged as theology in disguise.

To be sure, there are many references to "Third Camp" politics and "Socialism from Below," as well as totemic readings by Hal Draper and Stan Weir (a blue-collar Marx-

ist intellectual with a long history of union activism). Unfortunately, in this volume they come off more like a catechism of catchphrases than freighted with the kind of reflections merited by a backward look of five decades. (Surely, I can't be the only person whose perspective has been enriched by age and experience!) What would be helpful would be to have a companion volume of classic IS documents accompanied by updated evaluations; and especially ones with a dollop more irony, contingency, and insight into the complexity of human nature than is available here.

For example, Draper's "The Two Souls of Socialism" (1968) is terrifically inspiring morally. Yet its sharp bifurcation (a historic split between socialism from "above" and "below") doesn't attend to the reality faced by revolutions in the twentieth century. These have occurred mainly in economically underdeveloped countries under violent and economic siege from developed capitalist and imperialist countries. This suggests that it takes time and material resources—including from international allies—for state institutions to be fully captured, rebuilt, and democratized. In these settings, it seems more likely that socialism from below will have to be promoted and nurtured over years, not straightaway summoned into existence. One should constructively promote efforts in that direction, focusing mainly on getting hostile nations off the country's back, until a decisive turning point has been reached. Distilling complex ideas and situations into simple, binary categories of "below" and "above" can have a downside.

The state of affairs is similar with the call for "Third Camp" politics, as there are assorted perceptions and criteria for its meaning. In 1972, in a trial supervised by Farber (77), the IS expelled a "Third Camp tendency" led by founders Landy and Harrison (and supported by Lichtenstein, Weiner, and Capper) holding that the new

IS position of "military support" to the National Liberation Front of Vietnam was a violation of this principle. And the ways in which the IS was Trotskyist, "Shachtmanite" (after Max Shachtman, a proponent of the "bureaucratic collectivist" theory of the USSR), and "Draperite" are not much

Changing objective conditions after the 1980s were certainly critical to the ultimate failure of all Left groups in the late twentieth century.

clarified; Winslow, in fact, announces that she was only an "Anne Draperite" (301), referring to Hal Draper's partner.

What about the lessons from Weir and Moody's focus on a militant network of workers inside and independent of union leaderships? Clearly, they misestimated the ability of spontaneity (like wildcat strikes) to operate as a sustaining engine, not to mention the difficulty of consolidating gains without a durable organization. Moody's argument for "social unionism" (fighting for broad social and economic issues beyond just wages and working conditions) certainly stands. On the other hand, his belief in systematic waves of labor upsurges every few decades created expectations still unrealized.

I'm not suggesting there are easy answers to any of this, especially since my doubts about orthodox Marxism have always stemmed from a view like that of Stuart Hall in "Marxism Without Guarantees" (1983). That is, many Marxist categories and analyses of the past are convincing to me, but I could never accept versions of the future that assume that history is unfolding in a predictable, law-like

way. Too many multiple forces—economic, political, cultural, ideological, psychological—are at work. This seems to be one of the subtexts of the 2022–2025 *New Left Review* debate over Robert Brenner and Dylan Riley’s “Seven Theses on American Politics,” especially in Lola Seaton’s summary “Reflections on Political Capitalism.”⁶ Perhaps I shouldn’t confess it, but most “Marxist predictions” have always seemed to me like a competing set of guesses.

Gratifying Illusions?

What is more, if you’re interested in legible interior lives, this may *not* be the book for you. Facts alone can’t account for everything that occurs in the history of an organization; this is especially in relation to the two elements that plagued the IS after its auspicious start subsequent to its founding: devastating faction fights and the inability of many talented members, especially working-class recruits, to stick with the movement. Sometimes the real drama lies beneath the surface—unspoken desires, regrets, and frustrations.

To be sure, I’m not looking for a *tele-novela* of passion, angst, and guilt, narratives of those so haunted by the past that they spend their time jousting with the ghosts of the dead. Nevertheless, while we lack a list of ex-members (many once prominent), we do see a sufficient pattern of an all-or-nothing devotion to the movement to explicitly build a revolutionary workers party and implement its full-blown ideology—until there wasn’t. Why so many burned-out candles and unorganized veterans (who may still be socialists), and who or what is to blame?

Longtime central leader Joel Geier, who knows more about the Left than I ever will, gives a pep talk about all the IS achievements in “Life with the IS.” This is drawn from a book-length study on which he is at work and he will surely have more to say

there. Here, however, while he does his best to be uplifting, there are parts that sound over-the-top and exhibit some obvious blind spots: “the IS has passed the judgment of history” (154); “the IS and our British comrades were [in the 1960s] the only exponents of socialism from below” (154); “we were the most sane revolutionary group on American politics” (156); “Stronger than our formal rules was a culture that made democracy a living reality, and a membership trained to...not tolerate restrictions on their rights....no serious question was off limits, nothing prohibited” (138); and “There was never a cult of leadership, or of personality” (162).

Yet throughout the volume there are intimations of something much darker, suggesting that Geier may be promoting gratifying illusions about the internal culture of the group. These come mostly from women, and all the references remain consistently brief and undeveloped—as if, like in a mummy movie, there is a fear that meddling too much with something buried from the past might unleash forces that one can’t control.

Nevertheless, in 1972–73, Morehead reports that she was sent by the IS leadership to Los Angeles to fight the “Revolutionary Tendency,” which turned the organization into “a snake pit with each side charging the other side with betraying their socialist and revolutionary politics” (63). Holmstrom remembers that, in the later 1970s, “disagreements about strategies” led to “an extremely hostile factional atmosphere within the organization, leaving little room for the exciting intellectual discussions of the past” (135). She opposed the March 1977 expulsion of the “Left Faction” for “factionalism.”

Winslow describes IS “branch life in Cleveland” as “wracked with bitter political and personal differences.” A community college teacher, she believed she was “re-

sented for not industrializing” and that “sexism played a role” with “three alpha males in the leadership” (309). Contributions from veterans of RT, an affiliated organization admittedly not under the direction of more seasoned IS members, also contain charges of “abusive behavior” (338), “toxic masculinity, sexism,” and “bullying” (354),

What I missed most were assessments of the guiding theoretical positions of IS.

and one episode of a “physical altercation” (399). Even more problematic for Geier’s rosy depiction, La Botz recently published a new essay in *Links* claiming: “For a few years in the late 1970s...a British Socialist Workers Party comrade became our [IS] leader and, under his influence, we adopted a full-fledged democratic centralist form of organization, with no representation in the leadership for political minority factions. Most of us briefly bought that approach....”⁷

As one might expect, skilled journalist Finkel, whose political acuity and well-grounded restraint I have long admired, provides a precise and lively summary of IS activities from 1969 until the organization’s fusion with other socialist groups into Solidarity in 1986. It’s a bit sad to read about the final years of the IS. Reaching end-stage polarization in a climactic battle with the “Left Faction” minority, it seems as if the majority took careful aim at the opposition and then shot themselves in the foot. After that, following along about the further decline of the IS seems like listening to the final bits of air seeping out of a flaccid tire.

Where I did cringe quite a bit was

in reading Finkel’s aggressive insouciance—if not sangfroid—in describing how the “loyal” members had to “isolate the RT [Revolutionary Tendency], leading to its expulsion shortly thereafter when documented proof emerged that they were already functioning as a separate organization” (185). Then, in 1976 he refers to a “secret faction inside the IS” resulting in an expulsion (the one Holmstrom opposed) for “manifest disloyalty” (186).

I’m in no situation to judge the fairness and accuracy of any of these claims, but Finkel writes as if the minorities had fewer scruples than Al Capone, and British SWP leader Alex Callinicos comes off as a state-capitalist Dr. Evil (187). Moreover, Finkel uses the exact political terms employed against minorities by the student clique that I saw take over the leadership of the SWP in the same period. Yes, some people in a group *do* act like preening gasbags and wrecking balls, but sometimes one doesn’t really know what one “knows” about a minority. One person’s truth-telling dissident is another person’s scumbag. And “the party” isn’t always right.

A Window into Many Things

If one is wondering whether the above incidents and controversies are aberrations or recurrences, norm-busting, or a standard playbook, I can assure you that all are quite familiar from my own involvements and those reported by members of other organizations. Nor is the blame to fall exclusively on some DNA inherited from Leninism inasmuch as social democratic and non-Leftist groups have undergone similar experiences. This means that a fuller discussion of the causes of such conduct would open the door to addressing—and hopefully making some small steps toward resolving—issues that are certain to plague future socialist movements.

Sometimes the discipline that allows

one to “punch above one’s weight” comes at too great a price. Can we explain the cause of bureaucratic cliques and recommend how to prevent them? How do we know when a minority should stay in and fight or split and build separately? Understanding these puzzles are not footnotes. If workable explanations do not emerge, we socialist activists now long-in-the-tooth will never find younger people to replace us and carry on.

How and why do people in even a small group use power—and even hunger for it? Economic greed can’t be the motive, so is it a matter of political hubris? What kinds of guardrails for fair treatment are necessary and have worked? What have we really been told about the deliberations at the top of organizations with a history of the kinds of problems recounted above? What about underlying structures that silence people, causing many to simply drift away from movements rather than work to improve them?

Is the constant activist pressure of a “combat party” deleterious in the long run; is living a “full life” in the small world of a group the same as living a “whole” one? We all sometimes go over the line, and some of us can’t help stirring up trouble now and then; so how does one productively channel the rebellious and combative mentalities that revolutionary groups naturally attract? How much active unseeing appears in these memoirs?

The Left has spent a huge amount of time debating political theories and programs, which is certainly necessary. And I definitely don’t believe that formal membership in a party is the only way to contribute to the cause. Yet too little effort has been devoted to understanding bad political behavior and burnout in the organized Left, so that what starts as gaps between valuable experienced cadres and their movements evolve to become an

abyss. Clarity about these facets and past disputes—their causes and suggested resolutions—is not antiquarian; it is necessary. Notwithstanding, so many stones have been left unturned in the history of the Left that Higgins’ volume, despite incompleteness, is a worthwhile initiation.

In the exciting events of the late 1960s and early 1970s, none of us who made a revolutionary socialism commitment could see where we were truly headed. So how did we get to where we are and how must we change? Enduring organizational dedication seems to be part of the picture for socialist survival and advance, so we can’t allow the continual regurgitation of old problems in new forms to continue to cripple us. Joining a socialist outfit is a kind of marriage; if it works for one, despite the vicissitudes of life, one stays in it over the long haul. But what to do when the exhilaration of the rousing events ebbs and age introduces new challenges? To quote the most famous statement attributed to Chekhov, “any idiot can face a crisis, but day to day living is what wears us out.”

NOTES

1. Historians Nelson Lichtenstein and Charlie Capper were part of my graduate student cohort at UC Berkeley and IS leaders Mike Parker, Joel Geier, Joel Jordan, and Ken Paff were much on the political scene. Joanne Landy, a historic founder of the IS and its predecessors, at that time married to Nelson, was the secretary in my department (English); we used to chat about politics almost every day. Although I didn’t meet David McCullough (a philosophy graduate student who industrialized in Detroit) until fifteen years later, I was a member of the executive committee of the graduate student AFT local 1570 that he founded and took his place as the delegate to the Alameda County Central Labor Council along with long-time socialist Anne Draper. At Berkeley I spent an afternoon interviewing Marxist scholar Hal Draper, and later, while I was at the University of Michigan, labor activist Stan Weir stayed at my house and I visited him in San Diego. In 1992 I traveled to Cuba to speak at the University of Havana

in a group that included Philosophy Professor Nancy Holstrom, and I have edited the journal *Against the Current* for three decades with managing editor David Finkel and historian Robert Brenner, as well as sociologist Sam Farber and Holmstrom for part of that time. In 1986 I was a founder of Solidarity with *Labor Notes* initiator Kim Moody, teamster Dan La Botz, and auto worker Wendy Thompson.

2. At that time, the Cuba position forwarded by the SWP's Joseph Hansen made more sense to me. It was essentially that Cuba had advanced to the equivalent of a dictatorship of the proletariat by expropriating capitalist property and aligning against U.S. imperialism but was inhibited in an advance to socialism because it did not have a pluralist revolutionary party system and political power was concentrated in the Castro leadership that was relying increasingly on the USSR. In his 1961 essay "The Theory of the Cuban Revolution," Hansen clearly stated that Cuba "lacks, as yet, the forms of proletarian democracy" (see <https://www.marxists.org/archive/hansen/1961/xx/cuba-theory.htm>) and in his book *Dynamics of the Cuban Revolution* (1978), he criticized bureaucratic tendencies and leadership concentration. I should add that I never saw the differences in theories characterizing the USSR's economy to be a major obstacle requiring separate organizations in the 1960s and after; most members of the SWP and IS, including myself, lacked the skills and knowledge to convincingly hold a specific theoretical position. The question

was primarily about democratic opposition to the Stalinist bureaucratic regime and its politics, where there was mostly agreement.

3. It is described as "chief among the Stalinist states" with Vietnam and China (14); among the "so-called socialist states" with "nothing progressive" (39); and one of the "so-called progressive countries" with "Stalinist bureaucracies" like "Russia, China, Cuba, Albania, Vietnam and... Pol Pot's Cambodia" (154).

4. The alliance ended with a bitter split that led to the formation of the rival International Socialist Organization (ISO) in the United States at the same time as the British IS changed its name to Socialist Workers Party (SWP).

5. This claim of neglect is based on a survey of major books on the Left in those decades. Especially surprising is the absence of the ISC in Robert Cohen and Reginald E. Zelnik's *The Free Speech Movement: Reflections on Berkeley in the 1960s* (2002), although Hal Draper's writings are cited, and the IS in Jefferson Cowie's *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (2010), although centers of IS activity such as Cleveland and Detroit are discussed.

6. This debate began in *New Left Review* 138 (November–December 2022); Seaton's summary, which was mid-way in the discussion, appeared in *New Left Review* 142 (July–August 2023).

7. Dan La Botz, "Goodbye to Lenin and Leninism," *Links* (26 April 2026): <https://links.org.au/goodbye-lenin-and-leninism>

AI as the Logic of Capitalist Domination

FRIEDA AFARY

TWO RECENT BOOKS ON Artificial Intelligence (AI) offer rich research and key conceptual frameworks that can help progressive activists comprehend and analyze this phenomenon. They also offer ways of combating AI's harmful and dangerous effects.

Emily Bender and Alex Hanna's *The AI Con: How to Fight Big Tech's Hype and Create the Future We Want*, begins by discussing the origins of AI in the 1956 Dartmouth College workshop on "thinking machines" led by Marvin Minsky and John McCarthy, who coined the term "Artificial Intelligence." They situate this development in the context of the U.S. military competition with the USSR and the view that the human mind, too, is a machine. The authors cite the work of MIT professor Joseph Weizenbaum, who invented the first chatbot, named ELIZA in the late 1960s, and became a critic of AI; he developed his critique in a 1976 book entitled *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation*.

After briefly discussing the 1940s' ori-

gins of Large Language Models (LLMs) and word-sequencing with machine-learning algorithms, they demonstrate that ChatGPT (2022) is a "synthetic text extruding machine" generating language, "but without any intent or thinking mind behind it" (p. 31). Bender and Hanna do not discuss John Searle's "Chinese Room Argument," which had offered a serious challenge to Alan Turing's argument that computers

could imitate the human mind. However, their description of AI as a synthetic text extruding machine sheds light on Searle's argument by showing that large "language models only manipulate the form of language, with neither understanding nor communicative intent" (p. 32). Chatbots only "link together word patterns" through the use of "probabilistic algorithms" trained by other people's stolen works. ChatGPT as a "text synthesis machine" and its "learning by rote" are contrasted by the authors to the act of human writing, which involves critical thinking and requires communication, conversation, and in-person and written dialogues with other people, as well as with writers and experts in the case of scientific and academic writing (p. 50).

Furthermore, the authors emphasize

AI Con: How to Fight Big
Tech's Hype and Create the
Future We Want

EMILY BENDER & ALEX HANNA
Harper Collins, 2025

Atlas of AI
KATE CRAWFORD
Yale, 2021

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that although it appears that AI is doing all the work, AI requires a great deal of hidden human labor usually by low-paid workers in the Global South who train AI and monitor it. Two examples are remote human workers monitoring self-driving cars and content moderators monitoring LLMs.

In contrast to Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, who thinks that humans are only machines that string text, Joseph Weizenbaum argued in his 1976 book that computers restrict rather than enlarge our humanity. Bender and Hanna agree with Weizenbaum's critical views that extended to a critique of capitalism and its militarism. They also believe that reducing the human mind to codes can only strengthen militarization and authoritarian rule.

Furthermore, they view AI's massive use of energy and water and its intensification of the climate crisis as its existential danger. In their opinion, this problem and the surveillance state created by AI are the fundamental dangers.

Thus, they call for a "strategic refusal" (p. 190), meaning that anyone concerned about the dangers of AI should not use it and not feed it. They especially call on librarians and information science experts to train their patrons to do regular internet searches by looking up verifiable links, identifying sources such as books, articles, and websites, and evaluating the information in the context of the sources from which they arise.

In calling for "building socially situated technology" created to "strengthen and empower communities" and protect the environment (pp. 188–9), they argue that instead of all-purpose tools, we need specific tools for specific tasks. These can include tools for editing papers. People should be able to decide whether they want to "opt in" to AI or not. Technology should be created with the input and engagement of the people that it affects. People's data

rights would have to be protected. Technologies for facial recognition and data centers that are wasting our water and energy and contributing to climate catastrophe should be stopped.

Kate Crawford's *Atlas of AI*, which was published five years ago, offers a comprehensive account rooted in philosophical, historical, and global research, including travels to mining towns in the United States and abroad, close scrutiny of the labor pro-

Crawford demonstrates powerfully that "AI is neither artificial nor intelligent"

cess at Amazon Fulfillment Centers, and a trip to Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin suborbital launch facility in West Texas.

She begins with the idea that intelligence cannot be disembodied because it develops in a body and in relation to other human beings and nature. AI is not about "thinking" or "intelligence." It is about "mimicking" based on LLMs. It serves existing relations of domination under capitalism. Hence, the title "*Atlas of AI*" refers to the "map of relations of domination" involving labor, capital, resource extraction, and promoting policing, militarization, racism, and sexism.

The first chapter is devoted to the extractivism of AI and its rape, plunder, and pollution of the environment in places ranging from a mining town in Nevada to countries such as Bolivia, Congo, China, and Australia. We learn that by 2040, at least 14 percent of the world's greenhouse gases will be produced by Big Tech and that a single data center now uses an estimated 1.7 million gallons of water per day.

In the second chapter, Crawford takes

readers to an Amazon Fulfillment Center where she has carefully observed the ways in which workers have to keep up with “the picking rate,” which has no regard for the limits of their bodies. She speaks out against the capitalist “control over time” in the process of production and discusses the history of workplace automation and worker resistance to it. The work of Charles Babbage, Henry Ford, and Frederick Winslow Taylor are singled out to show how automation further and further intensified the division of labor to the point of quantifying every movement of workers’ bodies with the aim of maximizing output and minimizing cost for capitalism. In the twentieth-century Ford assembly line, humans were treated like robots with the main emphasis on speed of production. What she sees as new in the twenty-first-century Amazon Fulfillment Centers and similar production sites is the intensity of the “surveillance” of “every movement” of the body to increase speed.

Crawford writes that the process of automation has “exemplified Marx’s description of the domination of clock time, ‘Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at most, time’s carcass’” (p. 74). Furthermore, a human becomes “an appendage of

Bender and Hanna believe that
reducing the human mind
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rule.

the machine” (*The Communist Manifesto*). Crawford’s emphasis throughout the book is on the control over workers’ production time as a distinctive feature of capitalist production. This critical view of capitalism

not only as a system of unequal distribution of wealth but as an alienated and alienating system of production is one of the most important contributions of her book.

She demonstrates powerfully that “AI is neither artificial nor intelligent” (p. 8). Instead, it is the result of the onerous and low-paid labor of miners and other workers. Capitalist reform, in her opinion, at best allows for regulations at the margins, but leaves relations of production untouched (p. 72).

In subsequent chapters on data and classification, she offers an immense amount of research on how Big Tech companies have used data stolen from creators and without context, how they mix truth and falsehoods in their LLMs, and promote classification systems that are biased, racist, misogynist, and reify people as objects. AI, she argues, “flattens social, political and economic relations into quantifiable entities” (p. 144) and turns all data including human affect, feelings, and facial expressions into a quantifiable mass. This critique can remind us of Marx’s discussion in the first chapter of *Capital* on how capitalism’s extreme division of labor reduces concrete, specific, and differentiated labor into an abstract undifferentiated and congealed mass of human labor.

Chapter 6 on the state argues that AI has been shaped by a close relationship between Silicon Valley, the U.S. military, and NASA. AI was first a military technology. Now it is Big Tech companies such as Palantir, which is run by the billionaire and MAGA supporter Peter Thiel, that are designing the mechanics of mass deportation by ICE. All of these technologies, she emphasizes, are aimed at shaping a centralized state with a powerful surveillance system to dominate and exploit humans.

Crawford urges readers to see that “AI is not an objective, universal, or neutral technique” (p. 212). It is shaped by eco-

nomic, social, and political forces designed to promote domination and state power. It offers “computational interventions as universal solutions applicable to any problem” (p. 214). Its aim is to speed up production at the expense of human physical and mental well-being; mechanize and automate to the point of destroying the human ability and potential for critical thinking; and “convert an infinitely complex and changing universe into a Linnaean order of machine-readable tables” (p. 221).

Crawford does not think that there can be “an AI for the people.” The very foundation of AI is the promotion of “centralization of control” (p. 223). In the words of Black feminist poet and librarian Audre Lorde, “the Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” Her “renewed politics of refusal” asks us to not accept AI as “a technological inevitability,” but to “question the idea that everything should be subject to the logic of statistical prediction and profit accumulation” (p. 226). She cites philosopher Achille Mbembe’s call for “a new critique of technology” (p. 226) that examines the “interrelatedness of capitalism, computation, and control” and

“bring[s] together issues of climate justice, labor rights, racial justice, data protection and the overreach of police and military power” (p. 227).

Anything short of this, she argues, will allow for the dystopia of Jeff Bezos and

AI serves existing relations of domination under capitalism.

Elon Musk with the exhaustion of earth’s resources, creation of Nazi-style concentration camps, and a *Brave New World* scenario involving space colonies.

At a time when a movement seems to be emerging in the United States in opposition to AI’s mass replacement of workers, AI data centers, AI surveillance, and AI’s harmful effects on education, the above books by Bender, Hanna, and Crawford can provide fruitful ground for the effort to develop an affirmative vision and practical immediate activities.

An Orwellian Mockery of Critical Theory

JAVIER SETHNESS

GABRIEL ROCKHILL'S *Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?* (or *Pipers*) is a neo-Stalinist hatchet job targeting the German intellectuals, most of them Jewish, who associated with the Frankfurt-based Institute for Social Research before, during, and in some cases after Adolf Hitler's Nazi dictatorship. The collective work of the Institute, otherwise called the Frankfurt School, is widely known as Critical Theory. In *Pipers*, Rockhill accuses the dissident Western Marxist tradition, of which Critical Theory has played an important part, of accommodating and even advancing capitalism and Western imperialism during the Cold War.

In line with *Monthly Review's* Marxist-Leninist politics, Rockhill leaves no doubt that he intends to defend the so-called Second Camp—the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, or PRC—in *Pipers* (27–33, 64). To this point, in his review of *Pipers*, Russell Jacoby asks: “[Rockhill] never mentions North Korea, but why not?”¹ Given the author's explicit allegiances, for him to present simplistic

and reductive takes on the Frankfurt School is to be expected. Still, in *Pipers*, the misinformation is in overdrive.

After all, Rockhill's tedious and repetitive style reads like a mix of Soviet agitprop, rants by Lyndon LaRouche (as Matt McManus points out), and the “salacious gossip column” that Radhika Desai oddly hails in her promotional blurb.²

Who Paid the Pipers of Western Marxism?

GABRIEL ROCKHILL
Monthly Review Press, 2025

Rockhill reproduces the Stalinist-Dengist myth that only the Western ruling classes are imperialist, thus ignoring the continuities linking the Tsarist Empire, the USSR, and post-Soviet Russia on the one hand, and Imperial China and the PRC on the other (33–4, 64, 155). As John Rees explains in his review, Rockhill is thus “keen to set up a mutually reinforcing dualism where there is only ‘really existing socialism’ and ‘CIA funded anti-communism.’”³

Beyond ignoring the myriad atrocities perpetrated by the managers of Soviet and Chinese state capitalism, this binary approach in favor of the Second Camp lends itself to exaggeration and spectacle. It excludes the possibility of Third-Camp socialism, which rejects the hegemony of Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. Indeed, notes Richard Gilman-Opalsky, the author views even “Trotskyists and left-wing communists” as “imperialist tools.”⁴ As a matter of fact, Rockhill writes about “plenty of

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evidence” for a “Trotskyism-to-CIA pipeline,” while citing none—in keeping with the Stalinist school of falsification (261).⁵

In reality, as Charles Reitz emphasizes in his review, the Critical Theorist Herbert Marcuse wrote “33 Theses toward the Military Defeat of Hitler-Fascism” in 1947. “33 Theses” predicts that, in the post–World War II context, the victorious Western powers would become increasingly neo-fascist and aggressively anti-Soviet. As such, writes Reitz, it “does *not* draw social theory into a camp compatible with U.S. imperialism,” but “quite the contrary.”⁶ Later, Marcuse penned the militant essay “Repressive Tolerance” (1965), which calls for the “revocation of free speech rights to fascists [and] racists,” in Reitz’s words.⁷ Unsurprisingly, Rockhill ignores both of these Marcusean essays and only briefly mentions the right-wing threats made against Marcuse’s life following the publication of “Repressive Tolerance” and its author’s outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War (179, 306).

In this review, I will challenge Rockhill’s ahistorical approach, debunk the author’s reductive equation of Critical Theory with “anticommunism,” and contest his claim that Marcuse was a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) asset.

Rockhill’s Distortions

Rockhill ahistorically presents the “actually existing socialist” (AES) regimes as “seek[ing] the uplift of all,” while ignoring the plight of workers, peasants, women, colonial subjects, and sexual and ethno-religious minorities in the USSR and PRC (46). Rockhill announces that he seeks to “rejuvenate class struggle in theory,” yet fails to recognize class struggle within “projects of socialist sovereignty” (54–5). He cites Vladimir Lenin’s criticism of the social sciences’ defense of wage-slavery, but fails to mention Lenin’s own enthusiasm

for Taylorism and state capitalism, and the Bolshevik leader’s imposition of bourgeois management onto enterprises that had previously come to be self-managed by workers in the Russian Revolution (73–5). Rockhill suggests that AES “has not been an unmitigated disaster,” but rather is “preferable for the overwhelming majority of people and the planet,” without acknowledging China or the Soviet Union’s vast nuclear stockpiles and carbon emissions, the Chornobyl nuclear disaster, the desiccation of the Aral Sea, the Gulag, the Tiananmen Square massacre, or genocide perpetrated in Ukraine, Afghanistan, Tibet, and Xinjiang (171).

In Orwellian fashion, Rockhill misrepresents Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union as anti-fascist, hence glossing over not only the Stalinist betrayal of the Republic and the workers during the Spanish Civil War, but also the Nazi-Soviet Pact that partitioned Poland and launched World War II. Rockhill denounces McCarthyism and the FBI’s targeted assassinations, but not the KGB or the Stalinist Terror. He observes that West German “intelligence services [were] stocked with former Nazis,” but forgets that much of the same was true of the Stasi, the East German secret police (207).⁸ He objects to “the practice of academically laundering state propaganda” and intellectual “[c]ollaboration with powerful state agencies” in the West, but not, apparently, under AES (34, 38–9, 220).

Orwell considered one’s openness to condemning the USSR to be “*the* test of intellectual honesty” for fellow leftists.⁹ Rockhill would have utterly failed his test. After all, the author of *Pipers* cannot appreciate Jacoby’s point, that, “[h]ad the Frankfurt scholars fled to the ‘really existing socialism’ of the Soviet Union and not the United States, they would have *ceased to really exist* in Soviet camps” (emphasis added). He never mentions the former

Makhnovist Peter Arshinov, whom the Stalinist regime executed in 1937 for ostensibly attempting to resurrect anarchism in the USSR, much less the allegorical fate of the fictional love interest Larissa Antipova in Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* (1957): namely, to perish in the Gulag.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Rockhill gleefully highlights the CIA's opportunistic role in publishing *Doctor Zhivago* in Russian (138).

Rockhill falsely equates Critical Theory and Western Marxism with "imperial theory" and "imperial Marxism," respectively, and accuses the Critical Theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno of being "radical recuperators" (47, 145, 178). He renames the Frankfurt School the "Washington School," given that many of its associates worked for the U.S. government at one time or another. He does so, while barely acknowledging that the Frankfurt School legal scholar Franz Neumann served as a prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials (244–5).

In reality, Rockhill excludes what Adorno identified as the "new categorical imperative imposed by Hitler upon unfree [humanity]: to 'arrange [our] thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen.'"¹¹ He guards silence around Marcuse's equivalent formulation: "[t]he goal of radical change today is the emergence of human beings who are physically and mentally incapable of inventing another Auschwitz."¹² In this vein, Gilman-Opalsky, McManus, and fellow reviewers Doug Greene and Harrison Fluss rightly emphasize that *Pipers* features "naught but the most fleeting consideration of the historical confrontation" with antisemitism and the Holocaust in the post-World War II context, much less sympathy for the Critical Theorists as leftist and Jewish exiles fleeing Nazi Germany.

Communist Critical Theory

There is plenty of counter-evidence to *Pipers*' main claims about the history of the Frankfurt School—especially to Rockhill's complaint that Critical Theory is irredeemably "anticommunist" and pro-Western imperialism. These charges fail on practical and theoretical grounds.

To begin with, in winter 1926–1927, Institute affiliate Walter Benjamin visited Moscow, where he witnessed the Kremlin "trying to bring about a suspension of militant communism." Reading *Pipers*, one would not know either that Benjamin had been contemplating joining the German Communist Party at the time, or that his Latvian partner, Asja Lacis, would be imprisoned in the Gulag.¹³ Tellingly, Rockhill's own research reveals that Neumann served as a Soviet spy (codename "Ruff") during World War II (252–9). This finding seriously undermines Rockhill's whole argument about Critical Theory's "anticommunism," as does *Pipers*' revelation that the KGB was interested in recruiting none other than...Marcuse himself! Plus, the FBI files on Adorno and Marcuse that Rockhill shares in the Appendix describe the former as mingling with "Communist[s]" at a 1944 "Musicians' Congress" in California, and the latter as a dangerous "Extremist" and "Key Activist" of the New Left! (370–89)

Theoretically speaking, Horkheimer's early writings also disprove Rockhill's claims. Meditating in his diaries *Dawn & Decline*, the young Horkheimer declares, "One has to fight for socialism [...]." He decries "the horrible exploitation apparatus at work in the partly or wholly colonial territories," adding that "the mass misery in India, China, Africa boggles the mind." He expresses loyalty to the Soviet experiment:

It is extremely difficult to say what conditions are like there. I do not claim to know where the country is going; there is undoubtedly much misery [...]. Anyone

who has the eyes to see will view events in Russia as the continuing painful attempt to overcome this terrible social injustice. At the very least, he will ask with a throbbing heart whether it is still under way.¹⁴

Clearly, this is not the “compatible” theory to which Rockhill reduces Critical Theory (183). While there is much for which to criticize Horkheimer and Adorno—including their opportunistic collaboration with the CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF, 183–4), and, above all, Horkheimer’s support for the Vietnam War—a dialectical analysis would give credit to Horkheimer’s revolutionary youth. Likewise, the fragments of Adornian radicalism that persisted until a premature death (provoked partly by student protests) should be acknowledged, from Adorno’s co-editing of *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) and writing of *Minima Moralia* (1951), to his identifying the Vietnam War as the continuation of Auschwitz, calling on a “self-conscious global subject [to] develop and intervene,” and affirming the principle of hope in *Negative Dialectics* (1969) and “Resignation” (1969).¹⁵ It is notable, too, that Edward Said declares in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) that Adorno is a “cultural and philological criti[c] whom I revere.”¹⁶

Besides Marcuse, Neumann, and Horkheimer and Adorno (at least partly), Benjamin further refutes Rockhill’s allegation about the Frankfurt School being accommodationist. As with the numerous gaps in his coverage of Critical Theory overall, Rockhill does not dwell on the messianic revolutionism expressed in Benjamin’s writings, such as the unfinished *Arcades Project* or “On the Concept of History” (1940). Instead, he seeks to portray Horkheimer as abandoning his ostensible comrade Benjamin to near-certain death in Nazi-occupied Europe (197–200). Fearing imminent deportation to the Nazis, Benjamin took his life in 1940 in the Catalan border-town

of Portbou after failing to cross undetected from France through the Pyrenees mountains. The alleged text of his suicide note, which requests that his “thoughts” be transmitted “to my friend Adorno,” and for “the situation in which I find myself” to be explained to him, goes unmentioned in *Pipers*—as does Marcuse’s tribute to him at the close of *One-Dimensional Man* (1964).¹⁷

In terms of international politics, it is undeniable that Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse criticized the Second Camp during the Cold War. Still, Rockhill cannot concede that they had good reason to do so as Critical Theorists, given that AES has long shielded itself from criticism by presenting itself as faithfully following Marxist prescriptions. Accordingly, Marcuse presents a brilliant critique of the USSR’s evident betrayal of Marxian theory and adoption of technological rationality in *Soviet Marxism* (1958), while Adorno condemned Russian fascism in socialist guise and the “murder of countless millions” carried out by AES regimes (186).¹⁸

Marcuse: A Revolutionary Intellectual, Not a CIA Agent

Before joining academia in the mid-1950s, Marcuse worked at the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the State Department—not the CIA. Following his separation from government service, Marcuse became increasingly open about his revolutionary perspectives. The Marxian imperative of transforming the world clearly resonates in *Eros and Civilization* (1955), a utopian volume that Rockhill mentions only once, briefly—just as he mentions Freud, the book’s object of dialectical criticism, only in passing (15, 326–7). As a movement elder, Marcuse publicly supported his former graduate student Angela Davis during her persecution by the U.S. government and subsequent political imprisonment, and he donated

to the Black Panther Party, as Rockhill's own research shows (311n228). Writing in *The Marcusean Mind* (2025), Sid Simpson observes that Marcuse "largely ignores the dynamics occurring in the colonies," though I believe that the thinker's public opposition to the Vietnam War and the analysis he provides of the political situation in several post-colonies in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972) may provide mitigating circumstances.¹⁹

By contrast with the false version propagated in *Pipers*, whereby Marcuse only saw the proverbial light late in life (306–9), the thinker was nearly a lifelong radical: as a conscript during World War I, he joined the Social Democratic Party and defended Berlin's Alexanderplatz from right-wing gangs during the German Revolution. His doctoral dissertation, *The German Artist-Novel* (1922), links authentic art with revolutionary social change—a theme Marcuse revisits in *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978). As the recently deceased junior Critical Theorist Jürgen Habermas would do later, Marcuse broke with his former mentor Martin Heidegger for embracing Nazism. In *Reason and Revolution* (1941), Marcuse presents a progressive-revolutionary interpretation of G.W.F. Hegel and German Idealism. "Repressive Tolerance" is a call to arms that resonates to this day.

In sum, Marcuse was a revolutionary, anti-fascist intellectual: he was no "agent of empire" (267–71). Although Rockhill links Horkheimer and Adorno to the CCF, he must try a different tack to try to discredit Marcuse. To clarify, although the author of *Pipers* sometimes equates "OSS/CIA" (246), the OSS (1942–1945) was *not* the CIA (1947–present). Whereas Rockhill includes evidence of the CIA connections of several of Marcuse's mentors and contacts while at OSS and State, this does not prove that Marcuse worked for the CIA. Neither does the fact that the Agency distributed some

of his books in Eastern Europe during the Cold War (137, 271–88). The comment by Habermas that Rockhill cites about Marcuse returning to post-war Germany as an "officer of the U.S. army" likely refers to his being an OSS intelligence officer rather than an officer of the CIA, which didn't exist at the time (269).

Most controversially, Rockhill cites the Soviet mouthpiece *Pravda*, articles published in the late 1960s in the Marxist-Leninist *Progressive Labor* magazine, and claims made by the journalist Leo Matthias as the basis for the charge that Marcuse was an "Agent of Imperialism" and/or a CIA agent (268–9). Rockhill does not care to mention the antisemitic tropes Matthias employed in thus slandering Marcuse, as highlighted by his friend Günther Anders.²⁰ In fact, historian Tim Müller, one of Rockhill's main sources, candidly told him in a 2024 YouTube interview that he could "not find anything in the sources that would support" the claim made by Matthias.²¹ That did not stop Rockhill from repeating it in *Pipers*.

Conclusion

In closing, *Pipers* amounts to absurdist theater. It is a warmed-over reprise of the dystopian falsification that underpinned the Stalinist Show Trials. Rockhill defames the Critical Theorists, especially Marcuse, in keeping with this Orwellian tradition of falsification. Lamentably, *Pipers* plays on antisemitic conspiracy theories about "cultural Marxism" while underplaying the importance that Critical Theory places on identifying and overcoming antisemitism, other forms of racism, and authoritarianism.²² Rockhill expresses disdain toward the Frankfurt School's "esthetes" and "intellectual free agents," whose Critical Theory carries on the legacy of the radical Enlightenment through its "generalized critique of domination," in line with his

pushing of obscurantism and lies in defense of state capitalism and the Second Camp (151, 187–8).

NOTES

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The Bund: A Committed History

PETER DRUCKER

THE RAVE RECEPTION FOR MOLLY Crabapple's *Here Where We Live Is Our Country* is a breakthrough for Jewish radicals. After decades of Zionist hegemony within U.S. Jewish communities, including on the left, suddenly Crabapple's avowedly, even fiercely anti-Zionist book is on the *New York Times* best-seller list. What's more, the *Times* review calls the book a "terrific" history of "a Jewish political movement that opposed ethnic nationalism of all stripes" and specifically "fought the Zionists."¹ Nor is the *Times* alone.²

This breakthrough clearly reflects the strength of the movement, including among young Jews, against the Israeli genocide in Gaza and in Palestine more generally. Over the course of sixty years, the image of Israel for left-wing Jews has shifted from an overblown idealization of *kibbutzim* (though Black Power advocates and anti-imperialist activists rarely bought into that) to a picture in which the ethnic cleansing of Palestine (the *Nakba*) in 1947–49 rightly takes center stage.

The reasons are obvious. The devastation of Gaza since 2023 and the parallel

settler violence on the West Bank are a perfect illustration of what Palestinians have long called the "ongoing Nakba." In fact, the scale of the killing since 2023 exceeds the violence of the original Nakba in 1947–49. Although the repression of Palestinians inside and outside Israel's internationally recognized borders (the Green Line) has worsened qualitatively, decade by decade, since 1967, what is most striking to radicals in solidarity with

Palestine today is the underlying continuity in Zionist ideology and policy. It is hard to imagine that the image of Zionism on the left will ever recover.

Young Jews in solidarity with Palestine, to the extent they identify as Jews, therefore need a different conception of Jewish identity. Crabapple's history of the Bund is tailored to give them this new identity. This is visible in the praise that Jewish Voice for Peace, the main organizational U.S. expression of progressive anti-Zionism, has lavished on *Here Where We Live Is Our Country* on its Facebook page.

Much of the praise the book has received is richly deserved. While it draws on earlier histories of the Bund,³ Crabapple's work is far more accessible and livelier than her predecessors'. It is also explicitly informed by her own activist background. She makes clear how her radical commitment goes back to her activism in Occupy fifteen years ago. She illuminates some

Here Where We
Live Is Our Country:
The Story of the
Jewish Bund
MOLLY CRABAPPLE
One World, 2026

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Bundists' hybrid identity with her own (Puerto Rican/Jewish). When she describes the poverty and claustrophobic debates of exiled Bundists outside the tsarist empire, she draws vivid parallels with the Syrian refugees she wrote about as a journalist in Istanbul.

Anti-Zionist and Anti-Religious

The Bund's fierce opposition to Zionism—which it called “the most evil enemy of the organized Jewish proletariat” and “a Siamese twin of antisemitism”—speaks directly to the anti-Zionism of solidarity activists today. The Bundists knew what they were talking about. Crabapple cites Bundist leader Viktor Alter's reports from Palestine in 1924: his accounts of anti-Palestinian discrimination practiced in Labor Zionist unions and settlements prefigure later anti-Palestinian discrimination in Israel. So do interwar Zionists’ “conquest of land,” sealed in Crabapple's words when they “brutally expelled farmers who had lived there for generations.”

The Bundists' predictions of what Zionism in power would become were farsighted and chilling. In the words of Bundist leader Henryk Erlich, “If a Jewish state should arise in Palestine, its spiritual climate will be: eternal fear of the external enemy (Arabs)...the climate in which reaction and chauvinism ordinarily flourish.”

Crabapple acknowledges the Bund's mix of constant rivalry and occasional co-operation with their fellow Jewish Marxists of Left Poalei Zion (Labor Zionists). As she writes, “A young person looking for pride, purpose and community could easily go either way; many switched between groups.” The Bund and Left Poalei Zion both initially tried, unsuccessfully, to gain admission to the Communist International. As Crabapple notes, they ultimately fought side by side in the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Although she tends to grant the

Bund a monopoly on the spirit of *doikayt* (“hereness”), Left Poalei Zion tried to combine “hereness” with an orientation toward Palestine, and persistently organized in Yiddish.⁴

After the Holocaust, however, Zionists in European displaced persons' camps returned the Bundists' earlier hostility many-fold. “Bundists were marginalized, intimidated, or simply erased,” living “like hidden Jews in the days of the Spanish Inquisition.” In March 1948 Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion approved a military draft for Jewish refugees in Europe, including anti-Zionist Bundists, and “levied fines, threw [resisters] out of apartments, and denied them their meager supplemental rations,” subjecting them to “night raids and mob beatings.” Thus was the new Israeli army built. And when former Bundist Warsaw Ghetto uprising leader Marek Edelman was invited to speak at the Polish commemoration of the revolt's fiftieth anniversary, the Israeli prime minister did not wish to appear on the same platform.⁵

Along with anti-Zionism, Bundists had a strong preference for Yiddish (the everyday language of most Jews in the tsarist empire) over Hebrew (the language of religious liturgy and Zionism), Russian, or Polish (the languages of the bourgeoisie). Initially this was a practical matter of reaching Jews in the language they were most comfortable speaking and reading. Later Bundists developed into fervent advocates of Yiddish literature and culture.

This was not the original Bundist position. Crabapple recognizes the pre-eminent role of Vladimir Medem as a theorist of “national cultural autonomy,” whose affinity Enzo Traverso has noted with the Austro-Marxist Otto Bauer. But her account of the Bund's fierce debates on these issues neglects Medem's original “neutralist” position: as long as Yiddish speakers were granted equal rights and

facilities, he refused to predict whether Jews would remain a distinct Yiddish-speaking community or end up assimilating.⁶ Crabapple, by contrast, seems to share young U.S. Jewish radicals' attachment to Yiddish today, though this is more sentimental than practical.

Crabapple may not be as much in tune with young Jewish radicals today when she describes Bundists' hostility to religion, however. Sympathetic accounts of pro-Palestinian encampments at U.S. universities have described the space given to Jewish religious rituals and holidays (alongside and in harmony with Muslim rituals and holidays). By Crabapple's account, the old Bundists would have been unpleasantly surprised.

In general, Bundists and rabbis shared a strong mutual antagonism. The Warsaw Bundist newspaper *Folksdaytung*, for example, was delivered on the Jewish Sabbath, leading to the excommunication of its entire staff by the Warsaw rabbinate. For Bundists, "the synagogue was only an edifice on which to slap up posters," specifically on the Sabbath, secure in the knowledge that Orthodox Jews would feel unable to tear the posters down until Saturday at sunset, Crabapple writes. "At a Bundist gathering, the pastries might be fried in pig fat, just to make a point."

The Bund as Faction

Crabapple is in general a loyal defender of the Bund's positions within the Russian socialist movement. Sometimes she fails to do full justice to other currents in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP), of which the Bund, together with the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, was an integral part for most of the years until 1917. Since the Bund tended before 1917 to side with the Mensheviks, *Here Where We Live Is Our Country* loads the dice against the Bolsheviks, sometimes in ways that are

in tension with its politics.

Crabapple chides the Bund, for example, for walking out of the 1903 RSDLP congress instead of staying to back the Mensheviks against the Bolsheviks, even though the congress was rigged against the Bund with the Mensheviks' connivance. (Though they made up a majority of Russian socialists at the time, Bundists were given only five delegates.)

Increasingly aligned with the Mensheviks in 1905–17, the Bund was divided along the same lines as the Mensheviks. In these debates, Crabapple usually sides with the Menshevik-Internationalists around Julius Martov, an ally of Bundist Raphael Abramovich, rather than the right-wing Mensheviks allied with the Bundist Mark Liber. For example, she supports Martov's and Abramovich's opposition in 1917 to Russia's continuing participation in the First World War. "These former radicals... postponed their old promises of world peace... to an ever more distant tomorrow," she writes.

Yet despite her anti-war stance, she approves of the Bundists' and Mensheviks' commitment to unity in a single organization of both pro- and anti-war socialists. Although Lenin tried to win over left-wingers like Martov, Crabapple sides with those who rejected any unity with the Bolsheviks. She argues that the best outcome would have been a broad coalition government of all the socialist parties, though surely a coalition of pro- and anti-war socialists would have been doomed to paralysis.

She justifies her anti-Bolshevik attitude with some questionable arguments. She sees Bolshevism as a reflection of Lenin's "few scruples," and Stalinism as the culmination of Leninism. Critical sympathizers of Bolshevism like Samuel Farber⁷ have agreed with her in condemning the Bolsheviks' repression of the nonviolent

soviet opposition, such as the Menshevik-Internationalists and their Bundist allies, during and after the civil war. In her account of the pre-1917 RSDLP, however, Crabapple exaggerates both Lenin's autocracy and Bundists' advocacy of "a decentralized coalition of autonomous groups."

Like other Central and Eastern European socialists, the Bund followed the German model of a congress that decided on policy and a central committee that determined tactics. As for Lenin's practice, Crabapple is too inclined to draw "a straight line" from 1903 petty factional divides to "a mass grave" under Stalinism. She ignores the balanced picture painted by observers like Victor Serge and Marcel Liebman,⁸ who described Bolshevism's open, democratic side.

There is no room in her indictment for the Lenin who tolerated open opposition by other Bolsheviks after 1905 to his call for participation in elections to the Duma, and even in November 1917 by his close lieutenants Zinoviev and Kamenev to the seizure of power. In reality, neither the Bolsheviks nor the Bundists imposed monolithic unity across the board. But for the Bolsheviks, unlike the Bund, questions of war and peace were a red line.

Crabapple does give credit to the Bolsheviks (as well as Nestor Makhno's anarchists) for trying to stop antisemitic pogroms carried out during the civil war by the Red Army as well as the Whites. Still, "Everyone killed Jews," she writes—about 200,000 of them in 1918–21. Antisemitic violence by Red Army units is an undeniable and shameful fact. But she acknowledges the reality that Lenin condemned the pogroms, that the soviet government "imprisoned or shot instigators," and that the killing of Jews was mostly the work of Whites. This was a crucial factor in the majority decision by the Bund in April 1920 to dissolve their organization and join the

Communist Party (Bolsheviks).

The Bund and the Yevtseksia

Nevertheless, hostility to the October Revolution results in a one-sided tilt in the second half of *Here Where We Live Is Our Country*. Crabapple celebrates the Bund's accomplishments in independent Ukraine in 1918–20 in the face of bloody pogroms and in interwar Poland despite overwhelming state-backed antisemitism. By 1938 the Bund was by far the most popular Jewish party in Poland, where it built a strong array of institutions, from schools to sanitoriums, in the large Jewish community. As late as 1939, there were more Jews in Warsaw alone than in all of Palestine.

But Crabapple almost completely ignores the even more impressive achievements of the Belarusian and Ukrainian soviet republics in the 1920s—largely the work of the Communist Yevseksia (Jewish Section), mostly composed of and led by former Bundists. Although Crabapple occasionally cites Zvi Gitelman's books on this period, she barely mentions his account of the Yevseksia's work, his main focus. Even worse is her complete omission, from her narrative and even her bibliography, of Elissa Bemporad's excellent book *Becoming Soviet Jews*.⁹

As Bemporad recounts, before the Yevseksia was dissolved under Stalin in 1931 and (in Crabapple's words) "Bundists-turned-Communists ended up in mass graves" in the late 1930s, Belorussia and its capital, Minsk, were a showcase of secular Yiddish culture. The Communists formally decided in 1919 to favor Yiddish as a modern, working-class Jewish language, and made it one of the Belarusian SSR's four official languages, alongside Belarusian, Russian, and Polish.

Yiddish was a language not only of newspaper and book publishing, but also of theater, radio, film, the post office, election

materials and even a Central Jewish Court. Writers like Sholem Aleichem were celebrated as Soviet Jewish heroes. Minsk had a public Yiddish-language school system, from kindergarten to the Yiddish-language section of the university.

Yiddish was also spoken at citywide Communist Party meetings. Much of this was in continuity with the work of the pre-revolutionary Bund. For example, the main Yiddish-language newspaper in Minsk was the former Bundist newspaper. Despite Polish Bundists' valiant efforts against daunting odds, they could never equal these Soviet achievements. Whatever Crabapple's reasons for opposing it, only the October Revolution made possible these triumphs of secular Yiddish culture.

Where We Live Is Our Country is a much-needed, moving, at times brilliant portrait of the world of interwar Yiddish-language socialism. It eloquently shows the tragedy of this world's destruction by Nazism, Stalinism, and, in the end, by Zionism. It fully merits the praise it has received. It is to be hoped that the story Crabapple tells can eventually be integrated into a more complete history of pre-Holocaust Jewish revolutionary socialism.

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Doubling Down

Making Sense of Ukraine?

DAVID FINKEL

IN MY SHARPLY CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE first edition of this book, I concluded that its failures in addressing the war in Ukraine consisted “in giving no answers, or dreadfully wrong ones, to what ‘ordinary Americans or Europeans’ should be trying to do about it, and refusing meaningful solidarity to what ordinary Ukrainians are actually doing. A peace movement worthy of the name, and capable of facing the enormous challenges that confront us in a world of intensifying imperialist rivalries, is going to have to do better than that.”¹

On the fourth anniversary of the full-scale annexationist Russian invasion, what do the authors have to say now? As co-author Nicolas Davies recounted at a forum this past fall in suburban Detroit, the publisher assigned the writers a rushed two months to produce the first edition of the book in response to the full-scale Russian invasion of February 24, 2022.

The new edition, landing in 2025, coincided with the escalation of Russia’s mis-

War in Ukraine. Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict

MEDEA BENJAMIN AND
NICOLAS J.S. DAVIES
OR Books, 2025, new and
expanded edition

sile and drone terror attacks on Ukraine’s infrastructure and civilian targets, as well as assaults on the ground that have made hundreds of thousands of Russia’s soldiers cannon fodder for the sake of capturing modest square kilometers of devastated Ukrainian territory.

This was also a year when Donald Trump’s

intention to sacrifice Ukraine on the altar of great-power art-of-the-deal-making became unmistakably clear.

The Benjamin and Davies book has had significant influence in sectors of the U.S. peace and antiwar movements, which is certainly why the publisher commissioned the new edition. In light of the ceaseless horrors of the war and the time the authors had to prepare it, it’s reasonable to examine whether and how the book updates their initial assertions. In particular:

1. Do Benjamin and Davies reconsider their highly one-sided account of the chaotic events of 2014 and lead-up to them, particularly the narrative that these were overwhelmingly products of U.S. and NATO manipulation?

2. Do they take seriously what Russia’s president-for-life Vladimir Putin has said about what Russia is fighting for, and the war’s “root causes”?

3. To what extent have they used the intervening time to consult the actual voices

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of Ukrainians and, for that matter, antiwar Russians?

4. Do they state a clear position, as they didn't in the first edition (and as Medea Benjamin repeatedly refused to do when asked directly), on whether Ukraine is a *nation with the rights of independence and self-determination, and the right to fight for them?*

Because the last of these questions is the most fundamental, I'll take it up first. And here's pretty much what our authors have to say about it:

[W]e felt that recounting the history of three years of war and outlining the early stages of the peace process, with all its ups and downs, would be of value to readers who want to understand why and how these negotiations offer the best hope for the future of all the people of Ukraine, from Lviv to Luhansk, and Kyiv to Sebastopol, including those who no longer consider themselves Ukrainians. (226–7)

What's meant by "*those who no longer consider themselves Ukrainians*" is not specified, but it's difficult to shake the suspicion that it references people now living under Russian occupation, forced to assume Russian status and passports whether or not they choose to do so, and that "these negotiations" will normalize the bloody amputation of Ukraine's territory.

Sympathy with the victims of war is entirely proper and necessary of course, but *not* as a cover for evading basic issues of principle. That's especially the case when the principle of *Ukraine's right to exist* is precisely the disputed issue behind the reality, as the authors ought to know. "These negotiations" over Ukraine are proceeding at about the same pace as the purported "negotiations" over Israel's genocide in Gaza. Just as the mass slaughter and ethnic cleansing in Palestine continues under the cover of Trump's "peace plan," so Russia targets Ukraine's energy grid in a freezing winter while the pretense of negotiations drags on.

That's a point I want to develop a bit further below. But moving backward through my list of questions, it's distressing to have to reiterate what I noted in my earlier review, that the only Ukrainian voice the authors actually cite is a lone antiwar pacifist Yurii Sheliazhenko. (236)

There is no mention of left-wing Ukrainians fighting in the war for their country while also organizing against the anti-labor and neoliberal capitalist policies of the Zelenskyy government. That includes members of the democratic socialist organization Sotsialnyi Rukh, whom you can find on "Sotsialnyi Rukh": who we are?"²

The leftwingers also include Ukrainians with pacifist beliefs who joined the Ukrainian military, like Roman Ratushnyi and Pavlo Petrychenko, who died in combat in 2022 and 2025, respectively. If you relied on Benjamin and Davies, you'd never know that such people existed, or why.

As for Russian voices, "[w]e have been moved by the courage of Russian feminists who opposed the war." (236) But it would be nice to know who they are, what they've said, and above all why? And there are Russian scholars now abroad—like Ilya Budraitskis and Ilya Matveev, to name just two—who have discussed in detail the nature and trajectory of the Russian regime—which they have described as "fascist"—that underlie its choice to wage an annexationist war.

You wouldn't write a book on the Gaza catastrophe without the voices of Palestinians and Israeli resisters. Why a book on "making sense of a senseless conflict" in Ukraine where Ukrainian and antiwar Russian voices are effectively silenced? But there's more that needs to be said about that.

Root Causes

In that hypothetical book about Gaza, something else that wouldn't be omitted

are the actual views of Israeli and Zionist movement leaders—in particular, their denial of the Palestinian people's rights to independence and self-determination, or of Palestinians' very existence as a people in the first place. The denial of their rights and of their existence as a people is the cover for Israeli propagandists' justification for Israel's intended final ethnic cleansing and mass expulsion of the populations of Gaza and the West Bank, and disenfranchisement and eventual removal of much of the Palestinian population with citizenship inside Israel.

But in the case of the Ukraine war, that's exactly why it's absolutely necessary to pay attention to Putin's own pronouncements on what *he's* fighting for. Andriy Movchan has provided a detailed analysis.³ Or you can find Putin's interview with fellow far-right Christian-nationalist ideologue Tucker Carlson on YouTube.⁴

Putin may have angry grievances about NATO and its promises against eastward expansion in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. But by his own account in "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" (July 12, 2021, on the kremlin.ru website), the *independent existence of Ukraine* is the real affront to Russia and the "root cause" of the conflict that can be resolved only by reincorporating its people into the embrace of their natural motherland.

In fact, Putin accuses Vladimir Lenin of the historic crime of recognizing Ukraine's right of self-determination at the foundation of the Soviet Union in 1922. For Putin, as Andriy Movchan puts it, "the Ukrainian nation and its statehood are artificial—a historic accident, an awkward mistake that it is now time to correct."

If Putin is not reticent about presenting this view openly to the world and western public, and frankly getting a lot of sympathy from J.D. Vance and Donald Trump, why

do Benjamin and Davies obscure it? Indeed, Putin's Russian *idée fixe* explains why the authors' hope of "these negotiations" offering survival "for all the people of Ukraine" is hardly viable.

Facing this situation as it really is, readers are free to reach their own conclusions. You may decide, like those of us in the Ukraine Solidarity Network (U.S.), that Ukraine is entitled to all the political, material, and military support it needs to resist until Putin and/or those around him recognize that the goal of conquering, subjugating, and "denazifying" (that is, murderously purging) Ukraine is not attainable.

Alternatively, you might decide along the lines of "realist" authors like Professor John Mearsheimer that Ukraine's military disadvantages, casualties, and real threat of demographic collapse dictate that it must accept not only territorial losses but some form of semicolonial status to be agreed among Russia, the USA, and European states with whatever security commitments the West might offer.

Or you might decide like Donald Trump that any "solution" is acceptable, so long as it provides U.S. access to Ukraine's mineral resources and fabulous investment opportunities in Russia for his family and friends.

But whatever *you* might conclude, *the decision must reside with Ukraine and its people* who have already fought and sacrificed so much.

How It Happened

The authors state their appeal this way: "Tragically and unjustly, it was Ukrainians, as well as Russian soldiers, who paid the ultimate price for the folly of Russian and Western leaders.... Embroiled in arguments about the culpability of the different sides, activists were left unable to build strong popular support for peace negotiations." (7)

But “peace negotiations” for what end?

Unlike some left “campists” who support Russian victory in the name of “anti-imperialism,” Benjamin and Davies are not supporters of Russia’s war. They cite Noam Chomsky’s statement about “criminality and stupidity on the Kremlin side, severe provocation on the U.S. side.” (231) And they write:

“Russia’s invasion was illegal on many counts. It was not an act of self-defense and it was certainly not authorized by the United Nations. Under international law, including the Kellogg-Briand Pact and the UN charter, the invasion was an illegal crime of aggression. But it was not ‘unprovoked,’ as U.S. officials repeatedly claimed.” (72)

But we’ve seen that the invasion was actually “provoked,” first and foremost, by *Ukraine’s independent existence*. And the events of 2014, which touched off Russia’s first military intervention, erupted when a majority of Ukrainians across a complex political spectrum—right, center and left, nationalist and European-oriented, and many variations of all the above—violently resisted a peremptory government dictate to switch from a pending economic agreement with the European Union to a Russian-dominated one.

If the Benjamin-Davies narrative is severely warped by the failure to deal with deeply rooted Russian annexationism, the indisputable fact is that there *was* U.S. and NATO provocation and interventionism all along—beginning of course with the run-amok “shock therapy” of post-Soviet privatization that generated a massively wealthy oligarchy, a desperately impoverished population, and politics that expanded on the cynical corruption that already pervaded the Soviet Union.

If you’re looking for a primer on the machinations of NATO and the massive

scale of the military buildup in its expanded area, and can set aside the authors’ one-sided portrayal of the road to war and ruin, the relevant chapters of this book are useful. I won’t repeat here what I wrote in my previous review.

The central problem to be emphasized is that the people of Ukraine are treated as objects of sympathy, rather than the necessary agents of their own future. This is particularly tragic at a moment when U.S. imperialism is asserting its domination over the peoples and nations of “our” hemisphere, telling Putin and Xi Jinping to rule their “own” parts of the globe as they like, and when genocide and ethnic cleansing in Palestine has almost vanished from mainstream media headlines.

Once again, we need a global peace and anti-imperialist movement of solidarity, not just sympathy for the suffering. That means something better than what Benjamin and Davies are offering.

NOTES

1. “Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict in Ukraine?” *Counterpunch*, Dec. 23, 2022, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2022/12/23/making-sense-of-a-senseless-conflict/>. See also the review of the first edition by Carl Mirra in *New Politics*: “The War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Book,” Summer 2023 (Vol. XIX, No. 3, Whole Number 75), <https://newpol.org/review/the-war-in-ukraine/>.
2. <https://rev.org.ua/sotsialnyi-rukh-who-we-are/>
3. Andriy Movchan, “The Russian Idée Fixe,” *Counterpunch*, Jan. 1, 2026, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2026/01/01/the-russian-idee-fixe/>
4. “Exclusive: Tucker Carlson Interviews Vladimir Putin,” Feb. 6, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOCWBhuDdDo>. A transcript in all its glory is at <https://www.rev.com/transcripts/tucker-carlson-interviews-vladimir-putin-transcript>.

Teamsters for a Democratic Union?

ANDREW SERNATINGER

IN 1982, SOCIALIST ACTIVIST AND academic Sam Friedman published *Teamster Rank and File: Power, Bureaucracy, and Rebellion at Work* (TRAF) about the arc of a rebellious Local Union in California over roughly twenty-five years. *TRAF* recounts the struggle within Local 208 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), beginning with a movement of rank-and-file truck drivers at one “barn” (Teamster lingo for “shop” or “bargaining unit”) in Los Angeles in the 1950s, through their rise to leadership within the Local; the complex interplay of class struggle, Teamster politics, and changes in the trucking industry; and a trusteeship of the union following the 1970 wildcat strike.

The book itself has a story that’s worth paying attention to. In the mid-1970s, Sam Friedman, an academic researcher and then-partisan of the International Socialists, approached Local 208 with a proposal to study the union and draw out its lessons for rank-and-file workers more broadly. Local 208’s leadership and general membership agreed, allowing Friedman access to officers and the rank and file alike. Friedman attended executive board and general membership meetings, shadowed business

agents (BAs) on their daily business, sat in on Stewards’ Councils, interviewed members of Local 208 as well as management at the shops the union represented, attended grievance panels and arbitrations, and was granted access to the union’s files for archival research. All of this gave Friedman a highly unusual access to the extraordinary Local Union; the interviews with workers and participants in the events interspersed

in the book give it a feel of a story lived rather than an abstracted study.

However, the publication of *TRAF* in 1982 coincided with the end of the organized trucking industry as it had existed for nearly fifty years. Whereas half a million workers, and thousands of companies, had been covered by the Teamster Master Freight Agreement (MFA) at its height, the MFA has been reduced to an agreement that essentially covers only one company, ABF, and perhaps 10,000 workers. The world that is described in *TRAF* is gone—in its place is a nonunion freight industry that hardly resembles what once was.

For the history of the book, the immediate appeal of *TRAF* was limited on its release. Friedman notes, in his introduction to the second edition, that when Columbia University Press first published the book, it was scheduled to be an expensive hard-cover-only printing aimed at academics. Friedman convinced the publisher to print

Teamster Rank
and File: Power,
Bureaucracy, and
Rebellion at Work
SAMUEL R. FRIEDMAN
Routledge, 2026 (2nd ed.)

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a run of 500 paperback copies, which he personally paid for and distributed to contacts at no cost. Additionally, the book did not receive a warm welcome from Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), as *TRAF*'s conclusion (correctly) anticipated that TDU would likely steer away from shop-floor activism and toward elections within the IBT as its central strategy.

Forty years later, anyone looking for a copy of the book will find only a limited number of secondhand hardbacks, if they can get the book at all. But interest in the Teamsters resurfaced in 2021 with the election of Sean O'Brien as general president of the International Union and talk of a strike at UPS. This recent history is beyond the scope of this review, but the competing perspectives on this O'Brien Teamster period have renewed interest in earlier periods of Teamster history for a new generation of labor activists and young leftists. The second edition of *TRAF* recovers what feels like valuable lost history, telling the story of a time that, in some ways, is so unlike our own, but also strikingly familiar—Teamster militants will find that the description of the union and how it works is nearly unchanged half a century after the events described in the book.

Local 208

At the time the book was written, Los Angeles Teamsters Local 208 was a union of "over 5000 members at more than 200 workplaces, primarily trucking companies" (56). *TRAF* covers the thirty-year arc of the rank and file in Local 208 as they attempted to create a militant, democratic Local Union, a drive that largely succeeded.

The story begins in the late 1940s, when the IBT installed John Filipoff as the secretary-treasurer (typically, the principal officer in a Teamsters Local Union). Under Filipoff, Local 208 operated as one might imagine a stereotypical Teamsters Union

would work: the officials failed or refused to do the basic work of representing workers in their disputes with management. Worker Mauricio Terrazas is quoted as saying, "There was no democracy at all. They ruled it from the top. One guy I worked with was paid \$10 each meeting to work over anyone who raised stuff from the floor." As a result, drivers "were harassed, overworked, cheated out of benefits and protections contractually due them, and fired arbitrarily" (75).

In the mid-1950s a driver at Pacific Motor Transport (PMT) was fired after calling in sick. BAs at Local 208 ignored the members' pleas to reinstate their coworker. Frustrated, the driver-members barred entry to the workplace until the issue was resolved. As a result Local 208 BAs immediately arrived and secured a job for the fired worker.

John T. Williams, a black truck driver and soon-to-be key figure in the struggle within the Local, was similarly fired over an accident in the terminal. "The Local did not try to defend him or even to get him his pay for that last night; it just told him to work out of the hiring hall." Williams, who was driving freight while going through law school, added his intellectual heft to the effort.

The crises around basic defense of a worker catalyzed the struggle for democracy in Local 208. Years of frustration with the company and with the union spurred rank-and-file drivers to take on the deficiencies of the Local through a combination of efforts to democratize the Local Union and use direct action to confront their employers.

In the 1950s, Local 208 had no shop stewards—union business was conducted by BAs or not at all. Members requested stewards from the Local but the BAs rebuffed them. So the drivers at PMT selected their own stewards and forced the company to deal with them or risk work-

ers disrupting the operation. PMT gave in, and shortly after Local 208 conceded and recognized stewards as part of the union's representation system.

TRAF details further efforts to build a formal Stewards' Council, to institute elections for BAs (rather than having them appointed), to secure rank-and-file control of contract negotiations for control of the Local Union itself, and the aborted desires to spread their model to other Teamster locals. The story winds through decisions made by factions within the ranks of 208, the maneuvering of the Teamster Joint Councils against Teamster president Jimmy Hoffa at the national IBT bureaucracy, and the various trusteeships imposed on the Local to wrest control away from the ranks.

"Drivers and Driving" (chapter 3) is a crucial chapter for understanding the objective factors that made the rank-and-file movement possible. This is one of the shining moments of *TRAF*. Friedman explains concretely how the industry structured driving in a way that facilitated drivers from different barns and terminals regularly interacting with one another during the workday, which was the precondition of any organized movement. But more than that, truck driving allowed for *unsupervised* socializing between members of Local 208, free from the employers and the union officials.

In the 1950s, the kind of surveillance that has become part and parcel of working life was simply not a factor. Further, because the few BAs in Local 208 were spread across 200 barns, members rarely encountered BAs. The absence of serious intervention created an environment in which workers were freer to discuss, build trust, strategize, and execute their plans. This happened out of the union's hiring hall for drivers laid off from regular employment, in parking lots where members set up recreational spaces in tents or out of

cars, and in cafes that drivers frequented between deliveries.

Though the drivers were impelled by the failure of the union to respond to their real workplace grievances, it's important to pay attention to the balance of power in the freight industry over the period discussed in the book. When the freight industry was organized in the 1930s, it was made up of thousands of small employers in regional economies. "In 1951, there were 47,435 trucking companies in the United States. Only 34 of these had 500 or more employees" (121). The Teamsters Union was effectively larger and more organized than any of these companies, and it was possible for an organized rank and file to catch the employers unprepared and to win real and immediate victories, which galvanized their movement. Already by the 1960s, the industry had begun to consolidate into fewer, larger firms, with a professional layer of labor relations specialists who were ready to rebuff the union. Local 208 stood on this shifting terrain; as the movement formed, they had greater potential power. Paradoxically, as the drivers' rank and file organization developed, the opportunities to exert their growing power shrank as the industry changed around them.

This brings us to the issue of contingency. In many ways, what makes *TRAF* such an engrossing read is that it is a story of things that probably should not have happened. The regular mechanisms of the union bureaucracy failed such that a rank-and-file movement was able to form. The mature movement was able to win power over the Local but it then faced the combined forces of the employers and the IBT. The story gives us a rare look into the problems a rank-and-file movement in power might face, where we are more familiar with the early stages a movement-in-formation faces.

We can observe the contingent factors:

1. The Local Union fails to service the membership at the minimum level expected.
2. The workers are adequately organized to take the initiative for their mutual aid and defense.
3. If their efforts are successful, the rank and file seek to have their activity legitimized and incorporated into the Local Union.
4. The bureaucracy refuses, ignores, or rejects the workers' endeavors.
5. The rank and file seek to change the Local, challenging the bureaucracy either directly (for office) or indirectly (over practices, policy, bylaws, etc.).
6. The bureaucracy either:
 - Seeks to incorporate the leaders of the movement into the bureaucracy;
 - Presents a unified front of its officials against the rank and file to smash it;
 - Splits, where a section of officials seek to advance their own ambitions in alliance with the rank-and-file; or,
 - Submits for a change of venue to another arena more favorable to them (i.e. the International Union or a court of law), often forcing a receivership, where the local union's autonomy is stripped and decisions are made by an appointed trustee.

The story of Local 208 is fascinating because the bureaucracy repeatedly had opportunities to reassert their control with decisions that would have appeased the ranks and not fundamentally upset the balance of power. If instead of rebuking the workers the bureaucracy had incorporated certain practices, one would expect that the opposition would have been contained. Instead, they repeatedly failed to act appropriately, and that failure creates the possibility (but not the inevitability) of a greater organized movement.

The IBT, too, could have acted to stifle the insurgent movement. However, faced with raids by the AFL-CIO, federal corruption charges, breakaway locals, and

rank-and-file resistance, the IBT did not oppose changes in Local 208 that would normally be considered incompatible with its rule, i.e., elected BAs chosen directly by the rank and file. The conflict among IBT officials provided breathing room for the members in 208, though the IBT ultimately reasserted itself following the Teamster Wildcats in 1970.

To their credit, in the 1950s, Local 208 rank and filers did not believe that they were strong enough to directly contest for control of the Local. Instead they sought to build support in their shops and to advance their objectives through motions at membership meetings. This unintentionally helped the long-term prospects of the movement, because rank-and-file leaders were forced to develop independently and through direct shop-floor actions that built up an active layer of members to give substance to their democratic project. They just as easily could have won office prematurely and been disciplined into reproducing the business union practices they sought to overcome. Reading how this perfect storm brewed is a gift to anyone on the labor left.

TDU: 1982 and 2026

TRAF (in)famously warned, as early as 1982, that Teamsters for a Democratic Union was not immune to the conservatizing pressures to bureaucratize.

The direct bureaucratization of TDU seems unlikely. That would involve the development of a central staff in TDU that could exert its power over the membership and that could erode the rank-and-file democracy that characterizes the organization.... Bureaucratization of TDU is more likely to occur...[as] an institutionalized union opposition, creating a *de facto* two-party system within the IBT.... The growth of electoralism in TDU and the associated approach of looking toward lower-level union officers to carry out the battle in place of the active struggle of the rank-and-file, might

well lead to this.... If Local officials get elected by TDU, and stay in the organization, they will become an influential leadership grouping within TDU. They will, however, be subject to all the conservatizing forces discussed.... One can readily imagine the development of a bureaucratic cadre in the TDU national office around staff members who become experts at running elections. (217)

This is precisely what happened—even the “unlikely” parts. TDU formally became a nonprofit, which has been run for over fifty years by Ken Paff, Peter Landon, and David Levine from offices first in Detroit and then New York. TDU is the “membership” wing of the organization, while the “Teamster Rank and File Education and Legal Defense Fund” (TRF) is a 501(c)3 that takes money from anyone who cares to donate. In the 1980s, TRF appealed to the federal government to have its list of contributors exempt from public reporting requirements. They were successful, and to this day the names of contributors are kept secret.

The membership structure of TDU has been effectively killed: there are no longer TDU branches where activists meet to formulate plans. “Democracy” is limited to the annual TDU “Convention” where a slate of candidates for the “International Executive Board” (who have been picked in advance) are approved by the “members”—membership, too, has come to mean anyone who pays their annual \$50 fee to TDU. The International Executive Board has been made up primarily of Local officers or IBT staff, many of whom have won their positions with TDU’s support. How this developed in the years since the events in *TRAF* is beyond the scope of this review, but Friedman was attentive to these possibilities even before the Ron Carey administration (1991–97).

We can touch only briefly on TDU’s alliance with Sean O’Brien, general presi-

dent of the IBT, and on what this alliance represents. O’Brien embarked on a great marketing campaign for a 2022 strike at UPS that never materialized. Part-time UPS Teamsters organized a “Vote No” campaign, akin to TDU’s campaign in 2016, in which the new agreement failed to raise the wages of part-timers or to seriously address the conditions inside UPS sort-and-pick facilities. TDU sided with O’Brien and opposed the “Vote No” campaign. TDU likewise sided with O’Brien when he sued Teamsterlink.org, a rank-and-file website, for using the IBT logo, as TDU has done for decades. And they have worked—through editorials and election protests—to defeat the FEARLESS slate of members who were running for the top union office. The result is that for the first time in nearly forty years, there will be no election for top officers in the IBT.

The real weakness of this new edition is Friedman’s commentary from the present in 2026 is its failure to analyze the current role of TDU. In the new Introduction to the second edition of *TRAF*, he gives the first, last, and only word on TDU and the Teamsters to Ken Paff. He does not engage even one other Teamster regarding TDU or O’Brien; not Tim Sylvester, Tom Leedham, or Bill Zimmerman, longtime stalwarts of TDU who were cast out when they voiced their consciences about the disaster of the O’Brien alliance; not Dan La Botz or Mel Packer, or any of the older International Socialists (IS) cadres who founded TDU and are still alive today; not Richard Hooker Jr. or John Palmer who were leading the FEARLESS slate; not Joe Allen who has written extensively on the Teamsters; and certainly not any younger activists who may be attracted to Teamsters Mobilize, like Jess Leigh, who was barred from attending TDU’s convention in 2025.

Instead, Friedman ultimately characterizes TDU as a longtime success. He leans

on nostalgia for the IS as he dismisses the many controversies as merely unfortunate. It feels an alien imposition onto a book that is otherwise grounded in the activity of those it seeks to study. Similar to Pete

Camarata and Doug Allen's foreword in 1982, I welcome this book—and suggest skipping the introduction (at least until the end).

White Rage

FRANCIS SHOR

HARBORING LONG-STANDING RACIAL resentments against Black and Brown people, Bernard Goetz, a 6-foot 1-inch slightly built white man, boarded the subway on December 22, 1984 at the 14th Street Station in Manhattan. He carried something even more lethal than his racist biases. Armed with a .38 Smith & Wesson, one of the four unlicensed guns Goetz owned, he was on hair-trigger alert for any self-perceived threat from people of color.

Among the passengers that Goetz would encounter were four Black teenagers—Troy Canty, Barry Allen, James Ramseur, and Darrell Cabey. Acting out with the kind of kinetic energy typical of most youth, regardless of racial make-up, they appeared rowdy but not threatening to the other passengers on that car. Entering

that space, Goetz took a seat close to the standing Troy and Barry and not far from the seated James and Darrell. When Troy drew closer to him to ask for five bucks, Goetz rose, reached in his windbreaker and withdrew his weapon. Firing a total of five shots into the four Black teenagers, he then fled as they bled out on the floor to the horror of the frightened bystanders on that subway car.

The story of this dramatic confrontation, the subsequent arrest,

and criminal trial of Bernie Goetz is the primary subject of this exquisitely fashioned but excruciating story. Heather Ann Thompson's *Fear and Fury*, however, is more than the narrative rendering of a *Law & Order* extended television script. Beyond the compelling reconstruction of the lives of Goetz and his four victims, the book explores how the crime and legal proceedings fit into a larger socio-historical context—a context that is threaded throughout the trials, both criminal and civil. Without slighting the masterful presentation of those trials and their aftermath, I want to

Fear and Fury: The Reagan Eighties, the Bernie Goetz Shootings, and the Rebirth of White Rage
HEATHER ANN THOMPSON
Pantheon Books, 2026

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highlight and comment on the threads that Thompson weaves.

The immediate economic backdrop to what the nation and New York City faced in the 1980s was a full-frontal assault on the social safety net established by FDR's New Deal and LBJ's Great Society. While Thompson does not shy away from referencing how many of these programs "were in fact riddled with discriminatory provisions" (26), leading some historians to refer to this phenomenon as "white affirmative action," she curiously never discusses the neoliberal agenda sponsored by both parties. Hence, she overlooks the de-regulation undertaken by the Carter administration and the global development of U.S.-imposed structural adjustment policies that would have its domestic equivalents in the hollowing out of public services. Nonetheless, she hones in on how the "Reagan Revolution" extended tax breaks to the wealthy while cutting social services that particularly impacted Black families like those in the South Bronx where the four teenage victims resided (28–29).

The economic dislocations borne by the working poor in urban areas like the South Bronx were accompanied by increased discrimination, especially around the so-called War on Drugs. Thompson cites the astounding rise in unemployment "from 264,000 unemployed New Yorkers in January 1970" to "a full 753,000" by January 1983 (32). In turn, she describes the toll that crack took on young Blacks in such depressed locations and the constant hassling by police and unfair charges launched by the criminal justice system. As Thompson makes clear, such repressive policies during the Reagan presidency resulted in the prison population rising from 329,000 to 627,000 during the eight years of his presidency (34).

While the Black "underclass" would egregiously suffer during the 1980s, a

white "overclass" flourished through their privileged positions in areas like real estate and the media. In the illuminating chapter called "Profiting from Pain," the book presents two characters, Donald Trump and Rupert Murdoch, who would rise to prominence in the 1980s. Dominating the economic and media landscapes of New York City during this period, both Trump and Murdoch would play outsized roles in reinforcing racial resentments against Blacks, from their embrace of white vigilantes like Goetz in the pages of Murdoch's *New York Post* to Trump's scurrilous call for the re-institution of the death penalty to deal with the Central Park Five, five Black men falsely accused of the brutal beating and rape of a white woman in Central Park in 1989.

When it came to reporting on the sensational years' long criminal and civil trials against Bernie Goetz, the *New York Post* led the way in denouncing the four Black teenagers as "animals" who deserved no mercy and defending Goetz as the "real victim" during his bouts with the criminal justice system in the 1980s (234). Although the state did prosecute Goetz, the jury in the criminal case was swayed more by a barely suppressed white rage, played upon by Bernie's defense attorney and exacerbated by the media landscape. Hence, the murder charges were dismissed, leaving Goetz facing a minor prison term for the charge of carrying an unlicensed gun.

Indeed, the gun culture and its promoters in the NRA embraced Bernie as a hero. As Thompson points out, the NRA did more than merely utilizing Goetz as an example of the "good guy" with a gun. They also extensively bankrolled his legal fees. While *Fear and Fury* underscores this close link between the gun culture of the 1980s and white rage, it neglects the longer trajectory of the ways that white supremacy has been embedded in the history of guns

in the United States—a history explored in important studies by Carol Anderson, Kathleen Belew, Joan Burdick, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Doug Kellner, Richard Slotkin, and Angela Stroud, among others. She does, however, prove and reinforce her point that “Bernie Goetz’s shootings had unleashed and normalized a new era of racialized rage” (326).

The Goetz shootings and its legacy were not uncontested during and after the criminal trial. Newspapers like the Harlem-based *Amsterdam News* tried to counter the narrative of the white “victim” and Black “predators.” Especially when it came to seeking justice for Darrell Cabey, the most egregiously injured of the four Black teenagers who was confined to a wheelchair and in need of constant medical attention from the bullets discharged by Goetz, help came from prominent defense attorneys like William Kunstler, and his associate, Ron Kuby, and the Center for Constitutional Rights. While winning a verdict in the civil case, the Cabey family never received a dime of the awarded amount.

Fear and Fury doesn’t hesitate to link the Goetz legacy to more recent gun-toting vigilantes like George Zimmerman and Kyle Rittenhouse. Thompson also cites the significant work of Black Lives Matter (BLM) in challenging racist policing and the murder of unarmed Blacks. Yet, in her discussion of the insurrectionists who stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, she misses the opportunity to probe the racial rage and resentments that fueled many of those in the mob. It’s instructive to

note that one of those white insurrectionists was shocked by the police response he encountered. This person was quoted as saying that the people who deserved to be violently dealt with were Black Lives Matter activists and not “patriotic” whites.

Thompson is, of course, well aware that her recounting of the events surrounding the Goetz shootings still resonates. White racial rage, unfortunately, remains all too present, albeit somewhat mitigated by mobilization campaigns like BLM and the Minneapolis opposition to ICE predations. Certainly, there are hopeful instances of transcending weaponized whiteness. The election of Zohran Mamdani as mayor of New York City, swept into office by young voters and first-generation immigrants, offers some optimism. Yet, elsewhere, whether in the corrupt policies emanating from the Trump White House or in the gerrymandering sanctioned by the U.S. Supreme Court, especially in the South, white fear and fury fuels legal and extra-legal efforts to victimize people of color. Perhaps, most disheartening is the perpetuation of the idea of “victimized” whites, reflected most recently in the disgusting moment of silence at the Minnesota Republican state convention for Derek Chauvin, the convicted killer cop of George Floyd. Reading and truly engaging with Thompson’s compelling text is an important step in understanding the history of white racial rage. Such engagement may also offer critical insights into defeating the persistence of white racial rage in whatever form.

Partition in South Asia

AMNA LATIF

75 *YEARS AFTER PARTITION: INDIA, Pakistan, and Bangladesh* offers a timely, interdisciplinary intervention into the cultural memory, historiography, and ideological reproduction of the 1947 Partition of British India and the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. Spanning cinema, literature, textbooks, and language politics, the volume situates Partition not as a finite historical event, but as an ongoing process—a living memory-project shaped by state narratives, popular culture, and personal trauma. While the volume is ambitious and often incisive, it is uneven in theoretical depth, methodological rigor, and critical reflexivity.

Building on this foundational premise, the volume's most significant achievement lies in its interdisciplinary breadth. By bringing together scholars from history, media studies, literature, and education, it demonstrates how Partition continues to shape national identities and ideological frameworks across South Asia. The inclusion of analyses of cinema (both Bollywood and Lollywood), textbooks, novels, and language politics allows for a multi-scalar understanding of how Partition is narrated,

remembered, and weaponized in different contexts. This interdisciplinary approach is not just expansive—it is essential, as it reveals how memory is constructed not only in archives and classrooms but also in cinemas and living rooms.

Central to this endeavor is the editors' framing of Partition as a "politicized memory-project." This concept is theoretically grounded and sets a critical tone for the volume. It chal-

lenges statist historiographies that either glorify or erase Partition violence, and instead positions memory as a contested terrain where nationalist, gendered, and religious identities are continuously negotiated. This framing is particularly effective in destabilizing monolithic narratives and opening space for subaltern, feminist, and counter-hegemonic readings.

Among the most analytically rich contributions are the chapters on cinematic representations. Ritika Verma and Anjali Gera Roy's analysis of Hindi films like *Pinjar*, *Veer-Zaara*, and *Uri* offers a nuanced reading of how mainstream cinema oscillates between humanist cross-border romance and hyper-nationalist militarism. Their conclusion—that even seemingly progressive films like *Veer-Zaara* ultimately reinforce Hindu majoritarian nationalism through symbolic "Hindu-ization" of the female protagonist—is a powerful cri-

75 Years After Partition:
India, Pakistan, and
Bangladesh
AMIT RANJAN AND
FAROOQ SULEHRIA, EDS.
Routledge, 2026

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tique of how cinema can subtly entrench majoritarian ideologies under the guise of universalism.

Complementing this, Farooq Sulehria's chapter on Lollywood (the Pakistani film industry) is a standout. His theorization of Partition as a three-stage process—Context, Event, and Memorialization—is a significant theoretical contribution. Through discourse analysis of films like *Kartar Singh* and *Khamosh Pani*, he demonstrates that Pakistani cinema has both resisted and reproduced statist narratives. His observation that *Khamosh Pani* was banned for its radical gendered critique of Islamization is particularly striking, and his use of a Marxist framework to view cinema as an ideological state apparatus is both bold and well-earned.

In contrast, Fahmidul Haq's chapter on Bangladeshi cinema, while empirically rich, is theoretically thinner. He convincingly demonstrates the “absence of 1947” and the “abundance of 1971” in Bangladeshi cinema, but his explanation—that 1971 is more recent and emotionally resonant—risks reifying the very amnesia he critiques. This chapter misses an opportunity to engage more deeply with trauma theory or postcolonial melancholia, which other contributors, such as Afroja Shoma, employ more effectively to explore the psychological afterlives of Partition.

Shifting from screen to classroom, the two chapters on textbooks—Devika Mittal (India) and Mazhar Abbas (Pakistan)—offer scathing indictments of how state curricula produce and perpetuate stigmatized Muslim identities. Mittal's analysis of two Indian history textbooks reveals how Muslims are either “invisibilized” as freedom fighters or “demonized” as communal actors. Her conclusion that textbooks reproduce the “enemy within” narrative is chilling and empirically well-supported. Similarly, Abbas's comparative analysis of Pakistani textbooks under the Zia dictatorship and

Gen. Musharraf's military shows that both military regimes, despite ideological differences, used Hegelian philosophical history to selectively narrate 1947 as “liberation” and 1971 as “conspiracy.” His documentation of how Bengalis are “silenced” or “othered” as Hindu agents is a sobering reminder of the way Partition continues to shape intra-Muslim hierarchies in Pakistan.

Both chapters, however, suffer from a lack of engagement with pedagogy. They analyze content but not classroom reception or teacher mediation. Without ethnographic or student-centered data, their claims about the “effects” of these textbooks remain speculative. This methodological gap points to a broader limitation in the volume: while it excels at textual critique, it often assumes ideological transmission without empirically evidencing how audiences interpret or resist these narratives.

Turning to literature, Afroja Shoma's chapter on Bangladeshi novels and Qaisar Abbas's chapter on *Zameen* by Khadija Mastoor offer powerful gendered readings of Partition. Shoma's use of “post-amnesia” and “long partition” to frame 1971 as an extension of 1947 is theoretically sophisticated. Her reading of female bodies becoming sites of national honor and trauma is compelling, though her sample lacks Dalit or indigenous voices. Similarly, Abbas's analysis of *Zameen* is a searing feminist critique of how migrancy and patriarchy intersect in post-Partition Pakistan. His conceptual model—Partition → Ideological State → Patriarchy → Mendacity—is ambitious and largely convincing, though at times overly schematic, reducing complex literary characters to ideological archetypes.

Extending the lens to language, Amit Ranjan's chapter on the communalization of Hindi and Urdu is a valuable contribution to the linguistic afterlives of Partition. His fieldwork in Mumbai adds ethnographic texture, showing the way ordinary

speakers blur the Hindi-Urdu divide even as elites police linguistic purity. However, his conclusion that “common people speak *khichdi*” risks romanticizing syncretism and underplaying the fact that language is increasingly policed in contemporary India. The chapter also under-theorizes the role of script—Devanagari vs. Nastaliq—as a visual marker of religious identity, which could have deepened the analysis.

Despite these strengths, the volume has notable silences. Dalit and Adivasi perspectives are almost entirely absent, leaving Partition’s impact on caste hierarchies and tribal displacement largely unaddressed. Queer readings of Partition cinema or literature are missing, despite the volume’s strong gendered focus. Moreover, reader reception or audience studies are lacking—most chapters assume ideological

transmission without exploring how audiences interpret, resist, or reconfigure these narratives. Finally, while the volume spans India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, comparative transnationalism is underdeveloped; there is little dialogue between the chapters that could have enriched the analysis.

In conclusion, *75 Years After Partition* is a vital intervention in Partition Studies. The volume successfully demonstrates how Partition is not a past event but an ongoing ideological project that shapes citizenship, gender, and identity across South Asia. Its strengths lie in its interdisciplinarity, gendered readings, and critique of majoritarian nationalism. However, its methodological limitations—especially the lack of ethnographic or reception studies—and theoretical unevenness prevent it from being a truly transformative volume.

Media and Empire in Afghanistan

FAROOQ SULEHRIA

PUBLISHED ON THE CUSP OF WARS on Iran and Venezuela (and possibly Cuba), *Propaganda, Communication and Empire: Western Intervention in Afghanistan* is an ominously timely intervention to document and theorize

Propaganda, Communication
and Empire: Western
Intervention in Afghanistan
SUMANTH INUKONDA, OLIVER
BOYD-BARRETT, AND LARA
MARTIN LENGEL, EDS.
Routledge, 2025

Empire’s media and propaganda warfare through the already forgotten Afghan war post-9/11.

Jointly edited by Sumanth Inukonda, Oliver Boyd-Barrett, and Lara Martin Lengel, this tome brings once-fashionable Afghanistan back on the academic agenda.

This rather voluminous (15 chapters) book is neatly divided into three sections. Part One, consisting of six chapters, begins with a ritualistic Introduction. The declared

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aim the editors set for their investigations is to interrogate “mediated politics of western intervention in Afghanistan from the perspective of long-established critiques of such interventions with a view to a deeper understanding of the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan 2001–2021 within the violent, broader transition toward a multipolar global order” (p. 2). A cogent critique of Herman and Chomsky’s “Propaganda Model,” in the Introduction deserves attention from every reader with an interest in media studies. It really helps extend Herman and Chomsky’s framework.

The next chapter, by Boyd-Barrett, offers the context to the study and outlines the theoretical perspective. He reminds his readers that from 2001 to 2021, Afghan casualties amounted to between half a million and a million dead and wounded while 2,488 U.S. troops were killed and 20,722 wounded (p. 20).

Boyd-Barrett claims that because a “comprehensive understanding of the reasons for war is incompletely available to those involved in the fighting and immediate impacts of war,” therefore, we must distinguish between the causes of war; the explanations that participants, journalists, and scholars articulate to explain to themselves and to others; and the pretexts that authoritative participants provide as (self) justifications. While causes “may be established with reference to empirical evidence...[e]xplanations are more subjective, and they may or may not align with causes. Pretexts have a more formal character. They may or may not align with either explanations or with causes, but they are more likely to align with explanations than with causes” (p. 13). Furthermore, “the pretexts may be selected not so much because they are necessarily real or authentic, but because they are more likely than others to command consensus across the internal boundaries of war coalitions and/or more likely than oth-

ers to excite the attention and enthusiasm of mainstream media.... [T]he pretexts most likely will evolve, change, or adapt to new circumstances” (p. 13), while “causes may be subterranean, may lie beyond awareness or articulation, even as they contribute to the shaping of decisions that people take about the war. Such factors include demography, economic strength and weakness, employment trends, supply chains, and changing temperatures, factors that may play out over many decades or more” (p. 14). After an exhaustive review of the conceptual debate, Boyd-Barrett convincingly concludes, “The recent history of Afghanistan is in part a history of false or problematic pretexts for the actions of invaders, actions that invariably cause or provoke reactions, both predictable and unanticipated” (p. 19). Prophetically, long before the formulation “Donroe Doctrine” gained currency, Boyd-Barrett presaged Empire’s obsession with the Monroe Doctrine. By anchoring the Afghan war in the Monroe Doctrine, he demonstrates that the Democrats are as hawkish as the Republican Trump and his MAGA base:

Whatever the explanations and pretexts (overt and covert) for why the USA embarked on the invasion...underlying U.S. motivation [was] an extension of the 1823 Monroe doctrine from a commitment to preserve the Americas from European interventions to a more modernized version that establishes and preserves U.S. hegemony over the world order, first adumbrated in the Wolfowitz doctrine of 1992 and formalized by the Bush doctrine of 2002. I shall further argue that this history must be understood with reference to the parallel U.S.-led invasion and occupation of another predominantly Muslim country, Iraq (p. 21).

In chapter 3, Sumanth Inukonda foregrounds the Afghan war’s class basis and the nature of imperial aid to periphery states: “Around 80–90 percent of the U.S. \$2.6 trillion invested in Afghanistan has

been routed back through defense contracts. *Russia Today* reported that Raytheon, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, and Northrop Grumman's returns were in hundreds of percentage points during the war" (p. 39). From an AfPak perspective, the following claim, albeit unsubstantiated, holds great value in view of Pak-Afghan skirmishes since the summer of 2025: "As it became apparent that the occupying forces could not defeat the Taliban, the U.S. adopted the Pakistani narrative of good Taliban-bad Taliban. This narrative laid the foundation for negotiations in Doha regarding the Taliban's potential integration into the Afghan government" (p. 39).

Inukonda's claim (p. 57) about Doha investing in U.S. academics and holding academic conferences to pave the way for the good Taliban PR campaign (again unsubstantiated) provides intriguing clues to future research on Qatar's role in regional geopolitics.

The next chapter (no. 4) by Boyd-Barrett and Lara Martin Lengel, in a way, extends the theoretical concepts offered in chapter 2 through the notion of "narrative consolidation." This notion builds on their previous framework of strategic narratives which helps us understand "how power and influence work in political discourse, international relations, and other geopolitical discursive contexts" (p. 62). Down the line (chapter 6), Lengel scans the Afghan war through this lens. Meantime, in chapter 5, Daniel Boroudy and David Ulvag brilliantly flag the role of Okinawa as a key strategic location in the global war on terror.

Despite many merits, this section, however, is not lacking in contentious claims. From the outset, a campist perspective informs the narratives (for instance, uncritical justification of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and claims that Washington wanted to unseat Assad [p. 25]). Likewise, while chapter 4 flags important aspects

that 9/11 investigators ignored, the text smacks of conspiracy theory. It is true that the 9/11 investigations don't answer a host of questions, yet the fact is: Al-Qaida did not categorically deny responsibility. Narratives rescuing Al-Qaida dangerously legitimize Islamic fundamentalists whose prime targets are Muslims in the Muslim world. Certain erroneous terminologies, for instance "Afghani" as the term for the citizens of Afghanistan (pp. 16, 17, and later in chapter 9, p. 162), betrays the lack of an intimate familiarity with the case study. Afghani is the country's currency while the people are Afghans. Afghan nationals, justifiably, are irritated by this confusion. Another term: "radical Islam/Islamists (p. 5) is also problematic (see, inter alia, Sulehria 2022). An appropriate term would be Islamic fundamentalist. Similarly, the claim based on Lucy Edward's research that a clownish character such as Abdul Haq was an alternative to the Taliban (p. 28) hardly gels with reality.

Lengel's claims, contrasting 9/11 coverage in the UK and U.S. press, is also rather one-sided. Lengel says, "in the UK... there were more rigorous analyses and instances of counternarratives to the largely acritical U.S. reporting" and she cites Seumas Milne, Comment Editor for *The Guardian*, as an instance (p. 116).

The UK media were hardly critical in this case.

The watchdog *Media Lens*, for instance, was indeed critical of British media, particularly the BBC, and its coverage of the Afghan and Iraq wars. (See, inter alia, *Media Lens*, 2002; Nikolai Lanine and *Media Lens*, 2007; *Media Lens*, 2010.)

Geopolitics and Imperialism

Part Two, consisting of four chapters, contextualizes the Afghan case against a global backdrop. It begins with Raghwa Sharma's brilliant indictment of Moscow, Beijing,

Tehran, and Islamabad (though New Delhi is a glaring absence here) for their opportunistic politics in the context of the Taliban and Afghanistan. Philip Munch (chapter 8) skillfully outlines narratives and counternarratives on the Afghan war. Likewise, Pablo Sapag's chapter (10) adeptly documents Spain's role in Afghanistan. In Spain, the right- and the left-wing governments adopted different positions on the Afghan and Iraq wars, yet, both used the "war on terror" to serve their domestic agendas and revive Spain's de-glossed imperial past. Spain's case also reflects, pre-Trump, the imperial paradigm constructed by Gilbert Achcar (2010) whereby the United States plays the role of an overlord while key EU countries acted as Empire's vassals.

Inukonda and Lengel (chapter 9) contribute perhaps the topically most relevant text in this section, in the context of Afghanistan post-9/11. One of the pretexts to occupy Afghanistan was women's liberation, igniting an oceanic debate at the time. Although Inukonda and Lengel, to their credit, revive the debate and also shed light on the plight of religious minorities, nevertheless an important opportunity was missed to question both liberal and Islamic feminists. While liberal feminists lent support to the invasion, Islamic feminists seized the opportunity to discredit AfPak Marxists-feminists. Anybody opposing the Taliban and exposing their barbaric anti-woman agenda was cast as a suspect, if not an imperial agent by the Islamic feminists. The Taliban's return to Kabul and post-2021 Afghanistan and their establishment of Women's Apartheid prove liberal feminists as wrong as their Islamic counterparts. Inukonda and Lengel somehow avoid this primary debate. Instead, this chapter descends off-ramp when Noble laureates, Malala Yousufzai and Nadia Murad are binarized.

Media and Global War on Terror

Part Three opens with an excellent but complicated (for an audience unfamiliar with the AfPak context) study, by Syed Irfan Ashraf and Azmat Khan (chapter 11), with global relevance. On both sides of the Af-Pak border, another tragic legacy of British colonialism, the Pashtun tribes dominate the region. The Afghan Jihad in the 1980s turned Peshawar, a sleepy little town, into a nodal point for global media. Serving as the capital of the Pashtun-majority province, Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa (formerly, North Western Frontier Province), was a media outpost for the mainstream Pakistani press before the 1980s. To cover Afghanistan, Peshawar-based Pushto-speaking journalists were employed as authentic "insiders." These journalists, on the one hand, served as fixers for global media outlets, gathering information, on the other hand, their authenticity—as Ashraf and Khan skillfully demonstrate—was questionable since they had their own ideologies, prejudices, and biases. Notably, the authors demonstrate that a global conflict, the Afghan Jihad with 9/11 as a blowback sequel, sculpted the political economy of media in Peshawar besides shaping journalistic practices.

The next chapter by Christina Smith problematizes Sharbat Gul's iconic image, flashed for the first time on the cover of *National Geographic* in the 1980s. Gul's case demonstrates the power of imperial media. They can beautify a tragedy in line with Western aesthetics. Likewise, imperial media, as this chapter shows, can rescue individuals but destroy nations. This chapter is built upon secondary sources. An effort to reach and interview Sharbat Gul, giving words to her voice, would have lent this otherwise rich text a new empirical and conceptual value. The next two chapters (13 and 14), expertly establish Hollywood's imperial role in two ways. In chapter 13, Mathew Alford interviewed by

Ben Arthur Thomason, cites a number of Hollywood productions “directed” by the U.S. Department of Defense or the CIA. Inukonda, likewise, in the penultimate chapter delicately demonstrates various patterns of on-screen urban destruction in Hollywood productions, before and after 9/11. For students and scholars of film studies, both these chapters offer new empirical and conceptual insights. The book rounds up with an Afterword by Boyd-Barrett.

All in all, the book is a well-timed (albeit inadvertently) intervention. Not merely media scholars and students can benefit from this work as a framework to study imperial media’s role in the ongoing wars in the Middle East and Latin America. Although one may disagree with certain contentions in the book, the rigor in research and conceptual richness that inform the debates turn this book into an indictment of imperial media.

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Letter from Afghanistan

Women under Taliban Assault

AZADEH OMID

I AM WRITING FROM AFGHANISTAN, where days end with fear and nights end with anxiety. We Afghan girls no longer know whether life should be called life or simply “survival.”

Every day upon awakening, I hope not to hear more bad news. Sometimes, I prefer not to look at my cell phone because incoming news is so traumatizing: Women viciously beaten for not wearing their burqa; women murdered; women kept from continuing their education; women whose small businesses have been shut down by the Taliban. Hearing about Afghan women's deprivations and traumas makes us feel our pain more intensely.

A while ago, one afternoon when I was writhing in pain during my menstrual cycle, a text message from my sister arrived: “I have been locked up in a basement. I will call you when I get out. If you don't hear from me, know that the Taliban have taken us.” I jumped and suddenly forgot my pain. I tried to call her back, with trembling hands, but did not get a response. Gasping for breath, I quickly put on my hijab and headed toward her underground school.

When she was released from the basement, she told me that she had arrived in class early and was waiting for the teacher and other students when a Talib entered and began screaming at her: “You whore, what are you doing here?” When she said that this was her classroom, he continued calling her a “whore” and asked for her

cell phone. When she cried and said that she was not allowed to carry cell phones, he threatened to beat her and “bring this building down on the heads of you whores.” After he left, one of the school employees hid her in a dark basement and locked the door. She discovered other girls there who were also crying. Soon, more girls arrived. They embraced each other, held hands, and commiserated. After a couple of hours, the principal of the school came in and apologized for having to hide them in the locked basement for fear of the Taliban.

My sister's experience once again made me think about the miserable state of the women and girls of Afghanistan. *We have been left alone, helpless, and without recourse. We have been forgotten as if we do not even exist.*

Nowhere in this world do girls have to study underground and tolerate being called “whores” for going to school. We live with fear every day, night, and second.

Just yesterday, I watched the video of a woman in Kabul getting viciously beaten in the middle of a busy street. From a distance, I could feel the destruction of her being. That pain took over my body.

What crime have we committed?

Under the Taliban, child marriage is acceptable. The future of a girl is set from childhood and without her consent. The Taliban government's new divorce law speaks of “the right to annul a marriage after puberty,” as if a girl can later make a

decision. But here in Afghanistan, “making a decision” for a girl means standing up to her family, her society, and a judge who is anti-woman and knows her not as a human being but as an animal. We do not have the right to make a decision. We can only scream after a rape has taken place.

The Taliban define child custody as the mother’s right to embrace her child for only a few years before the child is taken away from her. For them, motherhood is an instrument that turns into a shadow and is no longer seen after the production of the child takes place.

These misogynist, inhuman, and horrific laws are not just written in books. They are repeated daily in our lives, on the streets, at home, and on short travel distances that should be simple but are not.

A few days ago, when I had gone to the market to buy food, the authorities stopped the cab that I was riding in. A Talib ordered me to lower the window and screamed at me for showing my face and not wearing a mask, even though I had the full hijab that fully covered my body and my hair. The driver apologized profusely to the authorities and said he would soon obtain masks for women passengers. The authori-

ties held us for 40 minutes, humiliated me, and lectured about what a “crime” it is for a woman to show her face. In the end, they warned that if I am seen without a mask again, I will be imprisoned. I just sat there, motionless and silent. I nodded not out of acceptance but out of fear.

This is only one moment of our lives, a moment that demonstrates how easily human dignity can be crushed. This is where laws and reality meet. Laws that take away women’s control over their lives are the same laws that allow girls to be imprisoned in dark basements for the “crime” of continuing their education. Laws that allow for child marriage take our future away from us before we even know what life is about.

We Afghan women are stuck between two stones. On one side, the pressure of laws and limitations that become more severe every day. On the other side, poverty, hunger, and lack of safety and security. Prices increase every day. There is no employment. There is no hope. There is only fear and waiting.

I wonder whether the world even sees us as human beings or only shadows?

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