


GARBAGE WORKERS
STRIKE FOR RESPECT P. 6

THE THIRD WAVE OF
MERIDEL LE SUEUR P. 34

SOUTH AFRICA'S JUST
TRANSITION P. 20

BIDEN'S DEBT
TO YOUTH P. 3

IN THESE TIMES



MEXICAN FACTORY WORKERS FIGHT THE PENTAGON

BY MAURIZIO GUERRERO

+
Indigenous
farmworkers tell
Brooke Anderson how
to heal our relationship
with the Earth

MARCH 2022



2022 YOUNG DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS OF AMERICA CONFERENCE

APRIL 1 - 3, 2022 CHICAGO, IL

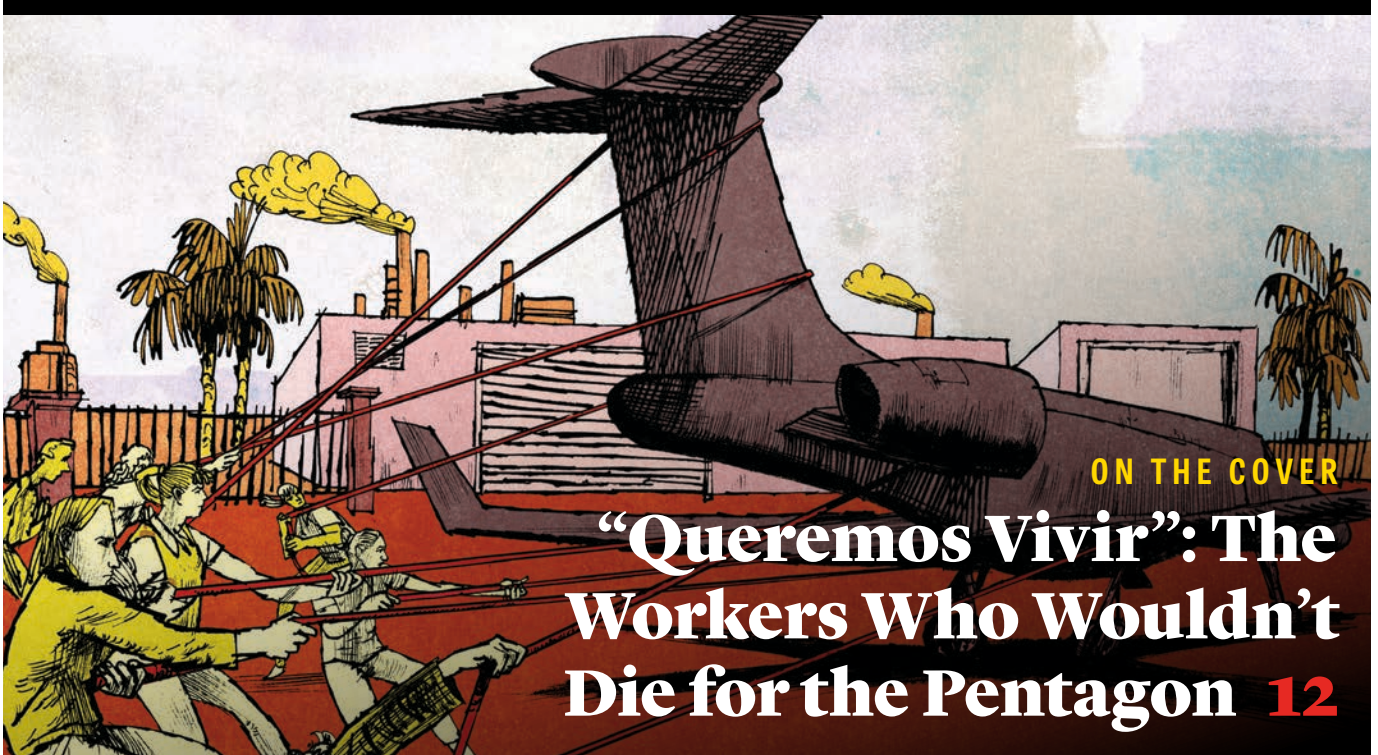
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“ No political movement can be healthy unless it has its own press to inform it, educate it and orient it. ”
—IN THESE TIMES FOUNDER JAMES WEINSTEIN

IN THESE TIMES

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ON THE COVER

Design by Rachel K. Dooley
Illustration by Matt Rota

Youth to Biden: Drop Debt

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN EXTENDED the pause on student loan payments and interest in December 2021 as Omicron spread, a forbearance that began under the Trump administration in 2020. Yes, the delay is a win for those crushed by a cumulative nearly \$2 trillion in student debt, but it also fails to truly address the debt, a pressing issue for more than 40 million Americans.

To prevent a blowout in this year's mid-term elections, Democrats must make transparent their plan for student debt forgiveness and deliver a tangible win for my generation.

On the 2020 campaign trail, Biden repeatedly claimed he would support \$10,000 of student debt forgiveness, which "should be done immediately." He had rejected more (as proposed by some primary challengers), saying, "I don't think I have the authority to do it."

But Suzanne Kahn, managing director of research and policy at the Roosevelt Institute, says Biden does have the authority, even without Congress: "[Biden] has the authority to direct the secretary of Education to at least cancel all of the student debt held by the federal government, which is about 95% of the student debt out there."

In April 2021, Biden asked Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona to prepare a memo about his powers to cancel student debt. In October 2021, the *New Yorker* reported that, thanks to a Freedom of Information Act request from the debtors' union Debt Collective, we know there is an update from the Department of Education—we just don't know what it says. The memo, titled "The Secretary's Legal Authority for Broad-Based Debt Cancellation," was heavily redacted in millennial pink.

Unsympathetic austerity politicians will try to pit Americans against each other by painting the student debt crisis as a nonissue for working people. Rep. Dan Crenshaw (R-Texas), for example, called the "cancel student debt" movement "nakedly corrupt," a scheme "to bribe elites who hold expensive graduate degrees." Biden himself has pushed this narrative in an odd way saying he's concerned about forgiving debt for students from "Harvard and Yale and Penn."

But student loan regressivity is a myth. A brief by the Roosevelt Institute puts it this way: "Debt cancellation leads to the highest reductions in the debt-to-income ratio for people with the lowest incomes." After all, nearly 40% of borrowers never even received a degree.

A 2021 survey from the Student Debt Crisis Center found that 89% of fully employed student loan borrowers can't afford their payments in



Among Gen Z voters, 65% went for Biden, 11% more than any other age group. The Dems cannot keep delaying meaningful action and expect our votes.

February; 20% said they will never be financially secure enough to resume payments; and 27% said "one-third of their income or more" goes to student loans.

As early pandemic protections fall away (such as the child tax credit, federal jobless aid and the eviction moratorium), the threats are compounding. According to a Federal Reserve of New York survey, 28% of Americans say they are "somewhat" or "much worse off" than a year ago.

The population of student loan borrowers is a core of the Democratic base—young people with some post-secondary education. This is a generation who, in the face of Covid-19 and an impending second Trump term, mobilized for Biden. Youth voter turnout climbed 8% over 2016, with more than half of all eligible young people voting. Among Gen Z voters, 65% went for Biden, 11% more than any other age group.

The Dems cannot keep delaying meaningful action and expect our votes. According to data from YouGov and the *Economist*, Biden's approval rating among those younger than 30 has plunged 50 points since Inauguration Day. This administration threatens to be defined by its inability to deliver wins for working people.

Meanwhile, loan payments are set to resume May 2—one day after International Workers' Day. Let's get organized.

—PAIGE OAMEK



GIVE CREDIT

In “Pro-Labor President? Where?” (February), Hamilton Nolan excoriates Labor Secretary Marty Walsh for failing to visit a picket line during a November 2021 trip to Alabama, speculating that such an act “would just be a bit too radical” for Walsh. Walsh did, however, visit striking Kellogg’s workers outside Lancaster, Pa., in October 2021.

We should be able to acknowledge any such steps in the right direction, however small, while still making the case that more is needed.

*ROBERT MCMAHON
Pennsylvania
Via Email*

HAVE NURSING DEGREE, WILL TRAVEL

I work as a travel nurse, and the depression, frustration, exhaustion and anger in most of the hospitals I work at is palpable (“The Big Business Behind Travel Nursing,” January). Core nursing staff have always understood their wages are lower than those of travel nurses because core staff have pensions, health

insurance, sick days, schedule and shift preference, etc.

But what happens when hospitals cut those benefits (as they have been doing for the past 30 years) and also force those who remain to work more, under far more dangerous conditions, for less compensation?

The answer: They leave the bedside completely, or travel.

Every nurse who travels knows you can go to California to make “big bucks” because nurses unions there have raised wages for all nurses statewide. Hospital administrators nationwide have never been weaker than right now. They have no leverage because they understand most of their core nurses can leave to travel. If the oft-spouted phrase “as Covid goes, so goes the economy” is true, isn’t now the best time to double or triple the efforts to organize hospitals?

*MARY
Columbia, Mo.
Via Email*

DEFUND THE POLICE

“Defund the Police” has to be the most wrong-headed, self-defeating slogan of all time, an instant turn-off to any voter who cares about crime in their neighborhood (and who doesn’t?). It was the police union that shielded Derek Chauvin from discipline for repeated bad behavior, allowing him to remain in the Minneapolis Police Department so he could go on to

kill George Floyd.

Statistical analyses have shown that the unionization of police leads to higher levels of violent misconduct. Police officers are typically underpaid, which discourages the best potential candidates from even applying—so what we are left with is too many bullies and thugs who enjoy wearing a badge, carrying a gun and misusing the power that goes with that. Then, the bullies turn to their union for protection from discipline for irresponsible behavior.

*JOHN STERLING
Asheville, N.C.
Via Email*

JUDY INJUSTICE

In “Judge-y Judy” (February), Yasmin Nair hits on all the points I have been feeling as I watch the newest iteration of *Judge Judy*. The way Judy Sheindlin demonizes people of color and poor folks, as she has for years, reinforces outdated stereotypes. It would be refreshing if Amazon threw \$25 million at an original concept that lifted up the stories and voices of those who are seldom heard, instead of berating those society has cast aside in a hand-picked courtroom setting.

*STEVEN HARBAUGH
Columbus, Ohio*



ITT WELCOMES BRITT JULIOUS!

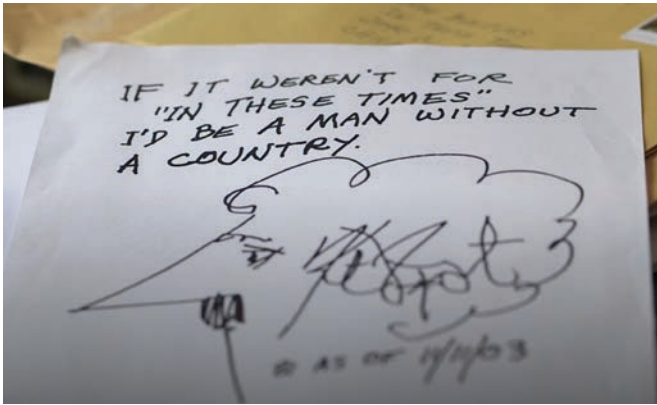
The stories Britt Julious wants to cover, as new ITT deputy editor, are the ones mainstream outlets put “on page 37, in a corner, at the bottom”—and she wants more people to read them. In fact, expanding ITT readership is her way of meeting the present moment, “when concerns regarding labor and climate are at the top of many peoples’ minds.” Her favorite part of investigative journalism is the chain reaction between publishing a story and the active engagement from readers that follows.

Britt’s work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Esquire*, *Elle*, *GQ*, *Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar* and others. She also won the 2019 Studs Terkel Award in journalism from Public Narrative and has been featured on BuzzFeed’s “21 Amazing Role Models for Ambitious Twentysomethings.” The *Chicago Reader* once called her the “Best Local Writer Who Excels at Social Media.” The Chicago native is also a big Prince fan — though she can’t listen to him while she works, or she’ll accidentally start writing down his lyrics.

TELL US HOW YOU REALLY FEEL

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UNSTUCK IN THESE TIMES



Fans of the novelist and satirist Kurt Vonnegut will want to check out the new documentary about his life, *Unstuck in Time*, built around the 25-year friendship between the late writer and the film's director, Robert B. Weide. Best known for the novels *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Cat's Cradle* and *Breakfast of Champions*, long-time ITT readers will also recall Vonnegut's last work—his Bush-era essay collection *A Man Without a Country*—is a compilation of columns that first appeared in these pages. Vonnegut referred to the Bush administration and

its corporate constituents as “psychopathic personalities” who “do not care ... because they are nuts.”

ITT editor and publisher Joel Bleifuss makes an appearance toward the end of the film, recalling, “[Kurt] wanted to speak out. And so, within a month of his first interview, he was sending me things to publish. He wrote about things that were important to him. With every essay, it would always bring in a variety of things, so sometimes Kilgore Trout would just appear.”

Kurt Vonnegut: Unstuck in Time is available to watch at home on various streaming platforms.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

As the pandemic stretches into its third year and social programs dry up (expanded unemployment, child tax credits), these are times of struggle and suffering—particularly for working-class women who hold families together, care for children, perform disproportionate household labor and work frontline jobs, all while earning 82 cents to the man's dollar. (Black women make 64 cents to the white man's dollar.)

For those who work in meatpacking plants or Amazon warehouses, or are jobless, or must navigate the broken medical system, all while bearing the burden of our society's crushing gender injustice—what does it look like not just to survive but to maintain a sense of humanity and togetherness?

The writings of Depression-era leftist, feminist and activist Meridel Le Sueur don't provide any easy answers, but they offer a sense of rage and open-hearted solidarity and the humble suggestion that we can still imagine a better world. Her work “explores alienation experienced under capitalism,” as Benjamin Balthaser puts it in his beautiful essay on page 34. Le Sueur's terrain is the messy world of the working class, of Polish women in Minneapolis stockyards, women who broke windows in the 1937 sit-down strike in Flint, women standing in breadlines—haggard, desperate, proud. She wrote about women who experience sexual desire, organize unions, and go on strike. Her characters proclaim women should not work themselves to death, and the reader walks away with the sense that this principle can be the makings of a better world.

These women speak to us from another century, telling us that today's suffering and death and loss are not OK, that we should let our anger blaze hot, and maybe that can give off just enough light to help us find each other.

Sarah Lazare
Web Editor

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DISPATCHES: THE GARBAGE EDITION



LAN WEI/XINHUA VIA GETTY IMAGES

Sanitation Strike Not a Waste

Above: Hundreds of New Orleans residents join a "trash parade" Sept. 18, 2021, lamenting the state of the city's sanitation and supporting better conditions for Metro Service Group workers.

NEW ORLEANS—Growing up in Memphis, Tenn., Rahman Brooks remembers hearing stories about the city's famous 1968 sanitation strike. Martin Luther King Jr. was in town supporting the workers when he was assassinated. They marched with signs reading, "I Am a Man."

"I never thought that I would be holding that same sign one day, striking for the same cause," Brooks says.

In May 2020, with the

Covid-19 pandemic raging, a group of nonunion sanitation workers in New Orleans, Brooks among them, spontaneously went on strike, kicking off one of the most inspiring grassroots labor actions of that dramatic year. Fed up with poverty wages, a crushing workload and a fundamental lack of reward for working while anyone who could cowered indoors, they dubbed themselves the City Waste Union and picketed for months.

Their signs read, "I Am a Man." Their story was picked up by media outlets around the world.

Nearly two years after the New Orleans "hoppers"—those

who hop on and off trash collection trucks—briefly held the spotlight, it has become clear that fights like theirs are rarely as easy as they may appear in their initial jubilant phase. Brooks, 40, is now keenly aware of where the strike succeeded and where it fell short.

Before the sanitation workers became the City Waste Union, they were just the sub-contracted employees of Metro Service Group, a company that contracts with the city to collect garbage. Brooks had been working for Metro since 2017. In spring 2020, the always-hard job became much harder, while the paltry compensation stayed the same. Brooks and the other Metro hoppers were making less than \$11 per hour. He had to get out of bed at 3 a.m. to arrive at the truck yard east of New Orleans by 4 a.m. At 5 a.m., Brooks would leave to do the dirty work of picking up the city's trash and wouldn't return until after noon. By May 2020, Brooks says, he and dozens of his coworkers were working as many as 100 hours a week; the amount of trash the city produced had increased as so many people were confined to their homes.

That May, the hoppers decided they had enough. The strike, impromptu and fiery, was on. Initially, Brooks stayed at home. On the third day, after seeing footage of the strikers on the local news, he joined the picket line. Soon enough, some of the less committed hoppers began trickling back to work. Brooks and those he calls the "strong 14" remained on strike until September 2020.

News of the City Waste Union

strike quickly went viral. The cause of the hoppers was embraced locally, then nationally. T-shirts and masks bearing a garbage truck logo were sold. Reporters wrote countless stories, including in mainstream publications like the *New York Times*. More than 20,000 people signed a petition calling on New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell to raise the hourly wage of city sanitation workers to \$26. A GoFundMe strike fund raised more than a quarter-million dollars.

Even as the hoppers felt the support of a nation, though, the strike was beginning to crumble internally. Brooks says workers questioned how the strike fund was being distributed, citing a lack of transparency, which caused resentments—their financial success, ironically, sowed mistrust. In September 2020, Brooks and most of his fellow strikers had been forced back to work to make a living. He is bitter they did not join an existing union when they had the chance during the strike; he was enthusiastic about joining AFSCME, the union that ran the 1968 Memphis strike.

“We were supposed to be a union,” Brooks says. “We went from being a union, to being a nonprofit organization. From day one, people were trying to dupe us. ... That’s what really killed the strike.”

Metro Service Group did not respond to *In These Times*’ request for comment.

For all of the attention that the City Waste Union generated, its financial returns for the strikers were not great—a raise of less than \$1 an hour in fall 2020. In October 2021, the city of New

Orleans passed a new ordinance raising the minimum wage for city contractors to \$15, beginning in 2023—a change that happened after the City Waste Union’s fight. At the end of 2021, Brooks, still a hopper, moved to another sanitation company for better benefits and a 401(k).

Brooks is just one of the many thousands of working people who took workplace action—for the first time—during the pandemic. The mixed nature of the experience does not make him regret it.

“I definitely feel like the strike was worthwhile. But to *win* is what I wanted, and we had it, I felt like,” he says. Its rewards, ultimately, were less tangible than money. “You had a lot of people that really showed support and said, ‘We appreciate what you do.’ So if we [learned] anything, we learned that we are appreciated.”

HAMILTON NOLAN is a labor writer for *In These Times*. He has spent the past decade writing about politics for *Gawker*, *Splinter*, the *Guardian* and elsewhere. He is currently writing a book about the labor movement.

Not Your Average Trash Day

CHULA VISTA, CALIF.—“Who are we?” *Teamsters!* “What do we want?” *Contract!* “When do we want it?” *Now!*

The sanitation workers of Teamsters Local 542 were still in good voice three weeks into their strike, which began Dec. 17, 2021, even as Republic Services started bringing in

THIS MONTH IN LATE CAPITALISM

🔥 TEN SOUTH DAKOTA TEACHERS SCRAMBLED ON ICE FOR SINGLE DOLLAR BILLS

to fund their classrooms—and for the amusement of a cheering crowd at a local hockey game. The sponsor, a local mortgage company, later conceded it “can see how it appears to be degrading and insulting.” Reportedly, the spectacle felt like *Squid Game* with less death.



🔥 WHAT’S THE SAFEST PLACE TO BE DURING A TORNADO?

According to Amazon, out delivering packages. One Illinois driver was told she would be fired if she left her route; within hours, a tornado actually hit the nearby warehouse. Amazon claims it’s investigating, though it also continues fighting union organizers who could, you know, actually help protect workers.

🔥 TIME MAGAZINE’S 2021 PERSON OF THE YEAR, ELON MUSK,

dismissed the issue of income inequality in a *Time* interview as simply the result of an aging society—and nothing to worry about. Musk, the wealthiest person in the world and a maniacal union-busting boss, also claimed he’s working to build a “utopian anarchist” future where “you’re not under anyone’s thumb,” a line almost as rich as Musk himself.

🔥 GROCERY CHAIN HY-VEE ALREADY PROMISES

“A HELPFUL SMILE IN EVERY AISLE,” but now that promise includes a helpful armed private security team, complete with handguns, tasers and body cameras, in “multiple markets” across the Midwest. Data suggests robberies are on the decline and private security has little impact on theft rates, but the move at least contributes to a more militarized society. So, worth it?

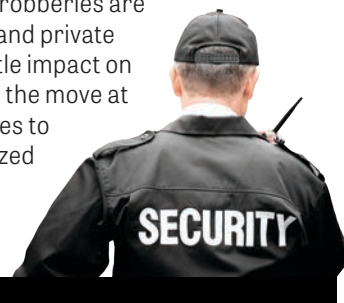




PHOTO BY JAMES STOUT

Striking Teamsters temporarily block the “Blew Crew”—out-of-staters brought to replace them—outside a Republic Services sanitation facility in Chula Vista, Calif., on Jan. 7.

nonunion out-of-staters as garbage piled up. Republic had refused the Teamsters’ demands for so long that the city of Chula Vista declared a public health emergency because of the amount of uncollected refuse.

Close to 300 workers, many of them Latino or Black, were on strike across three different San Diego County locations. “We want to go back to work,” said Chula Vista picketer Ladere Hampton, “so that we can clean up the city.”

Workers were demanding wage increases and new trucks (barring improved maintenance on the existing vehicles), saying their equipment was

poorly maintained and could create a health hazard—especially to the children who often greet them on their routes. “You don’t want to be driving down the street and you’ve got trash juices flying off your wheels, especially if you pull up to a customer’s house,” Hampton said. “And that’s happening.”

Workers also cited long hours as a point of contention. Many drivers work 11-hour days and six-day weeks, servicing more than 1,000 homes per route.

The picket line held back the “Blue Crew”—Republic’s term for the replacement workers, flown in from around the country—for a few minutes before letting

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

🎯 The Biden administration is requiring health insurance companies to reimburse at-home Covid-19 testing—if you can jump through all the hoops.



🎯 Fewer people are having kids, which could have something to do with the economy or climate change. Or, if you’re the Pope, it’s because people are selfishly choosing dogs instead.

TRIVIAL

🎯 Kentucky Republican Sen. Rand Paul will stop posting videos on YouTube, protesting the platform’s policy designed to limit the spread of Covid-19 misinformation. Never stop, Rand!



🎯 Former *American Idol* runner-up Clay Aiken is running for Congress in North Carolina again.

HYPED

Just a year into Biden’s term, corporate Dems have successfully sunk his (already milquetoast) legislative agenda.



🎯 The world’s 500 richest people added more than \$1 trillion to their collective wealth in 2021—as 150 million more people faced poverty.

VITAL

🎯 The Supreme Court could soon decide a Mississippi case directly challenging *Roe v. Wade*, changing abortion laws nationwide.



🎯 The Navy covered up a fuel leak at its Red Hill facility in Honolulu that displaced thousands. Noam Chomsky, Cornel West, Naomi Klein and others are demanding the aging site be shuttered.

IGNORED

them through to the facility's driveway. As the Republic trucks sat waiting, Hampton pointed out how filthy they were—they're normally cleaned weekly. He also held up a picture of a truck that arrived with a bin hanging off the side, a clear safety hazard.

"[Republic is] paying all this money to bring in a crew to try to do our job," Hampton said. "And they're not doing such a good job."

The Republic media relations office told *In These Times*: "Safety is our number one priority at Republic Services. ... Our Blue Crew relief team is made up of elite Republic Services drivers, technicians, and supervisors from around the country, and we're grateful for their support in taking care of our customers in the San Diego area."

The San Diego strike followed a similar dispute between Teamsters and Republic in December 2021 in Orange County, Calif., which concluded after seven days. It may not be the last. Republic is the second-largest trash collection company in the United States, with facilities in more than 40 states; the Teamsters represent more than 7,000 Republic workers, with contracts all over the nation up for renegotiation this year. And despite dragging its feet on wage increases for workers, Republic paid its CEO more than \$12 million in 2020.

Even with nationwide support, the strike wasn't easy on the workers, especially during the holiday season. Next to the picket line was a tent with a small box for donations. "If there's anybody that needs some help, we're willing to give them the box with the money, and hopefully that helps them so that they can stay out here," Hampton explained.

He said the strikers had also experienced an outpouring of

solidarity from the community. A couple of nights prior, two trucks had come through with "bags of groceries... for each [striking] driver," he said.

As we talked, someone shouts "*cliente*" and the picket line splits to allow customers to enter the facility and drop off their own trash. The driver honks and waves.

Hampton pulls out his phone to find a picture. "You know, we've had a lady come out here and bring her kids out here because they knew—the kids knew—what was going on and they wanted to come out here and support us," he says. In the photo, dozens of yellow-vested Teamsters smile and crouch down to share the frame with a small child holding a picket sign.

The Teamsters accepted an offer from Republic on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, January 17. The new contract includes wage increases and some healthcare benefits, but falls short of what the striking workers wanted.

"The new pay rates I believe are \$26.90 [hourly], and before the strike, we were at \$25 flat," according to worker Dohney Castillo. Workers will also receive wage increases in 2023, 2024 and 2025, Castillo says.

"This was one of the most difficult decisions I've ever had to make," Rafael Mejia, a worker at Republic, says in a statement published on the Teamsters' website. "We are fighting for dignity and respect on the job, but we also know that the strike has been affecting our communities and our neighbors and our own families. This contract isn't everything we believe we deserve, but it's enough to go back to work and go back to taking care of our communities."

JAMES STOUT is a historian of anti-fascism and a freelance journalist living in Southern California.

FOR THE WIN

DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE STAFFERS VOTED TO UNIONIZE with the Service Employees International Union by a 2-to-1 margin. The success builds on a broader union effort among groups and campaigns associated with the Democratic Party, including workers at the fundraising nonprofit ActBlue and Sen. Bernie Sanders' 2020 presidential campaign staff.

CALIFORNIANS ARE NOW COMPOSTING FOOD WASTE IN DROVES thanks to a new law passed to tackle the 23 million tons of organic (and methane-producing) material in California landfills. Grocery stores are also now required to donate edible food to food banks and distribution organizations.

ILLINOIS SCHOOLS CAN NO LONGER BAN HISTORICALLY BLACK HAIRSTYLES, like braids and cornrows, in their dress codes — enforceable by funding cuts for schools that don't comply. The new law also works to provide educational resources about hair discrimination. No such law yet exists for Illinois workplaces.

THE PATENT-FREE COVID-19 VACCINE, CORBEVAX, IS BEING MANUFACTURED in India, where it has already received approval for emergency use. The vaccine was developed in part at Texas Children's Hospital with an eye toward reducing global vaccine inequity, with hopes to produce more than 1 billion doses this year.

CHICAGO MUSEUM WORKERS WON THEIR FIRST MAJOR UNION FIGHT. The new union at the Art Institute of Chicago will represent more than 200 employees, including art installers, curators, custodians, librarians and retail workers. A day later, workers at the School of the Art Institute, which is affiliated with the museum, also won their unionization vote.



SARAH LAZARE

Biden Plays the Vaccine Blame Game

PRESIDENT BIDEN has largely abandoned social programs aimed at helping people weather the pandemic, like the child tax credit, and has vowed to avoid public safety measures that Democrats embraced earlier, like stay-at-home directives during surges. Now, Biden's key strategy rests on vaccines and paltry test reimbursement programs (while telling people to use Google to figure out how). The approach appears rooted in the belief that the spread is inevitable.

Vaccines are a powerful tool against the pandemic and should be encouraged. But Biden's turn to a vaccines-only approach has come with an ugly, even vindictive, tone of scolding—which is egregious given that Biden bears tremendous responsibility for profound global inequities in vaccine access. According to Our World in Data, only 9.4% of people in low-income countries have received at least one dose; in Nigeria, the largest country in Africa, less than 3% of people are fully vaccinated.

This American chauvinism puts everyone at risk: If the virus spreads anywhere, it will give rise to variants everywhere. Biden's policies are prolonging the pandemic and ensuring more deaths—with a sanctimonious wiggling of his finger.

One of the most blaming

comments comes from White House coronavirus response coordinator Jeffrey Zients, who warned the unvaccinated are “looking at a winter of severe illness and death for yourselves, your families and the hospitals.” Biden himself has implied the unvaccinated are simply unpatriotic.



There is a conversation to be had about vaccine reluctance in the United States. But as Melody Schreiber argued in *The New Republic* in August 2021, “shaming and blaming individuals, and assuming they have made a selfish, considered decision not to get vaccinated, overlooks the largely hidden inequalities that still serve as barriers to vaccination. Unvaccinated people are more likely to be lower-income, uninsured, from marginalized and neglected communities, and have lower levels of education. All of these factors contribute to another, less-noted phenomenon: information inequality.” By framing vaccine hesitancy as a

moral failing, we ignore these institutional barriers—which include predatory media and political figures who traffic in false information—and the fact that people without access to regular healthcare do not have trusted medical professionals in their lives or reason to have much confidence in the medical system.

And as long as we're only talking about individuals, we undermine “the idea that fighting Covid is a ‘public’ health responsibility that requires the support of institutions and communities,” as noted in *The Lancet* in August 2021. Meanwhile, Biden's broad policies are making the pandemic worse, from the lack of meaningful hazard pay to failing to decarcerate people trapped in Covid-19 hotbeds, as Abdullah Shihpar argued in *Teen Vogue* in January.

If Biden believes so much in vaccines, why isn't he using his political capital to vaccinate the world? The United States has pledged 1.1 billion vaccine donations globally—significantly more than other wealthy nations—but data from the Duke Global Health Innovation Center shows just 32% of those pledges have shipped, while the Biden administration continues to allow Pfizer and Moderna to keep monopoly control over the production of mRNA vaccines.

At the World Trade Organization, Biden has failed to vigorously support the proposal by India and South Africa for a temporary waiver of intellectual property rules on Covid-19 vaccines, which would enable Global South countries to produce cheaper, generic



SARAH LAZARE

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THE BIG IDEA

versions (despite his claim in May 2021 that he supports a patent waiver). My reporting has shown the administration dragging its feet in closed-door meetings, with outright opposition from the European Union and United Kingdom. This reluctance is a travesty, considering healthcare researchers have identified 120 potential mRNA vaccine manufacturing sites in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Beyond these global inequities, the Biden administration's "blame the unvaccinated" approach still has other, far-reaching domestic implications. Immunocompromised people, for example, may be at risk even if they are fully vaccinated — how should they be considered? They aren't, apparently. Dr. Rochelle Walensky, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director, told *Good Morning America* in January that the "overwhelming number of deaths, over 75%, occurred in people who had at least four comorbidities," which was "really encouraging" because "these are people who were unwell to begin with." As the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund noted on Twitter, Walensky's message "perpetuates widely and wrongly held perceptions that disabled people ... are more expendable."

The Biden administration cannot scold or dehumanize its way out of the pandemic. There is no shortcut to providing robust social programs and actual, meaningful vaccine manufacturing and distribution. Biden's "blame the unvaccinated" strategy harms us all. ■

clean • slate

noun

1. The push to automatically seal certain criminal records

⇒ **Why should people be able to "hide" their criminal records?** About 70 million people—1 in 3 adults—have some kind of criminal record; background checks often turn up arrests, for example, even if no charges were ever filed. Nine in 10 employers weigh that past in their hiring decisions.

And the collateral consequences go far beyond employment. Criminal records can disqualify people from housing, professional licensing and public benefits.

In short, a record can sentence an individual—and their family—to lifelong economic hardship.

⇒ **Aren't there already ways to seal criminal records, though?** Most states have laws allowing people to clear their records, but bureaucratic barriers and fees mean that many people never manage to do it. In Michigan, for example, a \$50 application fee is just the first in a series of hurdles; fewer than 7% of eligible Michiganders succeed, according to a 2020 study.



But those who did see their wages go up by an average of more than 22% within a year.

⇒ **How would "automatic sealing" work?** Pennsylvania became the first state to enact a "clean slate" law in 2018. Arrest records are sealed immediately from the public—including from employers and landlords—and convictions for nonviolent misdemeanors are sealed after 10 years for people without further convictions.

The process makes use of digitized court records and has resulted in more than 30 million cases being sealed since it took effect. An updated version of the law, passed in 2020, makes residents eligible for automatic sealing even if they have unpaid court fees.

"The states are really all over the map on this stuff, and they're all reinventing the wheel. It's getting harder for state legislatures to pick out a single approach. We have to start looking at this in a more systematic way."

—MARGARET LOVE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE COLLATERAL CONSEQUENCES RESOURCE CENTER

⇒ **Could this reform be enacted nationwide?** Since April 2021, at least 11 states have enacted automatic record-expungement legislation. The laws vary by state, but most advocates agree that unpaid court debts shouldn't be a barrier.

But to make this kind of reform a reality, states must first take another step: digitizing their court records to make automatic sealing possible. The bipartisan Fresh Start Act of 2021, introduced in both houses of Congress in the past year, would allocate \$50 million annually for the next five years to help states do it—which would mark an important, if small, step in criminal justice reform.


ILLUSTRATIONS BY TERRY LABAN

“Queremos Vivir”: The Workers Who Wouldn’t Die for the Pentagon



BY MAURIZIO GUERRERO

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MATT ROTA



Workers in the Mexican border city of Mexicali, many of them young migrant women, were fighting for their lives. It was the deadliest point of the pandemic in 2020 in one of the hardest-hit states in Mexico, Baja California.

By May 2020, a local news outlet reported that 432 of the 519 Covid-19 fatalities to date had been workers in *maquiladoras*—assembly plants on the border that mostly supply the United States.

On April 8, 2020, the Mexicali workers forced two *maquiladoras* of Gulfstream—a U.S. aerospace company with several active contracts with the Department of Defense—to shutter for nearly a month. Though it was temporary, workers saw the closure of a prime Pentagon supplier as a victory.

By May 4, under pressure from the Pentagon, Mexico allowed these factories to reopen as “essential businesses.”

Mexicali, a city with a population of 1 million just across the border from Calexico, Calif., is home to *maquiladoras* that

employ a total of 70,000 workers making parts and products for U.S. medical, automotive, telecommunications and electronics industries, among others. Mexicali and Tijuana, both in Baja California, together host most of the aerospace *maquiladoras* in Mexico, at least four of which are current Pentagon contractors.

Hundreds of workers across 90 of Mexicali’s 124 *maquiladoras* staged work stoppages in April 2020.

“The fact is that workers managed to close the *maquiladoras*,” says Jesús Casillas, an organizer with the workers’ rights group Organización Política del Pueblo y los Trabajadores (“Political Organization of People and Workers,” or OPT). “Nobody can take that [win] away from them.”

That victory hinged on the use of social media. Facebook pages of various labor organizations, including OPT, were crucial to amplifying the workers' concerns—by posting anonymous testimonials that workers sent in.

“We helped workers by giving them a platform,” says Liliana Plumeda, an OPT organizer. “Many of them were afraid of being fired. After seeing that there was solidarity, workers had the courage to organize.”

CHAIN LINKS

WHEN MEXICAN PRESIDENT Andrés Manuel López Obrador issued a decree March 30, 2020, declaring the pandemic a health emergency and closing all businesses except essential economic activities such as agricultural work and medical manufacturing, many maquiladoras in Mexicali ignored it.

And Gulfstream, which employs 2,200 workers to produce electrical wire harnesses, sheet metal components, sub-assemblies and machined parts in its two Mexicali plants, remained open. By then, Gulfstream was working on a U.S. Department of Defense contract to build G280 and G550 aircraft (known by the U.S. Air Force as C-37B planes), components of which are assembled in its Mexicali factories. At least three other U.S. companies with

maquiladoras in Mexicali had active contracts with the Pentagon in the spring of 2020: the engine and electrical manufacturer Honeywell, the sheet metal assemblies manufacturer Jonathan Engineered Solutions (JES), and the aircraft electronics manufacturer Collins Aerospace.

They all kept operating despite the mandated lockdowns.

None of these four companies provided a public explanation of why their factories' work was essential. Spokespeople for Honeywell and Gulfstream told *In These Times* that their aerospace factories in Mexicali were deemed critical enterprises by the Baja California state government. The March 30 presidential decree, however, does not refer to the aerospace industry as essential, and in early April the Baja California secretaries of health and labor issued a public statement saying maquiladora workers should have been at home since April 1, but the factories had refused to close.

It is possible to trace the successful efforts of Mexicali workers to temporarily disrupt the supply chain of the U.S. war machine by reading dozens of April 2020 testimonies, documented separately by OPT, the local civil society organization Mexicali Resiste (“Mexicali Resists”), and the independent union Sindicato Bajacaliforniano de Trabajadores de Empresas Maquiladoras (“Baja California Union of Maquiladora Company Workers,” or Sibatrem)—and shared exclusively with *In These Times*. The workers' testimonies showcase the spontaneous resistance to dangerous working conditions in a region where the coronavirus was spreading faster than anywhere else in Mexico.

“Workers have not been sent home regardless of the positive cases of Covid-19,” a Gulfstream worker's wife wrote to Mexicali Resiste by Facebook message April 8, 2020. “Many workers like my husband are still locked up there,” she said. (Messages have been translated from their original Spanish.)

Four days later, another Gulfstream worker wrote to OPT: “They have us working without [protective] measures, last night they found a [Covid-19] case and they don't want to send us home.”

“There have been cases of Covid patients and they do not even take the necessary measures or inform us so we can take care of ourselves,” a Gulfstream worker wrote on April 6, 2020,





to Mexicali Resiste. On a post made public by OPT, another Gulfstream worker wrote: “The truth is, for fear of being fired, people do not do work stoppages because they have us very threatened.” The worker added: “In my area on Tuesday, a colleague tested positive for Covid-19 and, do you know what they did? They made us go back in.”

According to a worker’s message to OPT on April 8, 2020, Gulfstream managers said both their Mexican and American lawyers concluded the company was essential because it supported “U.S. Army manufacturing, in addition to doing logistics at airports.”

SHUTTING IT DOWN

SOME OF THESE ANONYMOUS WORKERS granted the workers’ rights organizations permission to post the complaints on Facebook. The organizations also encouraged workers to defend their right to remain home if they were not doing essential labor and

denounced companies that violated the presidential emergency decree. None of the groups, however, directly organized any labor action.

Yet workers staged strikes in about 90 Mexicali maquiladoras in April 2020, according to the news website *La Izquierda Diario* (“*The Left Journal*”), which noted the role of social media platforms in amplifying the workers’ struggle. Women were crucial to the resistance as they comprise most of the workers at the plants. They tend to be young, single and with some level of elementary education; many come from elsewhere in Mexico or are migrants from Central America. Their rallying cry during the pandemic was simple: “*Queremos vivir*,” or, “We want to live,” according to a July 2020 op-ed by maquiladora worker María Guadalupe in *La Izquierda Diario*.

The stoppages took place without a central organizing group and apart from the official Mexican unions. Most “unions” in Mexico are actually “company unions”—subservient to owners and employers.

On April 9, workers began to halt labor at the

Honeywell maquiladora, a Mexicali producer of aircraft heat exchangers manufactured under military contract in April 2020. Soon after, workers at JES organized a work stoppage. Work at the two Gulfstream factories continued, but workers posted dozens of complaints on the Facebook pages of local organizations throughout the month.

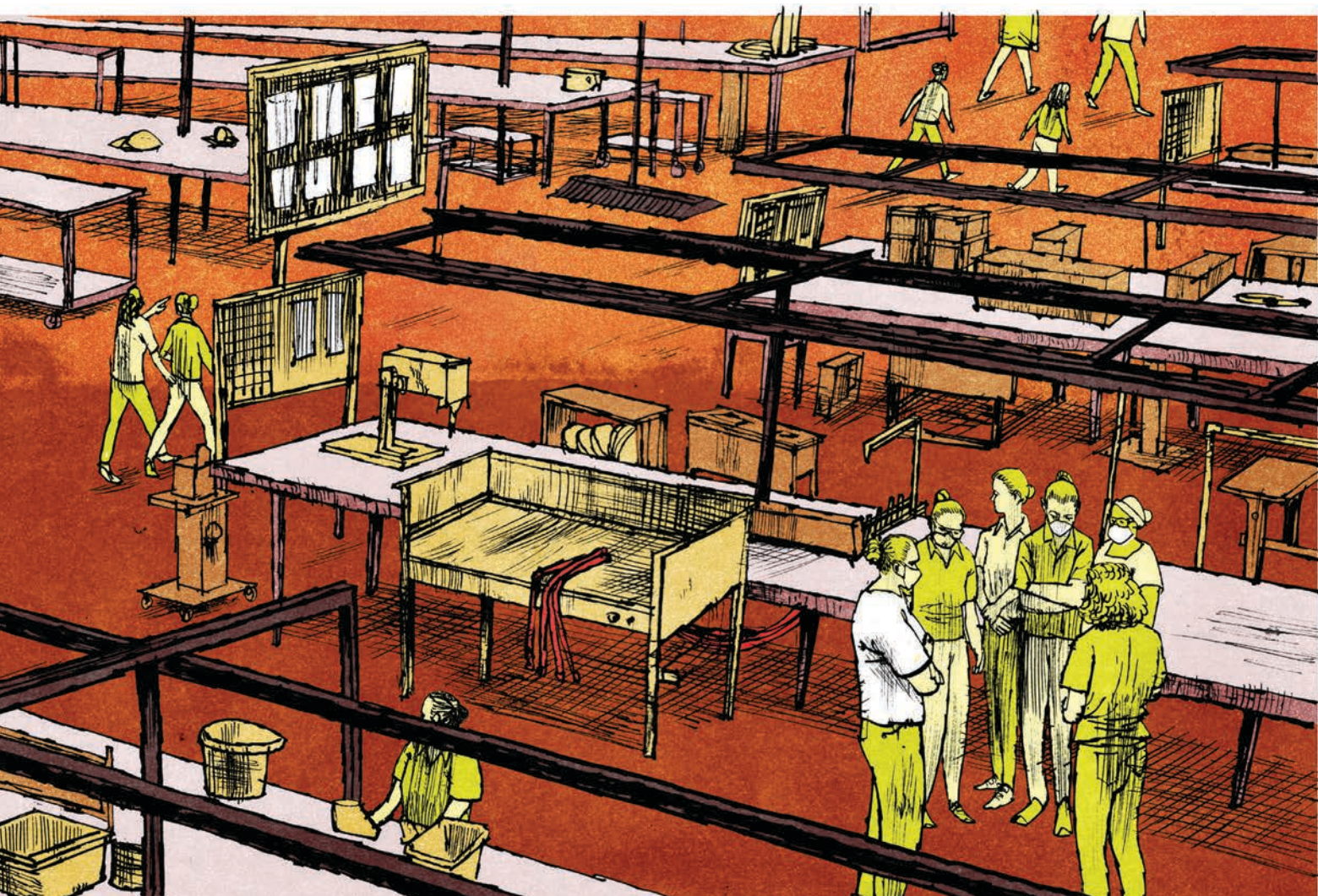
Gulfstream forced its workers to keep showing up for work or go home without pay, according to the testimonies of two workers. When workers denounced Gulfstream on social media for putting their health at risk by refusing to close, the company pressured them to take vacation days, according to an internal company memo posted by Mexicali Resiste on April 7, 2020. Gulfstream also tried to deter workers from organizing, says Luciana Benítez, an attorney at Sibatrem, which gave legal advice to more than 100 Gulfstream

employees. Managers told workers to leave earlier than usual so they would not have a chance to communicate and organize with the next shift as workers arrived, according to Benítez.

Also on April 7, 2020, Baja California Sen. Alejandra del Carmen León Gastélum denounced several maquiladoras for operating even though their activities were not essential. Among those named were Collins Aerospace and Gulfstream.

After the public pressure, Gulfstream temporarily suspended activities April 8, 2020, although managers told workers to return to work the following Monday. On April 10, however, Baja California Gov. Jaime Bonilla Valdez officially shut down 12 maquiladoras in Mexicali, including the Gulfstream and JES plants.

The closure notice was posted at the gates of Gulfstream, and the company issued a memo acknowledging the suspension until April 14, 2020.



The company stated workers would still receive full wages and benefits.

Workers took the memo as a victory: Their facebook posts read, “*Si se pudo*” (“Yes we could”). “Justice was served,” one worker wrote.

The challenges workers had to overcome in order to stand together were significant. Labor organizing in the maquiladoras at the Mexican border is very difficult, says Margarita Ávalos, founder of Ollin Calli, a workers’ rights organization in Tijuana. Many workers are Indigenous women who arrive at the maquiladoras having already faced a history of violence and abuse and are afraid to lose their jobs, focused completely on sending money home.

All told, a number of maquiladoras, including Honeywell and Collins Aerospace, shut down for varying periods in April, under government orders or worker pressure.

By the end of the month, the Pentagon had retaliated forcefully. That intervention ended what Juan Carlos Vargas, an OPT organizer, calls “the rebellion in the maquiladoras.”

Many workers are Indigenous women who arrive at the maquiladoras having already faced a history of violence and abuse and are afraid to lose their jobs.

PENTAGON’S BACKLASH

THE PENTAGON MADE CLEAR ITS intentions to reopen its supply chain. In an April 20, 2020, press briefing, Ellen Lord, then-undersecretary of defense for acquisition and sustainment, said that companies in Mexico were “impacting many of our major primes,” referring to the military’s primary contractors, which include Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Raytheon, General Dynamics and Northrop Grumman. General Dynamics, which wholly owns Gulfstream as a subsidiary, amassed military contracts in 2020 worth \$21.8 billion, making it the Pentagon’s third-largest contractor.

Lord said she had spoken with the U.S. ambassador to Mexico and the Mexican foreign minister “to ask for help to reopen international suppliers,” who were “especially important for our U.S. airframe production.” Pentagon officials were also calling industry associations, she said. “Mexico right now is somewhat problematic for us,” Lord added.

Vargas, from OPT, said the Pentagon’s statement meant “a very drastic change” in how the Mexican government was managing the 2020 lockdowns and reopenings. Vargas said the Baja Californian secretaries of health and labor had regularly appeared in the media to advise workers to file complaints against employers that violated the health emergency decree, for example—but after the Pentagon’s statement, there were no news clips of state officials advocating for workers’ rights. The administration of new Baja California Gov. Marina del Pilar Ávila Olmeda, who took office in November 2021, had no comment on the actions of its predecessor.

Demands from U.S. officials piled up. Christopher Landau, then-U.S. ambassador to Mexico, wrote on Twitter on April 21, 2020: “I’m doing all I can to save supply chains between Mexico, the United States and Canada.” A day later, the National Association of Manufacturers, with 14,000 company members, sent a letter to President

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López Obrador stating its concerns about the health emergency decrees, which threatened “our companies’ essential manufacturing facilities.”

Chus, an organizer from Mexicali Resistencia who asked to be identified by his first name only in order to keep attention on the workers, says, “At first, there was at least an attempt by the [Mexican] federal government to stop the flow of people to the work centers.” However, he added, when pressure mounted from the United States, “the federal and the state governments folded.”

Just three days after the Pentagon’s statement, President López Obrador said he expected an agreement “in due course” to allow factories on the border to begin operating normally again.

On May 4, 2020, the state government allowed 100 maquiladoras in Baja California—Gulfstream among them—to resume activities. Company managers communicated that the facilities would reopen that same day, despite the Covid-19 spike.

The price paid for those aircraft parts, in lives, is huge. By the end of 2020, Baja California was tied for the highest rate of Covid-19 deaths in Mexico. In Mexico City, the main cause of death for women in 2020 was heart failure; in Baja California, the main cause for women (and men) was Covid-19, reflected in the toll the pandemic took on female maquiladora workers.

An internal memo from Gulfstream, dated May 20, 2020, said the company would lay off workers and suspend bonuses for productivity, among other benefits, to preserve its “long-term health” following the pandemic disruptions. Workers estimated that 50 individuals were laid off. Benítez, of Sibatrem, claims the company “took advantage of the Covid-19 situation to get rid of people with seniority and those with chronic illnesses,” though in many cases the workers received severance, as required by Mexican labor law. Gulfstream spokesperson Christian Flathman says the layoffs were part of “company-wide cost-cutting measures ... to address challenges caused” by Covid-19.

The struggle in the maquiladoras marked a sequel to another massive demonstration in Mexicali; in 2017, the U.S. company Constellation Brands (producer of Corona and Modelo beer for the U.S. market) planned to acquire

Ultimately, labor organizing in Mexicali offered some protection for workers in dangerous conditions, at least temporarily.

exclusive rights to water in the drought-stricken Mexicali Valley. Tens of thousands of people successfully prevented the company from installing a facility in the region.

The experience of that resistance seemingly bore more fruit in 2020, inspiring “the rebellion in the maquiladoras”—which also provided lessons for Mexicali’s civil society, says OPT’s Vargas. Ultimately, labor organizing in Mexicali—fueled in good measure by migrant women—offered some protection for workers in dangerous conditions, at least temporarily, and despite disrupting the supply chain for prime Pentagon contractors.

Like the defense of water in 2017, the rebellion in the maquiladoras, Vargas says, is helping people imagine how to organize and face future challenges. ■

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MAURIZIO GUERRERO is a journalist based in New York City. He covers migration, social justice movements and Latin America.

Keeping the Lights On

South African energy workers struggle for green public power

BY CASEY WILLIAMS

T

HE LIGHTS WENT OUT AROUND Johannesburg on a Monday morning in November 2021, not to flicker back on until early that Friday in some areas. It marked the last rolling blackout of a year troubled by more outages than any in recent memory. The fate of Eskom, the beleaguered power utility behind the crisis, is now at the center of South Africa's struggle for a just energy transition — a break from fossil fuels without leaving behind frontline communities or energy workers.

As a public company, Eskom has a constitutional mandate to guarantee electricity as a basic right. But

the utility struggles to meet that mandate with its aging equipment, staggering debt, corruption and rules that require it to break even, which drive exorbitant rate hikes. Moreover, the electricity running through Eskom's wires comes almost entirely from coal, smothering the country's eastern coal belt in deadly pollution and adding planet-warming emissions to the atmosphere — and putting the utility at odds with South Africa's decarbonization commitments and global calls for renewable energy. South Africa, the 26th-largest country by population, ranks 14th in carbon output worldwide and is responsible for 1% of global emissions, because of this reliance on coal.

Few believe Eskom will survive in its current state, and what comes next is the subject of a high-stakes debate—and is about more than the climate. The state-owned company employs 45,000 workers and supports 82,000 coal jobs in a country where more than a third of the population is out of work. Eskom is a union shop, as are South Africa's biggest coal mines.

The government's plan, already underway, is to



A shopper browses during an electrical blackout in Johannesburg, a recurring concern as South Africa's energy crisis deepens.

invite private companies into the energy sector on the dubious grounds that clean energy is bound to win in a competitive market. The powerful miners and metalworkers unions oppose privatization, which they worry will hobble their organizations, if not eliminate the jobs they're entrusted to protect.

The unions have reason to worry. European multinationals have installed most of South Africa's wind and solar capacity so far, importing technicians and hardware. The local jobs that come with them are often low-paid and temporary, vanishing once plants get up and running. Workers with permanent jobs, meanwhile, have struggled with for-profit energy companies over the right to strike.

While some union leaders and workers have responded to the threat of privatization by

REUTERS/MIKE HUTCHINGS



defending coal mines and the union jobs they offer, unions also say they support decarbonization efforts. There are currents within the labor movement organizing for a just transition to turn Eskom into a unionized, public and clean power utility, run by and for the South African people.

This tug-of-war holds lessons for workers everywhere: The South African labor movement has largely succeeded in making the public debate about ownership and power—about who owns energy resources and who decides how they’re used—rather than simply about renewables versus coal. Still, the temptation for labor to double down on coal jobs remains strong as the South African economy flags and unemployment spikes, emblematic of how hard it can be to fight for long-term goals if jobs are under threat.

PUBLIC VISIONS

FOR JABULANI SOKHELA, A WORKS COORDINATOR in Eskom’s distribution division who is sometimes directed to cut power to working-class districts, a just transition would mean keeping the lights on for his comrades. “Electricity is a basic need,” says Sokhela, 41, an electrical engineer by training and a member of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). He is from a mining town on the eastern edge of Gauteng Province.

NUMSA members started organizing for a just transition in 2011, as South Africa was gearing up to host the United Nations’ COP17 climate summit in Durban. The union’s energy research and development group held workshops on decarbonization with workers, bringing in scientists to discuss climate change.

While not every member appreciated the significance of climate change at the time, Dinga Sikwebu,



a former NUMSA official who led the group, says “I know of no other union that ... had some of the people in the country who wrote or were involved in or part of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, who came in and ran workshops on climate change.”

In 2012, NUMSA adopted a vision for socially owned, worker-controlled, decommodified clean power that is among the most ambitious anywhere. Even the most progressive U.S. proposals, like the Bernie Sanders-backed Clean Energy Worker Just Transition Act, only propose federal investment, not a fully nationalized and democratized power sector.

Rooted in the principles of South Africa’s 1955 Freedom Charter and the National Democratic Revolution, the platform calls for public utilities to harness the country’s abundant wind and solar resources to provide clean power as a public good to South Africa’s population, including the millions who currently lack affordable electricity. Governed in part by municipal assemblies, this

democratized clean power sector would guarantee good jobs and build workers’ skills.

Thanks in part to proposals from NUMSA and allied unions, South Africa was the only country to commit to a just transition at the 2015 COP21 climate summit in Paris.

However, the South African government has yet to translate that commitment into a plan for replacing fossil fuel jobs. NUMSA and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) have organized high-profile actions for wage hikes and just transition guarantees in recent years, including a 2018 march opposing Eskom’s privatization that turned into three months of rolling strikes and bargaining. The strikes won significant raises, but, after picketing again and even briefly shutting down several power stations, won no assurances that Eskom would aggressively pursue renewable energy.



The electricity running through Eskom's wires comes almost entirely from coal, smothering the country's eastern coal belt in deadly pollution and adding planet-warming emissions to the atmosphere.



The next year, 2019, saw a noteworthy climate-labor alliance as the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), to which NUMSA belongs, joined a small but unprecedented demonstration in Pretoria with the environmental group Extinction Rebellion, calling for a just transition.

In December 2021, hundreds of NUM members and supporters marched on Eskom's headquarters in Johannesburg to oppose the utility's privatization.

In addition to labor, organizers with the Alternative Information and Development Centre, a South African social advocacy group,

have championed NUMSA's vision of socially owned renewable power within the climate justice movement. According to Sikwebu, however, the enthusiasm for renewables among workers has begun to wane since 2012, in part because foreign renewables companies hired local workers only for temporary construction jobs.

PRIVATE POWERS

THE PRIVATIZATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN POWER has been slowly increasing since 2011, when the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), opened a small crack in Eskom's power monopoly. Through the Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme, private renewable energy companies were allowed to sell power to the grid for a fixed term at a fixed price. Amazon has since built a solar plant to power a Cape Town data center, and a Turkish company won a lucrative contract (in an

Above: A farmer works a field outside the Kusile Power Station, just a 90-minute drive from Johannesburg, in a coal-heavy region known for its high levels of air pollution.

allegedly fixed bidding process) to provide electricity using floating natural gas plants known as “powerships.”

The government now hopes to widen that crack through something called “unbundling,” which would separate Eskom’s three operations—electricity generation, transmission and distribution—so private companies could more easily sell energy on Eskom’s wires. Because it would also require Eskom to buy these companies’ electricity at above-market rates, unbundling would, effectively, subsidize Eskom’s for-profit competitors in the name of decarbonization.

Foreign capital is backing the unbundling plan. One condition of the financing deal for clean energy that South Africa struck in 2021 at COP26—\$8.5 billion in grants and loans from the United States and several European countries—is that Eskom helps accommodate for-profit clean power producers.

Unbundling also has support on parts of the Left, as many environmental justice groups see it as the only way to put more solar and wind on the grid, according to Bruce Baigrie, former climate justice liaison at the Alternative Information and Development Centre. And while the Congress of South African Trade Unions, the country’s largest trade union federation (aligned with the ANC), does not explicitly support unbundling, “They’re also not necessarily coming out against it,” Baigrie says. That leaves the miners and metalworkers unions, and their handful of outside supporters, mostly on their own.

NUMSA, which split from the Congress of South African Trade Unions in 2014, has long opposed unbundling on the grounds that a public power monopoly is the best way to expand renewables while protecting jobs. Because of NUMSA’s opposition to unbundling, groups like Greenpeace Africa have accused the union of defending coal while South Africans suffer blackouts, pollution and climate change-related droughts and floods.

As the drumbeat for privatization intensifies, some NUMSA leaders are defending the coal industry. NUMSA General Secretary Irvin Jim has publicly supported calls by the pro-coal energy minister to resist global calls for a rapid shift away from fossil fuels, putting Jim at odds with many rank-and-file workers as well as the union’s official position.

Other NUMSA members worry leaders have been “captured by coal interests,” as one NUMSA staffer tells *In These Times* (on the condition of anonymity, fearing reprisal). Insiders told the *Mail & Guardian* in 2018 that



the union’s financial woes had made Jim less accountable to workers than to the interests of NUMSA’s investment arm, headed by anti-renewable businessman Khandani Msibi. (Jim dismissed the accusations.)

Whatever their motivations, the rhetoric from NUMSA leaders portrays a new common sense regarding South Africa’s energy future—that South Africans must choose between private (but renewable) energy or public (but dirty) power.

Others say it’s a false choice. “The whole world is on the brink of moving from coal to renewable energy,” Sokhela says. But “workers on the ground see [unbundling] as another opportunity for ... corrupt criminals we elect into parliament to further exploit the coffers of the country,” while handing the power sector over to for-profit companies.

As NUMSA’s former Deputy General



renewables. Although Eskom was initially barred from entering the renewable energy market in 2011, the utility has since invested in solar and battery storage projects. City governments are also starting to procure or generate their own clean power.

“That, for me, is socially owned,” Sikwebu says.

Genuine social ownership of South Africa’s power remains out of reach, however, as long as investors like the World Bank own Eskom’s debt, since the loan agreements make the utility answerable to creditors rather than the public. The World Bank’s 2010 loan to Eskom allocated \$3 billion for the construction of a coal plant while directing just \$260 million to wind and solar projects.

The Alternative Information and Development Centre has developed a proposal to address Eskom’s debt, with input from NUM and NUMSA members. It calls on rich countries to provide “no-strings-attached investment capital for the energy transition.” It also proposes using South Africa’s public employee pension fund, which consistently runs a surplus, to bail out Eskom.

Beyond the debt problem, the economic climate has put labor on the back foot. Even before Covid-19 pushed millions out of work, unemployment in South Africa hovered near 30%. In 2018, it was reported that the largest trade union federation declined by over 40,000 members in two years as unions struggle to organize a precarious workforce.

Meanwhile, austerity measures adopted by the ANC to appease creditors have worsened already high levels of poverty and inequality, which have in turn sparked South Africa’s largest protests in decades. The immediate need to protect jobs, wages and public services against austerity has left South Africa’s increasingly fractured labor movement little space to organize for a pro-worker transformation of the energy sector.

But the struggle for clean public power is still alive within the labor movement. “Different views are finding expression in the union,” one NUMSA staffer says, but Sikwebu believes much more organizing is needed, within NUMSA and beyond.

Joining forces with unions representing different sectors will also be key to realizing the union’s vision for a just transition, according to Sokhela: “When we are divided, our power is also divided.” ■

CASEY WILLIAMS is a journalist based in New Orleans. He writes about climate, energy and labor politics around the world.

Secretary Karl Cloete wrote in 2018: “We are against a capitalist transition organized around profit and exploitation. We are for a just and democratic transition.”

GETTING SOCIAL

SIKWEBU CONTENDS THAT, EVEN WITH privatization looming, achieving clean public power does not have to mean defending the Eskom status quo. He says the idea that clean energy can only come at the expense of public institutions rests on the mistaken view that public entities are unwilling to invest in

Above: Members of the National Union of Mineworkers and the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa rally Nov. 17, 2018, against government plans to close five coal-fired power stations and offer contracts for privatized renewable energy.



JUSTICE

TRABA

ESCUCHEN A LOS
TRABAJADORES

TRABAJOS CON JUSTICIA

INDUSTRIA
TRABAJOS CON JUSTICIA

TRABAJO JUSTICIA

TRABAJO JUSTICIA



Listening to the Workers Harvesting Grapes Amid Wildfires

Indigenous farmworkers can teach us how to right our relationship with the land

BY BROOKE ANDERSON

ANAYELI GUZMAN WAS BORN INTO a Mixtec-speaking Indigenous community in San Miguel Chichahua in Oaxaca, Mexico. Her family raised chickens on their land, and as a child she would help plant corn, squash and radishes. They ate handmade tortillas with beans, eggs and salsa. Her grandparents taught her to care for the land and to revere the rain. Few people worked for wages. Rather, families owned small plots and grew seasonal, drought-resistant crops, exchanged produce with nearby communities and helped each other with big projects.

After migrating to the United States to be with her husband, Guzman (along with 11,000 other, mostly Indigenous, immigrant farmworkers) toils for meager wages in the \$1.9 billion wine industry of Sonoma County, Calif. In the past several years, record-breaking wildfires have ravaged the area, often during harvest season. Vineyard owners routinely escort workers through evacuation zones to pick grapes in a haze of toxic smoke.

Fed up, Guzman and her coworkers began to organize

Left: "Escuchen a los trabajadores," one sign reads at the Nov. 13, 2021, picket at Simi Winery: "Listen to the workers."

PHOTO BY BROOKE ANDERSON



in summer 2021. After surveying hundreds of farmworkers, their committee created the 5 for Farmworkers in Fires campaign to demand language justice, disaster insurance, community safety observers, hazard pay and clean bathrooms. Workers hand-delivered those demands to dozens of wineries. When one winery, Simi, did not respond, approximately 300 workers and allies picketed Simi's lavish, \$145-per-ticket wine tasting. (Disclosure: I first met Guzman and other farmworkers as a photographer hired to help document their campaign.)

Wineries not only endanger workers' lives by instructing them to harvest in the midst of raging climate change-fueled blazes; wineries also accelerate climate destabilization. Industrial agriculture is one of the largest contributors to climate change globally, and wineries are particularly likely to erode local ecological balance through soil depletion, intensive water use and

the deployment of toxic fertilizers.

Indigenous farmworkers, however, often have access to traditional ecological knowledge passed down through millennia—about how to live in “right relationship” with the land, water and one another—but lack the power to steward and heal the land.

Now, farmworkers are organizing to change that. “The reality is that, in this decade, we’re going to see serious changes,” says Davida Sotelo Escobedo, communications and research coordinator with North Bay Jobs with Justice, which is helping with the campaign. “The rich, the land owners, are going to talk about solutions that are disconnected from the land. But those who work the land have the knowledge and leadership to show us what we need to do. There is power in remembering and uplifting this connection with the land.”

In the spirit of remembering our way forward, I interviewed two Indigenous farmworkers at the

Above: Anayeli Guzman (right) shows her daughter, Dalia, how to care for a pepper plant at their home in Windsor, Calif. Right: Guzman helps Dalia tie on a Trabajos Con Justicia (“Jobs with Justice”) bandana before the Nov. 13, 2021, picket at Simi Winery in Healdsburg, Calif.

PHOTOS BY BROOKE ANDERSON

heart of this organizing effort—Anayeli Guzman and Margarita Garcia—about their memories of home, working as a farmworker today, and what they’d change if they had the power to tend the land on which they currently labor.

ANAYELI GUZMAN

RESPECT. “The wineries treat us like they treat the earth. There is no respect for us nor for the land. The only thing that interests them is production and money. But if the workers and the land didn’t exist, there wouldn’t be a harvest. There wouldn’t be anything.”

RAIN. “Our elders said that when it is time to plant, the first thing they’d do is offer something—be it liquid or food—to the land, because she is our mother. Before the first rains, they’d go to a cave carrying torches and candles and have a party with food, dancing and singing to ask God for rain. It is different here. Wineries expect the fruit to produce because they put chemicals and fertilizers on it.”

WATER, DROUGHT, FERTILIZERS. “The wineries use fertilizers which damage the land and water. Sometimes it is as if they make a plant produce or mature when it shouldn’t. It is as if they are forcing nature. We are also in a drought. At my home, there is no grass. But at the wineries, everything is green. It’s as if you’re transported to another world, as if they had their own river. It makes me sad because all the animals need water. They have a right to live, too.”

CROP ROTATION. “There comes a time when we all must take a break. So too does the earth need a break. The farmers in my community let the land rest for a certain time. They let it breathe, let it regain nutrients for the next harvest. That doesn’t happen here. Here, it’s just constant work. As soon as the last harvest ends, they’re already pruning again.”

MUTUAL AID. “There used to be a lot of mutual aid: ‘you help me, I help you,’ not, ‘OK, you worked this many hours so you get this much cash.’ No. We worked as a team. We called it *tequio*. It’s a beautiful tradition and what I most miss. It is different



“ The workers are the ones who spend time watching how the plants grow, how the grapes mature. We are more the owners than they are.”

here because you arrive and the boss tells you, ‘Here is where we’ll work,’ and that’s it.”

MONEY WON’T HEAL THE EARTH. “They have to understand that there are things money cannot buy and that technology alone will not fix. This is true for the healing of the Earth. We can’t just put up solar panels or buy different cars. We have to do it ourselves.”

WORKERS ARE THE REAL STEWARDS. “Like [Emiliano] Zapata said, ‘*La tierra es de quien la trabaja*’ (‘The land belongs to those who work it’). The workers are the ones who spend time watching how the plants grow, how the grapes mature. We are more the owners than they are.”

MARGARITA GARCIA

WATER. “The wineries have damaged the land, the water and the environment. They use many pesticides to the point that the rivers are no longer clean. We have to be more conscious of caring for our water. Where I’m from, there’s always





been drought, so we knew to use only what we needed and no more. Rainwater was recycled. We'd put containers outside and when it would rain, we'd have water to water the plants. We had open-air toilets and the waste would go to the plants. Same with the water from the wash—everything went to the plants.”

FIRE. “There was a lot of drought in my community, so there would be fires. It is not new for me. However, the fires never grew as large as they do here. The people themselves would self-organize to put out fires because there was no fire department. They'd surround the fire so that it could not jump, throw earth on it and hit it with branches. We'd intentionally burn certain areas in order to later plant corn. The ashes were used as compost to prevent insects without chemicals. Later, each town would take its turn to plant again and the trees would return.”

EXCHANGE. “In my community, *el trueque* is the exchange of crops. If a family has avocados and we have oranges, we'd exchange. If one town's harvest was potatoes, plums, peaches and other things we didn't have in my community, we'd exchange. We'd bring potatoes and they'd give us bread, or we'd bring tortillas and they'd give us chiles.”

KNOWLEDGE. “The bosses don't respect the wisdom of the farmworkers. I remember this coworker of mine. The boss told her that she was born to work the fields because of the color of her skin. Instead of humiliating us like this, they should value our knowledge of the land. But they are interested neither in caring for the land, nor in the opinion of farmworkers. The only thing the wineries care about is extracting work from us to make money for them. Right now, you have to do what the boss says and sometimes it is against our will.”

Above: Margarita Garcia in her kitchen in Santa Rosa, Calif., wearing a traditional huipil that is “biodegradable” and “does not contain toxic material,” she says. The colors represent wildflowers back home, some of which are extinct. Left: Margarita Garcia (left) and Anayeli Guzman, among 300 other workers and community allies, rally with North Bay Jobs with Justice at Simi Winery on Nov. 13, 2021, in Healdsburg, Calif.

The Invention of the Year

The world's lightest and most portable mobility device

Once in a lifetime, a product comes along that truly moves people. Introducing the future of battery-powered personal transportation . . . The Zinger.

Throughout the ages, there have been many important advances in mobility. Canes, walkers, rollators, and scooters were created to help people with mobility issues get around and retain their independence. Lately, however, there haven't been any new improvements to these existing products or developments in this field. Until now. Recently, an innovative design engineer who's developed one of the world's most popular products created a completely new breakthrough . . . a personal electric vehicle. It's called the **Zinger**, and there is nothing out there quite like it.

"What my wife especially loves is it gives her back feelings of safety and independence which has given a real boost to her confidence and happiness! Thank You!"

—Kent C., California

The first thing you'll notice about the **Zinger** is its unique look. It doesn't look like a scooter. Its sleek, lightweight yet durable frame is made with aircraft grade aluminum. It weighs only 47.2 lbs but can handle a passenger that's up to 275 lbs! It features one-touch folding and unfolding – when



Available in Green, Black (shown) and Blue



The Zinger folds to a mere 10 inches.

folded it can be wheeled around like a suitcase and fits easily into a backseat or trunk. Then, there are the steering levers. They enable the **Zinger** to move forward, backward, turn on a dime and even pull right up to a table or desk. With its compact yet powerful motor it can go up to 6 miles an hour and its rechargeable battery can go up to 8 miles on a single charge. With its low center of gravity and inflatable tires it can handle rugged terrain and is virtually tip-proof. Think about it, you can take your **Zinger** almost anywhere, so you don't have to let mobility issues rule your life.

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“ The only thing the wineries care about is extracting work from us to make money for them.”



But if the landowners listened to us, we could guide them about how to work with the land, not against it.”

As the planet rapidly escalates toward ecological collapse, those who put us on that path can no longer deny the collapse is imminent. They will propose technological solutions (more solar panels, more electric cars) while propagating the very same social and economic inequality that got us to this point. What we really need is to put stewardship back into the hands of people who recognize how to live in right relationship to the Earth and each other. Farmworkers, as grassroots ecologists with the wisdom and respect to take care of the land correctly, are the voices we need to heed. ■

All worker quotes translated from their original Spanish and edited for clarity and brevity.

BROOKE ANDERSON is an Oakland, California-based organizer and photojournalist. She has spent 20 years building movements for social, economic, racial and ecological justice. She is a proud union member of the Pacific Media Workers Guild, CWA 39521, AFL-CIO.

Top: Anayeli Guzman (bottom, facing the crowd) demands language justice and hazard pay, among other worker rights, at the Nov. 13, 2021, picket of Simi Winery. Bottom: Margarita Garcia advocates for the 5 for Farmworkers in Fires campaign outside of Simi Winery in Healdsburg, Calif., on Nov. 13, 2021. The campaign demands include clean bathrooms for workers.

PHOTOS BY BROOKE ANDERSON

Get Ready for the Third Wave of Le Sueur

Revisiting lessons from a Depression-era Marxist feminist

BY BENJAMIN BALTHASER

IF YOU FEEL TIRED, FOR GOD'S sake, stop ... Don't work," a woman says to her friend in the short story "Biography of My Daughter," written by Midwestern radical writer and activist Meridel Le Sueur. The two had just watched their childhood friend die in a sanatorium — she had put herself through college by washing and cleaning in private houses without rest and often without food, causing the burnout that eventually killed her. Two weeks after graduation, the friend, who the narrator calls her "daughter" (despite no blood ties), dies of starvation.

"Oh, she worked so hard," the narrator's living daughter says. What for? "She wanted above everything to be a success."

This story by Le Sueur is one I have been returning to over the past two years, as working in offices, classrooms and factories has come to mean not only the usual long hours and low pay, but a question of life and death. Since the pandemic began, healthcare workers and schoolteachers have quit their jobs in droves because of safety concerns and overwork. This moment is especially disorienting without any clear messages about or universal standards for safety; instead, we must simply listen to our bodies and scan for risk like an antelope scenting the air, then make a private decision that will seem overcautious (or, conversely, dangerous) to many. "Stop, don't work," might be one's last best hope.

A Marxist-feminist writer, Le Sueur rooted her stories in working-class women's bodies, labor struggles and sexuality. They have circulated quietly since their recovery in the 1970s by feminist publishers and later in the 1990s by Marxist scholars writing about the Depression-era literary Left. Born in 1900 to progressive parents (her stepfather was the socialist mayor of Minot, N.D., in the early 20th century), Le Sueur later lived in a New York City commune (along with Emma Goldman) and worked as a stuntwoman in Hollywood before moving back to the Midwest and joining the Communist Party in 1924.

Le Sueur's work (including her essays, short stories and one novel) explores alienation experienced under capitalism, featuring, for example, men who want to force their partners to have abortions, women who can't acknowledge their own sensual desires, middle-class intellectuals who separate ideas from practice, and factory workers who experience a rare glimpse into another life when they are injured at work and allowed time to dream while they heal and wander. The alienating world of capitalist social relations—associated with well-kept automobiles, paper-thin bodies, sterile intellectualizations and automated and isolating work—is contrasted with images and expressions of sensuality, fertility and frank sexual desire. Le Sueur's binary world—of middle-class

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BEE JOHNSON



men and working-class women, of capitalists and proletarians—is rendered without apology and with an overflowing and raw particularity. These clear divisions feel lived and struggled through, rather than imposed upon the reader.

Unlike her many contemporaries, Le Sueur refused to settle down in New York, London or Moscow, and lived in the blue-collar Midwest most of her life. Even *New Masses* editor Mike Gold—a leader of the proletarian arts movement who famously pushed working-class writers in the 1930s to write in “hot jets of feeling” after their shifts in the lumber yards and factories—made a living writing in one of the few U.S. literary metropolises, like many leftist intellectuals. For Le Sueur, belonging to the working class had to be lived in the body, through daily experience. “If you come from the middle class,” Le Sueur wrote, “words are likely to mean more than an event.” For Le Sueur, there is no knowledge that can be had other than by experience; stories about the “dark chaotic passionate” world of the proletariat must be born not only of direct observation, but from “communal participation.”

In short, one cannot choose to join the working class, Le Sueur wrote in a 1935 essay in *New Masses*. One must simply “belong.”

In her essay “Women Know a Lot of Things,” Le Sueur details the profound insight working-class women have into exploitation and social change. Le Sueur opens with a portrait of a Polish woman in Minneapolis who works in the stockyards and who knows, despite not reading the newspaper, what “suffering is.” For example, she empathizes with the Woman’s Brigade that smashed the windows of a General Motors factory during the 1937 sit-down strike in Flint, Mich. Working-class women, according to Le Sueur, “pick it up at the source, in the human body.” She goes on: “How much blood and toil goes into the making of even a poor body” because “in that body under your hands every day there resides the economy of that world.” Such women “know everything that happens on the stock exchange ... the terrible misuse and destruction of land and crops and human life plowed under... . You have the news at its terrible source.” Working-class women, unlike most men (then as now), touch and feel the whole of the global economy.

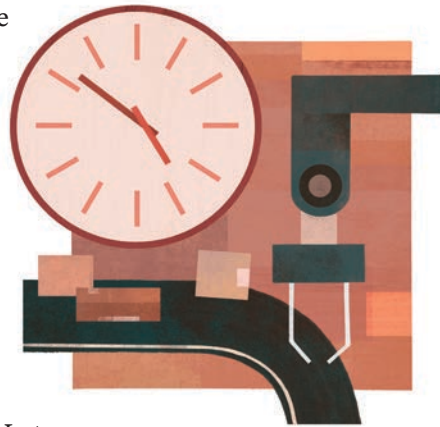
Whether touching a baby or rolling steel, one gains a direct knowledge of the sources of life and labor. For Le Sueur, this knowledge is not a cause of women’s imprisonment, but a site from which women can call for revolution—for an end to all forms of gender inequality, including the rights to vote, fight, serve in revolutionary armies, build unions and join the ranks of the Communist Party.

Le Sueur’s focus on the category “woman” may strike many readers as outdated or reactionary, as she ties sex and gender together. Especially at that time (and to a great extent today), however, “woman’s work” was the devalued name associated with care work and attending to living human bodies. As a materialist, this spot is where Le Sueur wants to begin. In doing so, she transforms the meaning of “woman” and its relationship to work and to “men” (and the system that produces such categories). In

her satirical story “A Hungry Intellectual,” for example, an unemployed but pretentious radical believes social change comes “without violence, that it must be intellectual.” The narrator replies, while powdering her infant, “When you have a baby, birth is violent.” For Le Sueur, revolution is violent the way birthing is violent. Motherhood was not reactionary; rather, through the “violent” act of birth, a “new world” could be seen.

In response to alienation, poverty, depression and gendered violence, Le Sueur’s working-class narrators celebrate sex, birthing, revolutionary militancy, food and laughter. In “Annunciation,” a story from her most famous collection, *Salute to Spring* (1940), the narrator decides to keep her baby, even though her husband wants “to be rid of it.” The story ends with an image of a pear tree outside the narrator’s window: “Far inside the vertical stem there must be a movement, a river of sap rising from below and radiating outward ... the leaves are the lips ... the fruit ... in full tongue on the tree, hanging in ripe body.” The child and tree “shot up like a rocket,” an image that connects to all living things. The story also offers an intimate portrait of a working-class writer, carrying “slips of paper around with me” even as she has no room of her own and no stable source of income or even food, representing a different kind of working-class workplace.

The final story in *Salute to Spring*, “I Was Marching,” combines Le Sueur’s insights about



the organic nature of unalienated labor with her politics of working-class revolution. Set during the 1934 Teamsters general strike in Minneapolis, the story centers on a middle-class narrator who says she was “afraid” of “mixing” and “losing myself” in the crowd of “lean, dark young faces” of striking workers. The narrator wants to remain a spectator, fearing that all “I had been trained to excel in would go unnoticed.” Then, she sees a “strange powerful trance of *movement together*” that was compelling and desperately frightening and alien. What happens to an individual when they lose their individuality but are not part of any political or social organization? The story portrays the fear of many middle-class writers and professional workers for whom their entire lives have been defined, as the narrator says, by “competing”—translating their own desires, needs and wants into a reified “self” that can wield prestige and social capital. Like the dying woman in “Biography of My Daughter” who wants to be a “success,” Le Sueur’s world is full of a painful and self-defeating individualism, marked by a refusal to live in the sensuous, communal world of people.

Resolving the next day to join the strike, the narrator in “I Was Marching” is immediately put to work washing cups and pouring coffee inside the strike headquarters. At first, she finds the work strange, as “nobody asks my name” and she is put “anonymously” on the kitchen line. Soon, she feels the “intense and natural organization” of the strike moving around her and understands her place among “live coals of living men,” reflecting that “I feel I know” a woman she has never spoken to. The narrator begins a sensual and intellectual transformation, from an individual to a member of a collective. She watches as bodies are dragged into the strike hall after being shot by police. She watches striking truckers build a barricade. She joins the funeral march for a dead worker. And for all of that, she never feels lonely, nor does she feel subsumed into an anonymous crowd.

“I am one of them, yet I don’t feel myself at all,” the narrator says. “It is curious, I feel most alive and yet for the first time in my life I do not feel myself as separate.” Rather than imagine the individual as separate from, or in rebellion against, a collective, the narrator imagines a collective as an organic, unalienated living organism in which the individual is brought forth and enlarged by their presence in a working-class rebellion.

Rather than imagine political revolution only as a means to live a materially comfortable life, Le Sueur’s fiction and prose wants to imagine a

different relationship among people, land and the self—a relationship that would make poverty (of any kind) spiritually impossible to imagine. In this world, it would make no more sense to ignore the aches of one’s body while working on the clock than it would to ignore the pangs of hunger. For Le Sueur, the process of what Marxists refer to as “reification”—how relationships among people become relationships among commodities—is built into the fabric of our lives: We work for money, allow profits

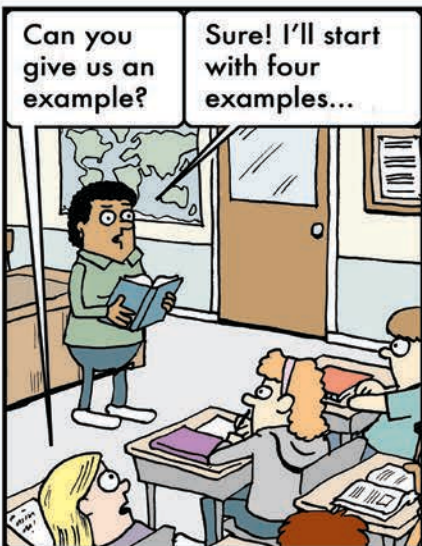
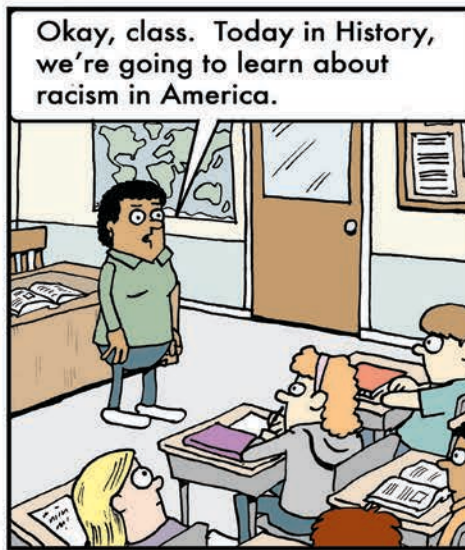
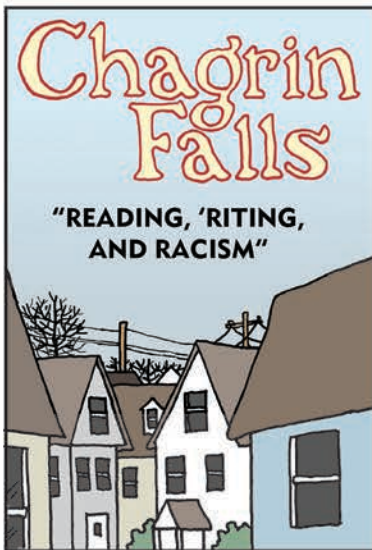
What happens to an individual when they lose their individuality but are not part of any political or social organization?

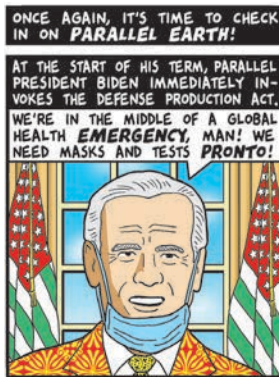
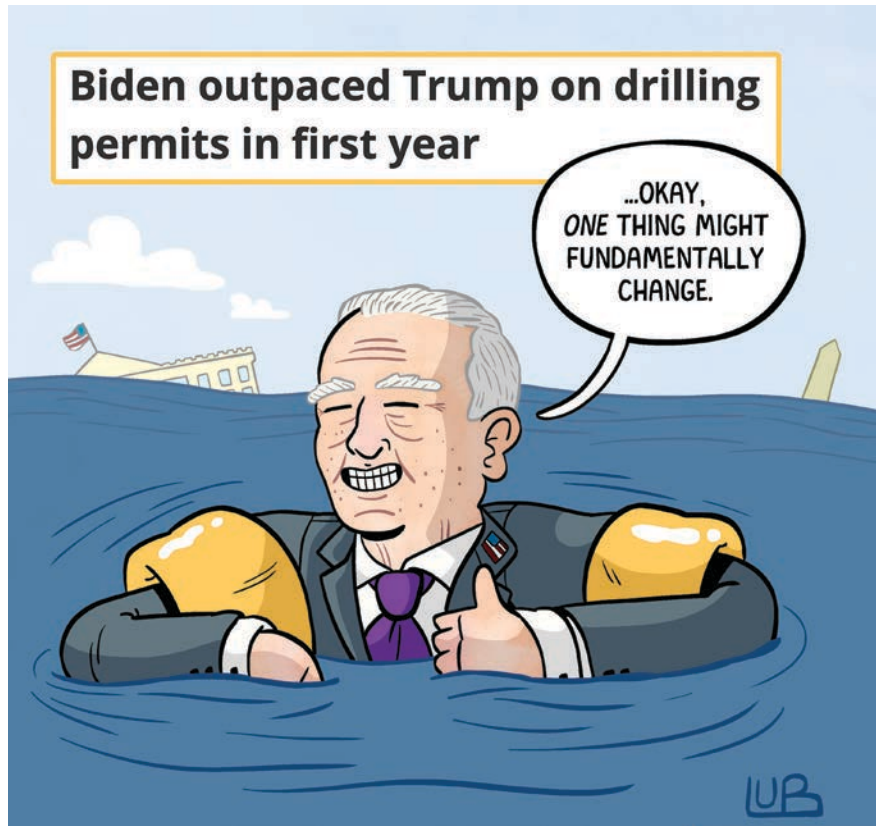
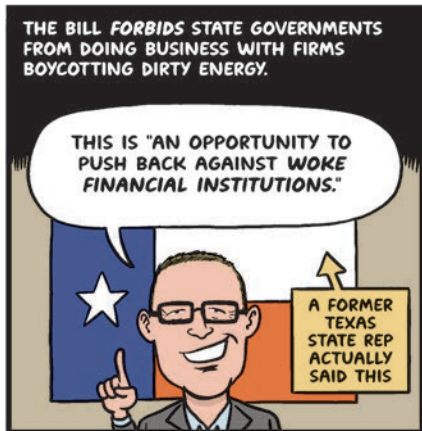
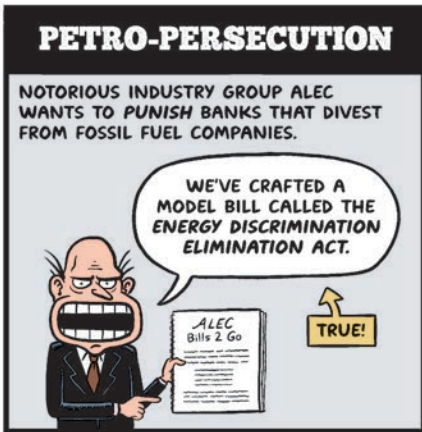
to dictate how things are used, use human beings as expedient tools to achieve ends and imagine that sexuality (and sensuality) follow from status, respectability and social stability.

Because of this understanding, Le Sueur would be appalled but not at all surprised to learn how employers and governments have willingly subjected people to Covid-19, hoarded life-saving vaccines, privileged profits over public health and hardly batted an eye when more than 800,000 people in the United States died of a disease that could have been substantially contained. Le Sueur would also be delighted, if not surprised, to see millions of workers walk off their jobs (whether individually or in mass strikes, such as those at John Deere and Kaiser Permanente), rejecting a culture of death and demanding what bodies need to live.

As Le Sueur asks in the short story “Corn Village,” why is it we have only “money dreams, power dreams,” and not rich imaginaries of social collectivity and thriving? In the last lines of “I Was Marching,” she tells of “that strange shuffle of thousands of bodies moving with direction, thousands of feet, and my own breath with the gigantic breath ... marching.” It is an image of revolution, social action and our strange, embodied human breathing that, together, make revolution meaningful. ■

BENJAMIN BALTHASER is associate professor of multi-ethnic literature at Indiana University South Bend. He is the author of the books *Anti-Imperialist Modernism* and *Dedication*. His forthcoming book *Citizens of the Whole World* is on contract with Verso Books.





TOM TOMORROW



WTO Yawns at the Revolution

The World Trade Organization has been on the defensive during the Covid-19 pandemic, with many groups and countries calling for waivers on international patent rights for vaccines so they might possibly be cheaply manufactured and urgently distributed around the world. Do developing countries stand a fighting chance?

One case study comes from John Vidal, covering the Battle in Seattle in 1999—specifically, the collapse of the talks at the WTO that year. What is less remembered about the historic conference is how poor countries banded together to reject demands from rich countries to expand free-market capitalism even more.



IN JANUARY 2000, JOHN VIDAL WROTE: Four tables, each 30 yards long. More than 100 ministers each sit opposite a diplomat or civil servant. A few observers line two walls. It is standing room only in Hall 6B. Of those present, 90 percent are middle-aged men in dark suits. The women wear bright scarves. ...

The working party of the World Trade Organization's "Singapore Group and Other Issues" is forbidden territory to the 3,000 journalists in Seattle and the non-governmental organizations buying for information about the talks. But to the thousands who are in Seattle to express their misgivings about the WTO, and who have been arrested for marching outside the convention center in pursuit of accountability and open negotiations, it is like the far side of the moon.

I have access to the talks because, in its incompetence, the WTO has issued me the wrong accreditation. Instead of a green press card they have given me a nice blue delegate one. In short, I am a sort of least developed country. ...

The five WTO working groups are where countries meet each day to thrash out some common ground. If the gap between them is too large, then they either enter bilateral agreements with each other or they can be called in by Michael Moore, the WTO

director general, to negotiations. ... It's called international diplomacy.

In the packed hall, the afternoon meeting is trying to establish whether the WTO should include talks over investments and competition in the next round of negotiations. Investment and competition are huge issues, with ramifications for democracy and sovereignty. If the WTO secretariat can get countries to reach any sort of agreement, these issues will be on the new trade agenda, and three years from now, after long talks in Geneva, all 135 WTO countries might have to amend their laws to allow, say, foreign companies equal access to their markets.

The NGOs are deeply worried that this would be a charter for transnational companies to go anywhere they like. They fear that eventually no country will be allowed to protect its own national interests. It seems there should be a stirring debate. The delegates look bored. The gavel bangs and the deputy chair announces that many ministers have been detained not by protesters, but by talks with President Clinton. But the meeting should go ahead, he says. ...

"Some basic political decisions need to be taken," he says. The question is whether member countries are ready to start liberalizing and harmonizing their investment and competition laws, or whether they should continue to debate as they have for the past three years. ...

Most rich countries, including Britain, want the new round to include the investment and

competition clauses. The poor say repeatedly that they are not ready and it would be unfair because they do not yet have the basic laws in place. The richest 29 countries in the world tried to get a major investment treaty passed in the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) last year. They failed after campaigning led by more than 600 environmental and consumer groups around the world. The investment issue was passed to the WTO. ...

Outside the hall, tear gas and rubber bullets are being used on protesters. In the meeting, faint snoring can now be heard. ... The meeting continues with the poorer countries more or less against the proposals and the middle-income ones swinging both ways.

The delegate from the Czech Republic booms his approval for further liberalization but the United States is hesitant, if only because it is worried that the proposal to liberalize investments and competition might rebound on its own protectionist attitude toward agriculture. “We feel it’s important not to prejudge the issues,” says a squeaky American voice. He suggests substituting a “more focused way” and urges the

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other delegates to “listen to civil society.” ...

In the far distance, one delegate is blowing bubblegum. One by one, the countries say their bit, but it looks as if the gap is far too wide to be bridged. The developing countries can breathe a sigh of relief.

Probably. ■

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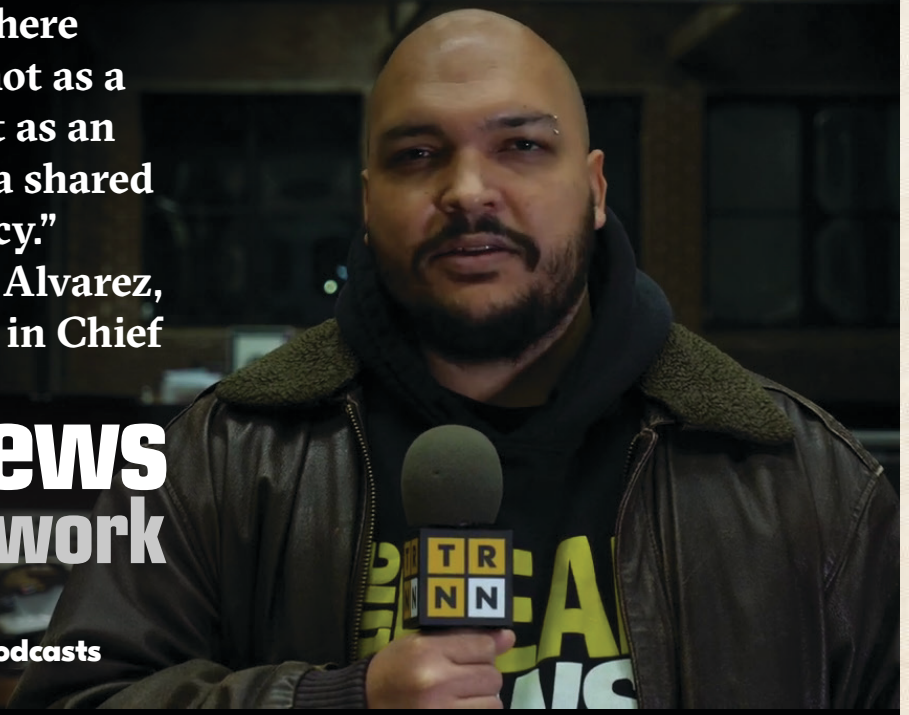
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