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IN THESE TIMES



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BY LUIS FELIZ LEON

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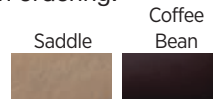
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“ No political movement can be healthy unless it has its own press to inform it, educate it and orient it. ”
 —IN THESE TIMES FOUNDER JAMES WEINSTEIN



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ON THE COVER

Illustration by Annee Schwank

Dear Reader,

AFTER MORE THAN 35 YEARS AT *In These Times*, I am moving on. When I began in October 1986, *In These Times* correspondents across Latin America were hard at work helping break the story of the Iran-Contra Affair. Because of the dogged efforts of independent journalists, those in power were held accountable. Eleven Reagan administration officials were charged, including Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger.

Perhaps we will always have to contend with reactionary nationalism, corporate greed and militarism, which too often go unchallenged. Yet, those who dream of a just and viable future for our country—and our planet—need an alternative to complacent apologetics if we are to evolve to a more complete social democracy.

A ferment is brewing in America's working classes, who are looking for signs of salvation under the strain of growing inequality and economic insecurity. They deserve independent, movement-led journalism that responds to injustice and guides society toward the common good. Progressive ideas once deemed impractical (but long championed by *In These Times*) are entering the mainstream, once lone voices of sanity are now national players, democratic socialists have forced their way into the Democratic party.

These gains have also fueled a backlash from the Democratic corporate donor class, making the independent reporting championed by *In These Times* more important than ever. Failure is not an option, as the alternative—a consolidation of power under right-wing extremists and rising neo-fascists—is untenable.

In the coming year, I will be cheering on the staff of *In These Times* as I split my focus across two exciting projects. First, I will be working at New Consensus, a think tank, with two of the co-authors of the Green New Deal, Zack Exley and Saikat Chakrabarti. Their forthcoming climate "Emergency Playbook" will detail how the federal government can work with corporations, states and localities to get to net zero carbon emissions in 10 years and at the same time create a sustainable



domestic economy that provides a quality life to all.

My second project will be a return to my roots. I was born and raised in a rural county in Mid-Missouri. I got my start in journalism as a feature writer, Saturday reporter and photographer at my hometown daily, the *Fulton Sun*. Today, rural America, by and large, has become a news desert. Once reliably blue counties are now deep red. In the coming months, I'll be launching an innovative nonprofit network of state-based media organizations, written by and serving the people of rural and small-town America.

When Jimmy Weinstein, *In These Times* founding editor & publisher, stepped down in May 1999, he passed the editor's pen to me. I wrote then, "[*In These Times* will continue to support] policy initiatives and public officials, which if not ideal, are politically preferable. ... Compromise is part of politics; the question is not if, but when, to do so.

What *In These Times* won't compromise is our faith in the democratic ideal. We will strive to be a catalyst for a democratic movement that will strike a balance between celebrating our differences and stressing our commonalities. It's not a question of one or the other."

Vibrant, independent media like *In These Times* breathes life into movements, and this magazine goes to press each month thanks to generous readers like you, who contribute above and beyond the cost of their subscription, and who share collective responsibility for helping publish this magazine.

I have no doubt that, with your support, *In These Times*, under the leadership of Christopher Hass, Jessica Stites and the rest of the staff, will continue to promote an alternative to the corporate, capitalist worldview amplified by for-profit media, and to serve movements for social, economic, environmental and racial justice.

In solidarity,

Joel Bleifuss
In These Times Editor & Publisher,
October 1986–April 2022



CRIMINALLY INCORRECT

Will you people please, please pay attention to what San Franciscans are saying, rather than just guzzling whatever Kool-Aid your friends tell you to drink (“Chesa Boudin’s Latest Test,” May)? I read and respect *In These Times* tremendously. But be better on this issue [of criminal justice], because its ramifications will not stop. If the Left can’t provide safety to citizens, they won’t be considered capable of governing.

—OAK SYDER
San Francisco
Via Twitter

STICKS & STONES

The fundamental goal of U.S. foreign policy is military and economic domination of the world, or as the neoliberals themselves put it, the United States wants “full spectrum dominance” of the world (“How To Stand In Solidarity With Ukraine,” May). Ukraine is a pawn in this U.S. game.

For progressives, a path to peace would be a demand for Biden to meet with Putin and take seriously Russia’s

concerns about its border security. Progressives, too, should demand an end to NATO, as this organization only means war.

Progressives should also condemn Zelensky’s call for a no-fly zone, as this would mean World War III and the deaths of millions.

—SAM KARNES
New Mexico
Via email

SANCTIONED HASSLES

With regard to sanctions (“In Those Times: Chris Hayes on the Cost of Sanctions on Iraq,” May), it might be interesting to look at a new book by Nicholas Mulder, *The Economic Weapon: The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War*. Based on how sanctions have worked in the past, it does not lead to great hopes for them to work against Putin’s Russia. They probably will not do more than slightly inconvenience Putin.

—RICHARD E. GRAY
Via email

NURSING CLARITY

Wow! Aparna Gopalan’s piece on the nurses’ strike at St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Mass. (“No Nurse Left Behind,” May) was both inspiring and thought-provoking. I am, more than ever, grateful for *In These Times*.

—NANCY FOLBRE
Professor Emerita of
Economics, University of
Massachusetts, Amherst
Via email

IN A FLASH



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALYSSA GOLDBERG

Meredith Goldberg, a Chicago-based freelance photographer (whose work has appeared in *In These Times*), took the April 12 picture of the Brooklyn, N.Y. subway shooter suspect’s arrest. Goldberg’s picture ran on the front pages of several newspapers around the country.

PARTY IN THE YSDA

It’s hard to be a young socialist these days, what with the pressure cooker of the climate emergency, student loan debt, a housing crisis and, oh yeah, a million other anxieties. But as Emma Goldman said, “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be in your revolution.”

So the least we could do is host a party at our Chicago office for the Young Democratic Socialists of America when they came into town April 1–3. Their winter conference, themed

“Solidarity Forever,” marked the group’s first big in-person event since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic shutdowns. Students and socialists from all over the country attended panels, political education events and organizing trainings, with talks from democratic socialist Chicago Alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa and Chicago Teachers Union member Dennis Kosuth. And YDSA members took home a free annual ITT subscription thanks to the generosity of the Puffin Foundation!

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Tell us what you like, what you hate and what you’d like to see more of by emailing letters@inthesetimes.com or tweeting @inthesetimesmag, or reach us by post at 2040 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago, IL 60647.

➤ **POLITICAL CONTRABAND**

The Arizona Department of Corrections banned our February issue from our incarcerated readers in the state for depicting “behaviors that may be detrimental to the safe, secure, and orderly operation of the institution.” Specifically unsafe, apparently, were a few images of protesters outside of Los Angeles police headquarters wearing “Black Lives Matter” and “Defund the Police” T-shirts.

PEN America’s 2019 report, “Literature Locked Up: How Prison Book Restriction Policies Constitute the Nation’s Largest Book Ban,” notes how prisons ban literature with little oversight or transparency, and disproportionately ban anything related to civil rights.

“Depending on how strict the bans are, prisons could end up restricting materials that are beneficial

for incarcerated people, either psychologically or educationally,” according to Delvin Davis, regional policy analyst for criminal justice reform at the Southern Poverty Law Center. “Some prisons may fear that materials containing information and images about social justice may inspire incarcerated people to organize themselves inside prisons to improve their conditions.”

He adds that the idea “supposedly helps maintain social order, but could easily turn into a violation of the First Amendment.”



LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

A common aphorism on the Left says revolutionary change is impossible until it’s inevitable. In practice, however, it seems progressive advances come slowly, if at all.

But the success of the Amazon Labor Union in organizing a warehouse in Staten Island, New York, may be just such an event. An independent, worker-led campaign finally outwitted the corporate giant, which has poured millions of dollars into union-busting.

“The revolution is here,” beamed Amazon Labor Union founder Chris Smalls after workers became the first Amazon union in the United States. Smalls quickly added that workers from more than 50 other warehouses have since reached out about organizing.

Amazon workers aren’t alone. As we’ve reported in these pages, Starbucks workers have been on a tear, organizing dozens of cafes with no sign of slowing. This pandemic-era rise in worker militancy and the tight labor market, combined with more positive attitudes toward unions (especially among younger Americans) and wage increases for many low-wage workers, have helped energize the enfeebled U.S. labor movement.

Green shoots are sprouting up across the country.

In this month’s cover story (pg. 14), Luis Feliz Leon reports from the front lines of this resurgence, interviewing workers who are taking the class war directly to Amazon, the most powerful corporate retailer in the nation. According to Hamilton Nolan (pg. 10), the key lesson from the Amazon Labor Union victory is that, to take on corporations on the national scale, they need to give up their territorial claims over particular industries and create “multi-union coalitions.”

Openings to bolster worker power are uncommon. When they arise, for those who believe in a fighting labor movement, it’s incumbent to seize them.

That’s how impossible change becomes inevitable.

Miles Kampf-Lassin
Web Editor

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PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTSIDE MOBILE HOME PARK COOPERATIVE

Mobile Home Owners Fight to Stay Put

Above: Alejandra Chavez rallies residents of Westside Mobile Home Park in Durango, Colo., during their March campaign to buy the land under their homes.

DURANGO, COLO.—On a cold January day at the height of ski season, as tourists check into Durango’s resort hotels and wealthy vacationers roll suitcases into their second homes, Alejandra Chavez pulls away from her single wide trailer on the outskirts of town and drives the two-lane road south to look for a new place to live in New Mexico. Chavez dreads the prospect of making this same

1.5-hour-drive, back and forth, every day, but she sees few options. Her work is in Durango, but Durango, it seems, may no longer have a home for her.

Chavez, 30, moved to the area 18 years ago to join her parents, who fled economic desolation in Mexico and found work in Durango. In 2008, the family bought their trailer in Westside Mobile Home Park for \$12,000. It was in rough shape, but Chavez’s father, who owns a construction company, spent years and some \$20,000 renovating it into a comfortable home. Westside, Chavez says, has been a good place to

live—a neighborhood where Latino, Native American and white families raise their kids together.

As is common in trailer parks, however, the Chavezes and most of their neighbors own their homes but not the land beneath them. In December 2021, they received notice that the park was for sale. Chavez pictured their homes being torn down to make way for a hotel, a gas station or some other amenity for ski resort-goers. Or their homes might simply become unaffordable: In recent years, an inrush of tourists, remote workers and investors has driven land and housing prices out of control in Durango and across the West. The park’s prospective buyer, Harmony Communities, raised lot rents by 50% when it bought a trailer park in Golden, Colo., in 2021.

Chavez and the other Westside residents saw one other option—one way to turn private tragedy into collective victory. On Jan. 14, residents formed a cooperative, elected representatives (including Chavez to the role of vice president), and voted to try to buy the park themselves.

The \$5.46 million asking price was daunting, but residents knew the cost of failure. Chavez has friends who pile in six to a car and drive 2.5-hour commutes to Durango from cheaper towns in New Mexico, casualties of this new, outdoorsy form of gentrification.

The land rush has not spared mobile home parks, which speculators buy up as investment properties. Two such investors even started “Mobile Home University” (MHU) to sell online courses in how to do it. In a blog

post titled “How to Make Huge Returns on Mobile Home Parks,” MHU co-founder Frank Rolfe sums up the strategy: “It costs \$3,000 to move a mobile home.... As a result, tenants cannot leave when you raise their rents.”

Thanks to a new Colorado law, however, IQ Mobile Home Parks, the New York-based company that owns Westside, had to give residents notice of its intent to sell and 90 days to make their own offer. And Westside residents had a model: In June 2021, residents of Animas View Mobile Home Park across town bought their park with guidance from ROC USA, a program that connects trailer park residents to financing so they can buy and run their parks cooperatively. The Animas View website lists some of the benefits of self-ownership: “There is no profit margin in your rent” and “no commercial owner who can decide to close the community.”

On March 15, with Denver-based Elevation Community Land Trust (ECLT) negotiating on their behalf, Westside residents made an offer at asking price, contingent on financing. IQ rejected it in favor of Harmony’s cash offer, but gave residents a week to come up with a cash offer of their own, according to Stefka Fanchi, president and CEO of ECLT. Residents launched a GoFundMe and hosted a fundraising dinner, bringing in nearly \$50,000 in a few days. La Plata County, the Colorado Impact Development Fund, the Local First Foundation and ECLT offered loans and grants to cover the rest. On March 31, after what Fanchi called “a

miraculous act of financial gymnastics,” IQ accepted the offer.

Michael Peirce thinks it shouldn’t take a miracle for residents to be able to buy their own parks. Peirce is project manager for the Colorado Coalition of Manufactured Home Owners (CoCoMHO) and president of the resident co-op that bought Sans Souci park outside Boulder in June 2021. But such successes are the exception: Of the 68 parks that have sold since Colorado’s opportunity-to-purchase program took effect in 2020, only four (including Westside) have been successfully purchased by residents. To lower the barriers, CoCoMHO is supporting a bill in the Colorado legislature that would extend the offer timeline to 180 days and impose penalties on owners who don’t negotiate in good faith.

In the meantime, Chavez offers this encouragement to other trailer park residents interested in buying their parks: “Look out for each other. Ask your community for help. If we did it, I’m pretty sure others can.”

JOSEPH BULLINGTON is the editor of *Rural America In These Times*.

Wildfire Victims Get Burned by Wall Street

EUGENE, ORE.—Three and a half years after the Camp Fire incinerated the town of Paradise, Calif., Shelli Bryan, 66, still waits for relief money to rebuild her life.

THIS MONTH IN LATE CAPITALISM



TWITTER’S BOARD AGREED TO SELL THE SOCIAL MEDIA GIANT FOR \$44 BILLION to Tesla CEO and super-rich guy Elon Musk. Twitter launched a “poison pill” to make the deal less attractive (if not impossible), and Musk then threatened to eliminate board salaries if his bid goes through anyway. The whole spectacle is like a plotline from HBO’s *Succession*, except stupider.

A MASSIVE CRYPTOCURRENCY LOBBYING EFFORT IS UNDERWAY, with one report claiming the industry’s gone from 47 lobbyists spending \$2.2 million in 2018 to 157 lobbyists spending \$9 million in 2021—lobbyists that include (of course) former regulators now advocating for crypto’s “self-regulation.” Meanwhile, more than 32 million Americans lack healthcare. Guess they should spend more on lobbyists.

THE NEW AMAZON UNION ON STATEN ISLAND cited the lack of safety protections as a sticking point. According to one report, Amazon warehouses saw more than 34,000 “serious injuries” in 2021, a 20% increase over 2020. Amazon CEO Andy Jassy attributed the injuries to the fact that new workers just get hurt more, and Amazon keeps hiring new workers. Sounds like Amazon might be getting a lot of new union members, too.

SOMNIUM SPACE IS OFFERING A WAY TO “LIVE FOREVER” in its metaverse gaming world, in exchange for a massive amount of your personal data. Your avatar can then bask in the love and affection of your living friends and relatives long after you shuffle off this mortal coil. What could possibly go wrong?



“We’re living on the edge of poverty beyond anything I could have ever imagined,” Bryan says.

A spark from a faulty transmission line, owned by private utility company Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E), ignited the 153,336-acre blaze that destroyed 18,804 structures and killed 85 people in November 2018. To shield itself from billions of dollars of liability, PG&E filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in January 2019. As part of a settlement in December 2019, the company pledged \$13.5 billion to fund the Fire Victim Trust, which

would provide payments to victims of the 2015 Butte Fire, the 2017 North Bay Fires and the 2018 Camp Fire—all sparked by PG&E’s grid. Victims of the 2016 Ghost Ship Fires were also compensated through a settlement with PG&E where the company claimed no fault.

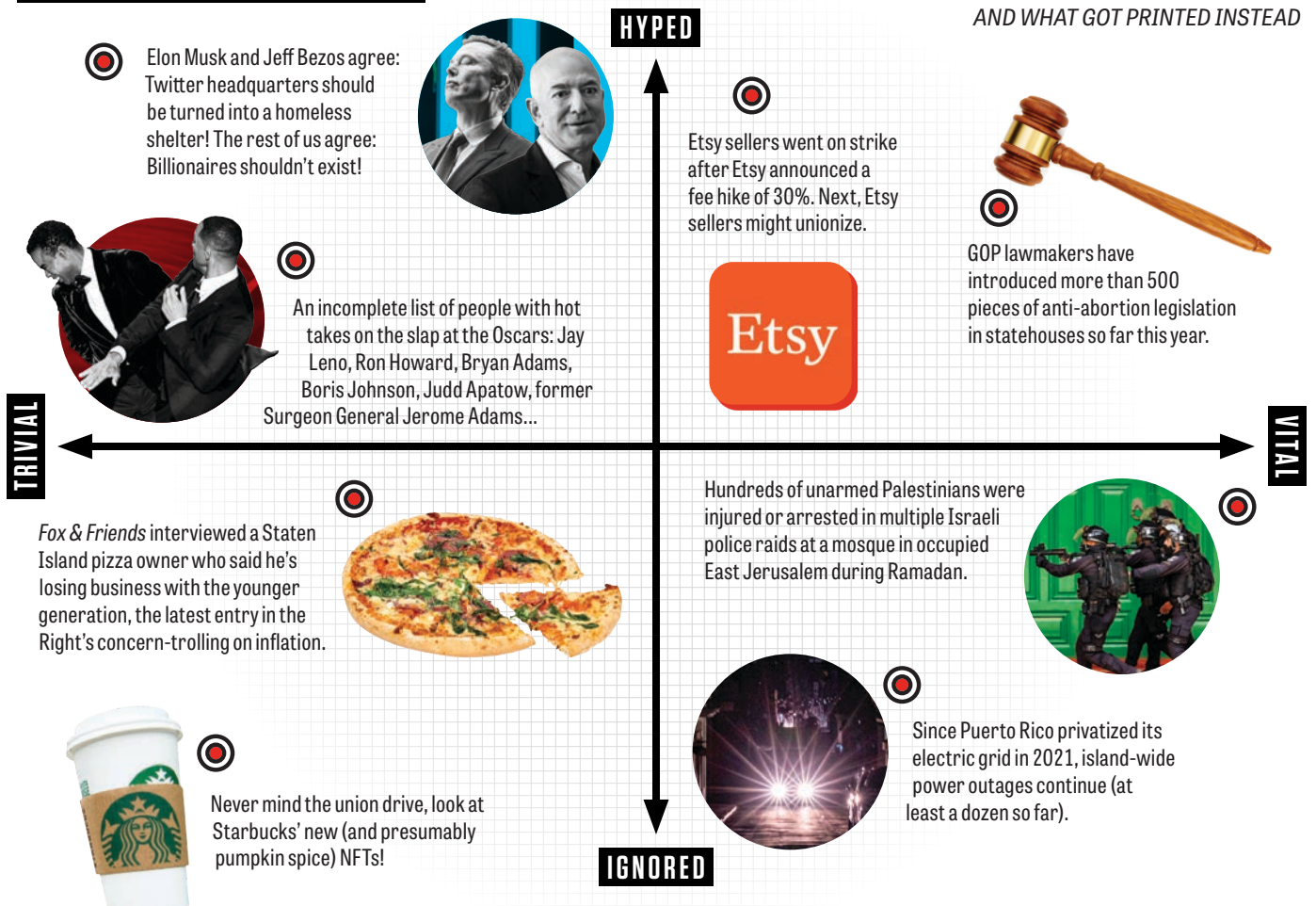
Today, only 60% of the 68,984 victims have received any relief money.

Soot damage rendered the home Bryan was renting unlivable and destroyed most of her belongings. Her storage unit also burned down. Cost of living increases have forced her out of California as she struggles

to cover rising rent and medical bills. She did collect a preliminary payment of \$34,000 from the Fire Victim Trust—on which she owed \$26,000 in taxes. She asked her lawyer when she should expect the rest of her \$187,000 payment, but was told “the same thing she says all the time: ‘We don’t know.’”

Under PG&E’s bankruptcy agreement, \$6.75 billion of the pool for victim repayment was in cash; the other \$477 million was in PG&E stock. The Fire Victim Trust was underfunded on the assumption that the stock price would eventually increase from \$9 to \$14.15

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT



ALL THE NEWS THAT WAS FIT TO PRINT—
AND WHAT GOT PRINTED INSTEAD

a share, but the stock price has only risen to about \$12 a share. In February, the Fire Victim Trust completed a major selloff of 40 million shares of PG&E stock, which added around \$480 million in cash to the fund but still left victims \$80 million short. To make up the difference, the remaining shares now have to sell at \$14.

Tammy Spirlock, 51, who lost her Magalia, Calif., home in one of the fires, was suspicious of the deal from the very beginning. “As soon as I heard that we were going to be paid half stock, I didn’t like that.” Her father had worked for PG&E for 33 years, and she had watched the price waver.

Spirlock tried to organize fire victims to vote against the 2019 settlement, but ultimately more than 85% approved it.

“If I had been told and knew exactly what the implications of a yes vote would mean,” Bryan reflects, “I would never have been part of the claim at all.”

Republican California State Assemblyman James Gallagher proposed a new bill in February to “ensure that the Fire Victim Trust is fully funded.” In committee, the bill was amended to, instead, mandate a review of whether PG&E’s actions hurt its stock value.

“We can tell you why the stock isn’t performing—because they keep burning things down,” Spirlock says. PG&E has also been accused of being responsible for the 2019 Kincadee, 2020 Zogg and 2021 Dixie Fire.

“The shareholders knew exactly what was going to happen, so they bailed and took their shares with them, dropping our amounts even more,” Bryan says.

Multiple Wall Street hedge funds involved in brokering the settlement deal unloaded 250

million shares of PG&E after it left bankruptcy, driving down the share price. The funds had received 169 million shares for free, amounting to \$1.5 billion, as an “equity backstop” to maintain the price point—but without any stipulation that they couldn’t just sell the stock.

It was the “largest [giveaway] of its kind in the history of corporate bankruptcy,” according to a KQED and California Newsroom investigation.

As the first corporation to be held solely liable for a climate-related disaster, PG&E is a test case. Legal scholar Alexander Gouzoules argues the bankruptcy system is not equipped to deal with disasters of this magnitude, and that using shares as compensation for creditors doesn’t work when “the shares ... will continue to be impacted by the continuing risk of wildfires.”

Victims of the Dixie Fire will receive cash from PG&E, according to an April settlement, and California has now created a wildfire fund not reliant on share value.

But the Reclaim Our Power! Utility Justice Campaign says putting customers on the hook for victim compensation creates a “license to burn” for PG&E, rather than an incentive to update infrastructure.

Founded in 2018, Reclaim Our Power! aims to replace PG&E with a “safe, reliable, community-and-worker-owned energy system that benefits all Californians.” As far as using PG&E shares to compensate fire victims goes, campaign coordinator Mari Rose Taruc says: “That is from the twisted minds of Wall Street to force fire survivors into that situation.”

JORDAN ALLYN is a Chicago-based reporter and an *In These Times* editorial intern.

FOR THE WIN

BOTSWANA HAS APPROVED CORBEVAX, the patent-free, Texas-developed Covid-19 vaccine. The approval is expected to reduce vaccine inequity across the African continent, with 100 million doses on their way from India. The cost per dose is less than \$1, while vaccine doses from Chinese and U.S. companies cost up to \$29 apiece.

THE EMMETT TILL ANTI-LYNCHING ACT IS NOW LAW, which designates lynching as a federal crime. Similar legislation was first introduced in 1900 (and hundreds of times since), but it failed to pass Congress even as lynch mobs often skirted state-level prosecution and terrorized predominantly Black communities.

TITLE 42 IS OVER. The Trump-era policy had effectively closed the asylum system at the U.S. border under pretext from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to help control the spread of Covid-19. More than a million migrants were expelled. The CDC says the policy is no longer needed because of Covid treatments.

COLLEGE IS TUITION-FREE IN NEW MEXICO for most residents. Students at the state’s public schools (including tribal colleges) must work toward a degree and meet certain other requirements—but income isn’t one of them. The state, one of poorest in the country, is allocating nearly 1% of its budget to cover the cost.

GRAD WORKERS AT MIT VOTED TO UNIONIZE, 1,785 to 912. After four years of fighting for recognition (and better healthcare, affordable housing and more), the workers will be represented by the United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America.



HAMILTON NOLAN

Amazon Workers School Labor

WHEN NEWS spread April 1 that the independent Amazon Labor Union (ALU) had won its union election at an Amazon warehouse on Staten Island in New York, the initial response from anyone who supports the labor movement was exultation at this unprecedented—and unexpected—victory for the working class.

The secondary response was a collective “In your face!” to mega-billionaire Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, who was shown that all the money in the world can’t crush the will for a union.

Now, we can all move on to what should be the next response: Forcing the union establishment to take a long, hard look at what it needs to change.

The ALU—a project of current and former Amazon workers as well as committed volunteer organizers—succeeded in organizing Amazon before any big, well-funded union could. That fact has produced a million insta-analyses: “They were in New York City, not Alabama—so they had the easiest target!” “The ALU was led by cool younger people—old union bureaucrats must be purged!” Etc.

Rather than indulge in that particular argument, I propose an adjacent conclusion that I think will hold true no matter where anyone lands on

the specific tactical questions about the ALU victory.

This is the lesson the union world should take from the ALU’s accomplishment: *Jurisdiction is dead*. By this I mean that all of the time unions spend arguing with one another over who has the right to organize which workers, in which



industry, at which company is one gargantuan waste of time. Stop it. It’s useless. It is, in essence, a bunch of drivers arguing over a single parking space in one corner of a vast, empty parking lot. While an asteroid is approaching. It is not something that should be on the list of top 100 priorities for labor, given the current situation.

Who cares about jurisdiction in the first place? Well, many major unions consider this parochial concern to be the most important reason for the AFL-CIO to exist—to serve as a traffic cop, arbitrating petty arguments between unions that want to organize the same place. Inherent in

this perspective is the belief that other things the central body of the labor movement could be doing—like, for example, building multi-union coalitions capable of organizing powerful employers like Amazon—are less important than this traffic cop role.

What has this approach gotten us?

It has gotten us a nation in which barely one in ten workers (including barely 6% of private sector workers) are union members, while economic inequality has been rising for decades. The idea that unions should have the right to lay claim to particular industries where 90% of workers are not union members is farcical. A perfect illustration of this absurdity is the fact that, in March, new Teamsters president Sean O’Brien told *Bloomberg* he “wants the Teamsters to be the only union that organizes workers at Amazon’s fulfillment centers and sorting hubs.” Less than two weeks later, the independent ALU had actually unionized an Amazon fulfillment center, which is one more Amazon fulfillment center than the Teamsters have unionized.

Unions serve workers. Not the opposite. What serves workers best is *having a union now*, not the abstract concept of a single union that owns their industry and may get around to organizing them years from now. Until union density in America reaches, say, 50% or more, we don’t need to hear any more jurisdictional arguments from unions about whose territory



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LONDON—Police in London carry off a demonstrator April 13. Thousands of scientists rallied in Madrid, Washington, Nairobi, Hong Kong, New York and other cities, largely organized by activist group Scientist Rebellion, which is calling for a “climate revolution.” In Los Angeles, four people—including a NASA scientist—were arrested after chaining themselves to a Chase Bank office; JPMorgan Chase has invested more than any other bank in oil and gas production. (Photo by Stefan Rousseau/PA Images via Getty Images)

is whose. Instead, we need to see successful union campaigns in which millions of new workers are unionized.

Want to claim “jurisdiction” in an industry? Then organize it. Otherwise, make way for those who will.

To the credit of America’s union leaders, their public reaction to the ALU victory has uniformly been one of support. But that same victory throws into relief how pressing it is for those same unions to change the way they’ve been doing business for the past half century. No more individual fiefdoms jealously guarding their own shrinking islands of union territory, while the majority of working people flounder with no support from

organized labor. The ALU inspired us all by unionizing the first 8,000 Amazon workers in the United States. Organizing the next 800,000 will require the combined efforts of many unions, and then some.

Rich, ruthless, and omniscient companies like Amazon will not be organized solely with GoFundMe donations, as the Staten Island warehouse was. Now is the time for the labor movement to start building multi-union coalitions capable of tackling employers on a national scale, and keeping up the fight long enough to win contracts in the face of endless litigation—think something like the Change to Win coalition, but more active, and

aimed at individual companies.

Building multi-union coalitions requires unions to recognize the futility of arguing over jurisdiction, and instead do the opposite: Combine forces and organize without freaking out over who gets to put their label on the end product.

ALU leader Chris Smalls, whose vision made the Amazon union victory a reality, has already become a celebrated figure. In the end, his greatest contribution to the labor movement might be that he’s served as a blaring wake-up call. There is no room for egos or territorialism in a country of 10% union density. This fight is going to be expensive. Everyone, ante up. ■

JOSHUA LEACH AND HANNAH HAFTER

Biden's Escape Clause for Private Prisons

LAST YEAR, PLANS to close a former federal prison near Folkston, Ga. were finally completed after President Biden signed an executive order phasing out the use of private prisons. So why is business now booming, at the same facility, for GEO Group, one of the nation's largest private prison firms?

Because the Biden administration pulled a sneaky sleight of hand: Rather than fully halting the incarceration of people in such facilities, it has allowed the prisons to simply be converted for immigration detention.

This pivot is an appalling reversal from the administration's earlier promises. After all, Biden came into office with bold pledges to scale back the use of for-profit incarceration of all kinds. Within days of the president's inauguration, he appeared to follow through on this promise by issuing an executive order purporting to end the use of private prisons to hold people in federal criminal custody.

However, Biden's order left at least one major loophole: It was silent on the use of private contractors to detain immigrants in civil custody. There was reason to hope

Biden might also bar privatized immigration detention as part of his immigration platform—he pledged on the campaign trail to “end for-profit detention centers.” In April 2021, he claimed he would make good on this commitment within five days.



In the year that has since passed, however, private detention has not ended—it has metastasized. In many ways, immigration detention is filling the gap in the federal incarcerated population left by Biden's order. The expansion of the Folkston facility, for instance, would make it one of the largest such immigration detention facilities in the country.

The Biden administration has taken a few positive steps to address the particularly harmful forms of immigration detention, such as the confinement of asylum-seeking families. But for each

step forward, there have been several steps back. In the case of family detention, for example, the sites where families were confined haven't closed down, but merely been repurposed. One of them—a facility in Berks County, Pa., which for years held asylum-seeking families—has now reopened as a facility for detaining single adult women.

This switch is part of a pattern. If a facility is emptied for a time but never shuttered, it is almost certain to eventually be refilled by another detained population. After Louisiana took positive steps to reduce the number of incarcerated people in its parish jails, for instance, many of these facilities simply switched over to detaining immigrants. The availability of such detention sites creates a powerful incentive to find ways to fill them, regardless of the stated rationale.

Far from reducing the use of immigration detention, Biden's order on private prisons left an opening to expand it—and the statistics bear this out. The number of people in custody with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has climbed since Biden took office—which is especially concerning in the midst of a public health crisis, as detention settings are known to become hotspots. During the most recent wave of Covid-19 infections in January, diagnoses surged in ICE custody, causing at least 11 deaths.

Medical neglect was among



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THE BIG IDEA

the concerns that prompted Biden's original executive order barring privatized facilities in a federal criminal context. If members of the administration knew of these dangers, why would they allow tens of thousands of people to remain in privatized immigration lock-ups during a pandemic?

The administration would undoubtedly claim that it's making efforts to reduce immigration detention over time. A recently announced pilot program, for instance, would essentially confine people at home instead of in crowded detention centers. Yet such a policy is merely detention by another name. According to the latest reporting, the contract to implement the pilot has been awarded to none other than GEO Group—one of the nation's largest for-profit prison contractors operating immigration detention sites, including the one in Folkston.

Even under a policy that confines asylum-seekers at home instead of in detention complexes, corporate actors will continue to “profit from the suffering of desperate people fleeing violence,” as Biden promised to prevent in his campaign pledge to end for-profit detention centers.

Ending the use of private prisons in the criminal legal system must be paired with vigilant efforts to combat their use against immigrants. Otherwise, taking on the prison-industrial complex will be like fighting the Hydra: cut off one head and two more arise. ■

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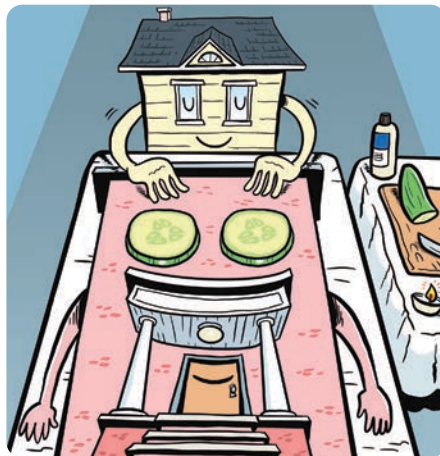
1. a commitment to supporting collective well-being, rooted in interconnectedness

➔ **So like self-care, but more?** Sort of. Discussions of self-care often reference writer and activist Audre Lorde: “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”

But Lorde's radical conception of self-care has largely been washed away by a sea of consumerism. The type of self-care that most recently dominates on social media, for example, is geared toward quick consumer fixes to cope with what really amounts to just living under capitalism. Like getting a pedicure “just for you.”

Community care means recognizing, first, that many don't have the time or money to engage in the consumption rituals typically sold as self-care. And, second, that those rituals are rarely any sort of real antidote to burnout and isolation.

We all need nourishment, rest and connection. Community care is a commitment to making sure no one around us goes without.



➔ **If self-care is bubble baths and eye masks, what's community care look like?** The likelihood that institutional structures will meet our most basic needs varies dramatically along the lines of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability—and when those institutions fail, being able to depend on community care is a matter of life and death. Mutual aid, eviction defense, jail support and more can be vital forms of community care. Or it might be as simple as offering to babysit so an overwhelmed friend has a minute for themself.

“**Shouting ‘self-care’ at people who actually need community care is how we fail people.**”

—NAKITA VALERIO, COMMUNITY ORGANIZER, IN A VIRAL FACEBOOK POST AFTER THE 2019 TERRORIST ATTACK IN NEW ZEALAND

➔ **Do we need community care, or structural change?** Both! Community care is a part of how we get structural change. Consider childcare collectives that enable parents to participate in movements, or community fundraisers to support a family fighting deportation. Failing to provide those forms of care severely limits who can fight for structural change.

But we can also think about baking community care into the changes we want to see. There's no substitute for universal healthcare and housing, but those programs become even more appealing when we start to talk about the difference they'd make in our ability to care for ourselves and each other. Think how much less alienated and fearful we might be if everyone had access to, say, high-quality childcare and home care, mental healthcare and support groups, or multi-generational public housing so we could more easily maintain rich social connections as we age.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TERRY LABAN

ESSENTIAL

BY LUIS FELIZ LEON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANNEE SCHWANK



ORGANIZING



Hey, Jeff Bezos, I'm going to let you know something today: We are just getting started," Chris Smalls declared at an August 2020 protest in Washington, D.C. August 2020 was the month Amazon founder Jeff Bezos became the richest person in recorded history.

Outside of his \$23 million, 27,000-square-foot pied-à-terre, a group of Staten Island Amazon workers and a crowd of supporters erected a mock guillotine.

"Give a good reason why we don't deserve a \$30 minimum wage when this man makes \$4,000 a second," Smalls went on.

After leading a walkout over Covid-19 safety at Amazon's mammoth JFK8 warehouse in March 2020, the first month of the pandemic, Smalls and his co-organizers took their rebellion on the road that summer. Outside Bezos' mansions—a \$165 million Beverly Hills home, a waterfront estate outside Seattle and a Fifth Avenue Manhattan penthouse—the group staged demonstrations denouncing income inequality and demanding wage hikes and protections for workers given the pandemic designation of "essential."

At each stop, they quietly grew the ranks of supporters who also sensed that the scrappy movement was the start of something big.

Those early supporters included Cassio Mendoza, then 23, who decided to show up to the October 2020 protest in Beverly Hills after connecting with Smalls on Instagram.

"Wow, this is really different," Mendoza remembers thinking at the protest. "Talking about billionaires, 'They gotta go.' Damn! This is really radical."

Mendoza would soon move across the country to take a job at JFK8 and ultimately help win the first-ever union at any of Amazon's U.S. warehouses.

Since the Amazon Labor Union's stunning win in April, much of the media analysis around the victory has been centered on Smalls. Just as important, however, is the collective story of the workers who charted their own path against one of the world's biggest companies.

What became the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) brought together an organic group of leaders demanding safety and dignity at Amazon—some with prior union experience—and a diverse, roving band of socialists in their 20s seeking to join a righteous labor fight. After setting their sights on a union election at the JFK8 warehouse, the group was joined by veteran warehouse workers who brought a deep bench of experience and relationships to the campaign. All of them were essential to the ALU's upset win to represent more than 8,000 warehouse workers.

In May, Amazon's union-busting efforts dealt the ALU a defeat in its second union election, this time at LDJ5, a smaller sort center across the street from JFK8. Out of roughly 1,633 employees eligible to vote in the election, nearly 1,000 cast ballots, with 380 workers voting in favor of the union and 618 against.

The outcome is disappointing but not entirely surprising for ALU leaders, who say they faced even steeper odds at LDJ5, a newer facility comprised largely of part-time workers. After the union's first win sent shockwaves through the U.S. labor movement, the ALU says that hundreds of Amazon workers nationwide have reached out for support in their own organizing efforts. There's every reason to think that the ALU is still just getting started.

ESSENTIALLY DISRESPECTED

IT'S FITTING THAT THE LAST DAY OF VOTING AT JFK8 fell on March 30, marking the two-year anniversary of the walkout that jumpstarted the organizing effort there.

Staten Island's first case of Covid-19 case was confirmed March 9, 2020. Things escalated quickly in the following weeks.

While infections rose, "They weren't giving us masks," says Gerald Bryson, a warehouse picker in his 50s who had been a union member at previous jobs.

Instead of responding to the pandemic, Amazon organized what Derrick Palmer, 33, describes as a "mini-carnival" to recruit workers to racial and ethnic affinity groups, crowding employees into a small room and handing out plates of food while people milled about maskless.

"They totally disregarded Covid," Palmer remembers.

Worker Jordan Flowers, then 21, has lupus and was

awaiting a kidney transplant, which put him at high risk for Covid complications. As Flowers saw stories of people dying across the country that March, he grew increasingly concerned about the lack of personal protective equipment at work.

"I'm my mom's only child," Flowers says. "I wasn't gonna risk my life to work for this company." Amazon had already fired him once anyway, when he took short-term disability in 2019, but the company reinstated his employment shortly after he challenged the termination.

Chris Smalls' job as a process assistant at the warehouse, a training role adjacent to management, gave him responsibility for approximately 60 people. Alarmed that managers weren't properly notifying employees when someone they'd worked with tested positive for Covid, Smalls took it upon himself to warn workers of their possible exposure.

Jason Anthony, 36, was one of the workers under Smalls. "Our relationship evolved from a worker-supervisor thing to a brotherhood, a bond that will never be broken," Anthony says. "We call each other brother and sister. We care about each other. That's something that Amazon doesn't even do—care about their own people."

In the afternoon of March 30, 2020, workers filed out of the New York warehouse, led by Bryson, Palmer, Flowers and Smalls. They demanded Amazon close the facility for cleaning and offer employees paid time off in the meantime.

"Alexa, please shut down and sanitize the building," one of their protest signs read.

Amazon fired Smalls that day, claiming he violated the company's quarantine rules. Amazon fired Bryson the next month, though an administrative law judge ordered the company reinstate him two years later in April 2022. Amazon gave Palmer a "final warning" and put Flowers on medical suspension.

According to a leaked memo, Amazon's chief counsel denigrated Smalls soon after, calling him "not smart, or articulate" and suggesting a press narrative of "us versus him." Amazon did not respond to a request for comment.

This narrow focus on Smalls ultimately backfired on Amazon, elevating Smalls to the status of a martyr while underestimating the depth of worker anger. The more that Amazon singled out Smalls, the more organizers could focus on talking to their coworkers and bringing new people into the union campaign.

Meanwhile, Smalls' story reached workers far and wide.

Brett Daniels, 29, got in touch with Smalls via social media after the walkout. At the time, Daniels was working at a dine-in movie theater in a suburb of Phoenix. When he was laid off due to pandemic-related closures, he picked up a



Cassio Mendoza

“ We know the ins and outs of the company. Derrick is a six-year vet. I worked there for almost five years. Who better to lead the fight than us? ”

—CHRIS SMALLS



job as a seasonal hire at an Amazon facility in Arizona with the hope of organizing among fellow workers. The child of a union firefighter and flight attendant, Daniels hoped to organize a union after years of community organizing experience, including the Fight for \$15 in Tucson, Ariz.

Inspired by the pandemic walkout, Daniels moved to Staten Island in November 2021 and was rehired at Amazon. “Almost all—if not all—of the organizers here were inspired by Chris, Derrick, Gerald and Jordan leading that walkout,” Daniels says.

Connor Spence, 26, also relocated from New Jersey to take a job at JFK8 in May 2021, shelving his aviation training to become an organizer instead of a pilot.

Smalls’ story “was emblematic of everything that’s wrong with Amazon—everything that’s wrong with society at the time,” Spence says.

Instead of backing down after his firing, “Chris was motivated to take the momentum and use it to fix the things he saw that were wrong with Amazon,” Spence says. “That was inevitably going to attract other people who wanted to actually step up, take action and change things.”

A UNION IS BORN

ON MAY 1, 2020—INTERNATIONAL WORKERS’ Day—Smalls, Bryson, Flowers and Palmer launched the Congress of Essential Workers, a predecessor to what would become the Amazon Labor Union. The group’s original goal was to unite frontline workers across industries in the fight for better conditions and pay. Jason Anthony joined up after he was fired from Amazon in July 2020.

The group envisioned a broad working-class struggle against billionaires profiting from the pandemic—and they didn’t mince words.

“The capitalist economy of the U.S. is built off the backs of a class of underpaid people who are degraded to wage laborers and valued only for what they produce, not for their intrinsic value as humans,” reads the Congress of Essential Workers’ website.

As they traveled the country to protest at Bezos’ mansions, the group forged stronger bonds with each other while welcoming newcomers, an approach Smalls describes as “all-inclusive” with a caveat.

“It is Black-led, and we’re gonna keep it that way,” Smalls says he would explain as people joined. “Once we have that understanding, we let them in. And they’ve been with us ever since. There’s loyalty, and there is trust. They’re family members.”

In summer 2020, Spence traveled from his home in New Jersey to the Manhattan protest outside Bezos’ penthouse. “We really only talked for about two minutes,” Spence says of his first time meeting Smalls. Nonetheless, Spence was quickly added to an organizer chat group. He is now the ALU’s vice president of membership.

“One of the signs of a good organizer is believing fundamentally that working-class people are smart and capable,” Spence says. “So building an organization where you tried to make everybody have a part in the democratic process, let everybody have a role in it—that’s going to be a successful organization of working-class people.”

That’s the same ethos that drew in Cassio Mendoza at the October 2020 rally outside of Bezos’ Beverly Hills home.

A committed socialist and the son of a videographer with Unite Here Local 11, Mendoza was skeptical of staff-led organizing. He saw in Bryson and Palmer genuine rank-and-file leadership and was especially impressed that Palmer had flown to Los Angeles after finishing up a shift at Amazon. The Congress of Essential Workers “didn’t seem manufactured in any way,” Mendoza says.

A Los Angeles native, Mendoza typically wears a blue L.A. Dodgers hat, loose black T-shirts and beige khakis—wardrobe choices that match his understated personality. Despite his attempts to fade into the background, Mendoza became a pivotal campaign organizer.

By June 2021, he had packed up and moved to New York. He began working at Amazon a month later, with the intention of helping the organizing effort.

But at that point, the labor fight was still solely about garnering more respect for workers, and the group mostly wanted to convene Amazon workers across the country for a national conference. “They didn’t even say the word ‘union,’” Mendoza remembers of those early conversations.

“The idea was to have us all come together under one banner,” Spence says.



Connor Spence



“ I’m my mom’s only child. I wasn’t gonna risk my life to work for this company. ”

—JORDAN FLOWERS

As members of the Congress of Essential Workers began reaching out to other worker groups through social media, they learned that most didn’t have a real organizing presence inside Amazon. One exception was Amazonians United, a loose network of worker committees in the United States and Canada. That group’s organizing model is based on “solidarity unionism,” in which workers begin acting like a union without any official, government recognition.

The organizers on Staten Island opted for a different approach when they formed the Amazon Labor Union, although members of Amazonians United have lent support to the union drive at LDJs.

Bryson had been a member of multiple New York City unions, including the Service Employees International Union Locals 32BJ and 1199, and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees District Council 37. And Smalls had once been a Teamster before working at Amazon, leaving what he describes as “a bad contract.”

While the Congress of Essential Workers at first resisted the idea of a formal union, that changed after the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) lost its campaign to unionize an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Ala., in April 2021. (As of press time, the outcome of the second election in Bessemer is still pending.) Put off by RWD-SU’s approach, which leaned on politicians and celebrities to gin up support among Amazon employees, Smalls and the other organizers thought they could do better.

“We know the ins and outs of the company,” Smalls explains. “Derrick is a six-year vet. I worked there for almost five years. Who better to lead the fight than us?”

As they discussed the idea of a new, independent union to keep workers in the driver’s seat, they looked for examples of other militant unions. Mendoza was especially inspired by William Z. Foster, a Communist organizer in the steel industry in the 1930s. Spence turned to *Labor Law for the Rank & Filer* from Daniel Gross and Staughton Lynd, and he distilled lessons from labor studies and copious online research into presentations for the organizing committee—including how to take on union-busting consultants on the shop floor. For language on inclusion, the group referenced Unite Here’s national constitution. For

union democracy structures—including how union officers’ salaries should be pegged to the average wages of the union membership—they looked at the United Electrical Workers.

All of these ideas would be reflected in ALU’s constitution. “Let’s combine the union model with the rank-and-file committee model,” Spence recalls discussing with Smalls. “Each building has a worker committee that is the main decision-making body of the union.”

Ultimately, the group eschewed abstract theories and rigid methods and looked to workers to act.

“Screw it,” Spence recalls saying. “Let’s just go to JFK8, Chris’s old building, and organize workers there. It’s probably the best building to start a union campaign.”

THE DRIVING FORCE

IT’S HARD TO OVERSTATE THE ODDS STACKED against an independent union taking on Amazon.

It’s not just that Amazon has a storied union-busting record. The company’s size and ubiquity make it an unavoidable part of modern American life, compunctions of conscience about the welfare of its workers aside. Amazon’s sprawling warehouse and logistics network delivers billions of boxes of stuff annually to its 153 million Amazon Prime members, with 40% of all online purchases in the country originating through Amazon, compared with just 7% at Walmart. More than 1.1 million people now work at Amazon’s more than 800 U.S. warehouses, and Amazon is projected to employ 1% of all U.S. workers in the next few years.

What’s more, employee turnover inside Amazon facilities is constant. Amazon’s annual churn rate—representing the number of employees leaving the company each year compared to their total number—is about 150%, which Bezos has said is by design to prevent what he called a “march to mediocrity.”

That high turnover made Amazon warehouse veterans, like Michelle Valentin Nieves (who’s been there three years), invaluable organizers. Inside the JFK8 warehouse at the height of the pandemic, Valentin Nieves was growing increasingly frustrated. Managers would reprimand her on the shop floor while she was risking a Covid infection.

In the first months of the pandemic, Valentin Nieves watched CNN for live updates on infections, hearing false reassurances from former President Donald Trump. “Then, come to find out, there were people



Gerald Bryson

actually coming up with Covid-19 already in the facility. And they were trying to keep it a secret.”

As Valentin Nieves waited to get vaccinated in 2021, “I was just losing my mind,” she says. “I’m like, ‘I’m gonna get it. I’m gonna bring it back to the house. I’m gonna give it to my family.’”

When Palmer approached Valentin Nieves to sign a union card in 2021, she didn’t skip a beat. Valentin Nieves would go on to read Martin Jay Levitt’s *Confessions of a Union Buster* and become a fierce worker organizer, connecting especially with Latino workers for whom she was a familiar face.

Valentin Nieves, who is from Puerto Rico, says good organizing entails good listening, so she would take her time to hear workers’ grievances and provide feedback. During one of these chats, she talked with a worker who had foot spurs from standing for prolonged hours at Amazon. Eventually, Valentin Nieves helped the worker file multiple requests for medical accommodations until they finally got approved.

Brima Sylla, 55, a widely respected immigrant worker from Liberia with a doctorate in public policy, started working at Amazon in January 2022 and joined the union campaign in March. He had come to Amazon after 10 years of teaching at a small private school on Staten Island, which laid him off during the pandemic. He quickly grew tired of the ambulances blaring to the warehouse entrance to ferry an injured worker to the hospital. Nationwide, workers at Amazon suffered 27,700 injuries in 2020 and 38,300 in 2021. The company accounts for nearly half of all injuries in the warehouse industry—a rate of 6.8 per 100 workers.

Sylla says he organized to build the union to make Amazon a dignified workplace, because “the company just wants money, money, money. They forgot about the human side of the workers. The job is damn hard.”

Pasquale “Uncle Pat” Cioffi, a former longshore worker with the International Longshoremen’s Association for about nine years, had been reticent about supporting the union when he was first approached. He scolded organizers for making promises about wage hikes before even securing a contract.

But when he saw cops arrest Smalls, Daniels and Anthony for trespassing as they delivered food to workers in February, Cioffi changed his mind.

“At the end of the day, they were dropping off food,” Cioffi says.

Cioffi occasionally wears Nike tracksuits and a yellow Amazon vest adorned with pins and the words “Italian G.O.A.T.” emblazoned on the back. Like Smalls, he is a process assistant. When he speaks, he jabs his fingers at your upper body to punctuate a point, evincing a self-confidence

that enraptures listeners. Workers say he personally flipped hundreds to support the union.

“People tend to go with people that they trust,” Cioffi explains. “Everybody knows me from day shift, any shift, any department. They know who I am because I’m always making that extra effort to help them out in whatever the situation is.”

“Amazon didn’t make this about the ALU,” Cioffi adds. “They made it about Chris Smalls. But this wasn’t really about Chris Smalls. This was about the people.”

Karen Ponce, 26, is one of those people. She had started working at an Amazon delivery station in 2020, intending to save up money for a master’s degree in social work. After a layoff without warning, Ponce was rehired at JFK8.

Though she had been active in immigrant rights causes in college, Ponce says she didn’t understand unions and initially bought into Amazon’s anti-union propaganda. “I was brainwashed, even scared,” Ponce says.

Her thinking began to shift after reaching out to her college sociology professor, who encouraged her to talk to the organizers. Connor Spence answered Ponce’s list of questions about dues and the union election, and they talked about working conditions.

“They understood the toxic work environment because they were workers themselves,” Ponce says.

As Ponce learned that some of her coworkers were living in their cars and homeless shelters, she began to connect the organizing drive to her social work calling. She began studying labor history and read Jane McAlevey’s *A Collective Bargain*. Not only did Ponce eventually join the union effort, she became the ALU’s secretary in December 2021.

Arlene Kingston, meanwhile, supported the union effort from the get-go. She grew up talking politics and had strong municipal unions in her native Trinidad and Tobago.

Kingston and another coworker aided the union effort by offering free food in the break room, cooking peas and rice, chicken and macaroni pie to give out. “And if we have to do it again, we’re gonna do it again over and over,” Kingston says.

She relishes how “a little person that you underestimated” defeated Amazon. “And that is just the beginning.”

SOLIDARITY & INDEPENDENCE

THE AMAZON LABOR UNION HAD NO TIME TO waste after the victory at JFK8. As messages of support poured in from Amazon workers nationwide, the priority quickly shifted to the vote at the next warehouse, LDJ5, where roughly 1,500 workers sort packages for delivery to the New York City metro area.

Less than a month after voting wrapped up at the first



Michelle Valentin Nieves

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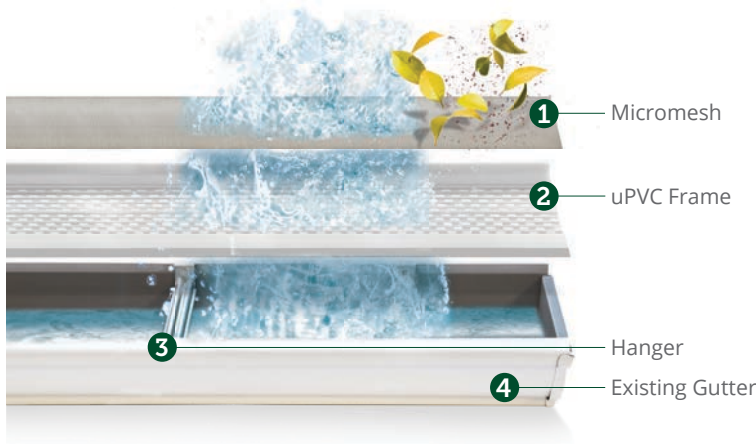
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“When it comes to organizing, you have to be vigilantly kind. And it takes discipline. And it takes a sort of militancy and love. People need to have unlimited chances here.”

—JULIAN MITCHELL-ISRAEL



facility, workers at the second facility began casting ballots. In a May 2 vote count conducted by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the union came up short.

Compared to the first warehouse, relatively few of the ALU’s key organizers work at LDJ5. That posed a tougher challenge for those who do, including Julian Mitchell-Israel, 22, who first sent Smalls his resume after reading an article about the ALU in the socialist magazine *Jacobin*.

Mitchell-Israel had been involved in electoral politics, including Independent Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential bid, but says he learned a crucial lesson about organizing over the course of a high-stakes campaign at LDJ5.

“When you’re up against misinformation, when you’re up against people that are violently anti-union, you have the instinct to sort of get on the defensive, to go—‘Screw you, you don’t understand you’re being brainwashed, whatever,’” Mitchell-Israel says. “When it comes to organizing, you have to be vigilantly kind. And it takes discipline. And it takes a sort of militancy and love. People need to have unlimited chances here.”

Madeline Wesley, another LDJ5 employee, arrived from Florida in August 2021. Wesley, 23, had been a student activist at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. It was there that Wesley met ALU’s pro bono lawyer, Seth Goldstein, who was representing the university’s physical plant workers and clerical workers. After stints working for Unite Here union locals in Boston and Miami, Wesley joined the Amazon campaign on Goldstein’s urging and soon became ALU’s treasurer.

After the upset victory at JFK8, “some of us thought that LDJ5 would be an easy win,” said Wesley before the vote. “And what we realized was that we were absolutely wrong. Amazon is really angry at us for winning JFK8, they weren’t expecting it at all. And now they’re giving us everything they’ve got here at LDJ5.”

Wesley says she and her fellow workers at LDJ5 faced a bruising campaign in which Amazon doubled down on its union-busting tactics. The company is also seeking to overturn the election results at JFK8 through an appeal to the NLRB.

On April 24, the day before voting began at LDJ5, national labor leaders rallied at Amazon’s Staten Island campus in a bid to boost support.

The mood at the “Solidarity Sunday” rally was jubilant. Surrounded by Amazon workers and hundreds of their supporters, Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) also delivered fiery speeches.

Many union leaders pledged their full support of the ALU—including Mark Dimondstein, president of the 200,000-member American Postal Workers Union; Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA; and Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. Earlier in April, Sean O’Brien, new president of the Teamsters, met with Smalls and Derrick Palmer, ALU vice president of organizing, in Washington, D.C.

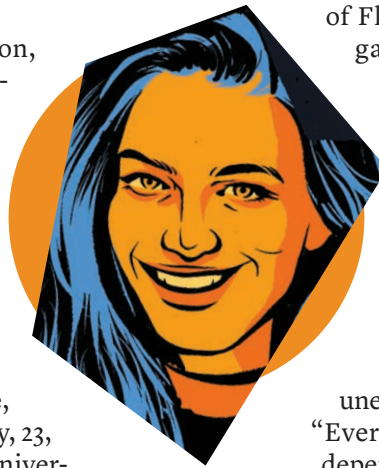
“We work in the same industry as all of you—and we’re either going to rise together or we’re gonna fall together,” Dimondstein said at the rally.

Smalls welcomes the support but remains unequivocal about the union’s independence. “Everybody knows that we’re gonna remain independent,” Smalls said at the rally. “And these bigger unions know—every time I meet with one of their presidents, I let it be known—there ain’t no strings attached.”

With hopes of unionizing a second facility postponed for now, the ALU still has another momentous task before it: winning its first collective bargaining agreement with Amazon. If the new union can channel its broad national support and deep connections inside JFK8 into improved conditions at that warehouse, it will make a clear case to Amazon workers elsewhere that they should join up.

“There’s no way we’re going to stop or let this bring us down,” said ALU’s co-founder Derrick Palmer at an impromptu press conference following the May 2 loss. “It’s going to do the complete opposite. We’re going to go 10 times harder.” ■

LUIS FELIZ LEON is a staff writer and organizer at *Labor Notes*.



Madeline Wesley

BY STEPHANIE WOODARD

A Golden Opportunity to Reform a 150-Year-Old Mining Law

Indigenous tribes sound the alarm about a mining boom



TRIBAL CHAIRMAN JOSEPH Holley looks out over the magnificent sweep of Nevada hills and mountains where his Western Shoshone people have thrived for millennia. Grey-green and bright-yellow shrubs embellish the carpet of golden fall grasses stretching to the horizon. As we traverse the area, driving and hiking, Holley points out scars on the cherished land.

He shows me battered metal contraptions marking long-shuttered mines. Active mines are gigantic, step-sided craters; widely spaced bars cover their dangerously long airshafts. “We keep our kids close by in these areas,” Holley says. “They could easily fall through.”

The access road to one mine destroyed stands of medicinal plants cultivated by an ancient Western Shoshone doctor. A mine’s crew gouged a trench across a hill where tribal members seek visions. Centuries-old rock shelters and hunting blinds have been demolished.

Holley has long spoken out against the hundreds of mines—for gold, silver, copper, barite and other minerals—that have torn up much of his tribe’s ancestral landscape. He says mining is killing his people. “It’s taking away our culture. It’s taking away our places of spirituality.” He describes it as a slow death, occurring over generations.

Left: Joseph Holley, chairman of the Te-Moak Tribe of Western Shoshone Indians, surveys a sacred desert place in Nevada.

These operations are called hardrock mines, which unearth metals and minerals other than coal and other fuels. In addition to damaging the land, the hardrock-mining industry is a major source of toxic waste in the United States, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Cyanide, arsenic, mercury, acids and other substances used to obtain and process ore seep into aquifers and rivers, foul the land and are carried on the wind. After a century-old copper-mining facility on the Tohono O’odham Nation in Arizona closed in 1999, for example, the Department of Health and Human Services found the mine had added enough arsenic to local drinking water to cause nausea—and skin, bladder and lung cancers.

The General Mining Law of 1872 set the stage for today’s profit-driven destruction by allowing hardrock miners—individual and corporate, foreign and domestic—to pay minimal fees to stake a claim, submit no royalties on their takings and do little or no cleanup afterward. Unlike coal miners, who pay the federal government between 8% and 12.5% of the gross value of what they have produced, hardrock miners have tendered no royalties on \$300 billion’s worth of minerals extracted from public land over 150 years.

Passed by Congress in an era when miners used pickaxes and simple machines rather than today’s voracious industrial machinery, the General Mining Law dangled easy riches as a way to lure settlers across the continent and push aside the Indigenous inhabitants. It also includes no protections for land, air or water.

U.S. Rep. Katie Porter (D-Calif.) calls the law a sweetheart deal for the hardrock mining industry.

INVESTIGATION

Tribes and environmentalists want the law reformed, with requirements for mining companies to consult with local communities about minimizing harm and to clean up any mess. Mining firms have a different view. The Society for Mining, Metallurgy & Exploration, a leading industry group, supports streamlining regulations instead, noting it can take 7–10 years to get permits for a mine. According to the group, “America is hindered by a costly, inefficient and often redundant regulatory structure that thwarts domestic investment, expansion and job creation.”

Despite industry’s complaints, approvals of new hardrock mines have been progressing at an increasing clip over the past two decades. According to the congressional watchdog, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), the Bureau of Land Management gave the go-ahead to 728 hardrock-mining operations between 1920 and 2018. A full 500 of these approvals have occurred since 2000, according to data from the GAO’s natural resources and environment team. The bureau, part of the Interior Department, oversees almost 80% of mines on federal land.

Much of today’s hardrock demand is driven by new technology. Copper and gold are critical to a range of modern technologies, and uncommon minerals, such as the lithium used in rechargeable batteries, will be essential to the transition to fossil-free energy. The United States currently has only three lithium mines, and the White House is advocating for more domestic production of lithium and other minerals that the U.S. Geological Survey identified as critical in a 2022 report. While the Biden administration emphasizes sustainable alternatives to mining, it has also opened the door to more extraction by invoking the Defense Production Act in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

With a new mining boom looming, tribes and environmental groups are pushing alternatives, such as mineral recycling, and sounding the alarm about the patchwork of regulations that allow companies to stake claims without warning or consultation.

THE LITTLE ROCKY MOUNTAINS, JUST SOUTH OF the Fort Belknap Indian Community’s reservation in Montana, were once verdant, tree-covered peaks sheltering a lively array of wildlife. Today, they are a pale-yellow slash on the tribe’s southern horizon. For years, orange-tinged streams poured off the slopes onto the tribal land below. The contamination came from a gold mine that had operated in the mountains from the 1860s until 1998. The mine used cyanide to extract the gold. The process produced tremendous amounts of toxic runoff, which included not just cyanide but acids created when the rocks were exposed to air. That all made its way into local tap water.

In the late 1990s, the mine’s owners declared bankruptcy and decamped, punting cleanup costs to the American taxpayer.

The U.S. government then banned mining on federally owned land in the Little Rockies—which comprised most of the mine—and began remediation. After more than 20 years of cleanup, the tab is at some \$77 million and counting, according to Bonnie Gestring, northwest program director of the environmental



nonprofit Earthworks. The water flowing off the mountains is now treated for toxins, which must be removed in perpetuity at a cost of as much as \$3 million each year, Gestrung says.

Still, tribal members thought they had left behind the worst of a century and a half of damage—until October 2020. As the bans on mining on the land came up for renewal, the Trump administration's scandal-ridden Interior Department caused a two-day delay in the bans' publication in the Federal Register, a required step for them to remain in effect. This 48-hour gap left the federal land legally unprotected and, in those few hours, a mining company staked several claims.

Then, in 2021, the tribe discovered that another agency—Montana's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ)—had approved one mining-exploration project and was poised to greenlight yet another in an adjacent portion of the Little Rockies. This tract is not federally owned, so the state of Montana oversees related mining permits. The tribe was not brought into the decision-making, or even informed it was occurring. "We found out about this in the newspaper," says tribal council member Dominic Messerly.

In a January 2022 online meeting with the DEQ, scores of Fort Belknap tribal citizens and supporters—Native and non-Native—expressed their adamant, heartfelt opposition to any mining in the Little Rockies. Tribal citizens described lives enhanced by fasting, praying and herb gathering in the mountains. "Those are our churches," said Jeffrey Stiffarm, tribal chairman.

After the meeting, the DEQ took a step back and announced more study of the area was required and a mining permit would be subject to those investigations.

But, thanks to the 48-hour gap in the mining bans, the claims on the adjacent, partially remediated federal land remain in place. Al Nash, spokesperson for the Bureau of Land Management's Montana/Dakotas office, which facilitates publication of the bans, tells *In These Times* the regulation gap was unintended, caused by "some unexpected delay in completing the process to publish the public notice." Nash did not respond to questions about the possibility of correcting the delay and revoking the claims.

"The whole sequence is suspect," says attorney Derf Johnson of the Montana Environmental Information Center.

Luke Ployhar, owner of the mining company—Bozeman-based Blue Arc LLC—says no backchannel communications tipped him off: He has private land in the area, had been watching the federal land for years, saw the opportunity and moved on it. Ployhar says that any mining that results from the exploration projects will result in jobs for the region.

The Interior Department has serious explaining to do about the 48-hour gap, according to Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.). As spokesperson Roy Loewenstein tells *In These Times*, "Sen. Tester believes there are some places that just don't make sense to

Left: Contaminated water—polluted by old, closed gold mines in Montana's Little Rocky Mountains—flows down the peaks toward the Fort Belknap Indian Community's reservation in September 2021. Cleanup costs at least \$3 million annually.

PHOTO BY KATY SPENCE/ MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL INFORMATION CENTER

INVESTIGATION

mine. The Little Rockies have huge cultural significance for the Fort Belknap Indian Community, and they've already seen devastating impacts on water supply from irresponsible mining in the area."

Steve Daines, Montana's Republican senator, did not reply to repeated requests for comment.

Fort Belknap Indian Community has formally requested an investigation by the Interior Department and was joined in its bid by Earthworks, the Montana Environmental Information Center and environmental group Trout Unlimited. The Interior Department has only acknowledged receipt, according to Johnson.

The Interior Department's Office of the Inspector General denied *In These Times*' Freedom of Information Act request for more information, saying that the incident is under investigation.

Securing answers will be cumbersome at best.

IN HARDROCK MINING, THERE IS NO COMPREHENSIVE nationwide accountability or transparency, says Talia Boyd, cultural landscapes manager for the nonprofit Grand Canyon Trust. Multiple federal and state agencies oversee narrow slices of large, dangerous projects with extensive human and environmental impacts. The Bureau of Land Management, Environmental Protection Agency, Forest Service, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, various state agencies and others may be involved in any particular project.

No agency has across-the-board oversight, or even across-the-board information. A 2019 analysis from the GAO found that a range of federal agencies collected varied arrays of data on existing and potential mining sites and minerals, with no clear picture of the industry as a whole.

"Who actually regulates any of this?" asks Boyd, a Navajo Nation citizen.

The Biden administration agrees. A White House memo noted in February, "There is no single federal agency with authority over domestic mining," and laid out new "fundamental principles for domestic mining" to reform the General Mining Law of 1872. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland is forming a working group to refine these ideas—"to update mining policies to reflect our current realities," as she puts it.

Derf Johnson is adamant: The 150-year-old law has to be scrapped and replaced with appropriate systemic change. If we do nothing more than alter rule-making, "It's just eating around the edges," he warns.

Hardrock mines have been required, since the 1970s, to reclaim damaged land and, since 2001, to post bonds to ensure they could pay for the reclamation. But bonds set by the state and federal agencies that permit the mines have generally been insufficient, according to the GAO. Moreover, responsible parties—such as the former mine owner in the Little Rocky Mountains—typically declare



bankruptcy instead of doing the cleanup.

After a bankruptcy, Holley observes, mining companies tend to just "change their name, come back and start up all over again."

The House's 2021 budget reconciliation bill imposed mining royalties and set aside \$2.5 billion for cleanup, but the provisions were stripped from the Senate version by Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto (D-Nev.), who said the use of a short-term budget process would create "uncertainty for the industry." *Roll Call* reports the National Mining Association, which opposed the royalties, nearly doubled its federal lobbying expenditures in 2021, to \$2.1 million. According to data from the research group OpenSecrets, the industry's total 2021 lobbying expenditures were \$18.5 million.

The Native communities on the front lines of hardrock mining's harms, like Fort Belknap, have far less money to advocate for themselves.

When the federal government first set aside tribal reservations, often in remote deserts and plains, they were thought of as worthless. After coveted minerals were identified in these areas, the federal government set about



non-Native population came to understand that Indigenous people may not claim to own a river or the land around it but feel they have the obligation to protect them.

National media has responded with more reporting on the Indigenous struggle against hardrock mining, though coverage is uneven. The battles at Fort Belknap and by the Western Shoshones have received mostly local attention, for example, though a few fights have grabbed the spotlight and pushed the federal government into action.

One such case, covered by the *New York Times*, NPR and other outlets, is the years-long battle of the San Carlos Apaches to block an Arizona copper mine. In 2014, it looked like Oak Flat, a rugged desert landscape sacred to the tribe, would be handed over to a copper-mining conglomerate whose mine would produce a sinkhole about 2 miles wide and 1,000 feet deep. Since then, tribal citizens and supporters—including some 40 tribal governments and 150 regional and national organizations—have rallied, marched and occupied the holy place.

In March 2021, President Joe Biden irked Republican members of Congress when he withdrew the Trump administration's approval of the Oak Flat mine and called for further review. To achieve permanent protection, Rep. Raúl Grijalva (D-Ariz.) introduced the Save Oak Flat Act.

Wendsler Nosie Sr., a San Carlos Apache activist and former tribal chairman, has been a leader in the effort to protect Oak Flat from what he describes as “total annihilation.” He offers a national perspective as well as a tribal one.

“The United States needs us Native people,” Nosie says. “Without us taking the lead on these issues, there would be chaos.”

breaking treaties and diminishing reservations. Mines then proliferated in and around many tribal lands. Today, in the 12 western-most U.S. states, more than 600,000 Native people live within about 6 miles of hardrock mines for uranium/vanadium, gold, copper and lead, according to a 2017 study in *Current Environmental Health Reports*.

Numerous tribal nations and their citizens are trying to warn the public at large about the dangers of hardrock mining, by speaking to the press, forming alliances with major environmental groups and bringing lawsuits.

Intense public interest in the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's 2016 objections to an oil pipeline has created more appreciation of Indigenous issues and opinions, according to attorney Robert Coulter, Potawatomi citizen and executive director of the Indian Law Resource Center, in Helena, Mont. “The great victory of Standing Rock,” he says, was that the public “believed the Indians were right.” Coulter explains that the

THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION IS BRINGING Indigenous perspectives into federal decisions. Among Native appointees to top positions in the administration are Deb Haaland, secretary of the Interior, from Laguna Pueblo, and Charles “Chuck” Sams III, head of the National Park Service, from the Cayuse and Walla Walla tribes. Biden also reestablished the annual Tribal Nations Summit in Washington, D.C., and reinstated the advisory White House Council on Native American Affairs. And he has advocated for updating the General Mining Law of 1872, the source of so much damage to tribal lands.

Meanwhile, the administration has moved to protect a few places from mining that are especially important to tribes, such as Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante, in Utah, and the Boundary Waters Wilderness in northeastern Minnesota. Cleaning up the many abandoned mines in or near traditional homelands is also on the agenda, with \$11 billion over 15 years in the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. The EPA warns, however, that \$35 billion is needed to complete the work.

Congress is listening to Indigenous people as well. On

Above: Joseph Holley, of the Western Shoshones, says mining crews bulldozed a gash across a hill where tribal members seek visions in Tosawih, a sacred desert place in Nevada.

INVESTIGATION

Capitol Hill in March, the House Natural Resources Committee held a hearing on tribal/federal co-management of public lands. Committee chair Grijalva has introduced a bill to strengthen federal requirements to consult with tribes on matters that concern them and, with Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.), has introduced a bill to overhaul the General Mining Law.

Heinrich calls the 1872 law “antiquated.” Grijalva agrees, adding that modernizing the law isn’t extreme or anti-industry. “It’s just common sense.”

Earthworks’ Bonnie Gestring is heartened by these plans, saying they can lead to stronger safeguards against future travesties, such as the mining in the Little Rocky Mountains. As it stands, she says, the General Mining Law of 1872 fails “to provide even basic protections for our shared public lands and the communities that call those lands home.”

At the same time, Biden appears open to more mining. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine led him, in March, to invoke the Defense Production Act in support of more domestic mining, ostensibly to reduce dependence on Russia and China for minerals. Grijalva and House Natural Resources Committee vice chair Rep. Alan Lowenthal (D-Calif.) are dismayed. Job one, they told Biden, is reforming the General Mining Law.

Advocates say the transition to green energy makes reform even more urgent. “Our current mining law was put in place before we even knew what a car was, much less an electric one,” says Grijalva.

“Paradoxically, the energy transition is already causing an increase in global mining—even as we hopefully begin to leave fossil fuels underground,” says Thea Riofrancos, author of *Extraction: The Frontiers of Green Capitalism* (forthcoming from W.W. Norton). “That’s because ‘green’ technologies, like lithium batteries and solar panels—that allow us to harness renewable energy—are themselves made with metals that come from the earth’s crust.”

Riofrancos argues the only way to reduce mining’s damage is to reduce demand for it—to reduce our newfound reliance on lithium batteries for electric cars, for example, through expanded mass transit and to repair, reuse and recycle batteries and other technologies.

Earthworks offers data to support this. The group reports that recycling could reduce demand for lithium by 25% and cobalt and nickel by 35% by the year 2040. Some minerals are already substantially recycled—copper at a global rate of 45%, says Earthworks.

The Biden administration also supports the notion of recycling. One administration initiative will recover essential minerals—lithium, cobalt, nickel and graphite—from used lithium-ion batteries. Another will capture industrially important minerals from coal ash and other mining waste, and another will extract lithium from geothermal brine. In the end, these projects may take the pressure off small tribes fighting installation of new lithium mines in culturally significant areas of Nevada and Arizona.

However, recycling will not meet the needs of the energy transition right away, says Riofrancos. Given the inevitability of more mining in the short term, she says it’s imperative to listen to tribes and their concerns.

WHILE THE NATION IS MAKING ITS WAY toward its domestic-mineral goals—and approving mines as it does—the federal government could help tribes, especially smaller and more remote ones, in their battles to protect people and the land, according to Joseph Holley. “Get out here, see what’s happening, and give us some damn help,” he exclaims. “For us to hire a million-dollar lawyer, it’s not happening.”

In These Times lobbed Holley’s demand over to the Interior Department. Are the department and its agencies interested in supporting not just larger tribes but small, isolated ones? Richard Packer, of the Bureau of Land Management press office, says Haaland and Biden have “challenged” the bureau to take its consideration for tribal authority “to another level.” Packer says the bureau is “contemplating” ideas such as “co-management” and “the significance of treaties.”

Holley is not surprised at the ambiguous response. For years, Holley says, the Bureau of Land Management refused to hear his tribe: “They never listened, they never took notes, they never took us seriously.”

After Haaland was chosen to take over the Interior Department in 2020, the Bureau of Land Management “went bananas,” Holley says. “They sent letters, wanted you ‘to be a part,’ wanted you ‘to share.’ ... It put fear in them because there was a Native in there.” But currently, on the ground in 2022, things are back to the old normal, he says.

Daniel Werk, a Fort Belknap tribal citizen and cultural liaison officer for his community’s Tribal Historic Preservation Office, took part in the January online meeting with Montana’s Department of Environmental Quality. There, he talked about how he’d prepared by reading documents from the 1990s, when reclamation was first considered for the Little Rockies.

“We’re just going in circles with you guys,” Werk said. He recalled that he was 11 when some of those documents were created. “Now my son is 12 years old, and he’s sitting here behind me listening. ... When is it going to end?” ■

This story was supported by In These Times’ Leonard C. Goodman Institute for Investigative Reporting.

STEPHANIE WOODARD is an award-winning human-rights reporter. An archive of her work can be found at stephaniewoodard.blogspot.com. Her book is *American Apartheid: The Native American Struggle for Self-Determination and Inclusion*.



The Family Policing System

How the child welfare system silently destroys Black families

BY DOROTHY ROBERTS

Above: Diamond Haynes tearfully discusses her seven children, all in foster care, on Feb. 13, 2018. Haynes, in her late 30s at the time, lived in a trailer outside Los Angeles before moving to South L.A. to work as a retail clerk.

T

HE SUN HAD JUST BEGUN to rise over Manhattan on an August morning in 2013. Angeline Montauban was whispering into the phone as she crouched in the bathroom of her apartment. As her partner and their 3-year-old son slept, Montauban had tiptoed to the

bathroom to call Safe Horizon, a domestic abuse hotline she had seen advertised in subway stations. She had decided it was time to stop the violence she was experiencing at the hands of her partner, and she hoped Safe Horizon could provide counseling or help her relocate with her son.

At first, the social worker who answered her call listened sympathetically to Montauban's story. But once Montauban mentioned the couple had a little boy, the voice on the other end turned harsh and began collecting information about the family's whereabouts.

That very afternoon, a caseworker with the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) arrived at Montauban's apartment, explaining she was there to investigate a report of child maltreatment. At first Montauban was confused; she and her partner took excellent care of their son and had never abused him. Then she realized the social worker at Safe Horizon had contacted child protection authorities based on Montauban's call for help.

"The minute she knocked on my door, she was building a case against me," Montauban would recall about the ACS worker. The caseworker inspected her son's body, as well as the entire apartment, finding no evidence of harm to the boy, yet she told Montauban that her family was under ACS supervision for the next 60 days. Twice a month, a caseworker would make an unannounced visit to inspect their home, looking for evidence that might warrant removing her son and putting him in foster care. Within a few weeks, Montauban obtained an order of protection for herself against her partner, and he moved out of their apartment. But the visits and order didn't satisfy ACS.



In a family court hearing, ACS insisted Montauban file for an order of protection for her son against his father as well. Montauban disagreed, explaining to the judge that she wanted her son to maintain a relationship with his father, who had never hurt him.

A few days later, Montauban's partner took their son to family court for an appointment. ACS instructed him to leave the boy at a daycare center on the first floor of the court building. It was a setup: ACS had filed a petition to apprehend Montauban's son on the grounds that he was neglected because Montauban allegedly had allowed him to witness domestic violence and declined to file an order of protection against his father. That evening, the caseworker called Montauban to inform her that ACS had snatched her son from the family court daycare center. Her toddler was in foster care—in the custody of strangers in the Bronx.

Instead of working toward reunifying Montauban with her son, ACS moved him to several foster homes, promised the foster caretakers he would be free for adoption, and retaliated against Montauban when she expressed concerns by suspending her visits with him. When Montauban faced termination of her parental rights, it was her son's insistence on being



reunited with her that preserved their legal bond. It took Montauban five years to retrieve her son from what she calls the “labyrinth” of family policing.

A longstanding narrative has convinced the public that the child welfare system is a flawed but benevolent social service program that strengthens families and rescues children from abusive homes. Most people think of the child welfare system and the criminal punishment system as distinct parts of government. Child welfare is supposed to be based on civil law and therefore not entail the surveillance and condemnation that characterize criminal justice. Whereas police investigate crimes to arrest lawbreakers, child protection workers investigate allegations of maltreatment to keep children safe. Whereas accused defendants stand trial to determine criminal culpability and are punished if convicted, family courts determine what’s in the best interests of the child and order services for their parents.

Or so goes the official story.

In reality, the child welfare system operates surprisingly like its criminal counterpart. It is a \$30 billion

apparatus that monitors, controls and punishes families in the same Black communities systematically subjugated by police and prisons. It is more accurate to call it a family policing system. State-level child protective services agencies investigate the families of 3.5 million children every year, with one in three children nationwide subject to investigation by the time they reach age 18. Most Black children (53%) experience an investigation from child protective services (CPS) at some point while growing up. A 2021 study of large U.S. counties revealed that Black children had consistently high rates of investigation, reaching 63.3% of Black children in Maricopa County, Ariz.

Identifying children as at risk of maltreatment gives caseworkers the authority to probe into and regulate every aspect of a family’s life. All it takes is a phone call from an anonymous tipster to a hotline operator about a vague suspicion to launch a life-altering government investigation. Based on vague child neglect laws, investigators can interpret being poor—lack of food, insecure housing, inadequate medical care—as evidence of parental unfitness. Caseworkers search homes, subject family members to humiliating interrogation and inspect children’s bodies for evidence, sometimes strip-searching them. Caseworkers can make multiple unannounced home visits at any time of day or night and request personal

Above: Protesters rally in Brooklyn, N.Y., on June 20, 2020, holding signs that say “Black Families Matter.” The march decried the Administration for Children’s Services, dubbed “the family police,” which disproportionately separates Black families.

information from teachers, hospitals, therapists and other service providers. In some cities, caseworkers force parents to sign blanket release forms to obtain confidential records about them and their children.

These investigations not only traumatize families, but can lead to intense family regulation and years of separation between parents and children, and ultimately can result in permanent dissolution of families. Every year, CPS removes about 500,000 children from their homes—half through judicial proceedings and half through informal “safety plans.” The racial disparities seen in CPS investigations are mirrored in the national foster care population, with Black children grossly overrepresented. Although Black children were only 14% of children in the United States in 2019, for example, they made up 23% of children in foster care. More than one in 10 Black and Native children in America will be forcibly separated from their parents and placed in foster care by their 18th birthday.

Recent foster care rates for U.S. children, at 576 per 100,000, are about the same as incarceration rates for U.S. adults, at 582 per 100,000. Black and Native children are also more than twice as likely as white children to experience the termination of both parents’ rights.

Child welfare investigations are essentially stop-and-frisk family surveillance, without the safeguards of law and public scrutiny that are present in the criminal

context. Because child welfare is classified as part of the civil legal system, CPS workers are not classified as law enforcement officers. The Fourth Amendment protection against unreasonable government searches still theoretically applies, but agencies and courts have created a child welfare exception—arguing that if the rights of family members pose a risk to children, then those Fourth Amendment protections can be waived.

The tentacles of CPS surveillance have reached across U.S. society, far beyond the walls of child welfare agencies. Family policing relies on an expansive network of information sharing that spans the school, healthcare, public assistance and law enforcement systems. By federal edict, every state must identify people who work in professions that put them in contact with children—such as teachers, healthcare providers, social services staff and daycare workers—and require them to report suspected child abuse and neglect to government authorities. These deputized agents are known as “mandated reporters.” Since states began enacting these reporting laws in the 1960s, the categories of enlisted professionals have expanded, and some states have passed “universal” reporting legislation that requires all residents, with few exceptions, to convey suspicions to the state.

As mandated reporters, providers of social services direct state surveillance against poor and low-income families—especially Black families. And using social services,

“We make media that gives a platform to the voices that you won’t hear anywhere else, that treats you not as a passive consumer but as an active participant in a shared struggle for democracy.”

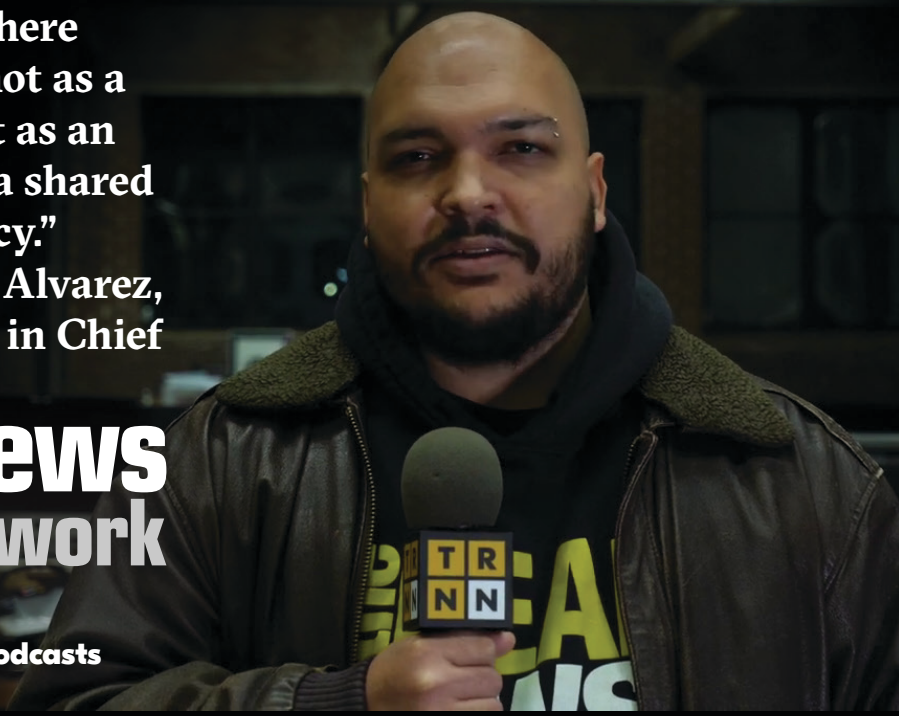
**—Maximillian Alvarez,
Editor in Chief**

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receiving welfare benefits and living in public housing subject families to an extra layer of contact with these mandated reporters. Public workers are far more likely to report suspicions about their clients (essentially, because they are poor) than their counterparts in the private sector (who work with a more affluent, paying clientele). Regardless of income, healthcare professionals, for example, are more suspicious of Black families than other groups who bring their injured children to the hospital.

What's more, mandated reporting drives parents away from the very service providers most likely to support them. Many parents are deterred from fully engaging with healthcare, educational and social service systems because mere suspicion from a service provider could lead to family separation.

Mandated reporting, then, thwarts the potential for schools, healthcare clinics and social programs to be caring hubs of community engagement that non-coercively help families meet their material needs. It also wastes millions and millions of dollars investigating baseless allegations—money that could have provided concrete assistance to children and their family caregivers. These funds would bear far better fruit for children if given directly to their parents as cash allowances or used to provide material resources that meet children's needs.

Instead, these professionals divert struggling families into a system with the potential to destroy them.

The extensive, multisystem network of CPS informants, combined with their power to pry into a family's personal life and space, gives CPS access to massive amounts of information ordinarily beyond the government's reach. In recent years, CPS agencies have begun adopting novel technological tools that are expanding the scope of family surveillance even further. Governments are increasingly considering hiring technology and consulting firms—including IBM, SAS and Deloitte—to employ big databases and artificial intelligence to monitor families and automate decisions about interventions. Some of the nation's largest child welfare departments—in California, Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania and Texas—are using computerized risk assessment technologies to police families. The contracts (lucrative for private enterprises) not only magnify government surveillance but eat up budgets that could be used to provide material resources that families need.

For families that are screened into the family policing system, the next phase of surveillance entails their forced compliance with mandated services requested by CPS agencies and rubber-stamped by judges. These “service plans” usually have nothing to do with providing the tangible things families need, but instead consist of a list of requirements family caregivers must fulfill—or else they lose their children to foster care. Rarely are parents asked what services they would find helpful; instead, parents

All it takes is a phone call from an anonymous tipster to a hotline operator about a vague suspicion to launch a life-altering government investigation.

are asked to focus on fixing their perceived parenting deficits with skills classes and psychological counseling.

Service plans are akin to the probation orders and restrictions imposed on people convicted of crimes. In the criminal context, the violation of a single provision lands the offender in prison. In the child welfare system, parents who fail to fulfill some provision on their list in time risk having their parental rights terminated and their ties to their children irreparably disrupted.

The public accepts this extraordinary infringement on freedoms and family relationships because it masquerades as benevolence—and because it disrupts the most marginalized communities. Precisely because it seems to operate outside criminal law enforcement, the family policing system has become an extremely useful arm of the carceral state. CPS has the power to intensively monitor entire communities, all the while escaping public scrutiny and bypassing legal protections by claiming to protect children.

It's time to tear off this veneer. The child welfare system oppresses poor communities and especially Black communities by policing families. Revealing the truth about the CPS system should force the public to question its purpose, design and impact—and to see the need to replace it with a radically reimagined approach that can actually serve families and keep children safe. ■

Adapted excerpt from Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families—and How Abolition Can Build a Safer World by Dorothy Roberts. Copyright © 2022. Available from Basic Books, an imprint of Perseus Books, a division of PBG Publishing, LLC, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

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The Revolution Will Not Be Televised... on HBO

HBO's miniseries "DMZ" stars Rosario Dawson in a depoliticized dystopia

BY DEVYN SPRINGER

IN THE CENTER OF DOWNTOWN Atlanta, footsteps from the city's busiest business district is the site of one of its most popular blocks for film production, and also a tent city. In July 2021, Atlanta police forcibly removed members of the Atlanta Homeless Union from the area to make way for the production of the new HBO Max dystopian miniseries *DMZ*. It was an on-the-nose moment—removing unhoused activists to film fictional activist characters, revealing once again that capitalist media productions centered on “radical” politics are just empty representation. *DMZ* is a prime project for promoting political inaction, confusion and propaganda.

It's difficult to explain the sensation of watching a major studio production, with its budget that surely cost more per day than I will make in a lifetime, and feeling like the writers' room possessed the political imagination of a rock. With themes of political division, authoritarian leadership and activism, *DMZ* uses cheap political rhetoric and sparse action to cast a dubious, politically incoherent shadow. Meanwhile, U.S. sanctions are starving millions across the world, the red hot labor movement is under attack, the inevitability of climate catastrophe is impending and communities (like those living in tent cities) are forced to commit crimes just to exist. It all makes escapist pictures like *DMZ* feel especially unpalatable.

For a show like *DMZ* to stand out, it would first need to contend with the uneasy and dystopian nature of our own reality. It doesn't.

Adapted from a DC Vertigo comic book series, *DMZ* follows Alma Ortega (Rosario Dawson), who works as a medic in a near future when the United States is at war with the Free States of America during the second American Civil War. Manhattan Island has become a demilitarized zone (hence the title). In the first episode, thousands of disheveled New Yorkers (including Alma) rush to cross the Manhattan Bridge to evacuate. Nearly a decade later, Alma has crossed back into the DMZ to find the son she was separated from during the evacuation. Alma's whereabouts in the years outside the DMZ are up for questioning, but her return is considered a dangerous and uncommon occurrence.

The DMZ is portrayed as a sort of bustling no-man's-land with self-segregated communities dominated by conflicting gangs. In this future, the apparent absence of U.S. law enforcement has led to violence, danger and deep division. Rival factions led by strongman personas take advantage of the demilitarized zone and fight for power. Parco (Benjamin Bratt) controls Spanish Harlem, and Wilson (Hoon Lee) controls Chinatown. Alma was Wilson's friend before the war, but her missing son's father is Parco.



This tapestry is filled in by the show's political and environmental backdrop. Fans of the comic may find some redeeming value in the opening episode's cinematography, which offers an "Escape from New York, Fallujah, and New Orleans right after Katrina" mash-up, as described by the comic's writer, Brian Wood, in an interview with the website CBR. While the comic evokes cautionary tales of war with radical-leaning and brutal dialogue carrying the story, the TV show has a more subtle approach, with much softer elements.

While Dawson dazzles as the lead (alongside newcomer Freddy Miyares' impressive portrayal of Skel, Alma's son), comic fans will find headaches comparing the show against

its politically complex source. With a total runtime of just four hours, the show's rushed introduction takes no time to make sense of its own political premise for viewers, who are asked to believe in a world in which the United States has collapsed but are never given much of an explanation, or any idea what the rest of the country looks like, or why Manhattan was chosen as a demilitarized zone.

As a medic, Alma worked in what resembles current U.S. border detention facilities. In one scene, she walks through a loud, crowded room full of people standing in long queues, and underneath a large U.S. flag we see soldiers bullying refugees.

"Do you know where you are?" Alma says to

a young woman. “You’ve been detained for unlawful entry into the U.S.” The woman apparently crossed the border to visit her dying grandmother in Boston. The woman tells Alma she was “caught” in Poughkeepsie and that she didn’t know the border had changed. Through quickfire, tweetable dialogue, the exchange is one of the scenes that most explores the show’s main political elements. “Feels like the border keeps changing day by day,” Alma says, before explaining the events of evacuation day. We soon see Alma paying a coworker to help get her back into the DMZ, saying, “I’d rather be stuck in an active war zone than be out here wishing I could look for [my son].”

A year before the pilot was originally written in 2019, performative Democrat politicians were co-opting the “Abolish ICE” slogan, and such scenes may have held more relevance. But after global mass movements for Black lives have taken place, including the growing anti-colonial and socialist sentiments shaping grassroots politics, with the material conditions pushing political consciousness to heightened levels, the scene simply comes off as shallow and cheap. With the same energy as that infamous 2017 Kendall Jenner Pepsi commercial, these moments feel insincere and forced in *DMZ*, asking viewers to extend empathy for the sake of patting themselves on the back, nothing more. Moments on *DMZ* such as this one desire to be conversation starters or political statements, yet they ring hollow in a fictional world that the writers never attempted to build.

Eventually, as the DMZ holds its first election for governor, Alma must choose between supporting either Parco of the Spanish Harlem Kings or Wilson of Chinatown. The election is proposed as a chance to fix what’s broken in the DMZ, the problem being the corrupt men vying for power—never questioning, of course, even in these destitute circumstances, if an election makes the most sense as their political tool of choice. Through this election, as Alma puts it in an impassioned speech, everyone can use their voices “to build a new kind of power.” We see no one advocating other approaches—not armed resistance to the outside forces of the United States and the Free States of America, no attempts to align with other demilitarized communities (which may or may not exist), no struggle to broadly reorganize society within their own small sliver of land.

This scenario presents a variety of failures, the first being the assumption that, in the absence of U.S. police and government, the same one-dimensional, “evil” gang monsters that politicians

have warned you about would use violence to dominate. Typical of Hollywood productions in the catastrophe genre, people left behind are rarely portrayed with the capacity to construct communalistic or, dare I say, socialistic ways of living. (And if such a civil society *is* portrayed on screen, it’s usually shown in the negative, where a shift away from individualism marks destruction, such as in Peacock’s *Brave New World*, based on the Aldous Huxley novel.) In *DMZ*’s case, boogymen step into place where bold visions of an anti-capitalist imagination could have been explored, such as community safety patrols, communal medicine and agriculture, and mutual aid and resource sharing.

The DMZ is also apparently despotic, ruled harshly by the aforementioned rivaling factions, but somehow the power of liberal democracy is so strong that electoral politics still reign supreme, which is doubly confusing. Memories of the George Floyd uprisings of 2020 come to mind, during which liberals continuously shouted not to loot, riot or protest in the face of anti-Black state violence, and to just vote instead. It’s quite bizarre to watch a TV narrative, teeming with revolutionary potential, become instead centered on the importance of an election. Liberal electoral politics are often upheld as a panacea to the social ills of capitalism—which should theoretically otherwise demand revolutionary action—and *DMZ* pushes these exact politics in its plot. Perhaps the writers just didn’t have time to portray revolutionary action in just four episodes, but they did have time to force a voting subplot.

We should also take note of Alma’s apparent aversion to violence and political action beyond a vote, within the context of the violently divided DMZ. Alma is horrified by the violence and exploitation she witnesses at the hands of Wilson and Parco, yet ultimately chooses the side she *feels* is the lesser evil—all while emphasizing that her motive to reunite with her son is not political. To promote her chosen candidate in the election, Alma enlists the support of Oona, leader of an all-woman commune who controls and cruelly constricts the DMZ’s water supply. In effect, Alma fights for the power of a vote (in the middle of a demilitarized zone!), even if it means justifying violence and evil.

By overemphasizing Alma’s disinterest in politics, and emphasizing instead the relationship between Alma and her son, a politically apathetic struggle is presented as politically important. Perhaps the writers just wanted to warn against charismatic leadership, which they do a

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bit heavy-handedly, without political complexity. All of the leaders are bad for one reason or another, and all are shown to be “authoritarian” in their own ways. In one scene, Alma speaks with Wilson’s mentor, Susie (Jade Wu), an elder mystic trope who only appears long enough to warn viewers that “communism is bad.”

In conversation, Susie essentially tells Alma that all rulers are equal, saying, “From up close they’re different, perhaps moment to moment, but that’s just an illusion.” As the conversation continues, Susie recites a monologue that feels like an After-school Special ghostwritten by the Cold War:

“You remind me of myself. You know, I’ve been through a revolution. I believed there was a difference. I believed in the incorruptibility of one great ruler. And I picked up a gun to serve Mao for what he said was right. And I fired at people he told me to. And my belief orphaned a child. [...] I ask you this because no one asked me before it was too late... What will you do when you leave orphans?”

The jarring diatribe adds nothing to the plot while pushing saturated anti-radical politics and outright anti-communist propaganda. *DMZ* equates the divisions of an oppressed demilitarized zone to a real-life communist revolution, and in the process, suggests that political action is simply useless.

The political incoherence of each episode becomes all the more jarring when looked at as a whole, and political incoherence is itself a powerful tool for political propaganda. By avoiding political depth and context almost entirely, *DMZ* is left with a vacuous script HBO can fill with simple, soundbite scenes, such as the Susie moment described above.

Sarah Aubrey, head of original content at HBO Max, told *Deadline* that “*DMZ*’s unflinching story of a country torn apart resonates eerily and profoundly amid our current state of the union.” The question remains, however, if the show has anything to offer the torn country.

Many may wonder what harm a politically incoherent show has for viewers—what message political confusion and apathy may carry—but it’s within the subtleties of these questions that we find our answer. Political propaganda does not always need to look like CIA analyst Jack Ryan swooping into socialist Venezuela to bravely ensure a U.S.-backed regime change. Political propaganda can also appear as a diverse project, teeming with mainstream-acceptable “radical” themes and liberal universalisms, to intentionally obscure notions of what radical grassroots change might actually look like.

In other words, capitalist propaganda can be incoherent, and even intentionally so.

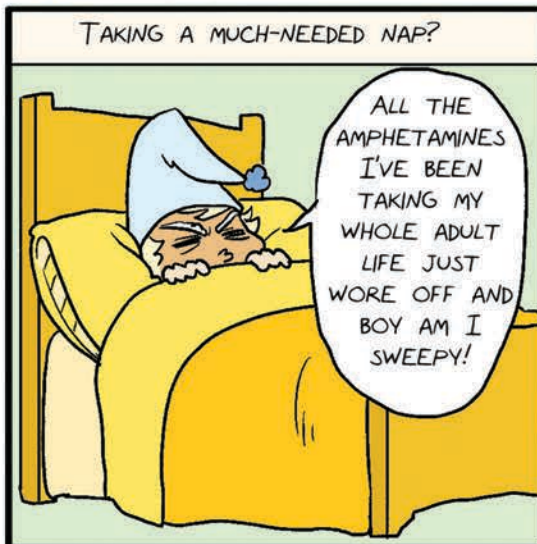
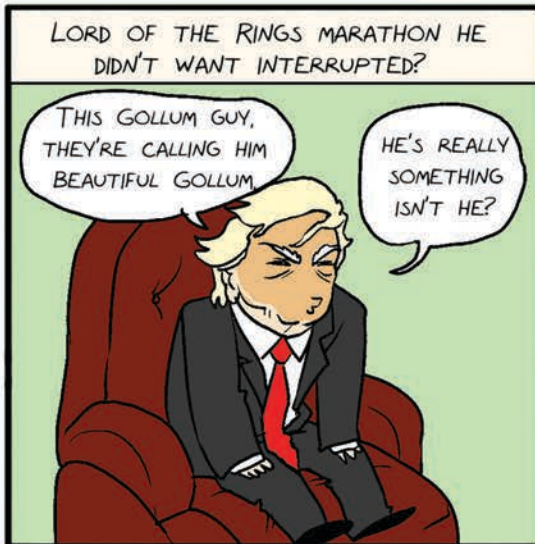
In fact, we’ve seen this empty political incoherence as propaganda before. The so-called War on Terror is a product of this weaponized incoherence, as its incoherence and irrationality create a void for strategic narratives to fill. Think back to the media messaging following the 2001 U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. With political incoher-

Boogeymen step into place where bold visions of anti-capitalist imagination could have been explored.

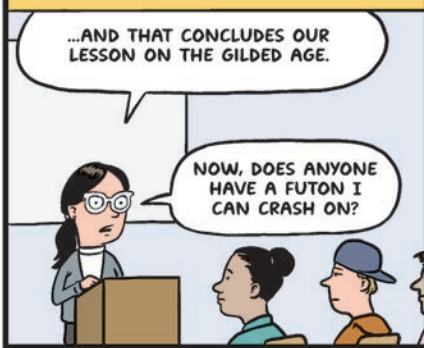
ence sewn into the War on Terror, testimonies of patriotism, moral duty, electoral obligations and other surface-level appeasements stood in place of rigorous political discussion. Celebrities were called in to promote the war, while massive anti-war demonstrations were drowned out.

One should also question the role of these wealthy celebrities themselves, like Dawson, who jump at scripts that satisfy the parts of their brands that speak to larger political moments—but only in the safest, most sanitized ways. Dawson’s activist history remains largely attached to electoral politics, having helped mobilize the Latino vote for Barack Obama in 2012 through her organization Voto Latino, Bernie Sanders in 2016, her then-partner Cory Booker in 2019, and then ultimately Bernie Sanders again in 2020. Using electoral politics to brand yourself an “activist” (or worse, a “celebrity activist”) does not actually make someone a radical activist. In fact, celebrities can agree to sign onto a show that promotes political inaction and confusion, anti-communism and cheap diversity and inclusion—all while utilizing the celebrity-activist moniker as a tactical net-positive for their careers.

One can’t expect a major network like HBO, nor the capitalist celebrities acting on the show, to deliver politics that contradict their own position. The political inconsistencies and lack of depth deriding the show are intentional, because the viewer better not dare to imagine an oppressed group of people do anything revolutionary. ■



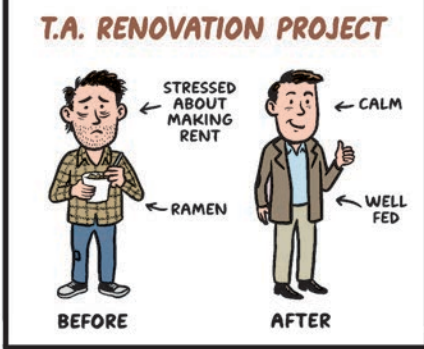
GRAD STUDENT WORKERS ARE UNIONIZING BECAUSE THEY CAN'T AFFORD LIVING EXPENSES IN THEIR OWN COLLEGE TOWNS.



MEANWHILE, THE DONOR CLASS TENDS TO HAVE OTHER PRIORITIES.



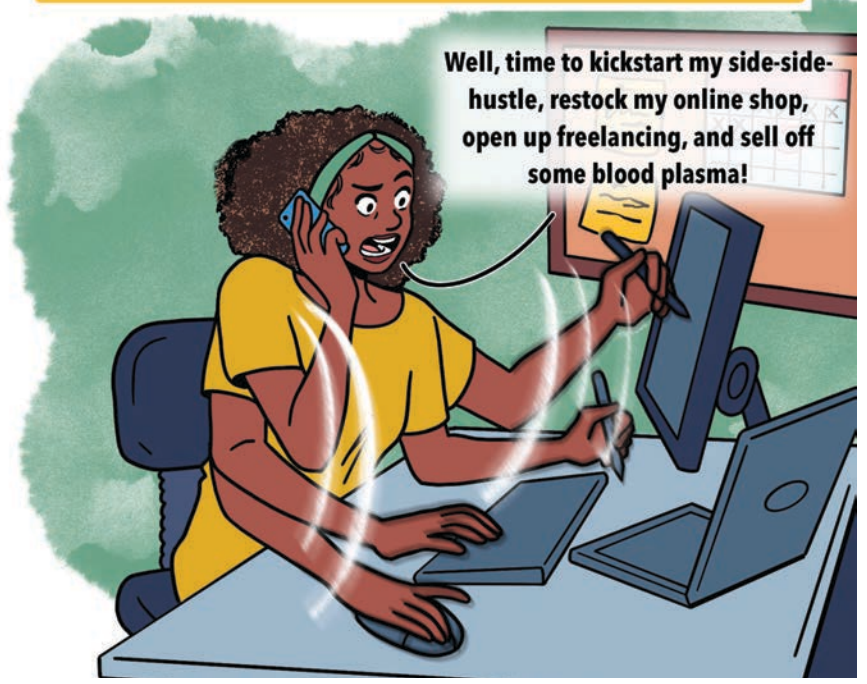
PERHAPS THEY'D GIVE TO ACTUAL WORKERS IF THEY VIEWED THEM MORE LIKE BUILDINGS.



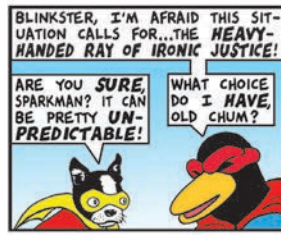
BUT IT MAY TAKE NAMING RIGHTS TO FULLY ENTICE THEM.



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TOM TOMORROW



Before Wokeness, There Was “Political Correctness”

Leftists and conservatives have often found common ground in their antipathy toward political correctness, from the “dirtbag Left” (and its critiques of “woke” capitalism) to the new *Compact* magazine (a social-democratic rag with a conservative co-founder).

Back in 1992, Barbara Epstein was making a leftist case against PC culture. A professor emerita at

the University of California, Santa Cruz, and editorial board member of the *Socialist Revolution* and the *Socialist Review*, Epstein worried a fear of speaking out of line would weaken the movement for progressive change, arguing that “political correctness” stifles classroom conversations and establishes a moral status based on subordination—a superficial stand-in for radical politics.



IN 1992 BARBARA EPSTEIN WROTE: For more than a year, the US media have been preoccupied with “political correctness” and the threat it supposedly poses to free speech and other accepted liberal values. ...

I suspect that the public attention to the “political correctness” debate reflects not only fears—especially among whites and men—about the impact of affirmative action, but also less easily articulated fears that American culture is coming apart,

that it is disintegrating into a series of disconnected and potentially warring fragments.

The neoconservatives are attacking university radicals for intellectual and cultural developments far beyond the control of the left, inside or outside the university. The attack is intellectually sloppy. It labels people as leftists who do not deserve to be so described, and it distorts the broadly progressive, or critical, academic culture that it is attacking.

Nevertheless, the attack raises some uncomfortable issues for the left and for the much broader critical culture that the neoconservatives confuse with the left.

PC history: The media’s obsession with “political correctness” began in October 1990, when the Western Humanities Conference held a forum entitled “‘Political Correctness’ and Cultural Studies” at the University of California-Berkeley. The conference, organized by promoters of

multicultural and feminist perspectives in the humanities, was intended to examine the impacts, both positive and negative, of explicit political agendas in scholarship. Richard Bernstein, a neo-conservative, reported on the conference for *The New York Times*. ... He asserted that:

“... ‘Politically correct’ has become a sarcastic jibe used by those, conservatives and classical liberals alike, to describe what they see as a growing intolerance, a closing of debate, a pressure to conform to a radical program or risk being accused of a commonly reiterated trio of thought crimes: sexism, racism and homophobia. ...”

Bernstein argued that, in spite of such good intentions, the conference had been more an illustration than an examination of the problems of politically correct orthodoxy. He quoted one conference participant—Leon Botstein, president of Bard College—as arguing that “the universities are being polarized into two intolerant factions. The idea of candor and the deeper idea of civil discourse is dead. The victims are the students.” ...

What’s wrong with PC? ... One can object that we should watch what we say: that this is what is required to criticize and, ideally, transform a culture that is deeply imbued with racism, sexism and homophobia. Still, there is a difference between maintaining a critical awareness of the assumptions behind our language and creating a subculture in which everyone fears being charged with bias or is on the lookout for opportunities to accuse others of it. ■

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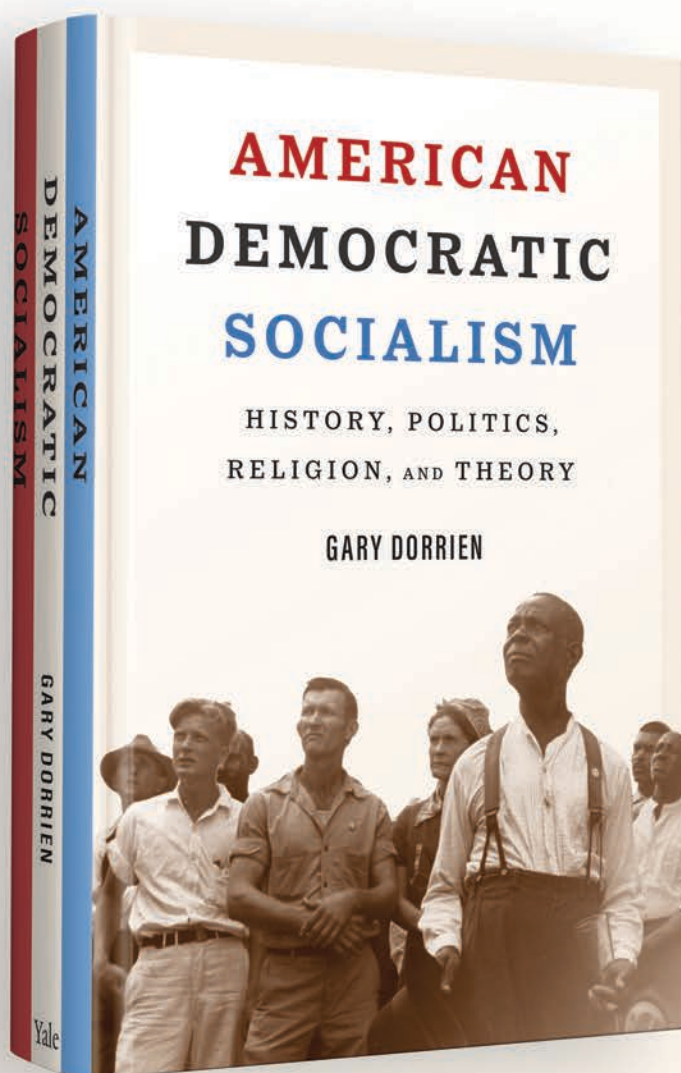
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