IN THESE TIMES

THE NEW FACE OF BLACK LUNG

A SPECIAL INVESTIGATION BY KIM KELLY

+

Delia Cai on turning 30 and saying goodbye to ambition

MAY 2023

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–Sen. Elizabeth Warren

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–Kelly, attendee/volunteer

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> No political movement can be healthy unless it has its own press to inform it, educate it and orient it.
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An Earthshaking Win in Chicago

As Chicago's 25,000 teachers walked out on strike in September 2012, I was looking for the right person to come speak about the historic action to a ragtag group of downtown restaurant and retail workers who were hatching their own ambitious campaign.

I immediately thought of a middle school teacher I knew who'd helped organize the teachers' strike. As a newly hired organizer at the Chicago Teachers Union, he'd stood out for many reasons. Always dressed in tattered hoodies and torn jeans, he had a willingness to take on ridiculous tasks, like planning a big rally on day three of the strike with just a few hours' notice. And he could always be counted on by his comrades—once showing up on his bike at 11 p.m., having pedaled nine miles from the West Side of Chicago after putting his kids to bed, to join an encampment of parents and education activists outside of the Board of Education building downtown.

All through summer 2012, those restaurant and retail workers had been meeting weekly at a church just off of Chicago's famed Magnificent Mile to plan a citywide campaign for higher wages, dignity and respect. When that middle school teacher came and spoke, the workers listened. "You're the ones who really hold the power," he told them. He was passionate about the need to fight for workers in all communities. They furiously took notes. They were filled with anticipation—and hope.

That November, those workers led a hundreds-strong march up Michigan Avenue—the first action under the banner of Fight for $15.

The workers who launched the Fight for $15 were young people who had largely grown up in Black and brown neighborhoods that had endured the brunt of disinvestment over the past decades. The energy created by the teachers' strike was electric, something you could feel in the air, particularly in those same neighborhoods. Watching their teachers walk out on strike not just for their own pay and benefits, but for student and community needs, was an inspiration and a revelation—a huge push to make ambitious demands.

Nearly 11 years later, we are still feeling the aftershocks of that moment, of the intersection of worker power in schools and the broader economy. Teachers in Los Angeles went on strike in March—not for their own contract but in support of tens of thousands of school support workers, with SEIU Local 99, against poverty wages. Over the past year and a half, workers at dozens of food service and retail chains—most visibly Starbucks—have organized in every corner of the country.

He was passionate about the need to fight for workers in all communities. They furiously took notes. They were filled with anticipation—and hope.

And on April 4, Chicago elected that aforementioned middle school teacher, Brandon Johnson, to the mayor's office.

This moment marks one of the largest-scale examples yet of the progressive Left leading a winning electoral coalition, with centrist Democrats following behind. Rather than filling an office with a career politician who has some limited alignment to a grassroots movement, this election sees one of the key organizers of that grassroots movement itself winning the spot. It is also, ultimately, proof that the Left cannot win without being in close coalition with BIPOC leadership and in deep connection with the majority of BIPOC voters.

We're not even halfway through 2023 and the race for the presidency in 2024 feels like it's already begun. But the next election we need to focus on isn't next year—it's May 16, when former elementary school teacher (turned education-organizer, turned city councilmember) Helen Gym is on the ballot for mayor of Philadelphia. More than any presidential campaign machinations of the moment, what just happened in Chicago—and what happens in Philadelphia—sets the table for what's possible for our country in 2024.

—ALEX HAN

ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICK MORGAN

JUST SICKENING

April's "Cut and Run," about Biden turning Covid-19 over to the private market, comprehensively and eloquently summarizes what so many of us have been fearing.

It was a beautiful dream to think this hideous pandemic experience—which shined a spotlight on the interconnectedness of so many social issues—would actually create a positive momentum of policies and programs so every single human might enjoy the basic rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In 2023, that means being able to earn a living wage sufficient to provide food and shelter without needing to sacrifice one's own health and safety. Education and healthcare should be available to everyone, not treated like a commodity only for the rich.

—*Josephine Monaco*
via email

DRUGGED UP

The "powers that be" don't really care about saving lives or helping people ("The Big Idea: Safe Consumption Site," April)—and how would we fund the police state without criminalizing drugs!?

—*Brandon Mouser*
via Facebook

TOOT TOOT

Cincinnati remains the only city to own an interstate rail line ("The Case for Nationalizing the Railroads," March), as leaders in the 1860s knew they couldn't wait for private capital to build a Southern rail line. And they have been shrewd enough to never try to actually run the line—but have been leasing it out since 1881.

So, we already have the model. And since rail companies have accepted this model for well over a century, it would be howlingly ridiculous for them to insist it is suddenly unacceptable (though of course they will).

This right-of-way could serve as the backbone of our first high-speed line connecting Atlanta to Chicago. And while we are building this safer, greener future, Amtrak should buy Greyhound and build a coherent ground transport company. Instead of competing for customers, this combined company would allow us to travel bus-train-bus on a single ticket. Folding Greyhound stations into train stations would allow downtown bus stations to be sold to improve profits. Lastly, everyone stays hired!

—*Richard E. Fitzer*
Berkeley, Calif.

WORKING 4EVER

It is definitely time for unions to get behind the push for a four-day, 32-hour workweek ("A 4-Day Work Week Could Be Closer Than You Think," online). The article brings up the concept of time-poverty, and if you ask virtually anyone in the workforce who is trying to raise a family, rich or poor, they'll tell you they don't have enough time to take care of all their family's needs. It's especially true for low-wage earners who have to hold down two jobs just to feed the family. A shorter workweek with no drop in their weekly paycheck would still leave them poor, but it would sure help on the time-poverty front.

—*John Crea*
Author of Shorter Workweeks & Stronger Families

THE FLORIDA PROJECT

I hurt. I ache. It is so embarrassing to be from Florida, the state with no compelling Democratic Party message and doesn't even know it ("Stop Cowering Before This Half-Bright Florida Fascist," online).

Until September 2021, I lived in Michigan eight months of the year. I maintained my Tallahassee residence and voted Florida by absentee. This past election, I was so proud of Michigan. In Michigan, "union" isn't a foreign or antiquated term and there is a real multi-party dynamic.

How badly do we want to keep losing? A whole lot, if we hang onto the "big tent" culture concept. What the heck difference does it make what "group" your DNA or religion put you in when you can't pay for groceries, transportation and manage finances? There must be a full-blown plan so real working folks can see a future for their kids or they just won't bother to vote—and I don't blame us.

—*Joanne Bowden Swain*
via email

TELL US HOW YOU REALLY FEEL

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.

WHAT WE'RE LISTENING TO

On my lunch breaks, I enjoy tuning into *Unclear and Present Danger*, hosted by Jamelle Bouie (a *New York Times* columnist) and John Ganz (known for his Substack *Unpopular Front*). The podcast focuses on '90s films with a post-Cold War bent. Curious how the Soviet Union parallels the Klingons in *Star Trek VI*? How surprisingly well *The Fugitive* addresses racial politics? To put it bluntly, as Ganz says: "[every podcast] is basically us going 'this movie has some terrible, reactionary politics and also... we really enjoyed it.'"

—Miacel Spotted Elk, Spring editorial intern

FINE ARTS

Meet our newest addition to *In These Times*, the visuals magician Sam Fine! An art director and communications strategist based in Los Angeles, Sam has designed graphics for nonprofits and organizations like IfNotNow and the Joshua Tree arts collective, Cracked Eggs. She is also the communications and development director for Inside Out Wisdom and Action Project, which works with Jewish social justice leaders. Sam grounds her artistic expression in an ethic of amplifying organizers and activists.

She enjoys Shabbat dinners with family and friends and exploring the ocean-desert landscapes of southern California, adding that the wonder of the wilderness constantly surprises her. A native Midwesterner (who was not only born in Chicago but once lived around the corner from the *ITT* office), Sam notes that, although she doesn't have any pets, she feeds sugar water to the hummingbird that visits her balcony every day.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

I have worked with and guided dozens of interns at *In These Times*, but in 2018, I was on the brink of quitting journalism altogether. That's the year I started a life-changing internship at the *Texas Observer*, one of the only left-wing publications in Texas, (which almost went under in March after 68 years, but had layoffs staved off by a staff-led crowdsourced fundraising campaign). The *Observer* had me sitting in on editorial meetings to learn how in-depth investigations on suspicious Texas legislation began, report on a protest at the Texas Capitol and tell the story of a 100-year-old massacre committed by Texas Rangers.

The *Observer* was the first place I worked where I felt like journalism could be more than just stenography for the powerful Washington elite. A few years later, I joined *In These Times*.

In These Times also does more than tell important stories that aren't given credence at other outlets. It's a place where young interns learn about U.S. labor, the power of grassroots movements, the resilience needed to create impactful journalism—and where they're inspired to mold the world into something better. Notable interns who have come through our doors include MSNBC correspondent Chris Hayes, the *Washington Post's* labor reporter Lauren Kaori Gurley, and Osita Nwanevu, who's gone on to write for *The New Republic* and the *Guardian*.

In this issue, interns have taken the lead on stories like "I Think I'm Done Striving" (page 48), in which intern Jireh Deng conducts a stunning interview with writer Delia Cai. Online, in "Norfolk Southern Donated $100,000 to Cop City," intern Hannah Bowlus reports on the controversial police training facility in Atlanta. And nearly every word in this magazine has been fact-checked by current and former interns.

The power of *In These Times* is not only in the stories we report, which help shape U.S. policy and politics. It's in offering a home to the next generation of journalists, who will do the same thing.

Nashwa Bawab
Assistant Editor

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PHOTO BY SRIKAR RAGHAVAN

Above: Just a few miles south of the techy Whitefield neighborhood of Bengaluru, India, Bengali and Bangladeshi migrants live, work and play.

Sweeping Changes

BENGALURU, INDIA—Travel a few miles south of the upmarket enclave of Whitefield (home to the offices of Dell, IBM and Cisco) and you'll find a settlement of shanties amid a vast tract of garbage. Thousands of Muslim migrant laborers from eastern India and neighboring Bangladesh live here.

In a city famous for being India's tech hub, workers sort garbage and clean sewers manually, under hazardous conditions, often without safety equipment. Sujith Sheikh, who came to Bengaluru a decade ago and works as a wastepicker, tells *In These Times* that he "segregates all the waste—broken glass, rotting food, plastic bottles, condoms—by hand, and the contractors don't even give us gloves." Their labor is necessary for the city's recycling efforts, but these workers receive no salary, earning only a few cents for every few pounds of sorted garbage.

Bengaluru's sanitation workers are stratified by degrees of vulnerability. City government employees, known as *pourakarmikas*, are at the top of the pyramid. Even though some of them only have subcontracted or temporary jobs, pourakarmikas—who are predominantly Dalit (oppressed caste) workers—are often unionized. Pourakarmika positions include sweepers, who scour the streets and pile garbage into heaps, as well as drivers, helpers and loaders, who move garbage to dumping spots.

At the bottom of the pyramid are Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants, who labor without even the nominal protection of a government job. Asked if he works for the municipal corporation responsible for Bengaluru's upkeep, Shakir Ali Sheikh, a migrant from Bangladesh, shakes his head: "No. Commercial." Migrants like Shakir Ali Sheikh are paid by contractors who act as middlemen between workers and employers (such as the city and the corporations selling water, soda and food).

R. Khalim Ullah, an activist working with the Swaraj India political party and a prominent advocate of migrant workers' rights, explains that the workers were "peasants and farmers who had to leave because the profession is completely untenable [in the West Bengal/Bangladesh region]." Ever since India's neoliberal economic reforms in the 1990s, the number of its full-time farmers has been plummeting as cultivation becomes financially infeasible, a situation exacerbated by droughts. Many who flee have turned to itinerant wage labor. Journalist Sudipto Mondal characterizes this phenomenon as the rise of "a new wastepicking class," including millions of Bengali-speaking Muslims across India. Many are recent entrants to Bengaluru's sanitation labor pyramid.

While caste remains a deciding factor in how the labor force is organized, decades of Dalit mobilization have given pourakarmikas a modicum of bargaining power. Over the past 15 years, pourakarmikas have organized under the umbrella of the All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU), affiliated

with the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). In 2016, pourakarmika sweepers in Bengaluru went on strike and managed to get on the city's payroll, which workers said allowed them to escape the mediation of corrupt contractors. In July 2022, pourakarmikas once again went on strike, this time across the entire state, to demand that all their positions be turned into permanent government jobs.

According to reporting in *The Hindu* newspaper, striking workers alleged that contractors paid them less than minimum wage with payments sometimes delayed for months. "Any demand for basic rights is met with threats of termination," one worker told *The Hindu*. "We demand that the contract system be abolished."

The strike, which halted garbage collection across the state for four days, was partially successful. By January, the government had agreed to convert more than 24,000 out of the state's 33,000 pourakarmika positions into permanent jobs. The government also vowed to abolish the contract labor system and bring more drivers and helpers into a direct payment system. If this promise is fulfilled, it will usher tens of thousands of workers into more secure conditions.

Even as some pourakarmika workers move up, the city's Muslim migrant workers are replacing them at the bottom. Maitreyi, a state committee member of the AICCTU who does not use a last name, says organizing these workers is posing new difficulties. Many of them do not have addresses and voter ID cards, which makes them difficult to contact. And unlike pourakarmikas mobilized by decades of Dalit agitation, Mondal explains, migrant workers lack local organizing structures or institutions. Fissures among migrants—between Indians from the state of West Bengal and Bangladeshi immigrants, for example—only complicate the situation.

But there is precedent for Bengali-speaking Muslims organizing in Bengaluru: Maitreyi says many are members of the pourakarmika union. "Yes, there is a difficulty in terms of language, but there is definitely a solidarity between them and the other pourakarmikas," she says. "People are coming together ... to fight and end the contract system."

If the city's ragpickers and pourakarmikas stopped working for even a day, Bengaluru would plunge into disease and chaos. But, amid widespread unemployment and poverty, organizing such a movement is hard. Akbar Ali, a migrant ragpicker from West Bengal, says "All I want is a regular job, so that I can take care of my family." Bengaluru pourakarmikas' recent victory has shown this desire to be achievable; the challenge now is to achieve it without leaving anyone behind.

SRIKAR RAGHAVAN is an independent writer and researcher from Mysore, India. He is presently working on a narrative history of social movements in the state of Karnataka.

Milking California Dry

PLANADA, CALIF.—Rita Rodriguez had prepared everything for her 57th birthday, a backyard family cookout with

THIS MONTH IN LATE CAPITALISM

- **HEALTHCARE WORKERS ARE STRIKING ACROSS THE U.K. AMID STAFFING SHORTAGES** at the National Health Service (NHS) as workers demand higher pay and better treatment. Not to worry: At least one hospital is piloting a "helper robot" to fill vacancies. Ostensibly, the robot will perform like a Roomba pharmacist, moving pills and medicines across the hospital, and will totally not make simple (though important and tedious) tasks needlessly complex.

- **HAVE YOU BEEN TIPPING YOUR LANDLORD?** In a widely shared video, TikTok real estate trolls Matthew Tortoriello and Kevin Shippee ask: "So, you'll tip a barista who pours overpriced coffee in a cup but not the guy who is on call 24/7 to make sure you have a safe home?" Thanks, guys, for the reminder to tip our pitchfork supplier.

- **SUPER-RICH PROFESSIONAL TROLL ELON MUSK** says ChatGPT is too woke and has challenged researchers to develop a "based AI" instead. Previously, for example, Musk said it was "concerning" the bot refused to use racial slurs—even in the scenario that it would save humanity. World-class, life-changing technological developments, and this is the state of our public discourse.

- **SELF-DRIVING CARS MAY SOON REPOSSESS THEMSELVES** if payments get in arrears. Ford applied for a patent on the tech, though a company spokesperson swears it has no "plans to deploy this." Other ideas include having the car "emit an incessant and unpleasant sound" or refuse to unlock its doors until you pay up. So far, at least, locking the owner inside the car is not on the list of tactics.

wine, hot dogs, popcorn, kebabs and a projector to watch *Pete's Dragon* under the stars. Then came the smell of manure.

"It just hits and you can't really do anything about it," Rodriguez says, recalling how they were forced to move inside because of the industrial Hillcrest Dairy nearby. "It was just so toxic that we couldn't sit out there."

When Hillcrest Dairy arrived in Merced County in 2002—originally permitted for a herd of 3,885 cows—lifelong residents Rita and husband David thought nothing of it. By 2012, though, the number of cows had more than doubled.

The waste from all those cows doesn't just smell bad. In nearby Tulare County, where cows outnumber people, air pollution from industrial dairy is causing and inflaming respiratory illnesses like asthma. David Rodriguez recalls his first thought upon hearing about the nosebleeds, headaches and children on respirators: "I don't want our kids to live like that."

Now Hillcrest is looking to expand again, one of dozens of dairies with similar plans in the San Joaquin Valley, the middle portion of California's fertile Central Valley. Access to ample land and a warm climate here has made California the leading milk producer in the country. Herd sizes have jumped 36% since 2011.

More cows means more money for farmers, but for neighbors they mean unbreathable air and increased pressure on California's most critical resource: water.

In the drought-stricken Valley, where millions of people live above aquifers the state deems critically over-drafted, the ceaseless expansion of industrial dairy lays bare the brute equation behind a global supply chain that saps critical resources from communities, ships them across the world and forces locals to bear the consequences. The Valley produces a full quarter of the U.S. food supply, and its inhabitants suffer some of the worst air pollution in the United States, along with contaminated groundwater from industrial fertilizers.

IN CASE YOU **MISSED IT**

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

HYPED

TRIVIAL

VITAL

IGNORED

World Wrestling Entertainment matches—you know, the ones that are fixed in advance—may soon be open for betting! We're gonna bet everything we have on this ending poorly.

About 1,200 *New York Times* contributors signed an open letter criticizing the *Times*' anti-trans bias, so the very next day the *Times* ... published a piece to defend J.K. Rowling?

Private texts reveal Fox News host Tucker Carlson hates Trump "passionately." Wait—a right-wing pundit on the record as duplicitous and manipulative? Have they no shame!?

After Walgreens announced it won't sell an abortion drug in states that have virtually banned abortions (in fear of legal action threatened by Republicans), California announced it won't do business with Walgreens.

Japanese media is referring to three arrested restaurant pranksters as "sushi terrorists," which either tells you how little we understand terrorism or how seriously Japan takes sushi.

Police swarmed an Atlanta music festival to arrest 23 peaceful Cop City protesters, charging them with domestic terrorism. (Note: This is how you make actual domestic terrorists.)

"Organizing consultant" Marie Kondo says she's "kind of given up" on tidying her house, sparking newfound joy for the rest of us.

California has a dastardly devious solution to the $200 insulin crisis: Make its own, sell it at cost (about $10), and save its government-backed health plans a ton of money.

Those consequences fall particularly hard on poor and non-white communities. Most of Planada's 4,000 people are Latino and live below the poverty line. The Spanish-speaking migrants and locals who work the orchards are already at higher risk of respiratory problems because of agricultural pollution. The dairy's expansion would accelerate the water basin's 20-year decline, potentially threatening the town's wells.

But Planada residents are fighting back.

"Their model is profits over people," Rodriguez says. He sits at his kitchen table, piled with papers, which serves as a command post in the quiet campaign the community is waging against Hillcrest's plan to expand its herd to 9,750 cows, more than six times California's average.

With the help of grassroots advocates, they have knocked on doors, circulated a petition and held community meetings on potential impacts.

"The majority of residents are concerned," says Madeline Harris, a policy advocate for the Valley-based nonprofit Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, which is helping to coordinate. "Planada is a town that's been around for a long time and the dairy hasn't."

Hillcrest Dairy declined to comment for this story.

Valued at $1 billion per year, milk is Merced County's top commodity. But milk is 87% water, and with the average dairy cow guzzling 30 gallons per day, the expanded herd would drink around 70 million gallons per year. Hillcrest would draw much of that water from the groundwater that supplies the town.

Industrial dairy also generates tremendous amounts of manure, stored in giant lagoons and often recycled into fertilizer for the crops that feed the herd. When this waste spills over or seeps into soil, nitrates can poison the water.

In the absence of any clear benefit to Planada—the expansion would create no new jobs, according to a county review—supporters point to Hillcrest owner Eddie Hoekstra's philanthropy. Opponents aren't convinced.

"No one is saying the owner is a bad guy," says Harris. "But donating bikes to the school district doesn't mean that the dairy is not using the groundwater."

In a town where everyone knows each other, conflict often plays out in the grocery store checkout or cold looks on the sidewalk, and three of the five members of the Merced County Board of Supervisors, whose vote will eventually decide the outcome of the proposal, have ties to the dairy industry. At a November 2022 meeting, former supervisor and dairyman John Pedrozo dismissed residents' concerns while his son Josh, a current supervisor, sat silently. When opponents of the Hillcrest expansion held a simple information session, it turned tense when Hoekstra showed up with supporters.

Rodriguez and his friends are working on educating their neighbors about the dairy. It's a difficult task, he says, because many have given up after years of inaction by local officials. Recently, they've teamed up with communities facing similar problems around the country and met with the Environmental Protection Agency and state and federal representatives.

"Our path has led us here," Rodriguez says. "We need the political muscle."

IAN WHITAKER is a writer and photojournalist based in California's Central Valley.

FOR THE WIN

- **WORKERS TRYING TO PROVE ILLEGAL UNION-BUSTING CAN RECORD THEIR CONVERSATIONS** regardless of state laws around consent. Starbucks workers won the victory from the National Labor Relations Board after being fired for covertly recording conversations with supervisors.

- **THE FIRST UNDERGRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT UNION IN THE COUNTRY** under the Teaching Assistant Labor Organization is now at Brown University. The National Labor Relations Board tallied a landslide victory for the computer science TAs this spring.
- **ENVIRONMENTALISTS ARE LAUDING A NEW MILESTONE IN PROTECTING THE OCEAN'S BIODIVERSITY** after nearly 200 nations signed onto a historic United Nations high seas treaty, protecting 30% of the ocean. The urgent calls to action are to reverse the ocean acidification exacerbated by carbon emissions and the overfishing that is decimating wildlife.
- **SOUTH AFRICANS ARE DEMONSTRATING SOLIDARITY WITH ANTI-APARTHEID MOVEMENTS** as South African lawmakers voted to downgrade their foreign embassy in Ramat Gan, Israel, over Palestinian human rights concerns. The move is just the latest demonstration in the country echoing back to South Africa's own freedom struggle.
- **THE AMERICAN BISON IS COMING BACK.** The species went "functionally extinct" after European settlers in the 1800s destroyed tens of millions of bison, which were a critical food source for Indigenous peoples. Now, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland has announced $25 million from the Biden administration's climate spending bill will be earmarked for bison restoration on tribal lands.

VIEWPOINT

DEJAH POWELL

Biden's Willow Project Is a "Wake-Up Call"

For humanity to thrive, we must abolish the fossil fuel industry.

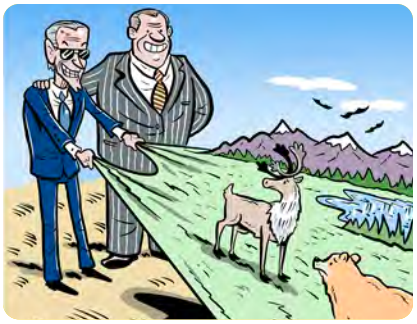
DEJAH POWELL (she/her), an organizer from Chicago, is currently the deputy organizing director for the national organization of Sunrise Movement, a youth-led movement to stop the climate crisis and create millions of good jobs.

DESPITE OVERWHELMING outcry by young people and climate justice advocates, President Joe Biden broke under the pressure of the fossil fuel industry March 13 to approve ConocoPhillips' Willow project—currently the largest oil project proposed on U.S. federal lands. It's $8 billion of fossil fuel infrastructure in Alaska that impacts Indigenous communities, will destroy wild landscapes north of the Arctic Circle and will erase much of the climate benefits of Biden's current renewable energy projects on public lands, adding 239 million metric tons of carbon emissions to the environment.

Willow also concretely breaks Biden's 2020 climate promise to stop new drilling on public lands, and the disastrous decision must serve as a wake-up call for all of us.

In order for humanity to survive, ordinary people must build both the grassroots and the political power needed to abolish the fossil fuel industry. If we don't, companies like ConocoPhillips will do everything to protect their bottom line—destroying humanity's shot at a livable future.

In the short time since this decision was made public, I've spent hours scrolling through TikTok and Twitter, where thousands and thousands of young people are expressing their disappointment, disgust and despair. Despite our generation saving Democrats year after year at the ballot box, despite the more than 650 million views on TikTok of mostly young people screaming to



#StopWillow, the White House decided to throw a middle finger to our generation. Many are now throwing their hands up, proclaiming that government does not work, that Biden's choice to move forward with Willow is proof of the inadequacies of our government system.

Biden's choice isn't a reason to give up on our government—it is only proof that the fossil industry is winning and that we must get serious about building the type of leverage and power that can compete with them. The fossil fuel corporations have spent decades building power to control both political parties, and now they're on a joyride, profiting off of the destruction and exploitation of our people, our communities and our planet. When gas prices went up for working people in 2022, the world's biggest oil companies made record profits, reporting billions of dollars in yearly earnings. In 2022 alone, ConocoPhillips made some $19 billion in profits, and their CEO took almost $20 million.

If we want to stop them, we can't turn away from the government: We must force it to govern in the will of the people. We need real power and leverage. It's a tug-of-war that the fossil fuel industry is winning. For us to defeat them, we need as many hands as possible pulling toward a society in which people and planet thrive over profit and corporations.

To win, we need people in the streets ready to halt business as usual. We need entire industries ready to strike and students refusing to go to school—everyone activated unless the government bends to our will. We need public support from every corner, demanding the scale of climate policy that meets the urgency of the climate crisis. We must continue to show up and beat every one of our opponents at the ballot box.

That's why the Sunrise Movement is organizing to make these tactics and strategies tangible options. We will force the government to

end the reign of fossil fuel elites; invest in Black, brown and working-class communities; and create millions of good union jobs. We're running campaigns, locally and nationally, to build the massive amount of people and political power we need. From demanding a Green New Deal for Public Schools in every district, to making sure cities across the country are taking the climate crisis seriously and passing policies that improve people's everyday lives, to hitting pavements and knocking doors, we're building a movement of young people across race and class to stop the climate crisis and win a Green New Deal.

By approving the Willow project, Biden is making a grave political mistake, proving he is beholden not to the people but to the fossil fuel industry. Our generation is growing in numbers and strength—with 8 million young people newly eligible to vote in just the past year. We're on our way to being an unstoppable political force. We've proven from 2018 to 2022 that we are a vital voting bloc, essential for any chance at Democratic victories. We staved off the red wave in the 2022 midterms, with voters over 45 leaning Republican. And our issues are popular across the board. Ahead of the 2022 election, 79% of Democrats, 46% of independents and 37% of Republicans said climate change is at least very important in how they vote.

Approving the Willow Project isn't just a climate catastrophe—it's a severe political misstep for Biden and Democrats. IN

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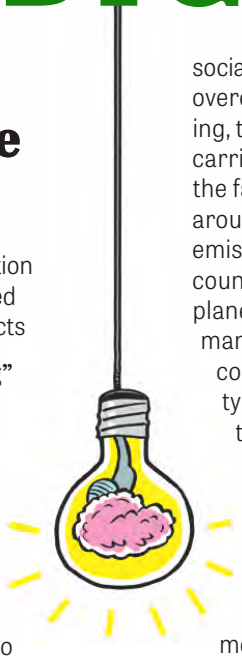
1. using social media to discourage the consumption of unnecessary, overpriced and unsustainable products



How did "deinfluencing" get started? Apparently in January on "beauty TikTok," that corner of the popular video app where users promote tips, tricks and products in the world of skin care and cosmetics, and the trend has spread into everything from fashion to electronics to kitchen gadgets. "No," deinfluencers are saying, "maybe you don't *need* Dior lipstick or $500 AirPods." And people are listening: #deinfluencing TikToks have more than 400 million views. It's in response to the $16 billion-and-growing "influencer" industry, in which brands sponsor social media stars and large hauls of products seem to be the norm.

What's so bad about treating yourself to nice lipstick? Nothing, in a vacuum. But the sheer volume of social media accounts promoting the overconsumption of makeup, clothing, tech gear and other consumables carries genuine risks. By one estimate, the fashion industry is responsible for around 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions, more than every African country combined (or more than every plane combined, or as much as Germany, France and the United Kingdom combined). With their ingredients typically derived from fossil fuels, the manufacture of cosmetics generates chemical waste. Only 20% of electronic waste gets recycled globally.

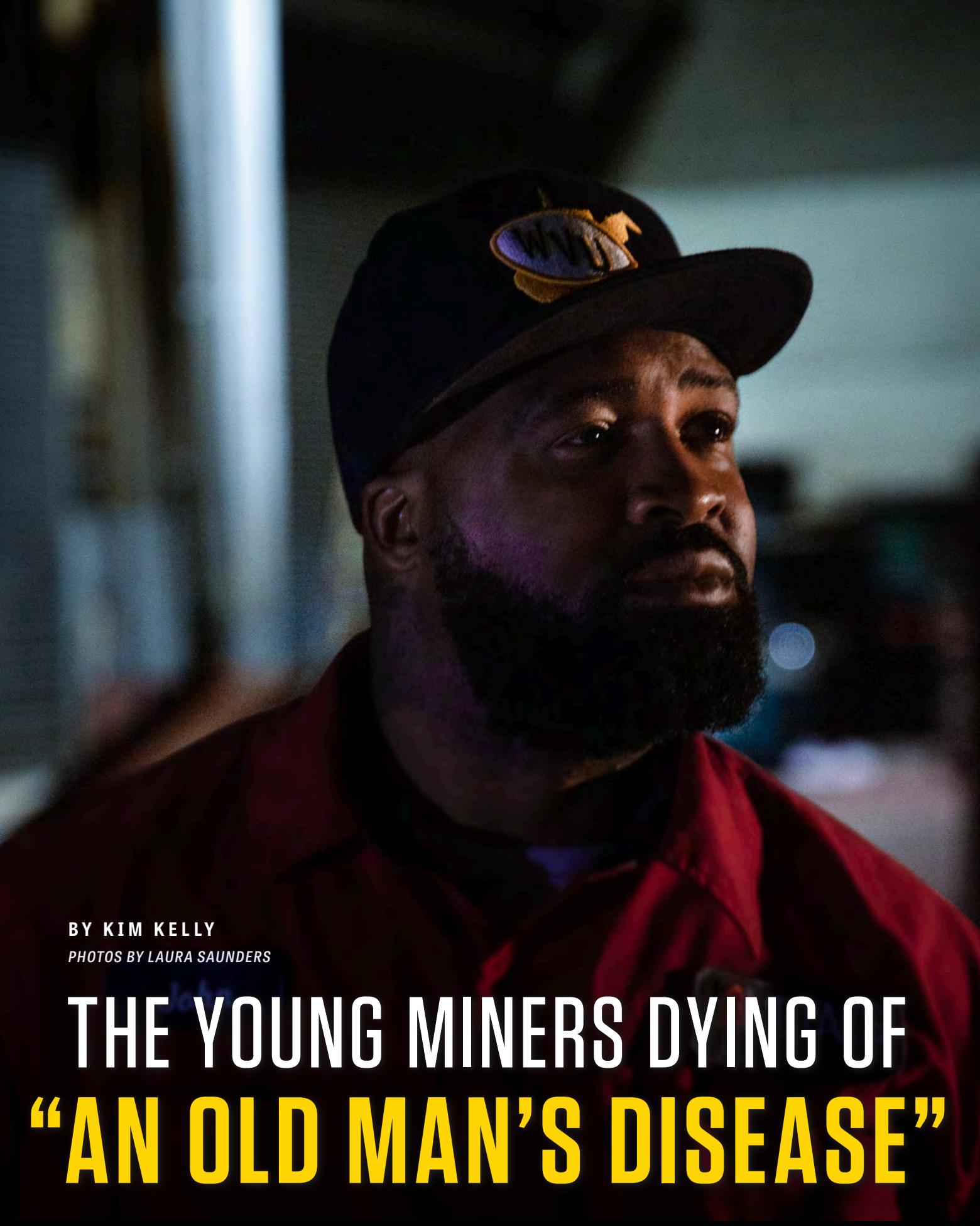
Then there is the psycho-social impact: We end up stuck on a treadmill of consumption, working more so we can spend more, always feeling we need the latest style or device to be successful.

> **"I know it's ironic for an influencer to be talking about overconsumption, but this is something that I'm truly trying to work on."**
>
> *—TIKTOK USER KAREN WU, 58.5 THOUSAND FOLLOWERS*

Can deinfluencers really stop overconsumption? On their own, of course not. And it's true that many deinfluencers aren't really trying—for every video discouraging one product, they have several promoting alternatives. For this reason, many environmentalists and industry critics worry that deinfluencing is just the newer, trendier version of influencing, asking us not to consume less—just differently.

But at least some deinfluencers are going further: They speak thoughtfully on the financial and emotional stress of keeping up with the latest social media trends, and they offer helpful pointers on how to buy less and live more sustainably. We could all use a little more of that in our feeds.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TERRY LABAN



BY KIM KELLY

PHOTOS BY LAURA SAUNDERS

THE YOUNG MINERS DYING OF "AN OLD MAN'S DISEASE"

Adaptation is a way of life for John Moore. He's worked construction, run a wig shop and now promotes concerts. The wig shop idea came to him because his middle daughter was having trouble styling her thick, curly hair. He didn't know much about wigs, or hair in general, so he learned and started turning a profit soon after the grand opening. That's the kind of man he is—someone who's always looking out for the next opportunity, the next chance to make it.

When we meet, Moore is wearing a black puffer jacket, a black durag, work boots and a cautious smile. He's soft-spoken but firm, and he lights up when he talks about his wife and three kids. At a glance, he seems strong, the kind of person who can win an arm-wrestling contest or help you move—like a man with a lot of living left to do.

But instead, Moore, at only 42, is dying of black lung disease.

You see, Moore's résumé also includes a few lines familiar to many people in Central Appalachia. He spent about 11 years running coal and clearing debris in the mines of Southern West Virginia. During that time, a cruel disease took up residence inside his chest cavity. Now, it is slowly destroying him from the inside.

He's not alone. Across Central Appalachia—and specifically Kentucky, Virginia and West Virginia—coal miners are struggling to breathe.

Left: Miner John Moore, 42 and diagnosed with black lung, stands in front of a piece of mining equipment in Beckley, W.Va., on March 16.

Many of them aren't much older than Moore—and many are much younger. Journalist Howard Berkes investigated the spike in a series for NPR in 2012, and multiple studies before and after have shown black lung (known more formally as coal workers' pneumoconiosis, or CWP) has been on the rise for the past decade.

"It was a big issue in 2009, 2010," explains Noemi Hall, an epidemiologist in the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) based in Morgantown, W.Va. "But as time went on, it continued to increase in such a dramatic fashion that, when you look at some of the figures we've produced, it just seems unbelievable."

Not only has black lung become more prevalent, but it has been impacting younger miners and those who have spent less time underground much more quickly and much more severely, according to recent data NIOSH shared with *In These Times*. In Kentucky and West Virginia, for example, black lung afflicts more than 1 in 8 coal miners who have been working underground for 20–24 years. That rate has risen from about 1 in 30 a decade ago. Rates are also creeping upward among those who've worked underground just 15–19

years—workers who may be as young as 33. Workers in their 30s and 40s are now making their way to the same black lung clinics that served their parents or grandparents and fighting the same battles against red tape and corporate malfeasance to win black lung benefits.

The primary cause is clear: It's the silica dust filling the air as today's miners have to dig through more and more layers of silica-laden rock to reach those storied Appalachian coal seams, which have been worn thin by centuries of prolific mining and are now much more difficult to access, despite (or because of) the heavy machinery that dominates the work. As one black lung clinic worker tells me: "Their daddies and granddaddies got all the good coal; now they're left with the trash."

Silica is 20 times more toxic than coal dust, and it is a silent killer. As the workers break through the layers of rock, silica dust clogs the air; it gets into their eyes, their noses, their throats and, eventually, their lungs. There, it bores into the tissue, scarring the delicate organs and causing irreparable damage. Eventually, it kills them. The coal dust that smudges miners' skin, clings to their eyelashes (it's not Maybelline) and causes coal workers' pneumoconiosis is no longer the primary respirable hazard facing America's coal miners; it's "excessive amounts of silica," Hall confirms.

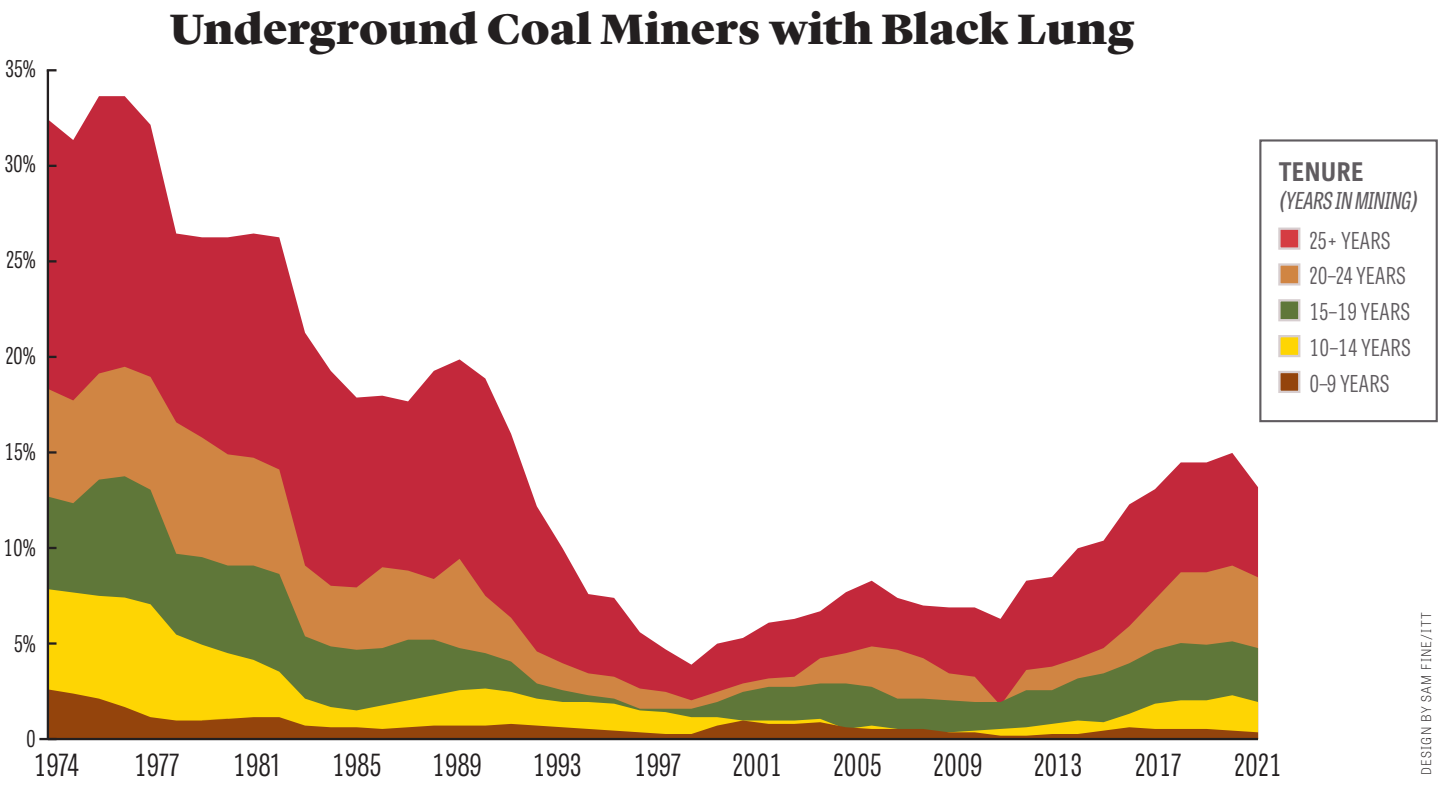
Considering the state of the modern coal industry, the decline of unions in Central Appalachia and the geological realities of the region, an entire new generation of coal miners is at risk of drowning in their own lungs.

GHOSTS IN THE TUNNELS

When most people hear the words "black lung," their minds tend to switch into black-and-white ("I thought that was something from, like, the 1800s!"). It's all too often treated as a punchline (thanks, *Zoolander*), a relic, or, at best, an issue that solely affects old people. But in the heart of Central Appalachia, black lung is all too real, and haunts the ancient hills. To those who have grown up in its shadow, seen it claim their family members and perhaps felt it in their own labored breathing, black lung has remained a hovering threat.

"Black lung" can encompass a set of illnesses and complications, from industrial bronchitis and silicosis to lung cancer and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. But when organizations and government agencies issue studies and reports on the crisis, they zero in on coal workers' pneumoconiosis (CWP), the only disease formally recognized by the medical establishment as black lung, once known as "miner's consumption" or "coal miner's lung" (or, in the hard rock mines out West, "the jackhammer laugh").

And they're increasingly seeing CWP in its most severe form. There is no coming back for patients who are diagnosed with progressive massive fibrosis (PMF), distinguished by the appearance of nodules (hard masses larger than 1 centimeter) within the lungs. At this stage, there is so much dust and so much scarring that the lungs begin to break down on



(DATA FROM NIOSH COAL WORKERS' HEALTH SURVEILLANCE PROGRAM)

DESIGN BY SAM FINE/ITT

their own. It is a heartless disease, one that catches hold of its victim and never lets go until they draw their last agonized breath. The only treatment is oxygen and, for many, prayer. Death may come slowly, but it always comes. A black lung diagnosis shortens a patient's lifespan by an average 12.6 years.

Like many younger miners, Moore never gave much thought to the specter of black lung. He grew up in Stanaford, W.Va., the site of a pivotal moment in the 1902-1903 New River coal strike, graphically recounted in famed labor agitator Mother Jones' autobiography, when armed deputies gunned down seven striking miners in their beds. But Moore didn't feel much of a connection to the profession's regional history or culture. He was simply a man with a growing family to care for, who wanted to upgrade from the city job that had paid him $5.15 per hour for too many years.

He began his career underground in 2005, making $18 per hour. "The dollars just made sense," he tells me. "It takes you from poverty to a level where you don't have to struggle if you manage your money right." The dust that clung to his work boots felt like an annoyance, not a threat. As a result, his diagnosis came as a shock; he had assumed his asthma was just worsening. "And then I actually went to the hospital and got X-rays on my chest, and the doctor came back and was like, 'You might want to see a black lung specialist.' ... The [specialist] came back after doing so many tests and he was like, 'You might want to get an attorney.'"

That attorney was Sam Petsonk. If a coal miner is diagnosed with black lung in southern West Virginia, the empathetic, fast-talking attorney is probably going to be one of the first people they call. Petsonk has an impressive résumé, with time in D.C. shaping federal policy impacting coal miners as well as extensive community development projects at home, but above all he has devoted himself to fighting tooth-and-nail against the coal companies whose actions have endangered his clients' lives. "When a client comes in with a medical death sentence due to illegal dust exposure, and that man has children who are younger than my little babies, and I'm only 38, it's heartbreaking," Petsonk tells me. "And it's embarrassing that our health and safety laws have failed to prevent the coal industry from tearing up people's lives like this."

Petsonk helps miners diagnosed with CWP access black lung benefits and advises them of their rights under Part 90 of the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977. Part 90 lets them transfer to less dusty parts of the mine with no penalty—an increasingly popular option among younger miners who want to keep earning money instead of dealing with the labyrinthine black lung benefits system. "Even though they have huge scarring in their lungs, that lung tissue is young enough and healthy enough that they can kind of power through," Petsonk explains.

Ben Cook, a current West Virginia coal miner and United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) member who serves on his local's mine safety committee, gave me a ride to meet Moore at Petsonk's wood-paneled office in downtown Oak Hill, W.Va. When we left, Cook told me he'd found it "alarming" to meet someone as young as John who was in such bad shape, and that over the past five years, he's noticed a difference in his own breathing and lung capacity. He's in his mid-30s, and is a third-generation coal miner knowledgeable about the risks and well-versed in safety procedures. He's also a fierce advocate for his coworkers and a poster child for mine safety. But the 12 years he's spent underground have taken their toll anyway. "I haven't been diagnosed with black lung, so I can't guarantee that I have it," he says. "But you can just feel a difference in your breathing. It's more labored."

Cook, with his nuanced understanding of the threat, is a bit of an anomaly. Among younger miners, particularly those like Moore who don't come from union families or coal-mining backgrounds, the idea that black lung is "an old man's disease" has proven difficult to shake.

"Too many young guys don't see it as an immediate threat," Cook says. He and other miners I spoke to mentioned the difficulty of convincing coworkers to wear full protection equipment, including the heavy, cumbersome respirators meant to protect them from dust. "If I was to tell them, 'I'm gonna push you out from the moving car,' they're gonna tell me no. ...But it seems like when you're telling them about something that may hurt them 30 years down the road, they think, 'Well, I've got time to worry about that later.'"

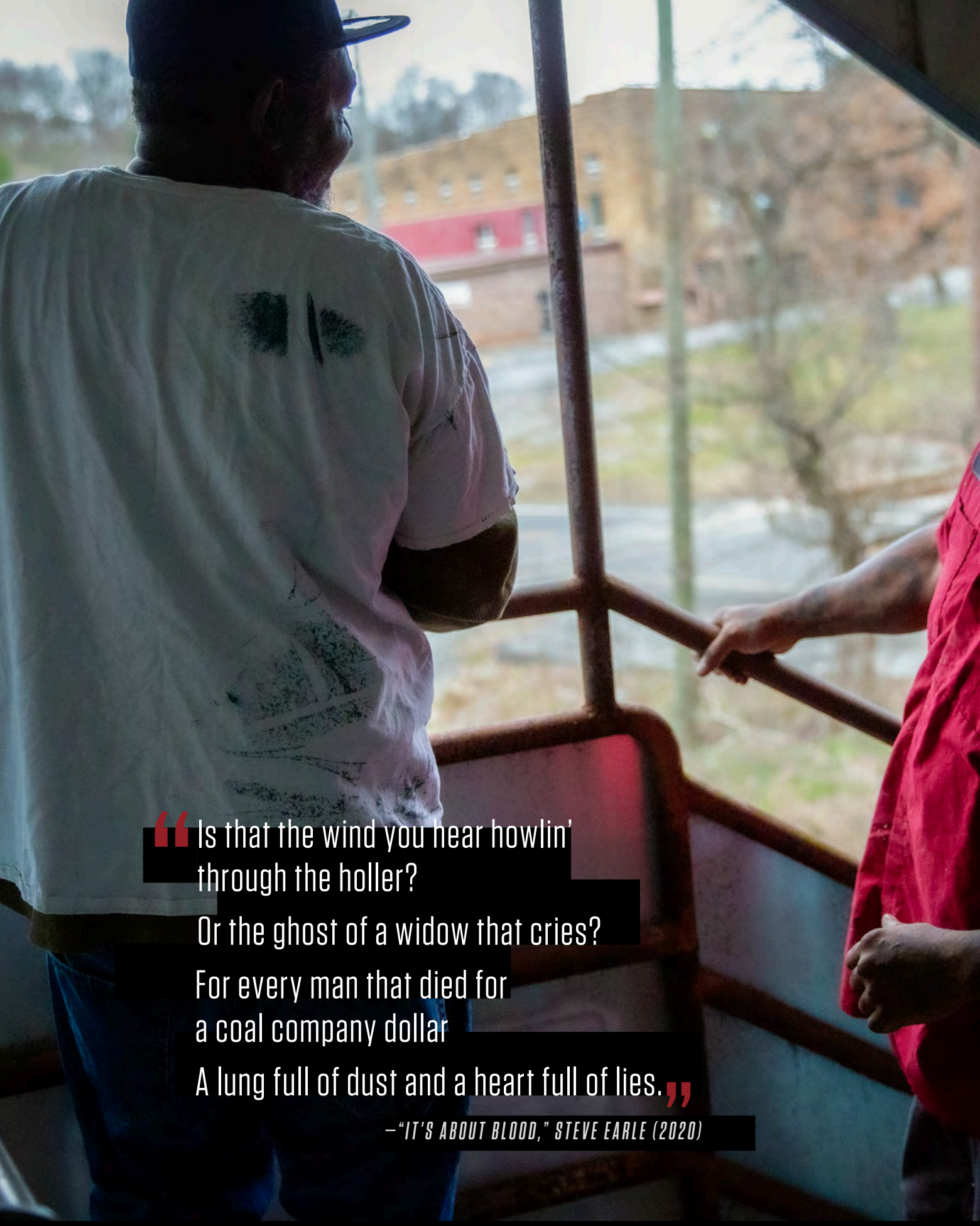
But as he and many miners and other experts have pointed out, if the proper dust controls were followed to the letter, the dust wouldn't be there in the first place.

"If ventilation has kept up and it's kept up right, you probably don't even need a mask," says Josh King, who worked in both union and nonunion underground coal mines between 2003 and 2017 and is a representative for UMWA Region 2. "But these companies, they want big numbers and they feel that sometimes you just gotta cut a corner."

REGULATORY HOPES AND FAILURES

Mine operators have been flouting federal mine safety regulations for decades. As journalist Chris Hamby reported in 2012 and expanded upon in his 2020 book, *Soul Full of Coal Dust: A Fight for Breath and Justice in Appalachia,* unsavory coal operators manipulate dust samples to skirt their responsibilities, using tricks and loopholes to magic dirty mines clean. While miners I spoke with say that some owners do their best to mitigate the risks and keep their employees safe, those examples were few and far between.

"There's no such thing as a good coal company; some are just worse than others," according to King. "The law lets them take so many samples and then they can choose the best ones. ... I remember working nonunion; when the federal government would come to run the



"Is that the wind you hear howlin'
through the holler?
Or the ghost of a widow that cries?
For every man that died for
a coal company dollar
A lung full of dust and a heart full of lies."

—"IT'S ABOUT BLOOD," STEVE EARLE (2020)

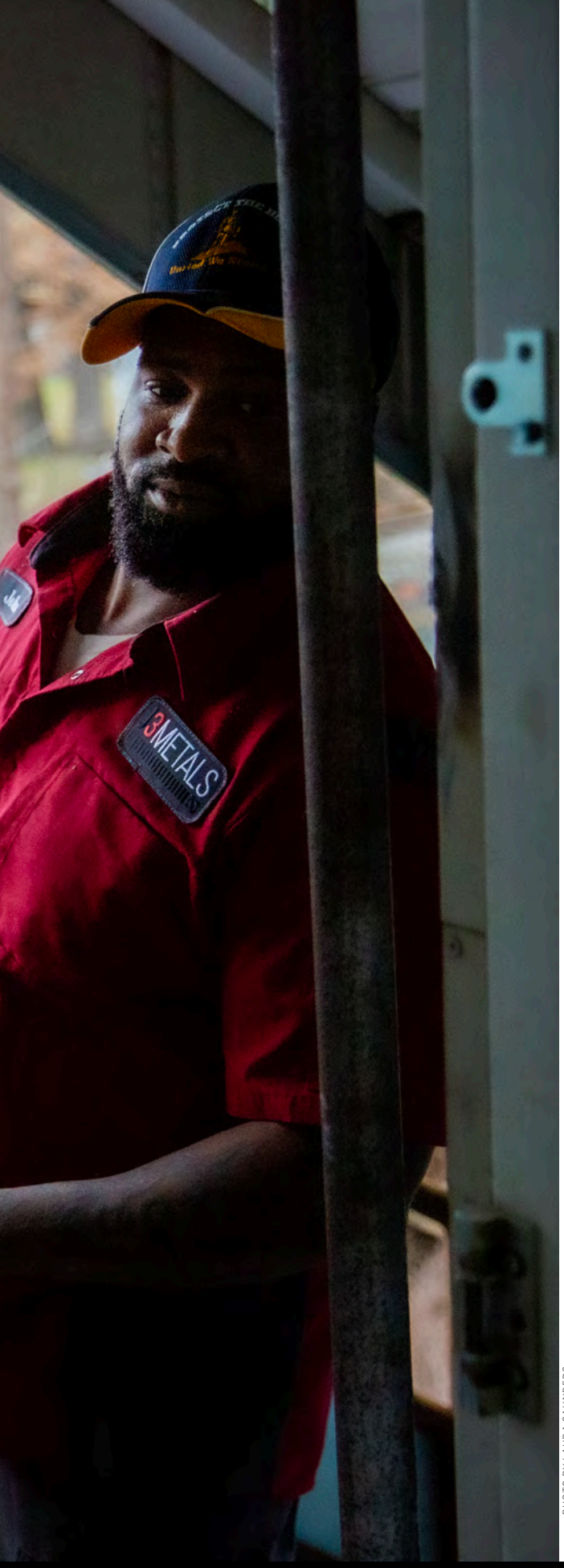


PHOTO BY LAURA SAUNDERS

surveys, the company would always send extra help on the bolt machines or on the scoops to get a cleaner reading than what normally they would. ... They'll do little stuff like that to not have a really accurate reading."

Regulations do exist. In addition to Part 90, miners are afforded other strong protections under the 1977 Mine Act (which built upon an act passed in 1969). The federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) is tasked with enforcing the act and expanding its safety and health rules. Theoretically, MSHA should be a bad coal boss's worst nightmare. But MSHA has been heavily criticized for going easy on violators. Hamby found that, between 2000 and 2011, the agency received more than 53,000 samples from underground coal miners that showed overexposure to coal dust, but only about 2,400 citations were issued.

King suggests the MSHA needs more staffers—and more teeth—to properly go after violators. Cook's glum assessment: "Whatever the agencies say they're enforcing, obviously, is not working."

MSHA has long known that silica is a problem, and its medical risks are no secret. The first recorded death from a silica-related respiratory disease came in 1672, when Dutch physician Isbrand van Diemerbroeck examined a group of stonecutters who died of "asthma" and found that "to cut their lungs was like cutting a mass of sand." In 1974, NIOSH recommended a silica standard of no more than 50 micrograms per cubic meter during any 10-hour shift of a 40-hour work week, noting that "compliance ... should prevent adverse effects of crystalline silica." It's hard not to think this current crisis could have been prevented, or mitigated, if only someone had listened.

In 2016, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) did implement the 50-microgram standard, but OSHA doesn't have jurisdiction over coal mines. MSHA's standard has been 100 micrograms since 1969, and mines can't be penalized for violating the silica limit alone—it's tied to the larger coal dust standard. As a result, coal miners today—many of whom are exposed to just as much silica dust as construction workers, non-metal miners and maritime workers—are subject to an older, much higher limit that has failed to protect them from the ravages of silica.

In 2019, the House Committee on Education and Labor held a hearing titled "Breathless and Betrayed: What Is MSHA Doing To Protect Miners From the Resurgence of Black Lung Disease?" in which several congresspeople questioned the agency's inactivity. Rep. Alma Adams (D-N.C.) opened by noting how "mine safety regulators and the industry have failed in their jobs to protect miners from this completely preventable occupational disease." Bruce Watzman, a former member of the industry lobbying group the National Mining Association, defended MSHA's record, saying the agency "does as good a job as it can."

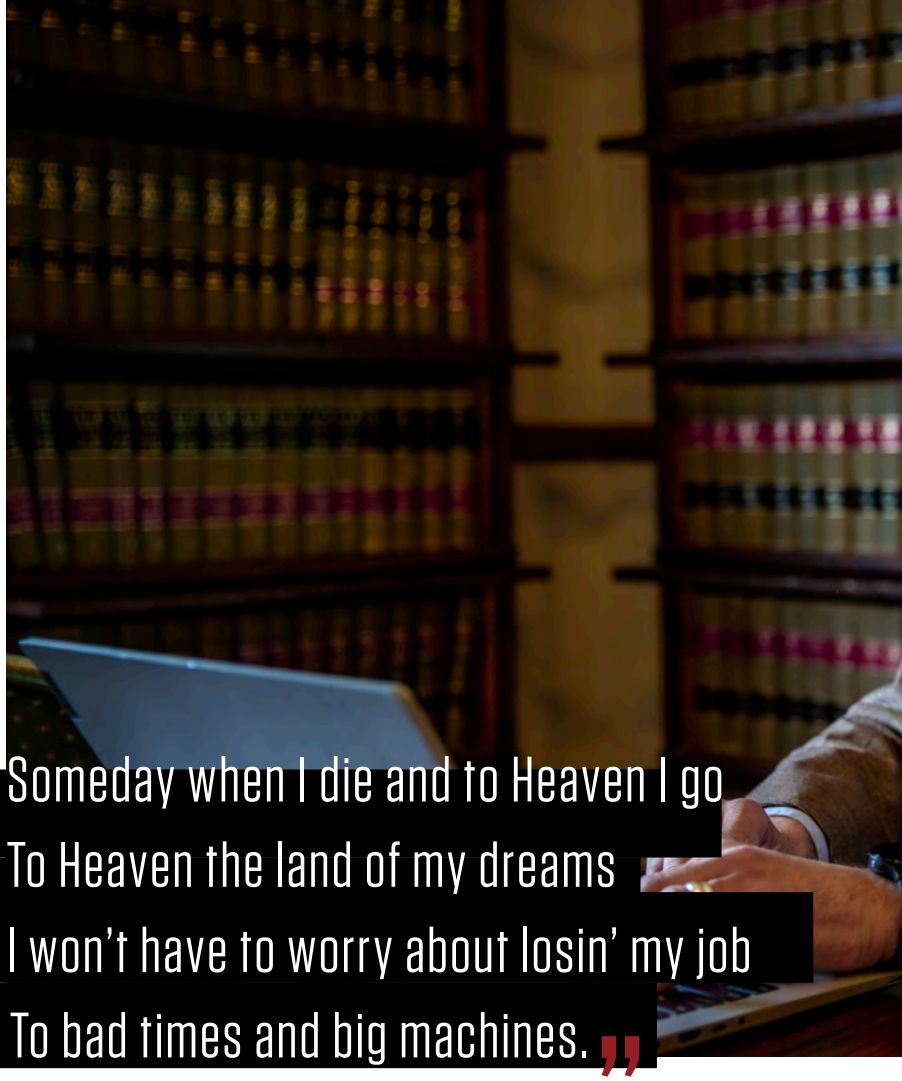
UMWA President Cecil Roberts spared MSHA itself his trademark fiery delivery, instead aiming squarely at the federal

Left: John Moore (right) is working to open an arcade at this downtown Beckley, W.Va., location, even while his mining-related health conditions continue to progress.

government. "Congress needs to take action to require the Federal Mine Safety and Health Administration to promulgate an emergency temporary standard that recreates a permissible exposure limit for silica," he told the committee. "Every committee that has ever been established in this Congress to deal with this, have failed to do so, so I hope today that we take some action to protect these miners."

They didn't. That year, MSHA requested testimony and public comment on a proposed rule but didn't go any further. Meanwhile, more than 1,000 miners and former miners die from the disease annually. Some worry MSHA has missed its moment in stemming what's now a full-blown crisis.

"Before 2010, we rarely encountered miners diagnosed with complicated coal workers' pneumoconiosis or progressive massive fibrosis," Wes Addington, of the Appalachian Citizens' Law Center, a black lung victims' advocacy group, wrote in a 2021 petition. "Since that time, scores of miners have come through our doors with very severe disease. They are younger and sicker than ever before and have been robbed of the life they hoped would follow their careers in the coal mines. A silica standard is long, long overdue."



> "Someday when I die and to Heaven I go
> To Heaven the land of my dreams
> I won't have to worry about losin' my job
> To bad times and big machines."
>
> —"COAL TATTOO," JIM CROCE (1966)

MSHA faces issues that plague many other small federal agencies—understaffing and a subjectivity to the political winds that blow in and out of Washington. An enormous amount of what any given agency actually gets done depends on who's sitting in the Oval Office and for how long.

"During the Obama administration, they basically ran out of time," Adam Banig, the UMWA's director of governmental affairs, tells me. "They were working on [a silica rule], and it just didn't get out soon enough before the end of the presidency and then the Trump administration never did anything with it." Banig points out Trump installed a former coal executive, David Zatezalo, to lead MSHA. Zatezalo spent his time there examining ways to make health regulations around coal and silica dust "less burdensome" for mine operators. "It's just a vast difference in the two parties, and who they listen to," Banig explains.

Right now, the political winds may be blowing in the miners' favor. President Joe Biden appointed Chris Williamson, a West Virginia native with roots in coal country, as assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health administration April 11, 2022, and Williamson has named the fight against silica as his top priority.

During the first few months of his tenure, MSHA announced plans to implement a new silica enforcement initiative that includes spot inspections of mines and reviews of ventilation plans, and it began promulgating a new regulation to address silica exposure.

Depending on how the next presidential election goes, Williamson may have only a couple of years to get this all done. Scholar Barbara Ellen Smith, author of *Digging Our Own Graves: Coal Miners and the Struggle Over Black Lung Disease*, has little faith in an agency whose leadership is as politically impermanent as MSHA's: "I hate to say it, but I think black lung is going to be eliminated when the coal industry shuts down, given the current state of the union."

DEATH HAUNTS A DYING INDUSTRY

THE INDUSTRY ITSELF IS ON LIFE SUPPORT. Despite the coal lobby and its pet politicians' best efforts, and a brief bump in demand in 2021, coal consumption for electricity generation continues to fall. The rise of natural gas fracking and the growing shift toward renewable energy have robbed coal of its former luster. Metallurgical coal, the soft bituminous variety used to

PHOTO BY LAURA SAUNDERS

manufacture steel that lines the Central Appalachian coal seams, will have a longer shelf life because of the demand from rapidly industrializing nations like China and India.

Miners will continue to be able to find work there—at least until mine operators figure out how to automate them out. Even before the green energy transition, coal mining jobs were disappearing. The number of coal miners peaked in 1923, with 862,536—about 2% of the U.S. workforce. In the past decade, it's dropped from 79,300 to 41,100.

In a stroke of bitter irony, the marks of progress that stole their jobs are a major reason behind the uptick in silica exposure; the machines can dig further faster than any human, and the air fills with deadly dust that much quicker. What once took a crew two weeks to dig out now takes less than 24 hours with a longwall or continuous miner machine.

To scratch out the remaining coal, coal companies have also turned to the old, abandoned metallurgical mines hollowed out by steel companies decades ago, bringing in workers to clean them up and take a crack at digging out the subprime coal that's left. John Moore worked in one of these "mine rehabilitation projects" in Raleigh County, West Virginia. These sites are classified as construction projects—not mines—so MSHA only conducts inspections twice per year. "They hire contractors, just like John, people that have no mining experience, and they have to learn on the fly, and they wind up breathing a lot of sandstone and coal dust," Petsonk explains. "A couple of years of exposure in that kind of environment can leave you with totally disabling, progressive, massive fibrosis and heart failure, which is what John's got."

Above: Mining and labor lawyer Sam Petsonk, who represents John Moore and countless others in Appalachia, warns that just a couple of years in an unsafe mine can cause life-changing damage.

Coal may be dying, but it's also taking an entire new generation of miners out along with it. Coal operators will continue asking the workers who remain to dig further, faster and through more rock to extract what little coal remains.

"[Operators are] just trying to get the buck that they can while they can, because they're not stupid," Smith says. "They know that their game is up."

Williamson at least seems genuine in his desire to tamp down silica dust. Since we first spoke in summer 2022, MSHA has rolled out a new suite of digital initiatives to educate miners on their rights.

On January 18, MSHA's new silica standards rule moved to the Office of Management and Budget, where it will soon be made available for public comment. If various federal bureaucratic hurdles are successfully cleared, the standard will be put into place and coal miners might be able to breathe a little easier. As experts and advocates have been saying for decades, it is entirely possible to minimize coal dust and silica exposure in underground mines by using more efficient rock-cutting methods. Other techniques include high-quality ventilation controls with HEPA filters, vacuums, dust collectors and wet methods (such as "flooded-bed scrubbers," powerful water sprays to tamp down dust), along with the use of face masks and respirators.

Those extra precautions, which can be time-consuming and slow production, tend to be unpopular with mine bosses, and MSHA's new initiative includes increased oversight of mine operators and more aggressive dust sampling in mines hit with previous violations. There's no method to collect real-time data on silica exposure, creating opportunities for skullduggery. NIOSH is working to address the issue.

"The important part of all this, especially from the MSHA standpoint, is: This illness is entirely preventable if mine operators are following the law and putting the correct engineering controls in place," Williamson says. "The miner also has to feel like he or she can report health hazards and do so without fear of retaliation, which is where MSHA comes into play."

"Black lung, black lung, oh your hand's icy cold
As you reach for my life and you torture my soul
Cold as that water hole down in that dark cave
Where I spent my life's blood diggin' my own grave."

—"BLACK LUNG," HAZEL DICKENS (1973)

THE UNION DIFFERENCE

It's also where a union can come in handy. Moore worked both union and nonunion mines, and it's impossible to tell if a union card could have saved his lungs, but union mines are known to be safer than nonunion. As Ben Cook explains, the union can preempt dangerous mining conditions by its involvement in the mine's ventilation planning and by forming mine safety committees tasked with monitoring the workplace and advocating for safety.

Unions also create a necessary bulwark against profit-hungry coal bosses. Many a coal boss has happily soaked his hands in blood if it meant staying in the black. "[In a union], I can say at any time I have a right to a safe workplace and I can remove myself from the unsafe environment," explains Cook. "I don't have to breathe that dust."

"When you break the union, it's the Wild West in terms of what employers can ask of workers," Barbara Ellen Smith tells me. "And we're seeing that—numerous, numerous miners talking about being required to work overtime, double shifts, their lungs get no break, all kinds of

PHOTO BY LAURA SAUNDERS

falsification of dust sampling, really unhealthy procedures in terms of ventilation. ... I have described to retired miners who worked union what current miners have described to me, and they are just aghast—they can't believe it. In the absence of a union, the companies are just really doing as they wish."

There are still a few union mines in West Virginia and southern Virginia, but Kentucky's are entirely nonunion.

Above: John Moore (left) enjoys a game with his family in Beckley, W.Va. He credits them as his motivation to keep pushing forward.

It's probably not a coincidence that miners I spoke to in union strongholds like Alabama, Pennsylvania and even Utah haven't seen anything like the black lung numbers consuming their brethren in Appalachia.

Until the coal companies start doing everything within their considerable power to protect their workers, young coal miners will keep knocking on Sam Petsonk's door. One fact that nearly everyone I spoke to for this piece emphasized—angrily, wearily, hopefully—is that black lung and all of its attendant horrors are completely preventable. With proper engineering controls, full compliance with safety regulations and up-to-date exposure standards, no one would have to live like this, or die like this.

It is a choice being made, and it is a terrible way to go.

My friend Danny Whitt, recording secretary of United Mine Workers Local 1440 in Matewan, W.Va., is a retired Mingo County coal miner who was diagnosed with black lung the year I was born, 1988. He's seen many of his former coworkers succumb to the disease and has had about enough.

"I've watched people die of black lung, and I'll just tell you, it's the awfulest sight you've ever seen in your life," he tells me when we bump into one another at a 2022 UMWA convention. "It's like taking a fish out of water and just laying them on a table and watching them gasp for breath. And a coal miner, if he dies with black lung complications, it's a horrible death. He just smothers."

For now, Moore is doing his best by eating well, going to the gym religiously and taking long visits to the sauna—"just to try to basically stay alive," he says.

When we spoke, Moore stressed he wants other young miners to get out of the dust before it's too late. "Learn more about the workplace, and if you got any type of equipment to protect yourself, use all the equipment that you can," he says. "If you don't, then you can end up like me."

As far as Moore's concerned, even with his diagnosis and the struggles ahead, he's lived an "all right life," because of his family. He radiates with pride as he tells me his eldest is now 21 and working as a dental assistant. "I just want to set up things more for my family now to where they won't have to go through the struggle I've gone through ...

"We was born to die, you know? ... You've just got to feed your family and do what you got to do and hope and pray for the best." IN

This story was supported by a grant from the Leonard C. Goodman Center for Investigative Reporting.

KIM KELLY is an independent labor journalist and author of *Fight Like Hell: The Untold History of American Labor*. Asbestos killed her grandfather, a former steelworker, and she hopes to help prevent others from losing their own loved ones to occupational disease.

Can Meatpacking Workers Take on Tyson?

As Iowa meatpackers emerge from the pandemic, plants are abuzz with talk of a union

BY LUIS FELIZ LEON

GLORIA ORTIZ'S PARENTS SPOTTED A SIGN ONE day looming over the fields of strawberries in California's Central Coast. It was announcing $11-an-hour wages for meatpacking in Iowa. They had been picking strawberries for $35 a day.

"So we came from Santa Maria, California, to this town, for Tyson," Ortiz says.

Her parents took jobs at the Tyson Foods pork processing plant in Columbus Junction, Iowa, in 1994, just as the meatpacking industry was in a race to the bottom. In the 1980s, meatpacking companies had begun vertically integrating their operations to control the whole supply chain, from the farmers who raise the animals to the workers who kill them and package the meat. Companies shuttered plants in union strongholds like Chicago (famously dubbed "Hog Butcher for the World" by Carl Sandburg), Omaha, Neb., and Kansas City, Mo., to flock to low-wage outposts like Columbus Junction in right-to-work states. There, the industry could hold off union drives and take over bankrupt farms.

Companies recruited immigrants, mostly undocumented, to work the nonunion plants. Wages

PHOTO BY JOHNATHAN RICHARD

and benefits plummeted while injuries soared. Human Rights Watch, in its 2004 report on meatpacking industry abuses, "Blood, Sweat and Fear," details how meatpacking transformed from an industry in which "workers had secure organizations bargaining on their behalf to one where self-organization is a high-risk gauntlet for workers." Meanwhile, union density in the industry fell from 90% in 1952 to 33% in 1983 to just 18% in 2020.

Ortiz struggled to acclimate to her new home and her parents worked "nonstop," she recalls. She was bullied at school, singled out as one of the few Latinas in a predominantly white town. She dropped out at 13.

Ortiz's mother, 62, still works at Tyson, on the cut line, and the work has taken a toll: carpal tunnel and chronic shoulder pain. She comes home totally exhausted, Ortiz says.

Ortiz, too, works in meatpacking, at a meat processing plant 22 miles away, in West Liberty, Iowa. The West Liberty Foods plant is owned by the Iowa Turkey Growers Cooperative, and Ortiz earns $18.90 an hour working the line.

Ortiz (who requested a pseudonym for fear of retaliation) describes a draconian "points" system, under which six penalty points for lateness or absence results in termination. "They don't think about the people," Ortiz says. "If you're sick and you miss days, you're out."

Soft-spoken and reserved, Ortiz, 36, has a steely determination imbued by her Christian faith and a righteous indignation at injustice ingrained from years of advocating for her immigrant parents.

When immigrant communities were denied pandemic relief, she sprang to action, joining faith-based community group Escucha Mi Voz ("Hear My Voice") to organize in 2021.

Now, Ortiz is among a number of workers with Escucha Mi Voz who are laying the groundwork for a unionization campaign at Tyson and West Liberty. A union, she believes, would boost wages, sick leave, bonuses, vacation time and, most importantly, respect.

In more than 20 interviews with current and former workers at both meatpacking plants, *In These Times* heard complaints ranging from understaffing to abusive supervisors to punitive attendance policies. Meatpacking workers say a union would also address the breakneck pace of the line and the unremitting production pressures, which they say make injuries all but

Left: Meatpacker Gloria Ortiz holds her mother's hands, affected by carpal tunnel after decades of repetitive motion on a meatpacking line, at Ortiz's home in Columbus Junction, Iowa.

David Goodner, a community organizer with Escucha Mi Voz ("Hear My Voice"), likes to quote his hero, farmworker organizer Fred Ross: "When you are tempted to make a statement, ask a question."

certain. They lift heavy turkey carcasses onto hooks at West Liberty and cut into pork limbs with dull knives at Tyson. Workers say they have soiled themselves trying to keep the line going by skipping bathroom breaks and suffered cuts and stab wounds from wielding knives elbow-to-elbow.

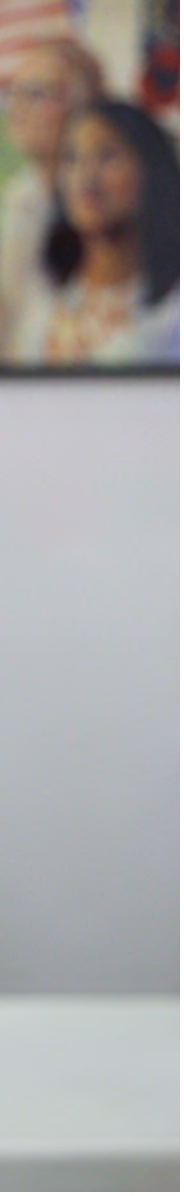
The union drive is just a few months old and is freighted with risk. With 1,400 workers at Tyson and an estimated 600 at West Liberty (the company would not confirm), it would be the largest U.S. meatpacking drive since 2012, when 1,200 Pilgrim's Pride poultry plant workers in Alabama joined the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union Mid-South Council. The largest in recent memory was the 2008 unionization of the world's largest hog slaughterhouse, in Tar Heel, N.C., where 5,000 workers were processing some 32,000 hogs a day. That campaign took 15 years.

But the Iowa workers have several winds blowing in their favor. The pandemic stirred empowerment around collective action and outrage at bosses' disregard for their lives. The reform leadership at the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 431 is committed to new organizing. And with roots—through Escucha Mi Voz—in Catholic social teaching and a record of success winning pandemic relief for their communities, the campaign comes from a place of strength.

DAVID GOODNER, CO-DIRECTOR OF THE CATHOLIC

organization Escucha Mi Voz, wears horn-rimmed glasses and has thin, silvery blond hair. He is a seasoned labor and community organizer with an excitable and conspiratorial mien, a firecracker encased in a human body.

"After years of surviving the worst abuses of corporate greed and Covid-19, worker resistance to exploitation has grown organically," Goodner explains, "from leaflets and pickets for pandemic relief to spontaneous wildcat strikes and walkouts, all the way to the current drives to unionize the plants."



> “After years of surviving the worst abuses of corporate greed and Covid-19, worker resistance to exploitation has grown organically from leaflets and pickets for pandemic relief to spontaneous wildcat strikes and walkouts, all the way to the current drives to unionize the plants.”

Escucha was founded in April 2021 to organize for pandemic relief for undocumented workers and their families, who were often excluded from federal relief despite making up, in many places, as much as 10% of the essential workforce. Meatpacking worker-organizers with Escucha won cash assistance in Iowa City and utility relief in West Liberty.

In late 2022, the organization was tasked with distributing $600 checks from the Department of Agriculture’s new relief program to cover farm and meatpacking workers’ pandemic-related expenses. Escucha also surveyed workers about their working conditions. According to Escucha, a survey of 927 workers at Tyson and 426 workers at West Liberty Foods revealed that more than 85% wanted a union.

A typical workplace union campaign would take years to compile such detailed information, but Escucha offered UFCW Local 431 access to the survey results and invited union staff to table the relief clinics where Escucha was distributing the aid in late December 2022 and early January 2023. Since, worker-organizers with Escucha have been meeting at churches and going door-to-door talking with meatpackers about pandemic relief and workers’ rights.

Goodner offered to take me on the road to introduce me to a few, and we start with Ortiz, in Columbus Junction. On the way, the Tyson plant—where 10,000 hogs at 200 pounds each are killed daily—comes into view. A sign on a chain-link fence reads: “Our work feeds the nation.”

Tyson denied my request for a plant tour, but ethnographer Kristy Nabhan-Warren was given access for her 2021 book, *Meatpacking America: How Migration, Work and Faith Unite and Divide the Heartland*. She saw firsthand the “sawing, cutting, peeling, and disemboweling, the kinetics of light and sound.” Each worker, she writes, performs a distinct job—sawing off the hogs’ torsos, plucking their toenails and ears, slicing off the hooves, burning off remaining hair—a bloody symphony of synchronized labor that earned Tyson $3 billion in 2022, another in a series of record-setting years since the pandemic began.

Goodner takes me to meet a worker-leader who, while not public with her union support, has clandestinely supported the union drive at Tyson, educating others about pandemic relief and management reprisals. Sofia Mercado strides into an empty party rental space after refusing to invite me, a stranger, into her home. She grills me about unions and assesses my answers. She wears a mask more to hide her identity than as a Covid precaution and insists on keeping the lights off.

Mercado (a pseudonym) has worked on the killing floor at Tyson for decades. She blames pandemic understaffing for giving her a repetitive motion injury in 2021, explaining that, before the pandemic, there were typically 18 workers on her section of the kill floor; as the virus spread through the plant, Tyson didn’t adjust production targets, and instead put the heavy toll of maiming thousands of hogs onto the shoulders of just five workers.

When *In These Times* asked Tyson about complaints of understaffing and the likelihood of injuries, spokesperson Liz Croton replied in a statement: “Team member safety is our highest priority. Our operations run at a level to ensure team members’ safety, animal welfare and food safety, including at our Columbus Junction, Iowa pork plant.”

Workers agree that “animal welfare” is prized, at least. “If the plant closes, it’s because something happened to the hogs,” Mercado says, such as hogs freezing to death on their way to the slaughterhouse. “But if it’s something that affects workers, the plant doesn’t stop.”

When Mercado was out sick with Covid-19 in April 2020,

PHOTO BY JOHNATHAN RICHARD

she says managers incessantly called and pleaded with her to return. "They never did anything to save our lives despite having the economic means to do so," Mercado says.

As the pandemic receded into the background, Tyson printed shirts claiming the mantle of frontline worker hero. "They gave me a shirt saying 'My work feeds the nation,' with the image of a fork and an American flag," Mercado recalls.

MEATPACKING WORKERS ARE A LARGELY INVISIBLE

workforce, occasionally nabbing headlines after fleeting cycles of public outrage. Earlier this year, a *New York Times* investigation exposed a nationwide shadow workforce of child laborers as young as 12 at major national brands, including slaughterhouses, even as GOP legislators in Iowa and a half dozen other states proposed loosening child labor laws.

In the early days of the pandemic, too, the spotlight turned squarely on meatpacking workers as they were forced back into slaughterhouses by former President Donald Trump's April 2020 executive order. The nation's attention was swiftly drawn to stories of their deaths. Less attention was paid to their collective actions, including walkouts, sickouts and petition drives to demand transparency on Covid infections, social distancing policies, paid sick leave and wage increases.

Those actions often won.

In summer 2021, hundreds of meatpacking workers at West Liberty put down their knives and strode into the company's cafeteria, refusing to work. Because of pandemic-related shortages, their shifts stretched to 11 hours—5 a.m. to 4 p.m.—says former meatpacker Rodrigo Hernandez Quiroz. (He was fired after 10 years for accumulating six points.)

Workers presented managers and a company Spanish interpreter with their demands: a wage increase from $16 to $18 and a return to the first shift ending at 2 p.m. so they could see their children after school, according to pro-union worker Pedro Sánchez (a pseudonym).

The company caved. Pay rose to $18 and the workday was shortened.

But as the pandemic marched on, Sánchez says, the company regressed to long-documented industry abuses, such as punitive attendance policies and line speedup. Sánchez typically works with five others; they're down a worker, he says, and yet have even tougher quotas.

Sánchez and his coworkers saw collective action make gains for them during the pandemic, and they see unions as the durable institutions to make those gains in pay, benefits, dignity and respect more long-lasting.

TOP: PHOTO BY JOHNATHAN RICHARD. RIGHT: REUTERS/JESSICA RINALDI

"We need to have rights," Sánchez says.

Another West Liberty Foods worker, Fernanda Salazar (a pseudonym), who grinds sausage meat and cooks ham, is still angry the plant only shut down for three days during the pandemic. Salazar, who's pro-union, recalls management simply saying: "The American people need to eat."

West Liberty Foods didn't respond to multiple requests for comment.

FOR A UNION DRIVE TO BE SUCCESSFUL AT TYSON

or West Liberty, workers will need to knit together cross-national and multi-ethnic coalitions. After high-profile Immigration raids of meatpacking plants in the mid-2000s, including a 2008 raid in Postville, Iowa, companies turned to recruiting refugees, asylum seekers and other documented immigrants. Today, the range of countries and languages spoken in the plants could fill a UN summit.

Escucha's survey data suggests workers hail from 23 countries at Tyson, with the biggest tallies from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico, Myanmar, Liberia, El Salvador and Angola. The most widely spoken languages are French, Lingala (a Central African creole), Spanish, Swahili and Portuguese. At West Liberty, workers from the Democratic Republic of Congo are the largest group, with the majority overall from Mexico, the U.S. territory of Puerto Rico and Central American countries.

Many of the Congolese workers come to the United States with advanced degrees from their home countries, some even bringing union traditions from home. Allain Elenga works at Tyson cutting the stomachs out of hogs. Back home, he was a union member in the country's customs department. He supports the union because he wants an end to at-will firings, the points system and mandatory overtime.

But overcoming racial divisions will be a challenge for the nascent union drive. Many Congolese workers see Latinos as part of the power structure in the plants, as supervisory positions are often filled by Latino workers. "The whites, they are all powerful; then it's the Mexicans, and we, Africans, are like shit to them," explains Jonathan Mamokbo, who worked at Tyson until

Above: Meatpackers visit the Escucha Mi Voz relief center in Columbus Junction, Iowa, for information about organizing and pandemic relief March 23. ***Below:*** *In a rare look inside a meatpacking plant, line workers disassemble turkey carcasses in 2011 at West Liberty Foods in West Liberty, Iowa, the first majority Latino town in Iowa, largely because of the local immigrant workforce.*

2018. (In December 2018, dozens of African workers at Tyson called out en masse to protest a Latino supervisor who monitored bathroom breaks by standing outside company bathroom stalls. The kill floor was slowed to a trickle, and the supervisor was eventually fired.)

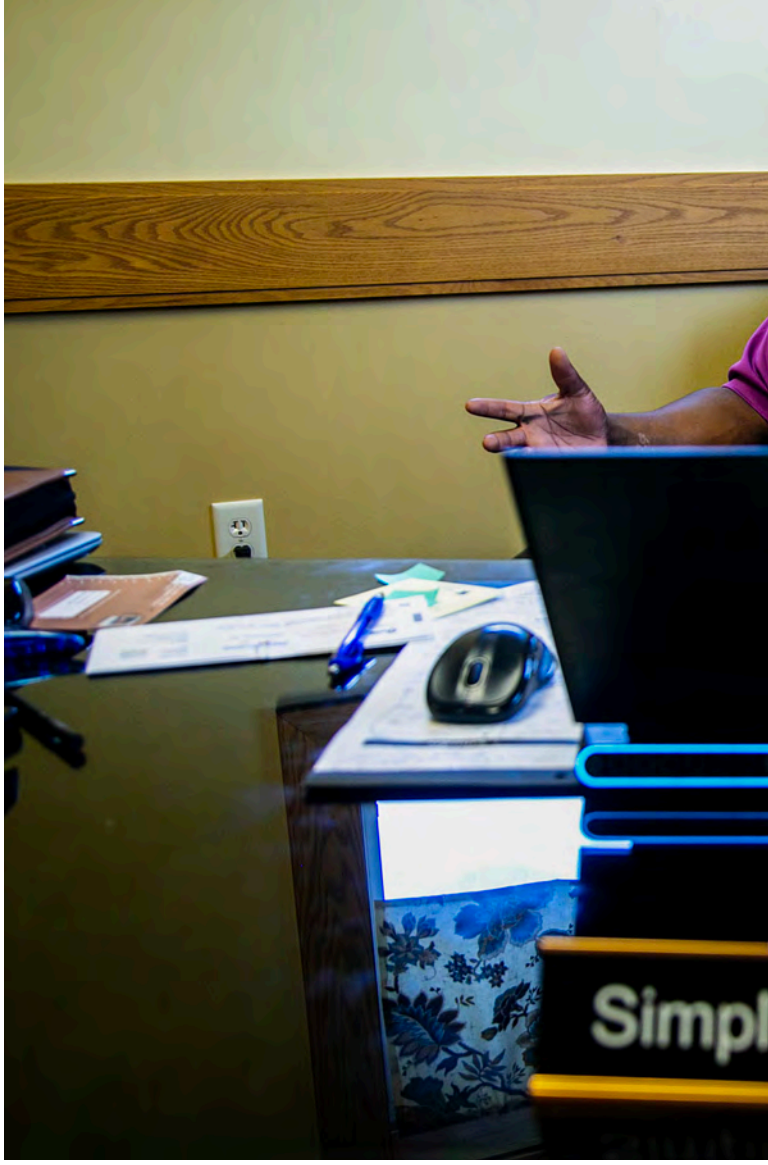
For their part, many Latino workers resent U.S. newcomers who arrive with greater benefits than they could have expected as undocumented workers (before their status was regularized), and some feel they are actually treated more harshly by Latino supervisors who don't want to be accused of racial favoritism or who use cultural familiarity as cover for jibes.

Inflaming ethnic and racial divisions is part of the deep history of how meatpacking plants have operated since the 20th century. In *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago's Packinghouses, 1904-54,* Rick Halpern writes how Chicago's meatpackers deployed this "labor market segmentation" to undermine solidarity. "They tapped one market [of European immigrants] for skilled labor and another, larger one for the remainder of their requirements," according to Halpern. "A third pool of workers, consisting of African Americans, was held in reserve for use during periods of unrest or labor shortage."

UFCW Local 431 President Simplice Mabiala Kuelo has personally seen how management plays on ethnic lines to keep workers divided. Kuelo, the first African immigrant to lead one of Iowa's largest labor unions, arrived first in the Bronx in 2011, coming from the Democratic Republic of the Congo after being selected through a visa lottery. Despite the law degree stuffed in his suitcase, he struggled to find work in New York. Upon the gentle urging of a friend, he moved to Illinois to process pork.

"There were lines where you only see French or African," Kuelo explains. "There were lines where you see Spanish. Or there were departments where they were only whites."

At a workers' rights training in early March, Kuelo spoke to a crowd of a few dozen Latino farmworkers and meatpackers through a Spanish interpreter. "Diversity means everyone is at the table," Kuelo said. "Inclusion means everyone can talk. Belonging means when you talk, they listen. Workplaces are diverse because they need workers, but what's missing in the workplace is inclusion and belonging—and that's what the union brings."



JOSEPH CRESS/IOWA CITY PRESS-CITIZEN / USA TODAY NETWORK

WHEN I MEET WITH KUELO IN FEBRUARY AT HIS UNION

office in Davenport, Iowa, he peppers me with questions with disarming charisma, blending his background as a union organizer, Catholic youth preacher, campaign advisor and life insurance salesperson.

"How was your drive? Did you speed or what?" he teases. As we talk, he pauses to field questions on the frequently ringing office phone. One of his campaign promises for his 2021 presidency was responsiveness to members.

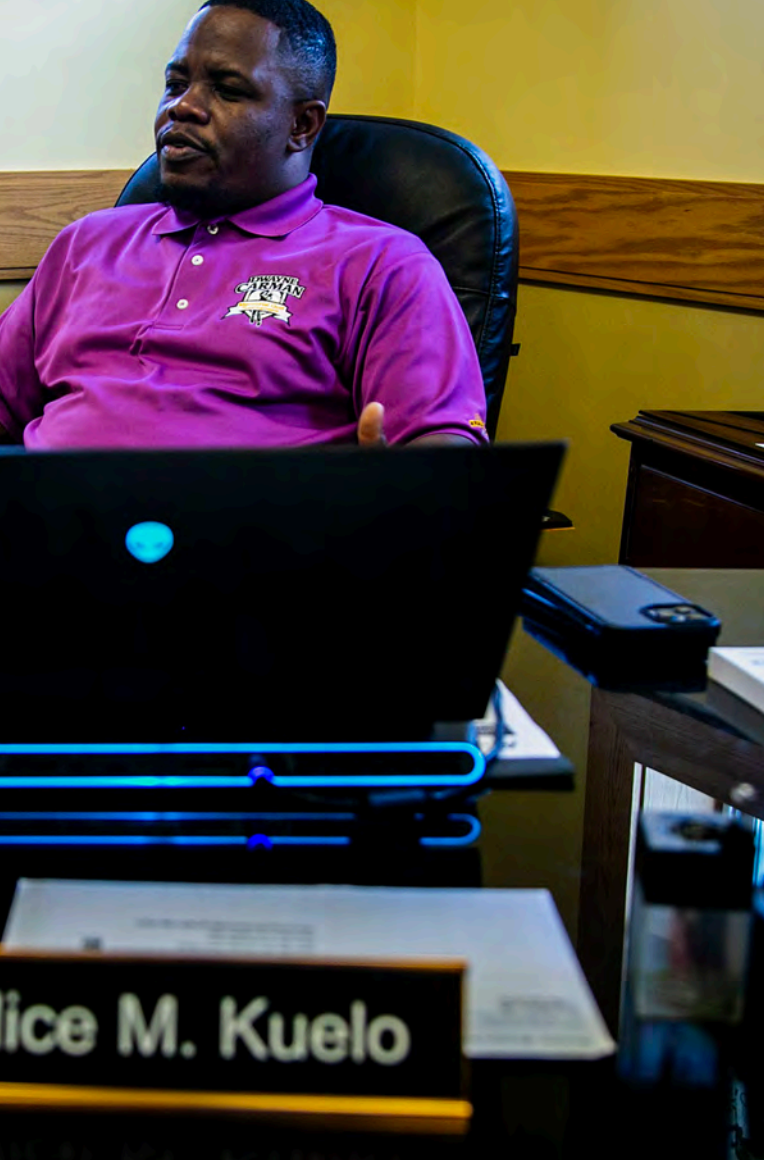
Kuelo's election was seen as a referendum on a bungled pandemic response from former Local 431 President Bob Waters, according to the *Des Moines Register*. As Covid-19 raged through a unionized Tyson meatpacking plant in Waterloo, Iowa, in April 2020, Waters was reportedly out hunting. Nearly 600 scared and angry workers—out of a workforce of 2,800—spontaneously called out sick April 13. By May 2020, more than 1,000 workers had tested positive and seven had died.

Meanwhile, Waterloo managers callously made a betting pool about the number of workers who would get sick, according to an unsuccessful wrongful death lawsuit filed by five of the deceased workers' families.

Among them was Axel Kabeya, a shop steward at the plant and a friend of Kuelo's from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

"It was a wakeup call," Kuelo says. He launched a YouTube channel, SimpliceBest TV, with Covid information in French and Lingala in summer 2020. It amassed more than 15,000 subscribers.

In 2021, Kuelo ran for Local 431's presidency with a commitment to new organizing and eschewing a cozy relationship with employers. Toward those aims, Kuelo echoes the reformers who have recently taken



power in the 1.4-million-member Teamsters union and the 400,000-strong United Auto Workers—as well as a pandemic-inspired reform effort in his own union.

The meatpacking drives in Iowa are arguably some of UFCW's most important in decades, and reformers are making a run for key leadership spots at its April convention. It was once, in 1979, the largest affiliate of the AFL-CIO, but the 1.2-million-members union is now the smallest it's been in 20 years. In that time, it lost almost a quarter million members.

Kuelo possesses an organizer's instincts and skills, but the role of union president comes with its own commitments and constraints. If he were to go into battle against a meatpacking giant like Tyson or the formidable West Liberty, he'd want the support of the entire labor movement and UFCW International. As this story goes to press, Kuelo is tightlipped about next steps, adamant about the patient work of organizing with correct assessments.

Above: Simplice Mabiala Kuelo, the first African immigrant elected president of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 431, who has promised to organize new shops, gets to work in Davenport, Iowa.

Meanwhile, it's clear workers are self-organizing, talking with each other about what a union could do to rebalance power between bosses and workers. The workers I spoke with did share reservations, ranging from dues to fears the plant might shutter should a union drive be successful, but they were signing union cards and speaking out.

What's unclear is whether UFCW Local 431 will seize this momentum. If the union hesitates, it risks not only starting over but also losing credibility. And those union cards come with a clock—they typically expire after a year.

GOODNER AND I DRIVE NORTH ON HIGHWAY 70 THROUGH eastern Iowa, mounds of snow beginning to melt, salt-and-pepper corn fields with shrubs poking through. Then the smell of hog shit hits us, just outside Conesville. There, the factory farms that raise the sows to be slaughtered spray liquid manure. Iowa's population is 3.2 million people, but the state's fecal waste from hogs, chickens, turkeys and cattle is the equivalent of 168 million people, according to Christopher Jones, a University of Iowa research engineer.

Back in Iowa City, Goodner and I meet a Congolese worker at a laundromat and talk in hushed tones over the whir of tumbling bundles of soapy clothes. He is visibly scared. A mechanic at Tyson, he had participated in the pandemic relief clinic and spoken with union organizers. He ran through every possible rationale for how supporting the union might jeopardize his job. After all, he said, he was an immigrant. He had to care for loved ones at home.

Tyson has yet to launch a full-court anti-union onslaught, but it has signaled that it's watching the campaign. According to Escucha Mi Voz, Tyson managers began showing up at pandemic relief clinics in December 2022, allegedly stealing a union card to post on social media, which Goodner sees as an intimidation tactic.

In a January 6 memo to workers, Tyson Foods plant manager Brent McElroy accused Escucha of coordinating with UFCW Local 431 to "pressure" workers into signing union cards to petition for an official election with the National Labor Relations Board. The memo's Spanish translation seemingly implied workers would have to quit if they signed on.

According to Kuelo, the memos are tantamount to Tyson "doing a commercial for the union—we don't look for people to organize. People come to us to organize."

In a plant suggestion box January 17, someone anonymously asked, "Why is Tyson so afraid of the union?" Another: "Why did you tell us in your posting last week that if we signed a union card, we would have to resign?"

Tyson replied: "We apologize but there was a miscommunication in our translation. Regardless of whether you signed a Union card or not, there will be NO retaliation, and no one will have to resign or lose their job because they did so." In an emailed statement to *In These Times*, Tyson spokesperson Liz Croston said the company has "encouraged our team members to apply" to the pandemic relief program and had

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Tyson Foods in Columbus Junction, Iowa, claims a memo allegedly implying workers would be fired for signing union cards was a "miscommunication"—and "there will be NO retaliation," according to a Tyson spokesperson.

PHOTO BY JOHNATHAN RICHARD

"addressed confusion and questions brought to us by team members on the requirements to obtain these funds."

On the subject of a union, Croston added, "We respect the right of our team members to choose, in fact it is included in our worker bill of rights posted in our plant facilities. Our Columbus Junction plant has been union free since opening in 1986 because we have a good relationship with our team members and provide answers to their questions so that they can make informed decisions."

The "Blood, Sweat and Fear" report from Human Rights Watch names Tyson as a prime example of how "employers in the U.S. meat and poultry industry carry out systematic interference with workers' freedom of association and right to organize trade unions." It describes past attempts by the company to decertify unions, break strikes and keep out union sympathizers. Workers at the Columbus Junction plant say Tyson discourages joining a union during orientation for new hires.

West Liberty may pose a somewhat less daunting target—the Iowa Turkey Growers Cooperative (a farmers' co-op whose profits are not public) employs only 2,700 workers across three states—but it still has a track record of union-busting.

Workers have previously tried to unionize twice with UFCW Local 431. The first drive, in 2004, lost by five votes, 303 to 308. In 2005, the union lost 231 to 322. In a settlement, West Liberty admitted it had violated labor law, including by distributing anti-union literature during the vote and threatening to close the plant. The company was required to post a notice that it would not make such threats in the future, but the damage was done.

The Tyson plant, too, has seen a union loss—a failed Teamsters Local 238 drive in December 1989, when it was owned by Iowa Beef Processors.

Goodner tells me the time is now, pointing to "the pandemic and the impact it had on workers, the recent change in union leadership to reflect the growing diversity and fightback mentality of plant workers, and Escucha Mi Voz's two-year history of organizing, fighting and winning for immigrant and refugee communities."

He adds: "This is a now or never, go big or go home, moment."

Gloria Ortiz is convinced a union is the only way forward. "As workers, as people, we have to come together," she says. "If we don't come together, change is not going to happen." IN

This story was supported by the Economic Hardship Reporting Project.

LUIS FELIZ LEON is an associate editor at *Labor Notes*.

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It's been a year of transition here at 2040 North Milwaukee Avenue. We bid a fond farewell to Joel Bleifuss, our longtime editor and publisher, as he focuses in on the critical need for rural reporting with his new project, *Barn Raiser*. We've also welcomed new additions to our staff and now have the most diverse team in our magazine's history. This couldn't be possible without our community of readers, supporters and volunteers, who have ensured we can continue to grow, reach new audiences and explore new ways to serve them.

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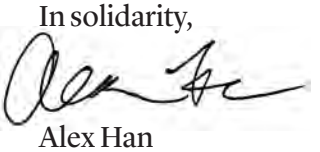

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—NATASCHA ELENA UHLMANN
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As I approach my 18th year at *In These Times*, it humbles me to think about all of the important historical moments and social movements I have been able to help curate with various photographers, artists and illustrators to share and tell these crucial moments of time visually— what an *important* role that is. Thank you for your continued support that makes this possible "*in these times*."

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>
> **—CAROLINE REID**
> ASSOCIATE EDITOR

IN THESE TIMES REMEMBERS

While thanking our supporters with this issue, we remember those who are no longer with us. We are honored to recognize our supporters who passed away in 2022.

STAUGHTON LYND, 92 (Nov. 21, 1929 – Nov. 17, 2022), grew up in New York City during the Great Depression and World War II. His parents, Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd, were authors of the well-known Middletown books. Staughton attended Harvard, Columbia and the University of Chicago, coordinated Freedom Schools for the Mississippi Summer Project and chaired the first march against the war in Vietnam in Washington on April 17, 1965. Along with Tom Hayden and Herbert Aptheker, Staughton made a controversial trip to Hanoi in hopes of clarifying peace terms to end the war. As an attorney, he represented indigent clients and led an unsuccessful effort for worker-ownership of the steel mills in Northeast Ohio before becoming deeply involved in advocacy for prisoners. The most recent of his publications, many written with his wife, Alice, is *My Country Is the World: Staughton Lynd's Writings, Speeches, and Statements Against the Vietnam War* (Haymarket). Lynd was a founding sponsor of *In These Times*.

Staughton is survived by Alice, children Barbara L. Bond, Lee Rybeck Lynd and Marta Lynd-Altan, seven grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

PETER MARCUSE, 93 (November 13, 1928 – March 4, 2022), passed away at home in Santa Barbara, Calif., attended by his wife of 74 years, Frances, and sons, Andrew and Harold. Born in Berlin, he immigrated with his family to the United States in 1934 after Hitler rose to power. He attended Harvard and Yale and met Frances at a May Day rally in New York. He participated in Freedom Summer, practiced law for 20 years and became a renowned urban planner. He taught at UCLA and Columbia, served as president of the Los Angeles city planning commission and became a member of the ACLU's board.

He continued to publish into retirement and was involved in a professional society dedicated to his father, the philosopher Herbert Marcuse. He is survived by his sons and their families; Frances passed away January 19. Frances and Peter were supporters of *In These Times* for 30 years.

PAUL HERMANN SCHRADE, 97 (Dec. 17, 1924 – Nov. 9, 2022), was born in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., and spent his life dedicated to labor and social justice causes. A labor and community organizer, he moved through the ranks of United Auto Workers and served as a top aide to President Walter Reuther, eventually being elected UAW's Western regional director. Paul was a confidant of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy and aided Kennedy's 1968 presidential campaign, where Paul was instrumental in building union support for the farmworker movement and leaders Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta. Paul was wounded when Kennedy was assassinated in 1968 and believed the following investigation was deeply flawed, never giving up on the possibility of another gunman firing the fatal shots. Paul worked to have the case reopened and believed the man serving time for the assassination was wrongfully convicted.

Paul is survived by his sister, Louise. He was a founding sponsor of *In These Times* in 1976.

ERIC DAY WERTHMAN, 81 (April 5, 1941 – Sept. 10, 2022), passed away in Maine in the presence of his wife and partner of 54 years, Polly Howells. He was a Gestalt psychotherapist for 38 years, produced and directed two feature films—*Going Under* (2004) and *The Drummer* (2020)—and was a lifelong activist. He sat in as a Bard College student in the 1950s, registered voters during Freedom Summer and marched against the Vietnam War, for abortion rights, against fracking, and more. Recently he worked to expand access to solar power and community heat pumps with Woodstock Transition NY.

Eric was a loving husband, dedicated father and energetic grandfather. His varied intellectual, artistic and political pursuits continue to inspire friends and family, the foundation for the rich life he lived. He is survived by Polly, sons Nick and Jesse and their wives Audrey and Alessandra, and four granddaughters. Polly and Eric have been supporters of *In These Times* for 30 years.

IN MEMORIAM

We regret to announce but are honored to recognize In These Times *supporters who died in the past year.*

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- **EARL BOOTIER**
- **DON BUCKMAN**
- **BARBARA EHRENREICH,** *FOUNDING SPONSOR*
  ITT published an obituary revisiting Barbara's work, written by Sarah Jaffe, in March.
- **PAUL FISHER**
- **MAURICE FORRESTER**
- **RICHARD GIESEGH**
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- **LINDA J. GREEN**
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- **GREGORY LUND**
- **MARY MATZEK**
- **BLANCHE MILLER**
- **DAVID MOBERG,** *LABOR REPORTER*
  ITT published 2 obituaries for David online written by Don Rose and Stephen Franklin in July 2022.
- **ROLAND NIEBELS**
- **STEWART PARSONS**
- **HARRY F. W. PERK**
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I'm excited to have recently joined the *In These Times* staff, something that would not have been possible without your support. Your donations resource our vital work of uplifting the stories of our movements for justice. I'm honored to be in this work alongside you!

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Dear Reader,

It's likely you're familiar with James Weinstein (1926-2005), the founder of *In These Times*. You may be less aware that Jimmy wrote several books, like 2003's *The Long Detour: The History and Future of the American Left.* There, Jimmy emphasized that a "unified left cannot be built by putting together a laundry list of worthy causes in the hope of building a non-ideological coalition. How to unite people across lines of parochial interest and in favor of the general interest is what we will have to teach ourselves. But it is the only way to bring and hold together a unified constituency committed to humanizing our society."

I highlight this quote because it gets at the core of what *In These Times* is still working toward. Earlier this year, we announced that Alex Han, a well-recognized union organizer, has taken the helm as *In These Times'* new Executive Director.

Alex's strategy as Executive Director is to use his extensive coalition-building experience to bring together a diverse body of readers toward a common vision: to help readers like you better understand and connect with the progressive movement.

As a reader, you are already part of the collective project that is *In These Times*. You have demonstrated you share our values by subscribing to supporting this publication. And you understand how *In These Times* offers perspectives from the Left you simply won't find in corporate media—or anywhere else.

But *In These Times* needs more than just your readership. We need your financial backing too.

In These Times relies on your tax-deductible donations, above the cost of your subscriptions, to make our journalism possible. This is a collective effort of thousands of supporters, like you, who chip in every year. That's why we thank every single donor in the pages of this issue.

And that's why I am asking you to make a donation if you are willing and able.

Engage more deeply with *In These Times* by making a financial contribution today. You can do so with the prepaid envelope in this issue, or by visiting www.InTheseTimes.com/2023.

Warmly,

Lauren Kostoglanis

Lauren Kostoglanis
Development Director

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Left: *In the late 1970s,* In These Times *staff pose for a photo on the fire escape at our old offices at 1300 W. Belmont Ave.*

IN THESE TIMES

To submit your intentions or inquire, email Lauren Kostoglanis at SolidarityForever@InTheseTimes.com

"I Think I'm Done Striving"

Delia Cai's debut novel is the antithesis of ambition

BY JIREH DENG

WE ALL HAVE MOMENTS we'd rather forget. Maybe an awkward high school crush or a fight that broke up a best friendship. That reluctance to return to a site of remembering is the focal point of Delia Cai's debut novel, *Central Places*, which tells the story of Audrey Zhou, a Chinese American woman living in New York City who returns to her hometown in central Illinois after eight years away. She arrives to support her father before a surgery, bringing her affluent, white fiancé Ben in tow, his first introduction to her parents. The visit extends longer than expected, unearthing memories of a place Audrey was attempting to leave behind and resurfacing romantic feelings for Kyle, an old high school crush.

In the midst of it, Cai details the contrasting contexts of a working-class small town outside Peoria, Ill., with Audrey's upwardly mobile ambitions in New York. There's an immediacy in which Cai captures place and time that fully immersed me in this fictional world about a hometown return that is almost-but-not-quite exactly like her own.

Throughout *Central Places*, Audrey wrestles with questions about how to introduce Ben to her middle-class Chinese immigrant parents, whether it's possible to repair fractured relationships she left behind in search of bigger dreams, and how to navigate an ongoing feeling of otherness. It's these self-interrogations that drive the narrative of Cai's work, which is effusive in its compassion for its ensemble of characters.

I was lucky enough to catch the Los Angeles leg of Cai's book tour, where she sat in conversation with fellow Asian American fiction writer Elaine Hsieh Chou. Approachable and warm, Cai herself is still incredulous at the enormous success her writing has yielded the past few years. We related in the stubbornness and thick skin one has to develop in order to persevere in journalism. Over the past decade, her arc in media spans a fellowship at *The Atlantic* to running her media newsletter Deez Links to her new position as senior correspondent at *Vanity Fair*. Even now, she shares that the imposter syndrome feeling is very real.

I sat down with Cai via Zoom to discuss the tension and disbelief that is the backdrop to *Central Places* and a reflection of her own fish-out-of-water moments: her Asian American experience living between the Midwest and the coast, state school pedigree and Ivy League prestige, and the struggle to build community.

JIREH DENG: How did your passion for writing start and where did the inspiration for your book arrive from?

DELIA CAI: I was a big reader as a kid. My mom would drop me off at the neighborhood Barnes and Noble on Saturday afternoons so she could run her errands in peace. I loved it because I could just sit and read a bunch of books all afternoon. I remember writing little stories when I was a kid, coming up with skits with friends. But I started writing stories in earnest around middle school, because I got really into writing *Harry Potter* fanfiction. Then I began inventing my own stories.

ILLUSTRATION BY KILLAMARI

JD: It's interesting that you got your start writing *Harry Potter* fanfiction, because your book is almost like a spin-off of your own life, particularly with the political happenings that are the backdrop of this novel. There's a general sense that this is the pre-Trump era of politics and a period where Midwestern communities are experiencing financial hardship and struggling with the opioid crisis. Even Audrey's dad, who's an engineer, is implicated in the working-class struggle of his peers—he's preparing to be a scab during a strike. There's all this texture that feels

Above: Jireh Deng (left) covers a range of topics with novelist Delia Cai—from fan fiction to earth-movers—during their interview on March 6 via Zoom.

very journalistic to me. How did your journalism background inform your writing this book?

DC: Journalism helped me put things in historical and political context that I just didn't really understand as a kid. For example, every six years the manufacturing giant in my hometown, a small town outside Peoria, Ill., renegotiates contracts with the unions. It's a huge thing because most people know someone who works there, and it impacts everyone because there's this idea of a strike looming and who's going to run the plants? At the time, I only understood that whole dilemma in the way that my parents told it to me, and they understood from the way that their superiors at work explained it to them. We were not a family that read socialist or leftist media; it was just sort of this thing that happened. Now, getting older, I'm learning about labor rights and making these connections. I think a lot about the culture and norms we grow up with, that I didn't notice until I was out of it. My journalism background helped me contextualize my own world, and helped me understand my childhood and the place I grew up in better.

JD: The characters and places in the book feel very fleshed out in a journalistic type of way with your attention to detail and everyone's humanity. Audrey aspired to go to New York City to get away from her past, which prevented her from being close to the people from her hometown. I also sense that cultural expectations from her immigrant Chinese parents weigh heavily on Audrey so much that she's developed this intense fear of failure. How does this track with your trajectory to New York City? How does it tie into how we think about immigrant parents, that pressure to do better and gain upward mobility?

DC: Something that I really love about the novel is that Audrey changes her mind about the stories that she's told herself about people in her life. When she says, "My best friend and I fell out and we don't talk anymore"—like, is that really true? What role did she play in that? Audrey spent her whole childhood telling herself, "I can't wait to get out of here." That's definitely something I've wrestled with a lot in my life. If you know you're going to leave, why would you invest in these relationships? Did I cut myself off from people, or was this really an isolating place to grow up? Did I contribute to that isolation by being really self-protective? Aiming for upward mobility comes with this inherent rejection of one world you're trying to escape from for another. It's a meta immigrant narrative for Audrey. Her parents came from China to the United States, and she's moving from this small Midwestern town to this big New York City life. She's sort of split between these worlds.

JD: And it causes her to have fractured relationships with the people in her town and her family. The distance between what Audrey wants for herself and what her mom wants for her. Your book has us, as readers, sitting in discomfort, but I see that discomfort being generative as a tool. There's that dichotomy between how her fiancé Ben sticks out in this Midwestern town, with racial tensions and that sense of political elitism coming from the coasts. Audrey is a Chinese woman, bringing home her white fiancé. How were you thinking about this tension as you were writing the book?

DC: When writing this novel, I was really curious about exploring these tropes of the Asian American mom or the trope of an interracial relationship between an Asian woman and a white man or even just the coastal elite versus middle America divide. It can be fun and snarky to take a stance one way or another on these dynamics. For example, during the Trump election, the *New York Times* did all these stories like, "Here's what real America is like, we went to this diner and interviewed a bunch of people who represent a very specific Midwestern or Southern perspective." It was really easy to make fun of that because it was so clear they were looking for a certain type of narrative which gave confirmation bias, you know?

So when looking at these dynamics, my thesis wasn't so simple. Interracial relationships can be so fraught, people have really strong feelings about it and a lot of toxic beliefs, especially within the Asian community. It was important for me to give these things a 360-degree view. I tried to consider what about a relationship like this—for these two characters, specifically—is so appealing? What about it makes it work and not work for them? I didn't want to make any sweeping theses. In the book there are these microaggressions, but then there's one very blatant incident of textbook racism and I wondered for a long time if that was stereotypical to put in. Like, does there need to be a very obvious racist incident for it to be legit to the Asian American experience? Sometimes racism is really random, and I'm just like, "Wow, I feel like I'm living in a diversity and inclusion ad."

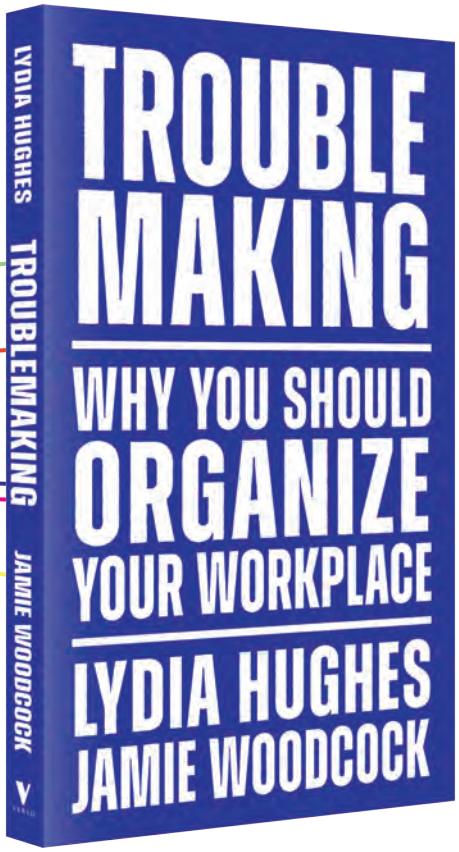
ATHENS—Greece's major trade unions call a 24-hour strike March 16 after the worst train crash in the country's history left 57 dead and injured dozens more. Thousands of citizens walked off the job to demand an official investigation into the cause of the train derailment, with critics claiming the conservative government's austerity measures led to the neglect of crucial safety guidelines. (Photo by Socrates Baltagiannis/picture alliance via Getty Images)

JD: I definitely know what you mean. It's like you're just going through life existing as a person and then it just smacks you in the face when someone else decides that you only exist as a category. Your book feels very reminiscent of the melancholy in the film *Minari* where this immigrant family is really isolated in their Korean American experience in Arkansas. You realize, "I'm really alone out here." Can you talk about how you're exploring experiences that aren't always represented in media and how you've figured out your own path through that?

DC: I was so surprised when I moved to the East Coast and started meeting Asian Americans who grew up in these coastal enclaves where they felt really enveloped in the security of their identities. I just didn't know that there were teenagers in So-Cal or Flushing, who grew up not feeling the way I did. On TV, you see being Asian American as an isolated experience. There's London Tipton on *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*, or the Chang Triplets on *The Proud Family*. I actually thought that was the norm, and then I met people and found out there are entire communities and subcultures where you could grow up Asian American and not feel singled out in everything you did. That was just so mind-blowing to me. I kind of just wanted to bring to light one very specific experience that I had. At the time, I didn't realize in the context of the Asian American experience, that my experience is actually pretty rare statistically.

JD: In your interview with the *Longform* Podcast, you talk a lot about feeling plucked out of your Midwest town and trying to make sense of New York City. I'm really curious to hear how your life experiences inform your own character development of Audrey.

DC: This is something I'm struggling with, just on a daily personal level, but I still feel like I don't really belong anywhere. In some ways, growing



Troublemaking
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By Lydia Hughes and Jamie Woodcock

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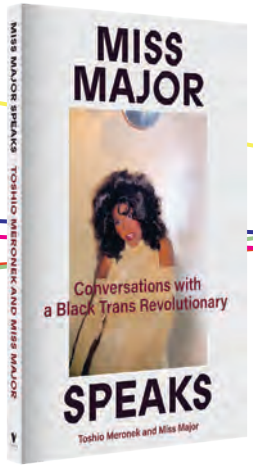
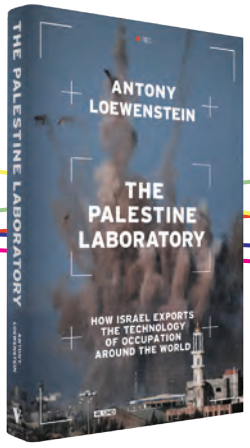


Miss Major Speaks
Conversations with a Black Trans Revolutionary
By Toshio Meronek and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy



The Palestine Laboratory
How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World
By Antony Loewenstein

Our Lives in Their Portfolios
Why Asset Managers Own the World
By Brett Chistophers

up, that was the default belief of not looking like anyone else in my friend group. I've had this underlying implicit feeling that I don't belong, and I carry it with me in these increasingly different circumstances and contexts.

At Atlantic Media, my first job after school, many of my colleagues were Asian but most were Ivy League kids. No one cared that I was Asian but all of a sudden I felt like I didn't belong because I'm from a small town, because I went to a state school. Some of my childhood beliefs come back to haunt me in different ways. I'm still figuring out how to actually form connections and create a sense of belonging for myself.

JD: Can you talk about the ways you've found community? Ways you've felt seen and like you aren't alone?

DC: Right off the bat, so many Asian American women authors have really welcomed me into their network here in New York. Especially Qian Julie Wang and Elaine Hsieh Chou. They reached out to me to get coffee and go to picnics, it's been so lovely. One example I'm really proud of: I live in an apartment building with six other people and over the past year we've slowly gotten to the point where we're on a first-name basis with each other and we have a group chat. A few months ago, our front door lock wasn't working and it felt like a problem for all of us that we helped each other out of. There's this real sense of knowing that we got each other's backs.

JD: That's really sweet. New York can feel so big, but you're trying to make it smaller in those intentional and person-to-person connections. Are there any particular artists or writers that currently inspire or inform your own work?

DC: It would be too hard to name all of them. I'm reading Jenny Odell right now. I really love her first book, *How To Do Nothing*, where she interrogates why we are so obsessed with productivity. And her new book, *Saving Time*, considers the concept of time. I don't think most of us really understand our concepts of time have been taken from us. Both books fit into a lot of the stuff I'm working out for myself in terms of how I want to spend my life.

Toward the end of *How To Do Nothing*, Odell talks about being at this super boring work conference, so she decided to play hooky and spent the day just walking around. At first she felt guilty for blowing off the learning and networking opportunities, thinking, "I should be at this conference to make myself a more productive worker." But then she realizes that playing hooky was a better use of time, because she spent that day on Earth. I love that part and I try to remind myself every day that I'm here on Earth, in this time and in this place. To tie up all the other stuff we've talked about, I think that is what helps ground me when I feel like I don't belong, if I'm getting really wrapped up in stuff from the past or I'm trying to forecast the future. Like, what really matters? How am I spending this day here on Earth? And so I just try to lean into that.

Getting older, I'm learning about labor rights and making these connections. I think a lot about the culture and norms we grow up with.

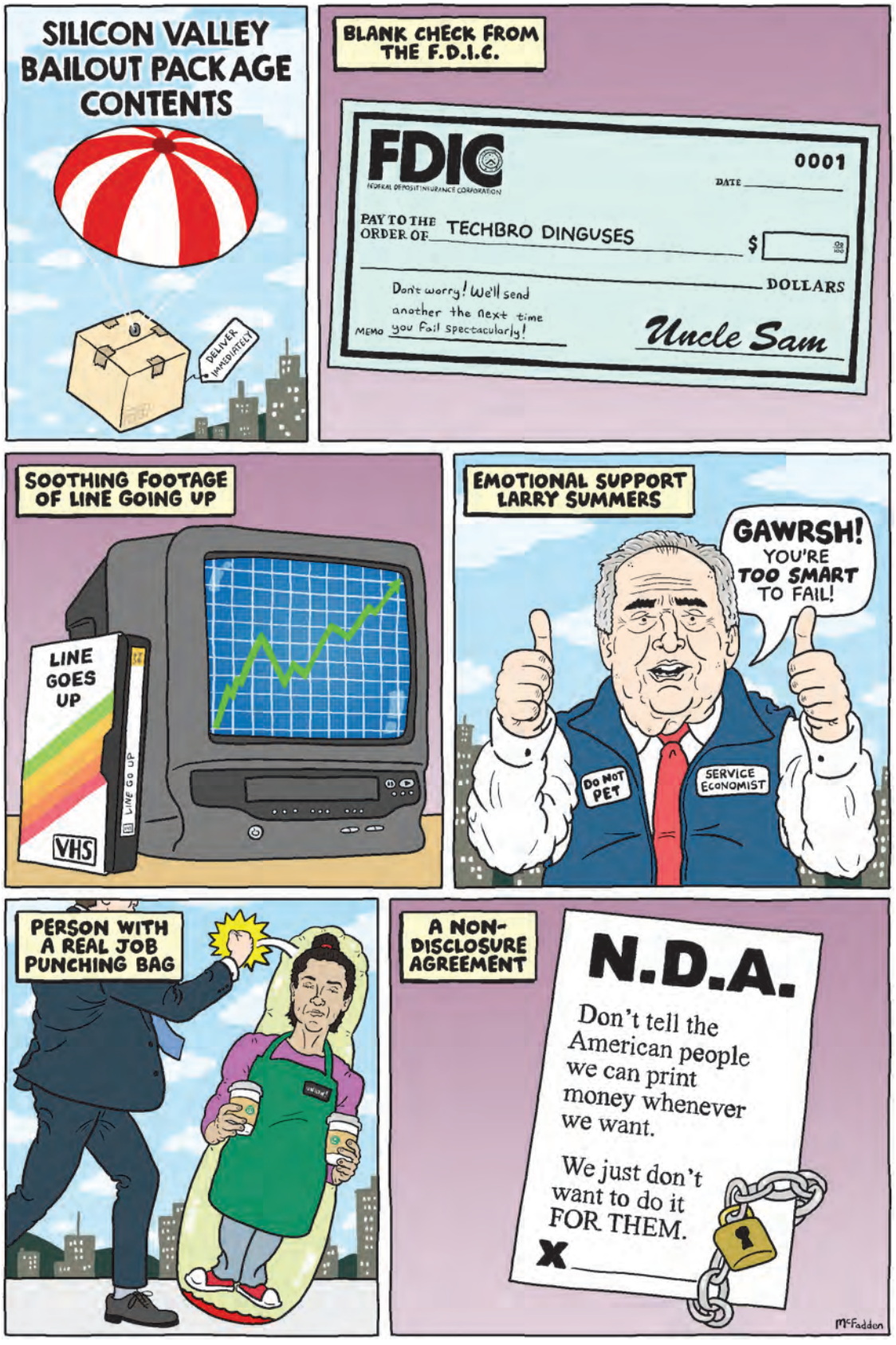
JD: That's beautiful. I feel like that's a nice way to end the conversation because I'm sure people want to know what's next, like, "When is your next book coming out?" But you're just thinking to yourself, "What if I just exist?"

DC: Exactly, exactly. I just turned 30, so it's really been at the top of my mind because people are always asking what I want to do next and I think I'm done striving. I'm not so into achieving anymore. Some people have told me, "You must be so happy, you achieved your dreams," and I am, but there's a ceiling to that and now what I'm craving is the joy you get from existing and being with people. I'm just trying to live for community and connection and that's all.

JIREH DENG is a poet and an editorial intern at *In These Times*. Their writing on Los Angeles arts, culture and identity has appeared in the *Guardian*, the *Washington Post*, the *L.A. Times*, *Teen Vogue* and on NPR. They co-direct the Asian American Journalists Association LGBTQIA+ affinity group and serve as national board representative for its LA chapter.

DELIA CAI'S debut novel is *Central Places*. Her writing has appeared in *BuzzFeed*, *GQ*, *The Cut* and *Catapult*, and her media newsletter, Deez Links, has been highlighted by the *New York Times*, *New York* magazine and *Fortune*. She lives in Brooklyn and is a senior correspondent at *Vanity Fair*.

BRIAN MCFADDEN



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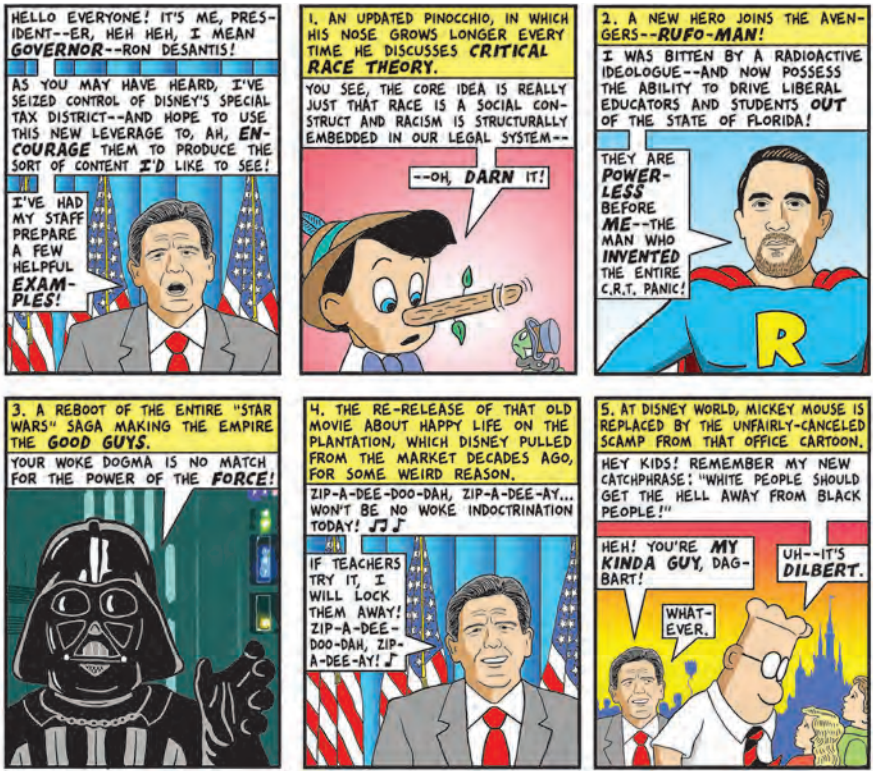


IN THOSE TIMES

The Fight Continues Against Chicago's Old Guard

The Chicago mayoral runoff in April highlighted an ideological schism: Chicagoans chose Brandon Johnson, who promised progressive change, and rejected Paul Vallas, who championed centrist and right-wing policies.

The referendum was reminiscent of Chicago's 1983 election between Republican Bernie Epton and progressive firebrand Harold Washington, who was also promising a progressive platform to a city that felt let down by its previous mayor. After Washington won, David Moberg wrote about his calls for a striking and fresh look at Chicago with "the greatest grassroots effort in the history of the city." Johnson, a former middle school teacher, is calling for a similar approach.

IN 1983, DAVID MOBERG WROTE: With his first words as mayor of Chicago, Harold Washington made it clear that he was not retreating from the reform program of his campaign. Within three days, the old guard of the City Council made it equally clear that they were going to fight without quarter for their own power and for business as usual.

Beneath whatever working compromise emerges, that struggle will undoubtedly continue during the next four years. Yet the old guard can hold onto its power only through obstructionism and confrontation that would deeply damage the city economically and continue racial polarization. They may be ready to pay that price, but Washington may also be able to convince enough skeptical white voters—and the necessary margin of their representatives—that urban suicide is too much to pay for defense of the prerogatives of the old machine.

In a short, tough speech at his April 30 inauguration in the auditorium at the end of Navy Pier, Washington depicted the city as in a crisis comparable to that after the great fire of 1871. The school system may be $200 million in the red next year. The public transit system faces its own $200 million deficit. And Washington's transition team estimated that the city's general fund could run as much as $150 million short this year out of a $2 billion budget, roughly half of which is locked into payments for interest, pensions and similar unavoidable items.

Washington called for immediate austerity and cuts. While outgoing Mayor Jane Byrne sat nearby staring ahead icily, he announced that he was freezing city hiring and wages and dismissing the 541 employees that she had added to the payrolls in a last-minute hiring binge. (Byrne tried to add many more and also attempted to switch political appointees into protected civil service slots.) Washington said that he would cut both unnecessary programs and executive salaries; the next day he slashed his own salary by 20 percent.

Although the city's severe financial problems, exacerbated by Byrne, will hamstring Washington as he attempts to improve city services and stimulate economic development, the austerity budget may give him greater flexibility in eliminating much of the waste built in by machine politics over the years. Court victories by liberal reformers have greatly circumscribed the mayor's powers to fire people for political reasons, but many of the leftover political appointees may be axed for economic reasons or their salaries could be cut so deeply that they will resign. ...

The old "evil cabal" of Cook County Democratic chairman Ed Vrdolyak and Alderman Ed Burke—at first Byrne's enemies, then her allies—had an anti-reform movement well underway even as Washington minced no words about replacing the ancient, decrepit machine with a new politics of neighborhood involvement and openness in city government. By the Monday after the inauguration, despite last-minute lobbying efforts by Washington and his allies, Vrdolyak

had assembled a majority of the Council behind a package of rules changes that would greatly strengthen the Council's powers to block legislation in committees—setting the stage for more direct Council control over hiring and personnel practices. He also drew up a plan to reorganize the Council: the 20 committees were expanded to 29 so that all of his allies, including freshmen members, were given chairs or top posts. ...

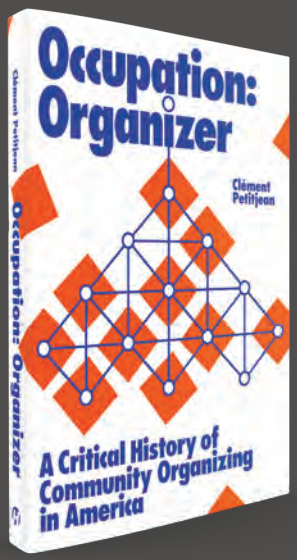
Sensing that Vrdolyak had the upper hand, the Washington forces played for delay. When the first Council session was convened on May 3, Washington immediately recognized the one white machine politician in his camp, who moved to adjourn. Washington ended the meeting. Then, in the midst of calls for a roll call vote, the Washington bloc walked out. Vrdolyak, the former president pro tem, seized the floor, was elected acting president by the rump session and presided over 29-0 votes in favor of his rules and reorganization. With the exception of the lone Hispanic, a machine appointee, the Vrdolyak bloc was all white. All 16 blacks, the four liberal white reformers and one other white alderman were with Washington.

Some whites on the Council—some newcomers who ousted old machine hacks, some who are loyal to Richard M. Daley or other figures who distrust Vrdolyak—were considered potential Washington allies. And, despite the vote with Vrdolyak, some of them continued to indicate a desire for compromise and a willingness to support Washington. "I'm still not 100 percent in favor of it [the Vrdolyak plan for which he voted]," new member Joseph Kotlarz said later. "I'm very much in favor of a compromise." Fear of reform motivated most of the Vrdolyak 29, but in the opinion of Council members, others came along out of fear of supporting a black mayor and out of a sense that "Fast Eddie" had the votes and that Washington, if he was truly going to abolish patronage, had little to offer them. ...

"If it was a loss, it may be a loss on good grounds," said reformer Alderman David Orr. "Any mayor could get a victory by paying people's price. But at some point if you've got principles, you have to go down with your ship rather than give up." ...

In order to generate the "spirit of renewal" that Washington called for in his inaugural speech, the new mayor will have to rely on and strengthen what he saw as the key to his recent election—"the greatest grassroots effort in the history of the city." IN

Visit InTheseTimes.com to read the full article.



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Clément Petitjean

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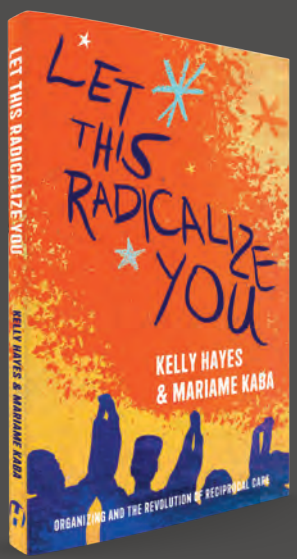
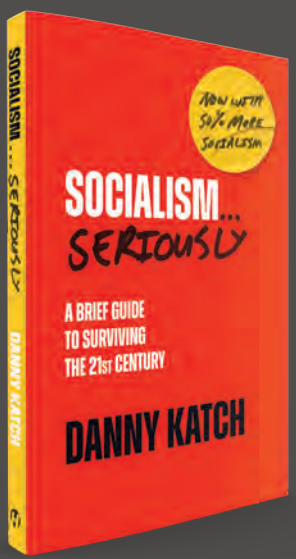


Let This Radicalize You

Organizing and the Revolution of Reciprocal Care

Kelly Hayes & Mariame Kaba

Let This Radicalize You is a practical and imaginative resource for activists and organizers building power in an era of destabilization and catastrophe.



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Danny Katch

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