IN THESE TIMES

DECEMBER 2024

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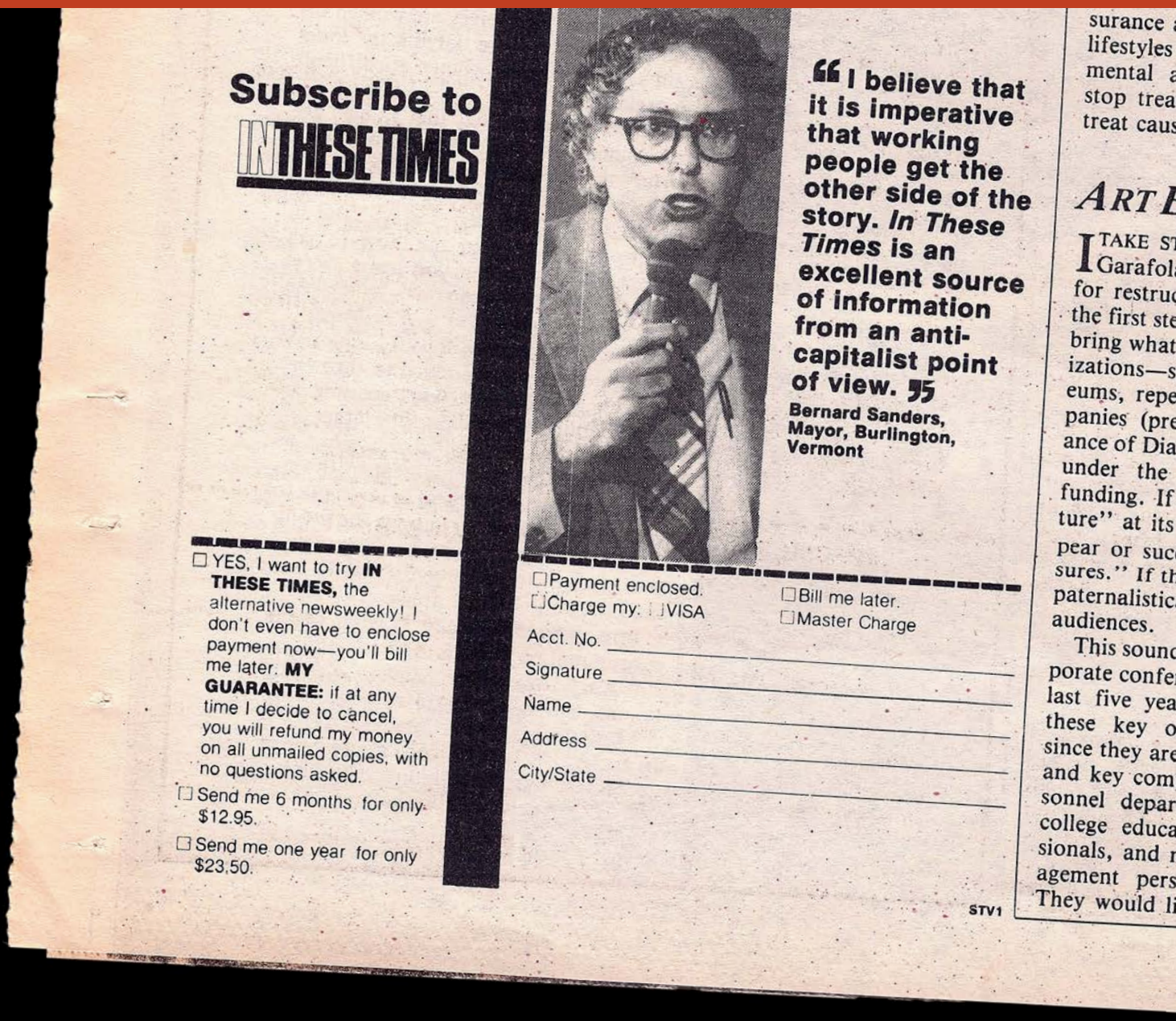

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Bernard Sanders, Mayor, Burlington, Vermont

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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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Illustration by Molly Crabapple

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Out of the Ashes

The week following the 2024 election, President-elect Donald Trump traveled to the White House to meet with President Joe Biden, who offered a simple, cordial greeting: "Welcome back."

It was a startling display of respectability for a Democratic administration that repeatedly referred to Trump as a fascist.

There is something discordant about immediately shifting from pulling the fire alarm over the menace posed by Trump to embracing him—and it points to the failure of the Democrats' strategy. When the party won back power from a Trump-led GOP in 2020, it was handed a clear mandate: bring real material relief to working people. At the time, I wrote for *In These Times* that "Trump will be leaving more carnage behind in his wake than many thought imaginable just a few years ago. Undoing it—by using government as a vehicle to improve people's lives through redistributing wealth and power downward—is the only way to make sure we don't wind up with a future monster like Trump who's even worse."

It turns out it's Trump himself who's back.

After allowing a Covid-era enhanced social safety net to fall to pieces, Democrats bled support from the working class this election, a trend that has continued over a decade. Class dealignment—when voters stop supporting parties that traditionally represented their class interests—is a very real phenomenon, and one that will continue to sink Democratic campaigns that don't win over disaffected voters.

For pointers on how to build a majoritarian working-class coalition, Democrats can look to the labor movement, which, at its best, models a form of economic democracy. Most workplaces exist as tyrannies where bosses hold all the power, but unions allow members a seat to negotiate and provide tools for deliberating strategies to improve conditions.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) illustrates what this dynamic can look like. After electing reform leadership in 2023, the UAW went on strike against the Big Three automakers and won. Now, the union is organizing new shops and growing membership, even in the notoriously anti-union South. Under the leadership of President Shawn Fain, the UAW has been unafraid to name clear enemies in entrenched corporate power and greed; defend members from attack, regardless of their identity; and pursue transformative, pro-working-class policies, such as a 32-hour work week. There are clear lessons here.

The second Trump era promises new attacks on civil and human rights, immigrants, trans people, communities of color, labor law, the entire regulatory apparatus and, yes, democracy itself. But there will also be new openings to build left-wing political power. Since Election Day, we are already seeing participation soar in organizations like the Working Families Party and the Democratic Socialists of America. These groups, among others—like tenants unions and coalitions that bring together labor and social justice movements—can help serve as vehicles for collective action.

Cohering opposition and organizing together are the recipe not just to resist, but to win.

In 1938, the year that saw Kristallnacht in Germany, Jewish Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch penned an article titled "Pessimism," five years after he fled Nazi rule. In it, he offers a helpful framework for navigating our current moment:

> The struggler belongs on the side of the light; light in general has the quality of not being suppressed in the long term. On the contrary, it has grown after every oppression; people cannot stand the denial of freedom. … The enemy has a right to pessimism: as his ultimate total truth. For us, it is a partial element, indispensable for deliberation, useful for defense. With it, however, optimism comes into its own and, as the situation matures, achieves sufficient victory.

Politicians who assail fascism but then smile next to its harbinger are part of how we got here. It remains true that people cannot stand the denial of freedom, and that's what's on the menu. Cohering opposition and organizing together are the recipe not just to resist, but to win.

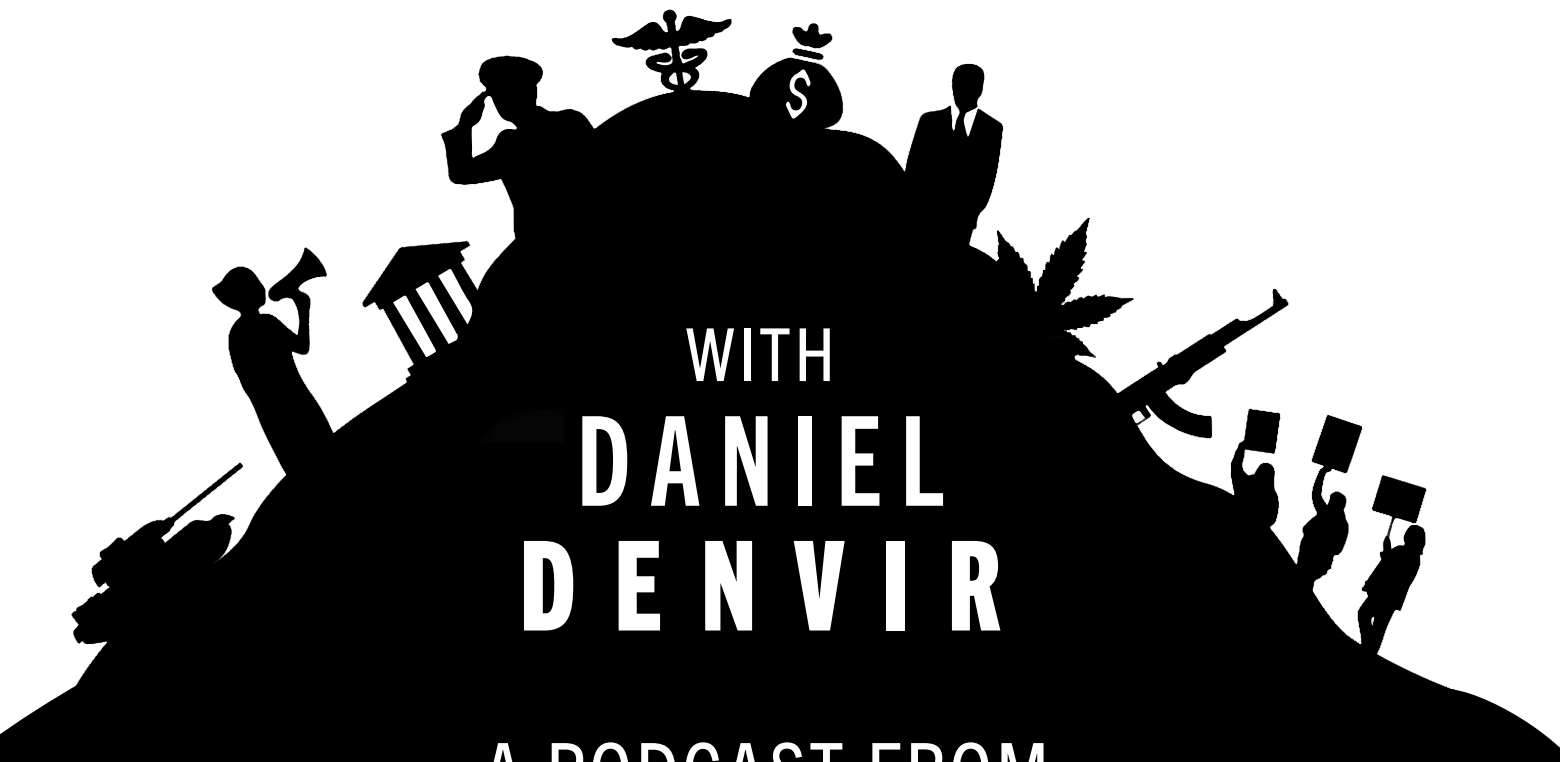
—MILES KAMPF-LASSIN

ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICK MORGAN

THE DIG

DISCUSSING THE POLITICS OF

CLASS WARFARE



WITH

DANIEL DENVIR

A PODCAST FROM
JACOBIN MAGAZINE

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MOLD EPIDEMIC TAKING ROOT

"As Corporate Landlords Spread, a Mold Epidemic Takes Root" (October) is an excellent story and so timely. I just spoke at the American Public Health Association's annual conference, in Minneapolis, on the topic of corporate landlords and their impact on tenant health—concerning issues such as mold—and the need for public health professionals to work with code enforcement to address this crisis.

I believe the Healthy at Home Bill is well-intended, as we went down that route here in California way back in 2001, in regard to setting mold standards. I was part of that legislative effort and believe that what we ended up doing, in 2016, would help Connecticut.

—Larry Brooks
Oakland, Calif., via email

Great reporting on the problems that still exist for tenants. Mold. Corporate landlords. Federal bureaucracy timeline. Connecticut can be faster to help. Let's do this!

—@CoastalMask_Cat
via Twitter

This is utterly appalling. For venture capital privateers to make money off of unsafe and dangerous rental conditions is nothing short of criminal negligence. No one should have to develop life-threatening illnesses to create a few percentage points more profit for wealthy private equity investors.

—Nutmegger27
via Reddit

SILENCING GENOCIDE

Thank you for the excellent investigative reporting by Shane Burley on Jewish institutions purging dissenters who are critical of Israel's war against Gaza ("U.S. Jewish Institutions Are Purging Their Staffs of Anti-Zionists," October). Sadly, from my own personal experience many years ago, the toxic effect on Jewish values and communities of unquestioning loyalty to Israel is not new—though it is worse than ever, perhaps precisely because the dissent is stronger than ever.

—Mark Steinberg
Brooklyn, N.Y., via email

The many stories collected here, of pro-Palestine staffers fired from American Jewish institutions since October 7, hit home for me. I was once rejected from a rabbinical school for my politics. Thanks, Shane Burley and *In These Times*, for shining a light.

—Ben Lorber
Chicago, via Twitter

I know one of the people interviewed for this article, and I am familiar with and have attended one of the other synagogues mentioned. Both of those synagogues are liberal Reform or Conservative synagogues. This silencing/excommunication is not new, but since Oct. 7, 2023, it seems to be reaching a new peak. I remember when I began to feel unwanted years ago in the synagogue I grew up in for my views on Israel, and I wasn't even anti- or post-Zionist at the time. It's a really sad state of affairs and one I look forward to seeing transforming in my lifetime. I'm tired of this "normal."

—JadeEarth
via Reddit

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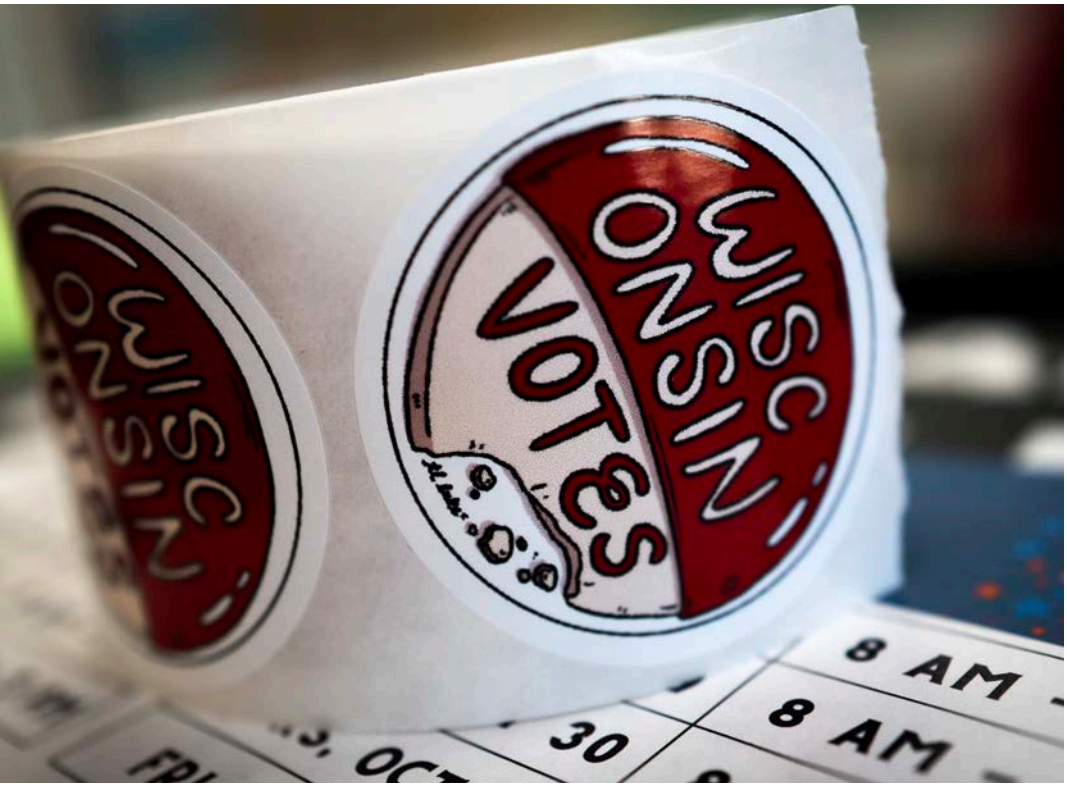


Wisconsin's Red Wave Crashers

MADISON, WIS.—Anyone who might question the decisive influence of gerrymandering need look no further than the dramatic 2024 down-ballot election results from the eternal battleground state of Wisconsin.

In 2022, Wisconsinites elected a Democratic governor, attorney general and secretary of state, yet Republicans retained a 64-35 advantage in the Assembly and a 22-11 majority in the Senate. This happened because Wisconsin Republicans, more than a decade earlier—after hyper-partisan, extreme right-wing Gov. Scott Walker swept to power in the Republican wave of 2010—had gerrymandered legislative district lines in a way that ensured GOP candidates could not lose the majority of districts.

More than the power of money, more than the power of incumbency, more than the power of right-wing media or negative ads, the power of gerrymandering is quintessential to American politics. No matter which party wields the gerrymandering pen, when the lines are drawn by partisans, those partisans win legislative majorities. Those majorities then decide what is possible not just in the states, but in Congress, where the membership of the House is determined by the same mapmakers.

This crisis was writ large across Wisconsin, where what was frequently described as "the worst gerrymander in America" created "an anti-democratic reality" such that "elections for the state legislature don't matter," according to the *Guardian*.

"What we saw in Wisconsin that cycle is every candidate at the statewide level who ran as a Democrat get close to 50% of the vote, some a little over, some a little under," Assembly Minority Leader Greta Neubauer, a Democrat from Racine, said of the 2022 numbers. "And yet, those same results yielded 35% of seats for Democrats in the Assembly."

That observation from the minority leader could have been made in 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018 or 2020.

But after more than a decade of organizing and court battles, the gerrymander was finally upended. New maps were drawn and everything changed, with dramatically different results and major lessons for the rest of the country.

In the 2024 election, President-elect Donald Trump won Wisconsin by the narrowest of margins: 49.7% to Kamala Harris' 48.9%. In the race for U.S. Senate, Democrat Tammy Baldwin won reelection by an equally narrow margin: 49.4% to Republican banker Eric Hovde's 48.5%. Yet, state legislative contests produced significantly stronger results for Democrats, who picked up 10 seats in the state Assembly and four in the Senate. The Republican advantages collapsed to 18-15 in the Senate and 54-45 in the Assembly.

That means Senate Republicans lost their previous supermajority and, with it, their ability to override vetoes by Democratic Gov. Tony Evers. And Republican legislators—who had long dismissed calls by Evers for special sessions by gaveling into their chambers

Above: Stickers that voters received at the Kenosha Municipal Building on Election Day.

SCOTT OLSON/GETTY IMAGES

and then out minutes later, avoiding issues from gun violence to workforce shortages to childcare and hospital closures—suddenly find themselves in a position where they will have to work with their Democratic colleagues.

"We are here to say that the era of gavel-in, gavel-out politics without accountability is over," said newly elected state Sen. Jodi Habush Sinykin, a Democrat who defeated a Republican incumbent for a high-stakes Milwaukee-area seat.

Democrats in Wisconsin still have their work cut out for them. Republicans still have the upper hand in the legislature. But the GOP's grip has been weakened to such an extent that there is now talk of building coalitions that can finally advance Evers' agenda.

Democratic Party of Wisconsin chair Ben Wikler, who in the aftermath of the 2024 election has been floated as a potential contender for chair of the Democratic National Committee, holds up Wisconsin as an example of a state where a long-term focus on obtaining fair maps—as frustrating as the process may be—was absolutely worth the effort. "Democrats [are now] on track for a majority in 2026," Wikler said.

In the Assembly, Neubauer announced, "There's no question that having closer numbers will mean that Republicans need to work with Democrats in a way that they have not before," predicting "real wins for our constituents."

Everything became possible because of a 2023 state Supreme Court election that proved to be the death knell for gerrymandering.

For years, a 4-3 majority on the court maintained Scott Walker's gerrymander. But in 2023, a Supreme Court seat opened that had been held by a conservative. Progressive candidate and Milwaukee County Circuit Court judge Janet Protasiewicz argued, at a candidate forum that January, that "the maps are rigged. Absolutely, positively rigged. They do not reflect the people in the state."

In April 2023, Protasiewicz won a landslide victory, flipping control of the Supreme Court and creating a "fair maps" majority.

When it became clear the court would force redrawing, Republican legislators finally buckled. They accepted more balanced maps drawn by Evers, which set in motion the most competitive Wisconsin legislative elections in decades.

The gerrymander was broken—and Democrats went to work. Neubauer and energetic progressive legislators, such as state Rep. Francesca Hong, traveled the state and met with county parties and local activists. With help from Wikler and Wisconsin unions that were hard hit by the anti-labor legislation enacted by Walker and his allies in the 2010s, Neubauer, Hong and their allies recruited candidates in all but two of the state's Assembly races. In every state Senate district, there was a Democrat on the ballot.

The party then poured resources and energy into districts that had not seen such active campaigning in years. Like Neubauer, Hong drove to remote corners of the state, weekend after weekend, to campaign with newly recruited contenders.

THIS MONTH IN LATE CAPITALISM

- **WELCOME TO AN "UNPRECEDENTED OPPORTUNITY" TO SURVEIL, DETAIN AND DEPORT MILLIONS OF IMMIGRANTS,** as one private prison exec boasted after Donald Trump's electoral victory. Private prison company stocks continued surging as Trump announced Tom Homan, an architect of Trump's family separation policy, as the new border czar. But surely it'll just be for "bad hombres," right?

- **THE HEAD OF THE UN CLIMATE CONFERENCE HAS BEEN PITCHING FOSSIL FUEL DEALS,** revealed after activists, posing as an oil and gas group, secretly filmed themselves discussing pipeline deals with the Azerbaijani energy minister leading this year's talks. Apparently, a global conference to address the climate crisis also serves as a great "meet and greet" for corporate businesses.

- **CRYPTOCURRENCY BOOSTERS ARE ALSO TAKING A VICTORY LAP** after their lobbying network helped topple key congressional critics like Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio). Trump once said crypto "seems like a scam," but then the industry became a top political spender for him. So why worry about a sustainable planet when we can live in the "crypto capital of the planet"?

- **BUT IF THIS PLANET DOES HAVE YOU DOWN, HOW ABOUT A NEW SPACE RACE?** Elon Musk's SpaceX launched a tech billionaire into orbit for the world's first private spacewalk this fall, China is working to build a lunar base and Europe's space chief has vowed to get in the game. Time to break out the Gil Scott-Heron, 'cause Whitey's back on the moon.

There were disappointments, to be sure, but Hong argues that even where Democratic legislative candidates fell short, Wisconsin Democrats laid a base for the wins that could yield majorities in 2026. And the seats won in the November election give Democrats enough power to continue transforming the state's political agenda.

They can now talk about governing on behalf of public schools, labor rights and environmental protection in urban and rural districts across the state.

As Neubauer says, "We have fundamentally shifted the status quo in the Wisconsin Legislature."

JOHN NICHOLS writes "The Beat" column and covers national politics for *The Nation*. He is also an associate editor for the *Capital Times* in Madison, Wis.

Two Parties, One Genocide

CHICAGO—The night before Election Day, a group of Palestinian women gathered in a Logan Square apartment to work on their *tatreez*, hand-stitched embroidery projects. They cursed Trump, Harris and the U.S. government for fueling genocide.

"Everyone who was there had the outlook of, 'Fuck this election,' " said one of the attendees, who was embroidering the Arabic word for "Lebanon" on a shirt. She requested anonymity for fear of online harassment over her voting choice: the Green Party's Jill Stein.

Almost everyone there voted early, and not one voted Harris or Trump.

"I felt a little better about at least being able to control my own vote and not giving it to either party that supports our genocide," she added.

Chicago is home to one of the United States' largest Palestinian communities, which has been at the forefront of the city's pro-Palestine movement since October 2023. For more than a year, there have been weekly protests and a steady stream of organized, nonviolent actions trying to push politicians—from President Joe Biden to Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-Ill.)—to meaningfully act to end the genocide.

Palestinians in Chicago have been particularly vocal about the Biden administration, and many of those interviewed said they felt it was hypocritical for Democrats to

IN CASE YOU **MISSED IT**

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

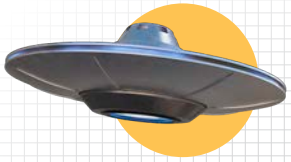
HYPED

TRIVIAL

VITAL

IGNORED

Are UFOs spying on American military installations? Unclear, but a former Pentagon employee speculated as much during a congressional hearing.

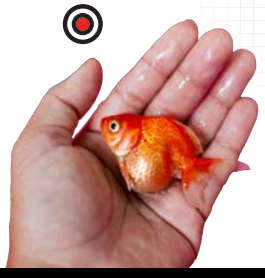


Progress 2028 posed as a pro-Harris counter to the conservative Project 2025, but it's actually run by a pro-Trump, dark-money network.

At a Las Vegas rally, Trump claimed that Democrats want to ban cows and windows.

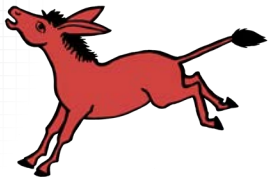
After Hurricane Francine, 420,000 electricity customers were left without power as climate change continues to trigger extreme weather.

An Ig Nobel Prize, awarded for ridiculous scientific achievement, went to a Florida professor who demonstrated that live fish move more than dead fish, "but not by much."



Several tattoos on Pete Hegseth, Trump's pick for defense secretary, are related to Christian nationalism and far-right symbology.

In states that banned abortion, the rate of sterilization rose 39% in the six months after *Roe v. Wade* was overturned.



The Democratic Party's 2024 platform quietly abandoned opposition to the death penalty. Among the 21 people executed this year was Marcellus Williams, whose conviction rested on paid eyewitness testimonies.

support policies that fuel violence against Palestinians while asking for their votes.

"The first thing everyone wants to talk about when I knock on doors in this area is foreign policy," says Yazan Badwan, a Palestinian fellow with the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights who canvassed the southwest suburbs for months ahead of the election. "The majority of people don't know what to do, so most of them are voting for Jill Stein or uncommitted."

Abla Abdelkader, president of Students for Justice in Palestine Chicago—which supported encampments at Northwestern, DePaul and the University of Chicago—believes Harris' defeat was not only about Palestine, but her inability to energize her base, including students.

"The bottom line here is that the Democrats failed to run a good campaign," Abdelkader says.

Others, like Eyad Zeid, owner of Nabala Cafe in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood, didn't vote. "I'm not going to deny that Trump is going to be shitty, but I see that more as an opportunity for more people to be brought into movement spaces and to come together in solidarity than it is a reason to think, 'Oh, we should have voted for Kamala,'" he says.

Zeid's café has been vandalized twice since September. But, he adds, "We've had a lot more people come through the doors since Tuesday seeking community in different ways. I've had several people reach out to me and ask how they can get involved in organizing."

Nesreen Hassan, an organizer with U.S. Palestinian Community Network, which has organized at least 50 protests and 15 disruptions in Chicago since October 2023—including at the Democratic National Convention in August—says a central theme in discussions with Palestinian voters about Harris was that calling for an arms embargo would have been enough.

Demonstrators, organized through the U.S. Palestinian Community Network, rally outside of Chicago's Trump Hotel to demand an end to the Israeli attacks on Gaza, the day after Election Day.

JACEK BOCZARSKI/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

Nearly every person I spoke with said the same thing.

"Even though we're not a fan of the Democratic Party, if she would have said 'arms embargo,' folks would have voted for her," Hassan says.

One June poll from CBS News found 61% of Americans—77% of Democrats and nearly 40% of Republicans—do not think the United States should send weapons to Israel. More Americans—67%—support a cease-fire, according to a February survey from Data for Progress, including 56% of Republicans. A YouGov poll commissioned by the Institute for Middle East Understanding Policy Project in three swing states—Arizona, Georgia and Pennsylvania—found an overwhelming majority of voters supported a cease-fire and an arms embargo.

Meanwhile, in September, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) introduced legislation to block $20 billion in U.S. weapons sales to Israel, which didn't get far—the Senate rejected this attempt in November.

The Palestinian organizers I spoke with say they are recommitted to the fight for Palestinian liberation.

"I think many of us are simultaneously glad she lost and sad he won," says Eman Abdelhadi, an *In These Times* columnist and organizer with Faculty for Justice in Palestine. "I think, as Palestinians, we always knew that, on Wednesday, we would find out who our next enemy was. It was never that we were going to have a friend in the White House."

After the polls closed, The Qahwa—a Palestinian-owned coffee shop in the Chicago suburb of Bridgeview—hosted an open mic dedicated to Palestine. Across the street from the courthouse where voters had lined up earlier, the event drew community members eager to share their thoughts and vent their frustrations.

"The Arab and Palestinian people know that, no matter who the president is, the bombardment will not end until there is a complete arms embargo," one of the performers said. "Elections are really used as a suppressant for radical movement and organization."

NASHWA BAWAB is assistant editor at *In These Times*. She is an organizer and reporter with bylines at *The Intercept*, *Electronic Intifada*, *Texas Monthly*, *The Texas Observer* and more.

VIEWPOINT

MAURICE MITCHELL

Don't Retreat, the Ballot Box Belongs to Working People

After the brutal murder of teenager Michael Brown in 2014, I felt called to Ferguson, Mo., where I spent the next several years building the Movement for Black Lives with some of the most brilliant organizers I know. But even when we could turn out thousands to a protest, or pack a town hall, our hard-fought victories felt like cargo that wasn't tied down, vulnerable to flying away at any moment.

Without governing power, we were at the mercy of the many elected officials more concerned with appeasing wealthy donors than showing up for their constituents.

After a loss like the one we just endured this Election Day, it's easy to feel alienated from any left electoral projects. After all, we live in a rigid, two-party system, where the majority of people don't feel represented by either party.

Some of us are debating whether to retreat from elections altogether. I understand the instinct; I never expected to find myself in electoral politics. I grew up in a working-class, union household on Long Island and got my start as a youth organizer before getting involved in direct action against police violence.

But if we're serious about power and reducing suffering, we cannot abstain from elections. While we could just take our ball and go home, the power vacuum would still get filled—just not by us.

Of course, elections should not be our only—or even our primary—tool to build power. But given the fact that our power is limited and our opponents are so well-funded, we can't afford to leave any tool on the table.

My party—the Working Families Party—has done something very few independent parties have been able to do: win at both the state and local level. In Philadelphia, where the City Council reserves two seats for a minority party, we ran against Republicans and swept them out.

Now, decisions are negotiated not between Democrats and Republicans, but between Democrats and the Working Families Party. It's allowed us to win, for example, a landmark eviction diversion program that keeps tens of thousands of people in their homes every year and has made Philadelphia an outlier when it comes to national eviction trends.

In states like New York and Connecticut, we've used the fusion voting system to give real representation to working people. It was once a widespread practice, but it was banned in many states after working-class people began gaining too much power. It works by allowing multiple parties to endorse the same candidate, who then appears on the ballot separately under each party. All of the candidate's votes are added to their total, which allows for more constituencies and sets of issues to be represented in our politics.

Just imagine a presidential election in which hundreds of thousands of voters in key swing states are Working Families Party (WFP) voters, and the Democratic nominee has to win their votes to defeat the Right. That's possible if we can grow our power and pass fusion in more states and cities around the country.

We've also won in places where we don't have ballot access by primarying corporate Democrats and flipping purple seats. This year, we added dozens of new WFP leaders in states like Wisconsin, Arizona and New Mexico. And in Delaware, WFP-backed Kamela Smith unseated the 20-year incumbent and sitting Speaker of the State House.

It took the conservative movement five decades to dismantle the gains of the New Deal and Civil Rights era, to implement a pro-corporate agenda and rig the courts. They certainly didn't leave any tool on the table in their ruthless pursuits. Our job now, over the next several years, is to scale our own experiments so that our local wins build to state wins, and our state wins build to national wins.

In other words, we want to be the ones with the power instead of the ones left to fight it.

Trump and his crew of billionaires, grifters, failsons and hangers-on want us to give up, to surrender to their attacks before they come to our doors. As with any authoritarian project, cynicism is their most powerful weapon. They want us to learn helplessness from defeat.

Instead, we need to be honing and sharpening our tools, rigorously applying the lessons of each win and loss, until we are the ones with the power to govern. IN

MAURICE MITCHELL is the national director of the Working Families Party.

VIEWPOINT

BHASKAR SUNKARA

The Path for Socialism Is Focus

As bad as the Left fares in any particular election, there will always be space for egalitarian politics in a world where the elite have enormous power and wealth and the vast majority struggle to get by. A right-wing Supreme Court might dismantle the National Labor Relations Board and severely curb collective bargaining, but as long as the objective contradiction between capital and labor exists, there will always be battles for justice in the workplace.

Yet looking at this *longue durée* isn't much conciliation with Donald Trump coming back to power.

Far more than socialists, Democratic Party leadership should own November's outcome. President Joe Biden failed to communicate the merits of his domestic agenda to Americans. He didn't direct public ire about the economy towards profiteers or speak with urgency about the impact of inflation on ordinary people. Instead, Democrats spent much of the last four years saying everything was fine, and hoping abortion rights and "protecting democracy" would be enough to keep them in power.

Now is a time for the Left to show its distance from the Democratic Party's elites and their discredited style of politics.

The first thing to do is to make sure socialist politics are oppositional and rooted in working-class communities. One way is to identify villains—from grocery giant CEOs at the national level to corporate landlords at the local level—that people can blame for their difficulties. Programmatically, we need to focus on the pocketbook issues that workers care about the most. That means not only providing rhetoric but having credible policy answers to both the distributional and supply aspects of problems like the housing crisis.

We're at our weakest when our demands seem both maximalist and contrary to popular interests, like police abolition. The Left is at its strongest when it has a credible social-democratic response to a problem: "Can't afford health insurance? Well, we have this policy called Medicare for All that would give everyone free insurance and a direct relationship with their doctor unmediated by expensive, third-party insurances. We can win this good policy, but we need your help to take on vampiric health executives and their allies in Congress."

It is important to remember, if we campaign on everything, we campaign on nothing. In the coming years, we need to pursue a ruthlessly focused politics that highlights issues that will best build a popular base for the Left.

Creating this politics starts with constructing a rhetoric and program that's built to attract working people, not members of the same professional class that brought us Kamala Harris.

Indeed, part of our distancing from the professional-class style of today's Democratic Party will mean a thorough rejection of identity politics in favor of a universal appeal that has the same popular message for people of all backgrounds.

This is a politics that is reductionist by design, not in its theoretical rejection of the many forms of oppression that exist or the complexity of working-class life, but in the practical application of its politics.

A politics rooted in the centrality of class, and the creation of institutions that can carry on the class struggle within and beyond the workplace, would win the material gains and build the social base that could permanently reshape our society.

Tapping into our shared desire for peace, stability and dignity will lead this movement toward solidarity with those deprived of their dignity by bigots, or deprived of peace by warmakers, or deprived of stability by ruthless market competition.

But creating this politics starts with constructing a rhetoric and program that's built to attract working people, not members of the same professional class that brought us Kamala Harris. IN

BHASKAR SUNKARA is the president of *The Nation* magazine and the founding editor of *Jacobin*.

VIEWPOINT

OLÚFẸ́MI O. TÁÍWÒ

Scapegoats and Solidarity

On November 6, Vice President Kamala Harris formally conceded the election to Donald Trump, with sitting President Joe Biden promising a peaceful transition of power to a party the Democrats had just days ago described as fascist. "How did we get here?" is a natural and politically important question—but "Whose fault is it?" is the one many analysts and pundits find themselves answering instead.

Many fingers have been pointed at individuals: Attorney General Merrick Garland for failing to prosecute Trump, the Supreme Court for granting unprecedented immunity to Trump and the presidency, or Biden for nearly falling asleep at the debate that launched Harris' candidacy. Casting a somewhat wider net are the pundits who blame "wokeness" and "identity politics"; Sen. Bernie Sanders, who excoriated Democratic Party leadership for insufficient attention to the working class; and researchers who call attention to disinformation campaigns and AI-supported attempts at voter suppression. Depressingly, other voices have leveled blame at demographic groups—at Muslims for depressed vote totals in the wake of the Democrats' unreservedly genocidal policy in Gaza, at Black and brown men for voting in greater numbers for Trump than in 2020.

Then there are the macro explanations. There's blame directed toward the longstanding misogyny and racism that informed the strategy of the Trump campaign and formed the cultural environment that received it. On the economic side, there are the effects of the global cost-of-living crisis as incumbent parties across the globe hemorrhaged votes to their opposition. (It's interesting to note that the Democratic Party actually lost a smaller share of votes than its counterparts in the "developed world" in 2024.)

This second set of explanations is certainly getting warmer. But so, too, is the Earth. Whomever we decide to scapegoat, our climate predicament continues unabated.

If current trends continue, we are set to hurtle past 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) in 2024, the target scientists set to limit the damage of global warming. Under a president who threatens to pull out of the global Paris Agreement for a second time, we can expect the U.S. contribution to dramatically worsen. In the meantime, the cascade effects of warming have already begun. In the United States—the world's biggest petrostate—the climate crisis is feeding into a housing bubble headed for crisis. Beyond the direct, physical effects of escalating wildfires and floods are the systemic risks that increasingly uninsurable houses will create in the housing market.

We should be particularly concerned about a worsening climate in an era where grievance politics and scapegoating proliferate. Climate denial had its day, and now something far more nefarious is brewing on the far Right. Researchers studying a database of content from the white supremacist website Stormfront found that 70% of sampled posts "accepted or exploited" the scientific reality of climate change, compared with a mere 16% expressing denialist views. Instead, as ProPublica journalist Abrahm Lustgarten has chronicled, the floods and wildfires engendered by the emissions of fossil fuels and big agribusiness are fueling right-wing border militias and several "lone wolf" eco-fascist mass shootings, from New Zealand to El Paso, Texas, and Buffalo, N.Y. On these corners

SARAH L. VOISIN/THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

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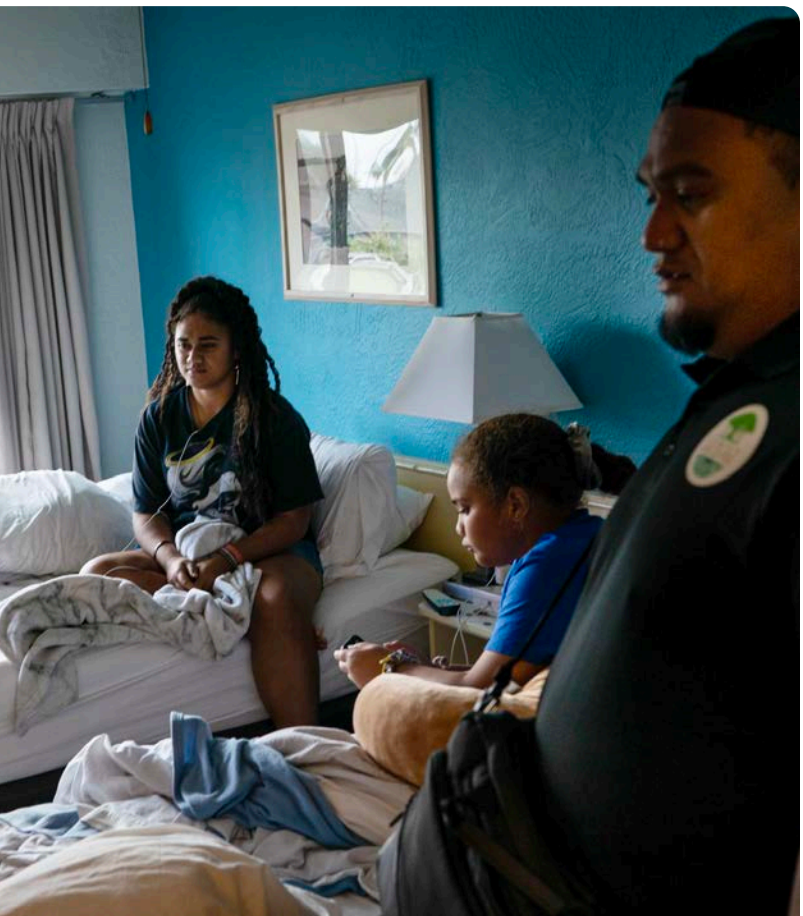
of the far Right, immigration and climate change conspire to steal open land from the white Americans who are entitled to it, as part of a "White Genocide" that aims to replace white people and their culture (and which, presumably, must be resisted by way of *actual* genocide).

This is by no means confined to the fringes. Stephen Miller, the political advisor Trump named as deputy chief of policy, has helped fuel a deluge of climate disaster coverage on Breitbart, framed by "research" from the far-right Center for Immigration Studies that stokes fears of resource scarcity and food shortages while platforming "great replacement theory." Trump, for his part, has offered to address rising housing prices through mass deportation—which baselessly scapegoats immigrants while ignoring the fact that the construction sector employs more undocumented immigrant labor than any other, except agriculture.

Meanwhile, the ability of the powers that be to contain this persistent, anti-organizing, anti-political counter-offensive is eroding. Even as candidates, Trump and JD Vance pushed back against the idea of fact-checking, with Vance doing so notably in his debate performance after being confronted with his lies about Haitian immigrants. A billionaire crony of the president-elect owns a sizable chunk of an influential information base that he has essentially converted into a misinformation machine for the Right at best ("Nazi bar" at worst). And local sources of news, which could counter the political narratives being shamelessly promoted by the billionaire class, are facing censorship, layoffs and closures.



These facts are intimately related to the facts that began this essay. Those invectives preemptively blaming Latinos for the carnage promised by the ascendant Republican Party were made by well-compensated pundits at major news organizations—not just those aligned with the far Right, but MSNBC and *Newsweek*. Log on to Twitter (if you can stomach it) and you will see plenty more where that came from: Under Elon Musk's tenure, the company has been converted into a de facto anti-organizing platform that eats solidarity and shits out bitcoin.

Moving forward, we need to be sharp-eyed about resisting the tempting allure of scapegoat politics. While electoral blame-casting by the center and Left is by no means equivalent to the genocidal mass deportation politics of the Right, both work against building the power that will be required to change our political trajectory. This is not to say that we should avoid the hard and necessarily contentious work of figuring out which strategies, actors and cultural realities have cost us our opportunities to head off the worst of the present crises. But we should keep our eyes fixed on exactly why that work is worthwhile—that we might come up with better things to do and build the power and connections required to do them. Much of the scapegoating discourse that has emerged in the wake of the election is practically lab-engineered to undermine exactly that.

In *Solidarity,* Astra Taylor and Leah Hunt-Hendrix consider solidarity to be "the recognition of our inherent interconnectedness" and "an attempt to build bonds of commonality across our differences"—the very preconditions for acting together, politically. One sense of solidarity is in the direction we want, that of solidifying

Left: About six months after the August 2023 Maui wildfires exacerbated a local housing crisis, a family makes a hotel room home as they wait for a promised tiny house. As climate displacement intensifies, the far Right blames the problems on migrants.

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Hundreds of demonstrators for women's rights and abortion rights gather in front of the Heritage Foundation offices on November 9. The Heritage Foundation is the conservative think tank behind Project 2025, which seeks to consolidate executive power and replace the federal civil service with presidential loyalists, among other right-wing policies. The rally marked the first organized Women's March in Washington D.C. since the election of Donald Trump. (Photo by Probal Rashid/LightRocket via Getty Images)

popular power against oppression and working to expand the zone of people whose material lives, rights and dignity are respected. But this "transformative" version has an evil twin: "reactionary solidarity," the type forged between those who aim to jealously protect the in-group from the out-group. This is what passes for solidarity between the Musks and Trumps of the world, who realize their combined class interest in controlling information, capital and political institutions that in turn control whether they can protect their money and power from our pesky needs for healthcare, bodily autonomy and a livable planet.

Solidarity can sound like a naive and idealistic ideal, divorced from the hard truths of power struggle in a contentious and unequal political world. It is anything but. Confronting the state will require a mass base of people, and the strategic value of preventing solidarity between the people who could make up that base is no more mysterious than the question of whether the average army would prefer to face a larger or smaller enemy army. Empires famously "divide and rule," and we know for a fact that various actors, from rival states to opportunistic politicians, see the seeds of tomorrow's success in today's sowing of widespread public mistrust.

We have reason for optimism about what we could get out of rejecting scapegoat politics and going all in on solidarity. While the support for the right-wing party in this country is sobering, it's important not to overread the top line electoral results into a self-fulfilling prophecy about what our neighbors do or do not support (or, more to the point, would support, under different political circumstances). The results of referenda and other forms of direct democracy in the November election bolster this point. Abortion protections won in 7 of 10 states (and earned majority support in Florida, though they failed to clear the needed 60% benchmark). Paid sick leave passed by large

margins in three states. Kentucky soundly defeated a measure to defund public schools in favor of private ones. California, Hawaii and Louisiana all opted to put public funds toward climate adaptation and resilience.

These results were no accident. The way that we are invited to participate in democratic life affects the kind of politics that result: People in the United States asked to weigh in on political issues directly often give answers to the left of the candidates they vote for. And the ballot box or direct referendum is not the only way to pose such questions: Unions are engines of democratic life that invite and allow for sustained participation. Union participation puts workers in common cause with one another, which offers a reason to rethink the social relationships between workers and owners. Unsurprisingly, union membership has consistently been shown to help erode prejudices and resentment between groups, as unions, after all, offer both a reason for solidarity and an opportunity to put that solidarity to work. It is perhaps also unsurprising, then, that union voters did not drift to the right in this past election, even as the rest of the working class did.

It is disappointing when people with whom we hope to make common cause do not politically align with us or make the choices we hope they will make. But solidarity is not a market exchange—it is not something we extend in payment for good behavior. It is that which forms our capacity to change political realities. As the climate crisis intensifies and capitalists consolidate their control over information and material, the pressure to bargain away solidarity for clicks will continue.

If we give in, we will be selling our ability to transform the world with it. And we'll have no one to blame but ourselves. IN

the BiG *idea*

court pack•ing

noun

1. a plan to reform the Supreme Court by adding more justices

» But why? It's safe to say many Americans would rather be alone in the woods with a bear than with SCOTUS right now. The court has lost a lot of legitimacy after a string of unpopular rulings, from stripping away abortion rights to making it easier to criminalize unhoused folks, and it holds a pitiable 44% approval rating. Adding justices is one way to rebalance.

» How many more robes are we talking? Theoretically, the sky's the limit! The Constitution enshrines the court's existence, but the number of judges can be changed with an act of Congress.

Congressional Democrats, led by Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.), have proposed the Judiciary Act to expand the Court from nine to 13. *The Nation*'s justice correspondent Elie Mystal argues for a more radical 20 additional justices, which would necessitate 15 votes (rather than four) to overturn a decision. Other possibilities abound.

» OK. Pack the court—or send the justices packing? While there's certainly an argument to abolish the Supreme Court as anti-democratic, there's more political momentum behind court packing. Adding new justices could make SCOTUS more diverse and less partisan—leading to less radical rights-stripping. Opponents think it's a slippery slope that would jeopardize judicial independence and allow a president to shape the court's ideological makeup—although some would say this ship has sailed. FDR, for example, famously tried to pack the court to protect his New Deal policies.

> *"The right-wing majority on the Supreme Court has shown repeatedly that they do not serve the people of this country—they serve Donald Trump and wealthy corporations exploiting our communities."*
>
> —REP. CORI BUSH (D-MO.) EXPRESSING SUPPORT FOR THE JUDICIARY ACT

ILLUSTRATION BY KAZIMIR ISKANDER

» Any chance it'll happen? Markey reintroduced the Judiciary Act in 2023, which was referred to committee. The current Congress could attempt to expand the court during President Joe Biden's lame-duck period, but this seems unlikely—Biden has proposed court reforms, such as term limits and a binding code of conduct, but court packing didn't make his list. And with the return of Donald Trump and Republican control of the Senate, the answer is: It's unlikely to happen soon.

Otherwise, reform advocates can still push for other changes to curtail the court's far-right dictatorial authority.

—J. PATRICK PATTERSON

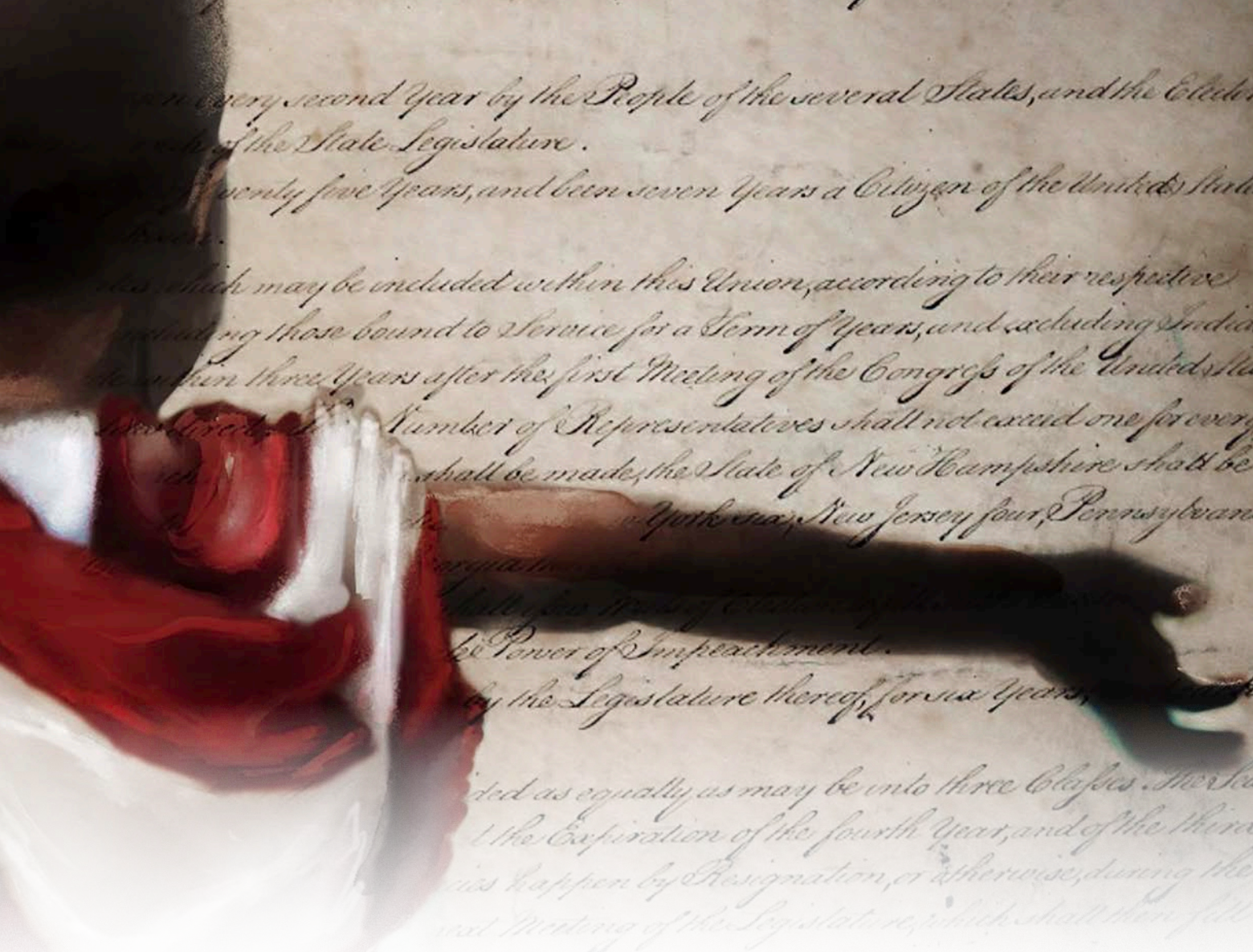
WHY DIDN'T THE PROGRESSIVE MOVEMENT CHALLENGE KAMALA HARRIS?

Recreating the #Resistance of the first Trump administration with such a fragile coalition will be a monumental task

BY KEEANGA-YAMAHTTA TAYLOR

The 2020 Democratic presidential race was shaped by a political landscape defined by years of grassroots activism, protests and relentless opposition to the first Trump presidency. By the fall of 2019, as Democratic contenders scrambled for position, mass protests had become a permanent feature of the Trump years. From the Women's Marches in early 2017, when millions of people across the country took to the streets to reject Trump's presidency, to the ongoing waves of protest against police violence, racism and inequality, the Trump era had galvanized a new generation of political activists and organizers. Movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM), the Sunrise Movement and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) emerged as forces, reconfiguring the political terrain in opposition to Trump and establishing a rising new Left.

The success of Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders' campaigns in 2016 and 2020 reflected the resonance of progressive politics within the Democratic Party base even as its leadership rejected Sanders' influence. Sanders' calls for Medicare for All, student debt cancellation and a Green New Deal became the gold standard for progressive policy, setting the terms of debate for the entire field. In response, other candidates—Kamala Harris among them—jockeyed to craft policies that



would appeal to this growing left-wing sentiment, offering ambitious plans for housing reform, free college, a higher minimum wage and government-assisted healthcare.

The Democrats won in 2020 with 81 million votes, the most in U.S. history. The 2024 race could not have been more different. Not only was there no primary (because of President Joe Biden's ill-fated decision to stay in the race), but when Harris emerged as the party's nominee, she did so as a moderate, distancing herself from the progressive policies that had defined the Democratic platform four years earlier. She went on to spend much of the campaign trail alongside former Rep. Liz Cheney (R-Wyo.). The shift was glaring: Harris abandoned her earlier posture as a reformer and progressive prosecutor, opting for a new message that mostly—with the exception of abortion rights—tried to shake off any hint of progressive politics, and it instead embraced Trump's law-and-order rhetoric on the border, deferred to gun culture and American militarism, and distilled free-market principles through the dystopic language of "opportunity economy." Harris deftly avoided the 2020 protests that were the reason she was selected as Biden's running mate in the first place.

The Democrats' sharp turn to the right can be mapped through their party platforms and political programs. In 2020, they offered a "new social and economic contract" of "shared prosperity" and racial justice. By 2024, Harris and running mate Tim Walz failed to directly or meaningfully mention the impacts of racism, police brutality, inequality or diversity in their 82-page policy platform.

Undoubtedly, some of this political retreat was in reaction to the right-wing backlash against so-called woke politics. What began as an outcry against the 1619 Project created by *New York Times Magazine* writer Nikole Hannah-Jones—who argued in a Pulitzer Prize-winning essay that racism is endemic to the founding of the United States and pervades all aspects of American democracy—spiraled into a wider assault against any recognition of racism as a fact of American life. The right-wing attacks on critical race theory, affirmative action and diversity initiatives reached a fever pitch, with Trump leading the charge with accusations of anti-white bias across the country.

But the backlash did not only come from the Right. Even as Democrats benefitted from the growth of the progressive movement, there were also Democrats who denounced the

ILLUSTRATION BY HOWARD BARRY

progressive influence in the party. When activists, in 2020, made the political demand to "defund the police and refund the communities," Rep. Karen Bass (now the Democratic mayor of Los Angeles) denounced the refrain as "probably one of the worst slogans ever." South Carolina representative and former House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn blamed BLM activists who used the phrase as responsible for the gathering conservative backlash against the movement.

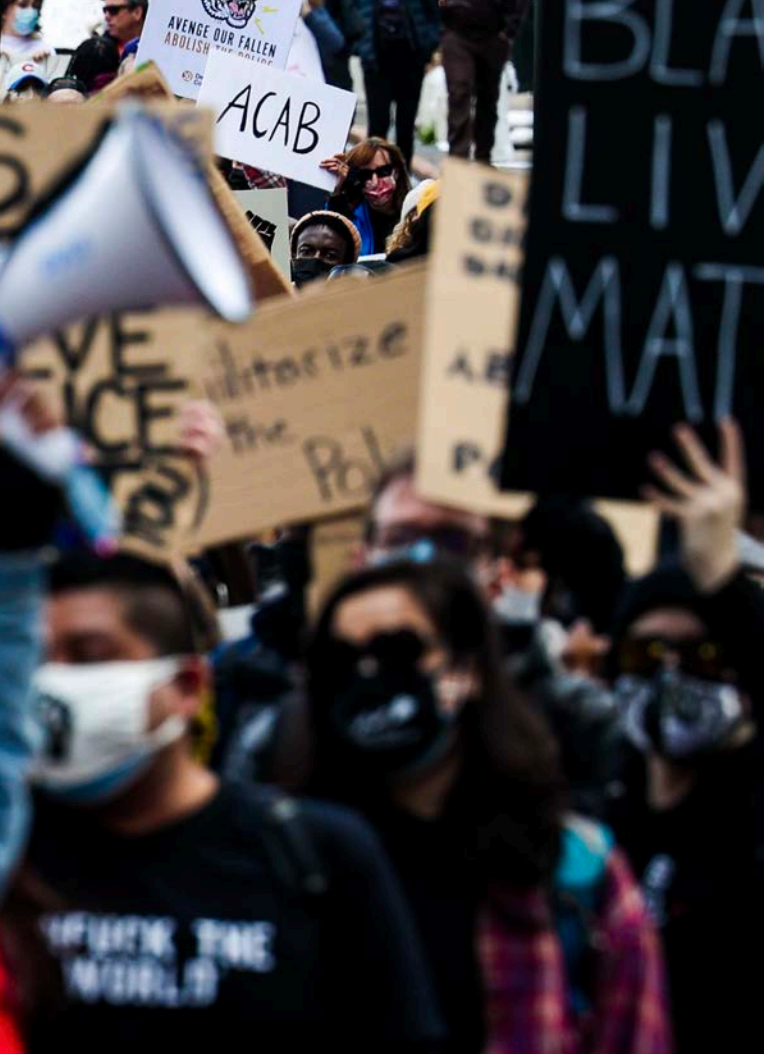
In the 2020 election, as Democrats lost seats in the House, Democratic Rep. Abigail Spanberger (Va.) said, "We need to not ever use the words 'socialist' or 'socialism' ever again." After Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown lost his Democratic primary to democratic socialist India Walton in 2021, he won in the general with a write-in campaign and exhorted "mainstream Democrats" to "stand up and fight back" because the "intolerant" far Left is "not good for the country." Brown left his post as mayor before the end of his term to leverage his nearly 20-year stint into a nearly $300,000 job as CEO of Western Regional Off-Track Betting.

But Democrats were not just positioning themselves against the political rhetoric of the Left; they were also trying to scrub away their reputation as big government spenders. Spanberger complained, "Nobody elected [Biden] to be FDR. They elected him to be normal and stop the chaos." The editorial board of the *New York Times*, on behalf of the liberal establishment that hated Trump, lectured that "Democrats Deny Political Reality at Their Own Peril" and warned "the 2020 election was about removing Mr. Trump. ... Mr. Biden did not win the Democratic primary because he promised a progressive revolution [but] because he promised an exhausted nation a return to sanity, decency and competence."

For all of the complaints of centrist Democrats about the deleterious role of the Left and progressives, it is simply undeniable that, in 2020, these groups played an affirmative role in the party's victory. On an individual level, voter registration "surged" at the height of BLM protests in 2020. Beyond that, progressive groups blanketed swing states—Georgia, in particular—to turn anger and protest into votes. Grassroots organizations like Mijente and Black Voters Matter helped turn a solid red Georgia blue, with two Democratic Senate seats. Indeed, the entirety of the BLM leadership turned its focus toward the election, on the hope of charting a new relationship of political collaboration with the Democratic Party.

Patrisse Cullors, co-founder and former executive director of the Black Lives Matter Global Network, described the role of Black organizers and Black-led organizations as decisive in the Biden-Harris victory. "We created a multimillion dollar get-out-the-vote campaign," Cullors explained. "We did not stand down, we actually stood up. ... We reached over 60 million people in that effort. ... I think our movement

MICHAEL CIAGLO/GETTY IMAGES



and I think our organization, alongside Black-led organizers across the country, won this election." BLM, which had been the recipient of a windfall of donations from the public, organized a political action committee to facilitate their political participation. As Cullors described it in 2020, "Through our PAC, we signed up 6,000 volunteers for 10,000 shifts to phone-bank in battleground states. We've knocked on thousands of doors in Miami-Dade [County], Philadelphia and Atlanta to bring registered voters to polls on Election Day." The Movement for Black Lives also created its own voter initiative, "The Frontline," which it claimed "mobilized hundreds of thousands of people to defend voters around the country and turn out the vote to win massive victories at the federal and local level."

In other key swing states, like Wisconsin, the Senate candidacy of Democratic Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes and the field operations of on-the-ground groups like Black Leaders Organizing for Communities helped push Biden over the edge where the margin of victory over Trump was just 20,000 votes.

In the fall of 2020, during the homestretch of the election, the Movement for Black Lives (then a coalition of more than 50 "organizing groups")—along with the Working Families Party, Service Employees International Union, Electoral Justice Project of the Movement for Black Lives, the Sunrise Movement and, in the House, the Squad—initiated "The People's Charter" as a list of demands to shape the post-election environment. Maurice Mitchell, national director of the Working Families Party, explained it as such: "People, in order to be enthusiastic about voting, need to vote for something—and The People's Charter provides folks with something that is outside of candidates' politics to vote for. It also sets up post-election conditions to articulate that this election was a referendum on this agenda."

After President Barack Obama's second term, the Democratic Party returned in 2016 to the old guard with Hillary Clinton as the nominee, a choice that alienated young voters enthralled by the rising BLM and climate movements. By 2020, debates over the future of the party were influenced by a new Left come to life through Occupy Wall Street, BLM, DSA and the rise of Sanders. These formations shaped the political discourse of redistribution, redress and restoration. The defeat of Trump fueled by a wave of unprecedented protest seemed to open a new frontier of politics and organizing.

Black organizers, in particular, believed that Biden should have been beholden to their efforts to mobilize ordinary Black voters.

Mary Hooks, founding member of Black Lives Matter Atlanta and co-director of the social justice advocacy organization Southerners on New Ground, pressed that, "For decades, Black people have shown up time and time again for a country that consistently tells us that our lives don't matter. … Beyond a cheap thank you, we need this administration to be bold and unapologetic about paying that debt through enacting policy changes." The Rev. William Barber, of the Poor People's Campaign, spelled out that, "We'll be expecting follow-through. … Biden needs to have a 50-day strategy, not a 100-day strategy, for addressing the issues." Cullors, was more succinct: "We want something for our vote."

After Biden won the presidency, he noted how the "African American community stood up again for me" and added, "You've always had my back, and I'll have yours." But Biden's Black agenda was mostly symbolic or oriented toward middle-class Black families, not the working-class Black majority. Juneteenth became a federal holiday and Biden signed anti-lynching legislation (nearly 100 years too late) and an executive order to advance "racial equity and support for underserved communities," but by his own assessment the returns were pretty thin compared with the depth of the problems.

The continuity of police brutality and police killings stunted any sense of progress, while inflation surged to historic levels, undermining any growth in wages for ordinary voters, Black or otherwise.

Above: Nationwide protests against police violence continued well beyond the 2020 murder of George Floyd, including this one in Denver on April 17, 2021, demanding justice for Daunte Wright, 20, and Adam Toledo, 13.

Even as the administration backed off of (or failed to deliver on) its promises, the array of progressive forces that worked to get Biden elected largely failed to mobilize in any substantive way to demand more. In part, it's because they imagined themselves as potentially collaborating with the administration—contrasting with their adversarial role during the Trump years—which complicated their efforts to mobilize.

Indeed, when Cullors was asked how she would respond to Democratic officials concerned about Republican attempts to tie the Democrats to BLM, she offered, "I do think the Democratic Party should lean on groups like Black Lives Matter. We made the effort to lean into the presidential race and we really do need the Democratic Party to reach out to us because we can, I believe, win these other races, if they leaned on us just a little bit more." She added, "What we need from the Democratic Party is allyship right now." And what of the Movement for Black Lives and the Working Families Party's "People's Charter," which was supposed to shape the post-election political scene? It turned out to be a tool to turn out ambivalent voters but not really part of an organizing strategy to take on Biden once he became president. Click on the link for the effort today, and the website exists only as an archive.

But this begs the question: If the Left and progressive groups largely view Democrats as allies—rather than as political opponents who must be pressured and protested—then how do Left and progressive groups imagine they might leverage their political influence to make Democrats meet their demands? The strategy of working inside relationships and connections may provoke cynicism among activists perpetually "all out" against Republicans, but when Democrats are in charge, muted disagreement prevails. It was a failed strategy during the Biden administration, and it failed to move Harris from the disastrous stances that defined her failed bid for the presidency—which alone should be enough to question the strategy.

Beyond pressuring the Democratic administration holding power, the past four years saw the general retreat of big forces on the organized Left and among progressive organizations.

It doesn't mean no one has been doing anything. Far from it. There are many small and struggling organizations fighting local campaigns against private capital and local and state governments for better and affordable housing, school funding, against police brutality. There have been local efforts to challenge the racist and homophobic book bans and censoring of school curricula. There have also been attempts by low-wage workers to form unions against all odds. But the scale of these smaller and local struggles raises the question of what happened to the massive uprising and demonstrations that upended the political status quo just four short years ago?

No mass organizations emerged out of the most significant movement against racism and inequality in the United States in two generations, despite the widespread sympathy and solidarity with the movement. Today, the Left feels small, marginalized, fractured and disorganized as enormous problems confront the communities we are attached to. The absence of focused organizing on building grassroots

Today, the Left feels small, marginalized, fractured and disorganized as enormous problems confront the communities we are attached to.

organizations with clear on-ramps and entry points for ordinary people has resulted in a political culture that views politics passively as donating money and occasionally showing up to an event or protest to register political discontent and express solidarity. All too often, movements and organizing have been conceived of having a professionalized core or center, while viewing the broader public as people to mobilize for an event—not as collaborators, and not for the purpose of building sustainable organizations.

By 2024, when Harris announced her surprise run for president, many progressive organizations supported her candidacy with few, if any, questions asked. Even as Harris promised a lethal military and refused to meaningfully confront Trump's racist invective directed at Haitian and Latino immigrants, she faced no serious opposition from the left or progressives. Once again, the urgency of not allowing Trump to regain the presidency overwhelmed the capacity or willingness to question or criticize the Democratic nominee, let alone exert any pressure on Harris to commit to progressive and left demands. The United Auto Workers, led by Shawn Fain, took slightly more time before endorsing Harris, but still embraced her agenda as one for the working class. Sanders held out on an immediate endorsement, but eventually came around and stumped wide and far for Harris.

Almost immediately after Harris lost the race, Sanders had searing criticism of the Democratic Party for essentially abandoning the interests of the working class. But this level of criticism was necessary during the campaign itself to exert any pressure to change the disastrous course of the Harris candidacy. We all understand the pressure to coalesce around the Democratic candidate when the Republican Party is openly embracing racism, xenophobia and fascism. But if there is no way to hold Democrats accountable to their working-class constituents because of the fear of an even worse GOP, then we can expect this dynamic of right-moving Democratic presidential candidates to continue.

Only the movements in solidarity with Palestinian freedom offered a substantive challenge to the Harris coronation, as it remains the only issue impervious to party influence. To be sure, the absence of a primary for the Democratic Party lessened the ability of progressive forces to push back against Harris galloping rightward. Given the posture of the party's leadership of hostility toward progressive and left forces, there is no guarantee Harris would not have deflected that pressure in an attempt to demonstrate her independence from left influence.

The questions concerning the relationship between progressives, the Left and the Democratic Party are still here, even as Trump has improbably regained the White House. Not only has there been no resolution to the questions surrounding those relationships, the current political culture of the broadly construed Left doesn't necessarily allow for an interrogation. There are few platforms or outlets for constructive debate and disagreement. The online culture of American society that became even more embedded as a result of the pandemic has turned political debate—and even conversation—toxic. For others, the need to debate or even engage is seen as exhausting and a chore that the experience of oppression should protect them against. That it is someone else's responsibility to engage in these debates, persuade the unconvinced, to "do the work." These tensions running throughout the progressive ecosystem will make it difficult, if not impossible, to recreate the #Resistance to the first Trump administration. Moreover, the idea that we can just pick up the batons of protest from the earlier Trump administration ignores the political debates and questions from then, which were unresolved and buried as Biden was swept into office.

And yet, a response will be necessary as the new Trump administration unleashes its horrors on the undocumented, Muslims, trans kids and others.

How can we build an effective movement if we don't address the questions concerning democracy and political accountability within it? How might those discussions create the possibility of engaging the debates on the relationship between the Left, progressives and the Democratic Party? And how do we guard against our activism becoming the latest directives demanding we drop everything for the 2026 midterm elections, and then again in 2028?

It doesn't mean that elections don't matter, but the Left's lack of political independence leaves us beholden to whatever candidate is placed before us—as in the scenario of this 2024 election—continuing a cycle that reproduces and amplifies conservative electoral politics, regardless of party.

Given the scale of the crisis in the lives of ordinary people, it's politically unsustainable.

KENT NISHIMURA / LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

Left: Volunteers with Black Leaders Organizing for Communities (BLOC) prepare to knock doors and reach out to Milwaukee residents ahead of the 2022 mid-term elections.

KEEANGA-YAMAHTTA TAYLOR is a co-founder of *Hammer & Hope* and the Hughes-Rogers Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University.

"WE DON'T HAVE THE LUXURY OF GIVING UP"

Activists rally against President Donald Trump's immigration ban at New York's JFK International Airport on Jan. 28, 2017, after Trump signed an executive order to halt refugees and residents from predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States.

STEPHANIE KEITH/GETTY IMAGES

Five movement organizers discuss the dangerous terrain of a second Trump term—and the critical task of building working-class power.

BY MILES KAMPF-LASSIN

President-elect Donald Trump has frequently castigated what he calls "the enemy within" and pledged to "root out the communists, Marxists, fascists and the radical Left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country." With his second term promising a campaign of cruelty, he also has a Heritage Foundation-authored playbook ready to carry out this plan.

Immigrants, trans people and communities of color are set to be targeted while the Trump administration lines the pockets of billionaires and corporate tycoons at the expense of working people.

The incoming Trump era is also expected to see a nationwide effort to disrupt and nullify groups within the U.S. Left and anyone else considered a political enemy of the far-right administration.

Amid this landscape, social movement organizations are preparing not to simply assume a defensive crouch, but to strategize, organize and grow progressive political power in the face of a very real authoritarian threat. The Democratic establishment suffered a monumental defeat this November after running a disjointed, moderate campaign that elevated venture capitalists like Mark Cuban and war hawks like Liz Cheney while dismissing the party's base, hungry for relief from economic pain and an end to the Biden-Harris administration's backing for the genocide in Gaza.

Organizers must now learn from the deep failures of the Democratic Party elite while helping build a viable political alternative to the Right that can speak to—and unify—the multiracial working class. That task will largely fall to labor unions, grassroots community organizations, left electoral coalitions and movement groups that seek to wield solidarity as an antidote to demagoguery.

Three days after Election Day, *In These Times* convened a panel of organizers and thinkers to discuss what to make of the results, the lessons to be learned and how the Left can chart a path forward.

The group included Asha Ransby-Sporn, a community organizer who co-founded Black Youth Project 100; Marisa Franco, director and co-founder of Mijente; Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson, a leader in the Movement for Black Lives and co-executive director of the Highlander Research and Education Center; Brandon Mancilla, the Region 9A director of United Auto Workers; and Reema Ahmad, a Palestinian community organizer who helped lead the Uninstructed campaign in Wisconsin.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

What are your immediate reactions to the major defeat for Democrats we saw this election?

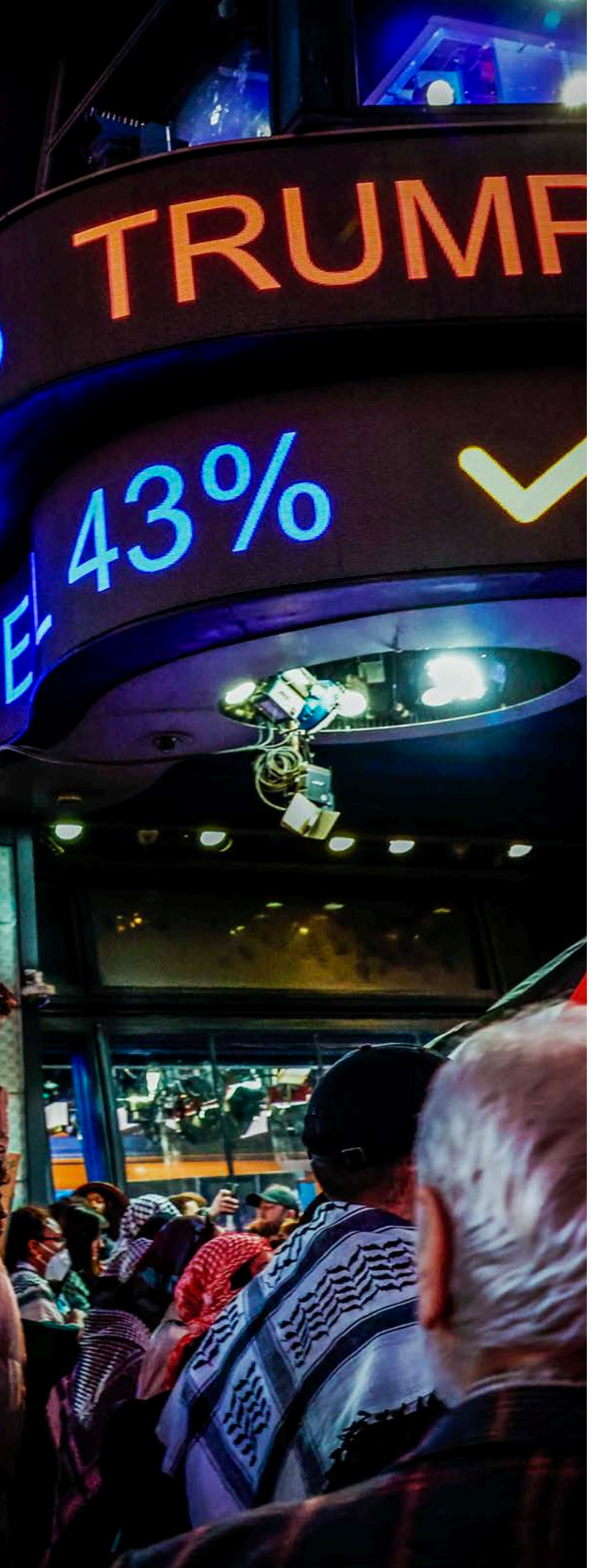
ASH-LEE WOODARD HENDERSON: A lot of us thought this would be a contested election, and I don't think many folks had a plan for what would happen if Trump just outright won. A lot of our assessments—mine included—misread what the working class would do, or not do, in this moment. There's some real talk we need to have about the status of base-building in this country. We are too often making assessments about people without talking to them, and that's not the organizing traditions a lot of us come from. How do we get back to it?

MARISA FRANCO: The Democratic Party has largely abandoned working people. But for the Left and progressives, there is also a distance from working people—a non-acknowledgement that working-class people do not have complete alignment with the full progressive agenda.

An almost contradictory result of the first Trump victory, I think, was that the money that came pouring in to fund the resistance ended up catalyzing a bureaucratization of the grassroots movement. So, precisely when we need to be more adaptable, more willing to experiment, we're increasingly inside of formations where so

KENA BETANCUR/GETTY IMAGES

Right: On Election Day, pro-Palestinian demonstrators march through New York's Times Square as results favoring now President-elect Donald Trump roll through the marquee.



much has to be done internally that we're too slow or disconnected to respond appropriately to crisis or opportunity.

One of my favorite quotes is from [African anti-colonial leader] Amílcar Cabral: "Tell no lies, claim no easy victories." Whether it's for the Democratic Party, for the Left, for progressives—this was an unequivocal loss. There are some bright spots, and I'm grateful for long-distance runners and people who jumped in to participate for the first time. This appreciation shouldn't come at the expense of being honest about where we are and how we got here.

We also need to reckon with the fact that when Biden dropped out, there was a rush to immediately endorse Kamala Harris. We have to grapple with what it means for our constituencies to associate us with the Democratic Party. Also, it's clear that we may increasingly see folks put forward who look like us to defend the status quo.

BRANDON MANCILLA: Simply put, the billionaire class and Donald Trump and the radical Right won this round by fracturing the working class and exposing the labor movement's historic decline. [United Auto Workers] members led a massive electoral organizing push. We found out that when members talk to other members about the stakes of the election—for things that Harris wasn't running on, like the cost of living, trade, retirement security, healthcare—we made significant strides in shifting support away from Trump. But most workers are not in a union, and most unions didn't commit to this program the way we did. So as a labor movement, we don't have the reach we need right now.

We're in a moment of reflection, of course. But I don't think we can question ourselves so much that we move away from what did work for our union, which is to talk to working-class people about their issues and all the complexity and messiness that entails. The Trump administration is going to entail a lot of chaos for working-class people. So it's time to really interrogate, how do you build progressive, working-class politics? We believe that a lot of the work we've done in the United Auto Workers—a big, multiracial, multisector union where we've won record contracts and finally been able to organize successfully in the South—shows a sort of blueprint for the future.

ASHA RANSBY-SPORN: What feels clear across the board is that there is a general appetite for disruption to the status quo. That is a critical thing for the Democratic Party to understand—and for those of us who do understand it to be contending for power. That's true on the national level, but it plays out in a place like Chicago, where in 2023 we elected a mayor who comes from the labor movement. In our first-ever races for an elected school board in November, we saw the Right and the charter school industry pouring money into this election. They were able to win some narrative ground and undermine our pro-public education candidates by

painting labor and the Left as the establishment. The Left needs to be able to deliver materially for people, but people also don't wake up every day with the analytical tools to make a completely objective analysis of their conditions. I think sometimes we rest too much on feeling like we're right about what would benefit people materially and don't spend enough time telling a story that people can connect to, something inspiring to belong to.

Despite some optimism when she first entered the race, Kamala Harris ultimately refused to break from Biden's disastrous support for Israel. What impact do you think this had?

REEMA AHMAD: We have been under no illusions; Trump will not do better here. But what else was invited in when our government continued to say it was OK to send our tax dollars to support a genocide? I think about not only the ways that has shown up in our elections and who is going to be governing this country, but also in what it did to our ability to see our humanity in one another, and our liberations as intertwined.

Above: United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain (right) ignites a crowd of vote watchers in Chattanooga, Tenn., on April 19. Local plant workers won the right to form a union, with more than 51% voting yes.

MANCILLA: I'll add that there was no excuse for the Democratic Party to allow Trump and Vance to occupy the antiwar lane in the campaign. Number one, because it's nonsense—they're going to give a blank check to Israel to provoke war in the Middle East. But it's also a Democratic failure from the electoral standpoint. There's a lot of discussion about how important Gaza really was to the electorate. The numbers we have are clear from our own internal polling, which is that our members understood the importance of the war in Gaza and they supported our union's cease-fire position and our call to either embargo or condition aid to Israel. I think the working class in this country remains antiwar because they know who pays the consequences.

And, of course, there's no excuse for the support for genocide to continue under the remaining months of the Biden administration, and we have to continue to build grassroots and institutional pressure.

Trump's second term is likely to be even more dangerous than his first. What lessons have we learned about supporting the communities most under threat?

FRANCO: Trump has pledged mass deportations. The machinery and the infrastructure in which

ELIJAH NOUVELAGE/GETTY IMAGES

he can carry them out was largely built by Democrats—let's acknowledge that. There's no easy answer. What few pathways we had before are increasingly an obstacle course. In order to understand how they're going to implement the agenda, we have to get close to the ground with people who are facing the threat. Our experience teaches us that one of the key ways to do this is through individual and community deportation defense. From there, you can identify weak points in the system and generate the stories that give you the real, human face of what's happening.

The other piece that is incumbent to grapple with is the permission structure that's been created. Housing costs are high, people can't pay their bills and Trump successfully blamed all of that on immigrants. So we can and must build out support for people under threat of deportation, but we also have to have a concurrent response to these economic needs. Without that, we may win some battles, but we're going to continue to lose the war.

What do you see as some of the immediate tasks ahead of us?

RANSBY-SPORN: Mobilization under Trump is inevitable. People getting upset about the things that he will do is inevitable. I just hope that we are able to translate that anger and mobilization into real organizing and other kinds of efforts that bring more people and institutions along. The most organized forces on the Left are still relatively marginal, and the goal is not to stay that way. The goal is to win majorities of people.

A lot of what I feel like I saw in the aftermath of 2016 was retreat. Retreat isn't inherently bad if we're doing it to reassess and strategize. But accepting powerlessness is not an option for me, and we should not allow it to be an option for our movements. And I think that it requires strong leadership from movement leaders to really wrestle with and be honest with our folks about how the odds are stacked against us, and what it will take to build the power we need anyway. We don't have the luxury of giving up.

HENDERSON: I don't want us to pivot too quickly to what we have to do in 2025, when there's still work that we should be doing to put pressure on the Biden administration. We need to finish as strong as we can, including pushing for judicial appointments.

But we also have to be intentional about telling the whole truth about what is coming, so that we don't lose the minimal trust that we still have with the working class.

Donald Trump and his loyalists have very clearly tried to put themselves on the map as economic populists, and we know that's bullshit. What are the demands that we can raise that show working people very clearly that Donald Trump is lying to them about what he says he's going to fix?

I think far too many of us as organizers have experienced that, in times of great crisis, people can become more conservative in the risks they're willing to take because of the consequences involved. When the potential consequences exceed just getting a ticket for protesting, folks might stay with the devil they know, for lack of a better metaphor. We have to build a community that makes it worth it, that folks believe will keep them safe. And even if it won't keep them safe, we'll care for them in their sense of insecurity, and flank them around the blowback.

I don't think there's a simple answer to what's going to get us through the next four years, or what kind of institutions we need to be strengthening or building. We can't just say that it's going to be rooted in any one single issue or tactical intervention. The dialectic here is that folks mobilize when they feel like they have access to meaningful work. The more that we create low bars for entry, to be able to reach masses of people and plug them into meaningful work at the intersection of their skills and their desires for community, the less likely we will see demobilization and people just being frozen in despair and grief.

AHMAD: As much as I've been thinking about how we build power, I've also been thinking about how we wield it when we have it. I'm thinking of the Uncommitted Movement and the ways in which folks across our country and in key swing states were able to take our protest and our demands to the ballot box. And I'm still reflecting on the ways that we could have taken this further. There is a reason, in my mind, that the election outcomes we are seeing have come after almost 400 days of complicity in a genocide. And I want us to really interrogate that while we double down in the places where we have power and the places where we need to continue to build and support our communities.

MANCILLA: I think this election has sharpened the importance of the United Auto Workers' call for May Day 2028, the call for a general strike. There's a big push to align with other unions and organize new unions so that contracts line up [to expire concurrently]. That's something that really has to happen over the next year. But there's also the component of it that needs to be connected to grassroots organizations outside of the traditional labor movement. That is when this becomes a real political strike, a referendum on what will now be a Trump administration in an election year. It's also a question for Democrats: Which side are you on? We are—alongside other progressive voices, like Bernie Sanders—really kind of trying to reset the agenda for the party, if it is willing and able to do that. If it's not, we're going to mobilize our own political program, and we need to find allies and build the institutions to do that.

MILES KAMPF-LASSIN is senior editor at *In These Times*.


POLICE
POLICE

The New College Gambit

The right-wing takeover of Florida's public honors college blurs the line between tragedy and farce, but attacks on universities are about to get worse

BY KATHRYN JOYCE
ILLUSTRATIONS BY GABRIELLA TRUJILLO

ON THE EVENING OF MAY 17, UNDER A BILLOWING WHITE TENT overlooking the sunset on Sarasota Bay, a titan of business, a self-made man, stood before a sea of ungrateful punks, trying to impart some wisdom.

Joe Ricketts, founder of the online brokerage firm TD Ameritrade, was talking about his boyhood paper route and the importance of hard work when the graduating class of the New College of Florida—the small, unorthodox honors college of the state's public university system—drowned him out with raucous chants of "Free Palestine."

On stage, Ricketts turned to New College President Richard Corcoran and sorrowfully said, "I hate it, but they really don't care what I have to say." Corcoran gripped his elbow: "We will win, Joe." Ricketts nodded. "You will win."

That's one version of the story—the one Corcoran subsequently recounted in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, vowing to punish the students who'd chanted, perhaps by withholding their degrees.

Here's another: On the evening of May 17, the New College class of 2024 sat under the watchful eye of cops, security guards and surveillance cameras, all trained on their faces, waiting for them to misstep. They'd passed through stringent security to enter their own graduation after a uniquely trying four years: entering college amid a pandemic; their third year consumed by a made-for-media takeover of their school's administration; and, for many, spending their senior year living in off-campus hotels, their dorms given to new students recruited to take their place.

Now, on a day ostensibly meant to celebrate their accomplishments, it appeared they were instead being trolled with a keynote speaker seemingly chosen not despite, but because of their objections: Republican megadonor Joe Ricketts, who gave $1 million to Gov. Ron DeSantis' failed presidential campaign, referred to Muslims as "naturally my enemy" and partnered with Corcoran on a conservative-coded degree program opposed by nearly every New College professor.

So when Ricketts stepped to the podium, some graduates booed, but then—like young people anywhere forced to listen to lengthy platitudes—mostly settled into bored silence.

Then the silence stretched on, and on, because the sound system wasn't working. Of the two microphones on the podium, only the one for an internet livestream picked up Ricketts' voice, while the in-person audience largely heard a mumbling drone, periodically interrupted by feedback and shouts that nobody could hear. After 15 minutes, a handful of students launched a 30-second chant, which, after a brief exchange with Ricketts, Corcoran seemed to seize as an opportunity to end the debacle.

Ever since Jan. 6, 2023, when DeSantis appointed a series of right-wing activists to New College's board of trustees with the mission to transform Florida's weirdest, queerest public college into a "Hillsdale of the South"—emulating the Michigan Christian college known for its conservative "classical education" and hard-right politics—it was clear the takeover was meant to be a model.

As one new trustee, right-wing education activist Chris Rufo, told the *New York Times*, "If we can take this high-risk, high-reward gambit and turn it into a victory, we're going to see conservative state legislators starting to reconquer public institutions all over the United States."

Nearly two years later—after interviews with current and former New College students, faculty and staff, extensive research of news and academic reports, first-hand reporting and numerous documents shared with *In These Times*—there's no simple answer as to whether they've succeeded.

The new New College certainly gained notoriety for its steady stream of provocations: replacing professors of gender studies and history with those

making an affirmative "case for colonialism" or excoriating the "cult" of "wokeness"; recruiting mostly male student athletes who could "rebalance" the "hormones" on campus; inviting a climate change denier and "race science" advocate to address the school. But to date, the totalizing takeover DeSantis enacted in Sarasota hasn't been replicated elsewhere.

And yet, in the past two years, attacks on higher ed have metastasized across the nation, with the tactics deployed at New College reappearing in state after state, school after school—and with the promise Donald Trump's return will take them further still.

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ON NOV. 2, 2021, WHEN JD VANCE INFAMOUSLY DECLARED "THE PROFESSORS ARE the enemy"—invoking Richard Nixon to close that year's National Conservatism conference—Rufo sat in the audience, basking in the acclaim of his peers.

While Vance was speaking, excited shouts from the audience delivered the news that Glenn Youngkin had just won Virginia's gubernatorial race. Given that Rufo, a Manhattan Institute fellow, had spent the previous year whipping critical race theory (CRT) into a nationwide moral panic, and that Youngkin's campaign had focused heavily on denouncing CRT, Rufo's fellow activists declared him a visionary: a "right-wing Leninist" providing Republicans a post-2020 path back to victory by waging a cultural "counterrevolution."

While Rufo's primary targets had been K-12 schools, his scope was rapidly widening. In a speech five months later at Hillsdale College, he called on state lawmakers to "lay siege to the institutions," dispensing with the "fundamentally false" idea of academic freedom to demand that universities "reflect and transmit the values of the public." Henceforth, he declared, state legislatures should use their budgetary powers to remind higher ed "what the public giveth, the public can taketh away" and to rewire universities that had long undergirded progressive activism to instead become a "patronage system" for the Right.

Today, that notion is conservative conventional wisdom. The Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 agenda for a second Trump administration proposes not just dismantling the Department of Education—a longstanding Republican goal—but transferring federal student loan programs to the Treasury Department, ending federal loan forgiveness, upending the college accreditation system and defunding disciplines like gender studies to instead fund "intellectual diversity" and majors that "bolster economic growth"—wonky words for hiring more right-wing faculty and shunting more students toward trade schools and vocational education. In his new book, Heritage President Kevin Roberts calls for destroying "every Ivy League college"—as a start.

Trump has promised to raise billions of dollars by "taxing, fining and suing" private university endowments to establish a "no wokeness or jihadism allowed" online academy; to base university accreditation on how well schools promote "Western civilization" and attack diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs; and to deploy the Justice Department against schools suspected of continuing to use affirmative action principles. Combined with Vance's proposals to rescind universities' tax-exempt status and emulate Hungary's attacks on academic freedom, this year's Republican ticket led one elated American Enterprise Institute fellow to predict a Trump-Vance administration will "go Henry VIII on universities."

It hasn't been a good time in higher ed for a while. If you take the really long view, says University of New Orleans historian Lauren Lassabe Shepherd, author of the 2023 book *Resistance from the Right*, you can trace right-wing attacks on universities back past Nixon, past Supreme Court Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr.'s pivotal 1971 memo urging conservatives to counter "the campus origin" of hostility to capitalism, past William F. Buckley Jr.'s *God and Man at Yale*, to at least the 1920s and the early Red Scare that accompanied the entry of Jewish intellectuals into U.S. academia.

Yet it's a uniquely bad time now—one that academics say ranges from "worse than McCarthyism" to "an intellectual reign of terror."

The legislative attacks accompanying this fury are so numerous that observers track them in broad categories of assault: 365 proposed "educational gag orders" restricting discussion of "divisive concepts" like race, gender and U.S. history, finds PEN America, and DEI bans that have affected 207 campuses in 32 states, according to a running tally maintained by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

There are laws to weaken tenure and accreditation and policies to compel both "viewpoint diversity"—a transparent means of elevating conservative voices—and "institutional neutrality"—an equally transparent means of suppressing pro-Palestine views. In numerous states, legislatures are establishing explicitly conservative "centers" within flagship public universities, exempt from the normal oversight of faculty.

But the scale of such an accounting obscures the effects on the ground. Like that the University of Alabama's Black Student Union and LGBTQ center were forced to relocate following a new anti-DEI law. Or that Tennessee has an online portal to report professors for teaching concepts like intersectionality. Or that Wisconsin Republicans blocked salary raises until the state university system agreed to excise DEI programming and create a new position dedicated to "conservative political thought." Or that Florida is purging hundreds of courses from the state's general education requirements, after already removing introductory sociology courses last year.

"You can have a university system without academic freedom," says Henry Reichman, history professor emeritus at California State University, East Bay and co-author of a 2023 American Association of University Professors (AAUP) report on "political interference" in Florida's universities. "It won't be a good university system and it won't serve society very well," but "that's the kind of higher education they want."

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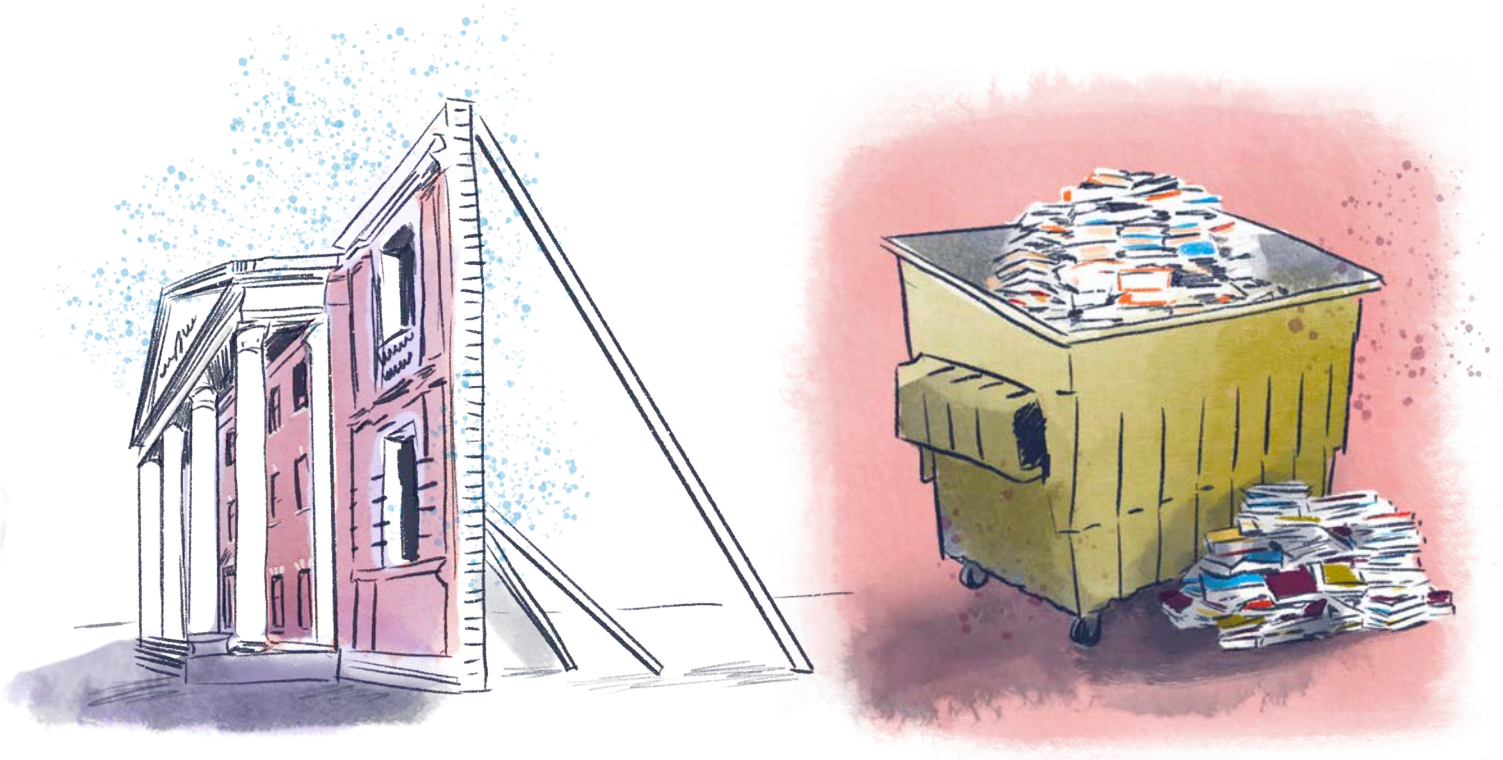
IN CAME THE TRUSTEES: TWO MEMBERS OF TRUMP'S 1776 COMMISSION, CREATED in 2020 to foster "patriotic education"—one a Hillsdale dean, the other a fellow at "MAGA think tank" the Claremont Institute; the editor of a Christian Right magazine; the head of a Christian Right group and anti-LGBTQ activist; and, of course, Rufo, who immediately cast the "hostile takeover" in military terms—his "landing team" would "liberate" the campus from "cultural hostage takers." They were "over the walls and ready to transform higher education from within."

When they first met that January 31, the new trustees wasted no time in voting to fire then-President Patricia Okker, the first woman to head New College, and replace her—at more than twice the salary—with Richard Corcoran, a charter school advocate who'd resigned his position as Florida education commissioner in 2022 amid a bid-rigging scandal related to the privatization of Florida's public schools. (The following October, when Corcoran's interim appointment was made permanent, his compensation leapt to a total package of more than $1 million—an unheard-of amount for such a small school.) In the same meeting, the board discussed plans to shutter the school's DEI office (perhaps, Rufo mused, repurposing it to measure "ideological diversity" instead), and the additional funding that might come if they met DeSantis' "expectations." (Over the next three months, the school received record-level funding of $50 million from the legislature.)

The same day, five miles north, DeSantis announced similar reforms coming for all of Florida's public universities: new core curriculum requirements focused on Western civilization; eliminating "all DEI and CRT bureaucracies"; post-tenure faculty review; and establishing university presidents' and trustees' "authority over the hiring process," to prevent faculty from imposing "ideological litmus tests." That May, DeSantis used New College as a backdrop when he signed a law codifying some of those measures.

In the months in between, students and faculty reeled from such an onslaught of changes that some called the transformation of their college colonization, others terraforming (or "terror-forming"). Signs indicating gender-neutral bathrooms were removed, student murals were painted over, lawns changed to Astroturf. A student-run cafe was replaced by a vendor whose coffee came with Bible verses printed on the cups. The campus police presence at board meetings, recalls student Sara Engels, went from "'I'm a police officer here to help' to 'Fuck around and find out.'"

Even the school color was changed—from bright cyan blue to sober Oxford navy—as well as its anti-mascot mascot,



the Null Set: the empty brackets that, in mathematics, signify zero and at New College represented a gently dorky statement of nonconformity. (While the administration ultimately chose "the Mighty Banyans"—remaking the tropical trees that grow on campus as a meathead with bulging biceps—their initial proposals included the Rufo-esque "Conquistadors.")

Online, Rufo predicted a similar reconstitution of the school's people: "The student body will be recomposed over time: some current students will self-select out, others will graduate. We'll recruit new students who are mission-aligned."

Since part of the takeover's rationale was New College's years of flagging enrollment, Corcoran instructed admissions officers to approve as many applications as possible, recruiting particularly among private and religious schools, homeschooled students and athletes, and offering abundant $10,000 scholarships.

Admissions staff told the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune's* Steven Walker they'd been promised $5,000 bonuses if they enrolled 300 new students that fall, potentially violating federal law. When the next semester began, Corcoran announced a record enrollment of 325 incoming students. More than a third were athletes, including enough baseball players for more than two teams, although New College had no athletic facilities.

But a quarter of the students expected to return did not, and many of those who did were reassigned to off-campus hotels to make room for the new recruits. (Administrators blamed mold in some dorms and a policy requiring first- and second-year students to reside on campus.) That the new class was disproportionately male, Rufo praised as a bonus, reasoning the influx could "rebalance the hormones and the politics on campus."

A similar transformation was underway among faculty and staff, as a tide of political allies—including a former state senator, GOP aides and political spouses—assumed leading roles in the transition and offices of general counsel, student affairs, admissions and the New College of Florida Foundation, which manages the school's modest endowment.

One former GOP lobbyist and aide was first named dean of students and then, in early 2024, interim provost, despite lacking a doctorate or other customary qualifications for a college's chief academic post. The new athletics director—hired from a private Christian academy run by one new trustee—recruited coaches almost exclusively from conservative Christian colleges, according to a federal civil rights complaint.

At the same time, faculty and staff were fleeing or being pushed out—with 77 leaving by fall 2023, shortly after trustees abolished the entire gender studies program. The school's chief diversity officer and librarian were fired without cause. The provost, who had clashed with Rufo, was forced to step down. The contract for a visiting professor who had publicly criticized the takeover was not renewed. And that April, trustees made the anomalous decision to overrule faculty recommendations to grant tenure to five junior professors—prompting the board's faculty representative, computer scientist Matt Lepinski, to resign mid-meeting, from both board and school.

The same month, Aaron Hillegass, a New College alum and data scientist who had joined the faculty that semester, followed suit, posting a resignation letter on X (formerly Twitter) declaring the takeover a fascist experiment that threatened academic freedom nationwide.

"I love New College," he wrote, "but for the good of our nation, I hope the school fails miserably and conspicuously. If I were more patriotic, I would burn the college's buildings to the ground."

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BEFORE THE TAKEOVER, 700-STUDENT NEW COLLEGE WAS KNOWN NOT JUST FOR ITS progressive politics but its no-grades/no-majors pedagogy—the kind of individualized education typically only available at private schools like Oberlin or Reed, for a fraction of the price.

But it was also a weak institution. For years, student enrollment and retention had been declining—which some faculty attributed to chronic underfunding—and the legislature had increasingly paired allocations with warnings that both must improve.

"It made it an obvious target," says Hillegass, "for DeSantis to say nobody really cares about this school anymore, why don't we use it for this publicity stunt, to see if we can get away with it."

That's the broader context surrounding the Right's assault on higher ed: decades of systematic defunding that's cost some public universities a full half of their prior support.

In 2023, West Virginia University's flagship campus cut or terminated some 30 academic programs, laying off nearly 170 faculty. This fall, the University of Connecticut is reviewing almost 250 programs for possible closure, in everything from ethnic studies to English.

"What's interesting about the West Virginia situation is that wasn't the ideological dismantling of a public university," says Dennis Hogan, a Harvard lecturer who teaches and writes about higher education. "Unless you think starving institutions of higher learning of money is ideological."

But the defunding that created the current system of astronomical tuition, crippling student debt and the adjunctification of academia—70-75% of all U.S. faculty are now contract employees—has also helped delegitimize higher education among much of the public.

When right-wing activists like Turning Point USA co-founder Charlie Kirk hawk books with titles like *The College Scam*, notes Yale professor of race, ethnicity and migration Daniel HoSang, they're drawing on a reserve of distrust built over decades, as higher ed went from "a public good that everyone was entitled access to, to now a private responsibility that's devolved onto individual families." Faculty and administrators didn't create that situation, but they're now "asked to defend: Why does this thing cost so, so much money? Why does it seem to guarantee so little economic security?"

And in the face of that anger, other complaints have taken hold.

"There's a way in which these guys are the cleanup crew of the neoliberal hollowing-out of our universities," says Hogan. "They're showing up to the fire sale."

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AS NEW COLLEGE UNVEILED A NEW MISSION statement—"to be the best classical liberal arts college in America"—debacles piled up.

The departure of roughly a third of the faculty meant classes some students needed to graduate were canceled or lacked an instructor. After Corcoran's frenzied enrollment drive, the incoming first-year class had lower SAT scores and GPAs than the year before. The school dropped 24 spots in *U.S. News and World Report's* 2023 ranking of liberal arts colleges—then another 22 spots in 2024.

Corcoran launched a new freshman seminar based on Homer's epic *The Odyssey,* which certainly seemed a step toward building a "classical" college. But a portion of each class was spent socializing around hired food trucks—according to a faculty member who asked for anonymity for fear of retribution, Corcoran had told professors he wanted "a class no one could fail."

In December 2023, the administration abruptly announced it was launching an online degree program in collaboration with the "Ricketts Great Books College": a brand-new entity underwritten by Joe Ricketts, whose business and political empire also encompasses various conservative education projects. (Among them, notes Florida education writer Billy Townsend, is Academica, the nation's largest for-profit charter school management company and a beneficiary in the bid-rigging scandal that led to Corcoran's resignation as education commissioner in 2022.)

Faculty, who had been given little chance for input about the program, subsequently voted against it. The administration had responded by surreptitiously naming a new academic division to house the program, and hired a visiting professor and an adjunct to teach its pilot classes. In its first semester, few students enrolled. By the time Ricketts spoke at graduation, rumors spread that he'd abandoned the project, and nearly all mention of his involvement disappeared from New College's discussion of the program.

"They're just throwing things at the wall to see what will stick," says former professor Amy Reid, then-faculty representative on the board. "They don't care about destroying what they don't understand—the educational model of New College. They don't really think about what should be replacing it. They don't care."

That assertion was arguably demonstrated in June, when the board adopted a new core curriculum centered on two sets of required courses: "logos" (covering the liberal arts) and "techne" (applied practical skills, including science and technology). An administrative presentation illustrated the tracks with mashup AI images: Benjamin Franklin flying a drone, Thurgood Marshall talking to a "robot judge," Millicent Fawcett selling Bitcoin.

Over the previous year, the administration had referred to the new curriculum as Corcoran's vision, but in fact it appeared to be taken—seemingly without attribution—from a proposal sent to Corcoran in April 2023 by a disgraced academic looking for work.

According to emails shared with *In These Times*, just days after Aaron Hillegass' incendiary resignation, former Harvard data scientist David Kane cold-emailed Corcoran, offering to take Hillegass' place. Kane noted he'd been " 'canceled' for the usual nonsense reasons"—in this case, fallout from a series of racist posts on a blog Kane founded, some written under a pseudonym.

Among the pseudonymous posts, reported the student-run *Harvard Crimson*, were calls for professors to discuss racial differences in IQ, a declaration that 90% of Black students at Williams College (Kane's alma mater) wouldn't have been admitted "were it not for their Black'ness" and, according to the student-run *Williams Record*, defenses of the white supremacist group Identity Evropa. Under his own name, Kane argued that Williams should admit fewer students of color and poor students in order to compete with the Ivy League. Kane's contract with Harvard's Division of Social Science, then overseen by Dean Claudine Gay, was not renewed, and a subsequent course he taught at Simmons University was canceled.

Corcoran responded quickly to Kane's email, arranging a call the next day, then a campus visit the following week. Kane wasn't hired. But much of a 20-page memo he sent Corcoran, outlining a new curriculum based on "virtue" and "techne," was adopted, as subsequent emails between administrators and faculty (including discussion of renaming the "virtue" component) made clear.

Three weeks after Kane first wrote him, administrators emailed faculty Corcoran's "vision statement" for the new curriculum, roughly 75% of which came verbatim from Kane's memorandum.

By late 2023, this apparent plagiarism seemed ironic, as Rufo shifted his attention to hunting for plagiarism among liberal academics. (Kane would not answer whether he'd given permission for his proposal to be presented as Corcoran's, but said any suggestion of plagiarism was "utter bullshit." Corcoran and Rufo did not respond to requests for comment.)

By then there were other problems. In November 2023, Corcoran asked Florida lawmakers for $420 million in direct and indirect funding to continue the school's transformation—including plans for an anti-"cancel culture" "Freedom Institute," a bass fishing team and other initiatives to reposition New College as a "luxury brand," even as the school's academic programs continued to operate on austerity budgets. The request drew skepticism even from legislative allies, noted Florida business and politics website *The Capitolist*, given the financial breakdown would make New College "the costliest per-student public higher education institution in the state."

In March, the legislature agreed to allocate an additional $15 million with the unusual caveat that New College submit a detailed business plan and quarterly status updates. And while the Board of Governors approved that plan in September, the decision came with strong reservations about the resources being spent to support the school's focus on recruiting athletes—something faculty and critics describe as a Ponzi scheme.

"The only way we're able to recruit students is by giving these full scholarships, and that requires the legislature to keep pumping money into the school," explains the anonymous faculty member. "I don't think the appetite for the legislature to keep funding this facade, this mirage, is unlimited."

"They had this libertarian fantasy that they can be the people who walk into the *terra nova* and remake the institution from the ground up," agrees Trinity College political scientist Isaac Kamola, director of the AAUP's Center for the Defense of Academic Freedom and author of a recent report on right-wing attacks on academia, including at New College. "But the truth is they are incompetent."

"Of course the only way you're going to get students there," Kamola says, "is fully funding the 75-person baseball team in order to pretend this is working."

The faculty exodus continued—including Reid in August—and the administration increasingly exerted authority in hiring their replacements, overriding faculty decisions 43 times last year, according to an open letter from the New College Education Policy Committee. A number of new hires hailed from explicitly right-wing institutions, while others seemed chosen for spectacle, like the author of a book called *The Case for Colonialism* and a British talk-show host best known for creating satirical anti-"woke" social media personalities. In September, the school hosted climate change denier Michael Schellenberger for a "Socratic" debate; a follow-up will feature neo-eugenicist Steve Sailer, a longtime contributor to white nationalist website VDARE.

"I don't see how this experiment can ever be successful," says former professor Matt Lepinski, noting that, despite the headlines such stunts garner, even conservatives have little interest in taking classes taught by extremists. "For ideological reasons they are creating a product there is no demand for, and they destroyed my school to do it."

By fall, there were signs the board and administration feared the model was failing, too. Trustee Mark Bauerlein wrote multiple articles urging conservative state governments to embrace "the trustee solution" of imposing change from above. In his newly released book, *Storming the Ivory Tower,* Corcoran mournfully writes that although he'd transformed New College "from one of the most progressively captured universities in the country to the freest in the nation," he didn't "see it happening elsewhere."

"There is still time to stop being talkers and start being doers," Corcoran urged. "We can ensure that New College is not just a blip on the screen."

New College declined to answer any specific questions, but communications director Nathan March wrote in an email, "New College is thriving like never before in its history."

But maybe it doesn't matter. "The failure of New College is not itself a failure," Kamola says. "Because the goal is not what's going on at that college; the goal is to fundamentally transform higher education."

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THE TAKEOVER MODEL PILOTED AT NEW COLLEGE may not have spread, says Jeremy Young, PEN America's Freedom to Learn program director, but its spirit has, as recent developments make clear.

Tennessee Republicans vacated the board of the state's only historically Black public university, claiming financial mismanagement had caused housing shortages and other problems—problems state Democrats instead attribute to $2 billion in underfunding over 30 years. The University of Kentucky's trustees dissolved the faculty senate, transferring its authority to the

administration. Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin, who had previously called for public university boards to be an "extension of the executive branch," installed a 12-4 conservative supermajority at George Mason University, including a lead author of Project 2025. After Indiana passed a law making tenure contingent on how well faculty cultivate "intellectual diversity," the state's attorney general argued professors have no right to academic freedom since, as state employees, their classroom lectures constitute "government speech."

Across Florida, so many current or former Republican politicians were appointed to university presidencies—most notably former Nebraska Sen. Ben Sasse, whose reign at the University of Florida was marked by outrageous profligacy and nepotism—that when state Rep. Randy Fine failed to be appointed president of Florida Atlantic University, and publicly complained that he'd "never agreed to compete for the job," the state chancellor suspended the search.

Then there was the fallout from widespread campus protests against the unfolding genocide in Gaza, as Republicans declared "our schools are producing monsters" and ultra-rich Ivy League alumni organized campaigns of donor attrition. The House launched hearings into what it cast as epidemic campus antisemitism, starting with the presidents of Harvard, Penn and MIT. Two of them subsequently resigned, including Harvard's Claudine Gay, the initial target of Rufo's new operation exposing plagiarism among progressive academics.

When Gay resigned in early January, Rufo—who, days after October 7, had urged conservatives to "create a strong association between Hamas, BLM [Black Lives Matter], DSA [Democratic Socialists of America] and academic 'decolonization' in the public mind"—declared her "the symbol of the DEI regime that has conquered American academic life."

The American Enterprise Institute pronounced DEI the "ideological engine for anti-White, anti-Western, and anti-Semitic hatred." Soon, conservative *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens echoed the logic—that the "real problem" lay among "the main convictions and currents of today's academia: intersectionality, critical theory, post-colonialism, ethnic studies and other concepts" that "politicize classrooms."

More targets emerged, from demonizing Middle East and Arabic studies to Corcoran's suggestion that campus antisemitism was in fact caused by shared governance, the principle of academic freedom that grants faculty authority over hiring, curriculum and tenure.

Some conservatives acknowledged the opportunism of the moment, declaring the protests a "once-in-a-century" chance to "change the face of American higher education," letting colleges become "the architects of their own destruction."

State DEI bans went into overdrive, and campus after campus began shuttering their departments. The Right moved the goalposts, arguing that simply firing DEI staff didn't "go far enough," and universities must "root out" subtler traces lingering in the system. The Texas Senate held a hearing to grill university leaders on how they would ensure that no DEI programming remained under alternate names. A new pattern arose, of schools preemptively complying before laws were even passed, as when the University of Missouri, Columbia closed its DEI office in August—citing what was "happening in other states"—and the University of Missouri, Kansas City followed suit in October.

"We're seeing an epidemic of university leaders capitulating to these threats," says Young, "that's more insidious than anything before. Previously, the weak link in the higher ed system was state legislation. Now we're seeing that the weak link is leaders themselves."

Meanwhile, universities have undergone a level of militarization not seen since Kent State. SWAT teams swarmed campuses, and students and faculty were arrested, suspended or barred from campus by the thousands.

Administrators enacted alarming new restrictions on campus "expressive activity," numerous contingent faculty lost contracts and at least one tenured professor was fired for publicly criticizing Israel. One foreign student protester was placed at risk of deportation, but many more could follow, since Trump has promised to revoke student visas from any "radical anti-American and antisemitic foreigners at colleges and universities."

All in all, AEI education policy director Frederick Hess told *The Hill* in September, "it's been the best two years for conservatives in higher education in a half century."

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AT NEW COLLEGE, THE UNRAVELING CONTINUED. In mid-August, videos circulated of a dumpster behind the library overflowing with more than 10,000 books, more stacked on the ground beside it. Some were culled from the library; others represented the collection of the Gender and Diversity Center, which once hosted icons like bell hooks but is now a student foosball lounge.

Corcoran and the trustees began arguing that the New College Foundation, a legally separate entity, is a "wholly-owned subsidiary" of the college, prompting concerns that a second, "mini-takeover" is coming, plundering the endowment to cover fiscal mismanagement at the school.

A sad consensus grew that the school will likely close within five years or less.

"I don't know anybody who's incredibly optimistic," says alum Sophia Brown, former editor of student paper *The Catalyst* who now, along with Young and Reid, works at PEN America. "What's more important is the student and alumni community we're able to foster in whatever time we have left."

Brown spoke to me on the morning before graduation, when several dozen members of the broader New College community had gathered in a Sarasota community center for a two-day teach-in about the takeover. The night before, hundreds more had met to hold an alternative commencement for graduates—a vastly different affair than the official ceremony that would take place that evening.

Graduates wore wings and capes, Patricia Okker watched her former students walk the stage and journalist Masha Gessen delivered the keynote, recounting "three painful lessons" New College students had been forced to learn: that institutions are fragile, autocracies have a dumbing-down effect and they couldn't trust the state to defend their education.

Both events grew from a wave of organizing that began in early 2023, as hundreds of students, faculty and alumni pooled their talents to respond to DeSantis' test-case takeover with "a take-back playbook."

After Okker was fired, recalls alum Brian Cody, a sleepy alumni forum shot up, almost overnight, to 2,000 members, who quickly began self-organizing into areas of focus: legal action, legislation, policy compliance, student support. New groups formed, including Cody's Novo Collegian Alliance (NCA) and NCF Freedom, and what began with rallies and op-eds led to lawsuits, federal complaints and public records requests filed by the dozens.

"We went through every issue asking," says Cody, "if there was someone who can regulate this, who would it be?"

NCF Freedom and the New College faculty union filed separate lawsuits on behalf of New College and other Florida professors, for violations of free speech, academic freedom and tenure protections. NCA submitted more than 100 pages of documentation to New College's accreditor, Cody says, for complaints ranging from violations of faculty governance to false advertising. Two civil rights complaints were filed with the federal Department of Education.

The community also learned about the limitations of those avenues, as lawsuits were dismissed, accreditation complaints stalled and the DOE settled one case while a larger civil rights complaint languished. The latter appeared to overwhelm a department that, as one faculty member says, was "designed for individuals experiencing civil rights harassment, not an entire school under a civil rights attack."

And yet, almost two years later, they haven't stopped—if only to make clear to other states that DeSantis' gambit was a failure.

"In the end, we may not save the college," says the same anonymous faculty member, "but I think we can save this model from being truly exported."

For Young, it's an example of "what could be possible all over the country, if advocates for higher education really organized to fight back in a way that could turn the tide."

Glimmers of that sensibility are starting to arise. In September, the AAUP gathered in Philadelphia with 10 unions that represent higher ed workers to launch a new coalition, Labor for Higher Education. Their demands—from fully funding public universities to ensuring the freedoms to speak, assemble and learn—represent a growing acknowledgment that the fights for academic freedom and against austerity are inextricably intertwined.

While the Right doesn't admit it, the vision of higher ed they're advancing is one where the lucky few have access to a rich liberal arts education, others get a "classical" right-wing imitation and the majority receive utilitarian instruction designed to fill holes in the labor market.

It's a future, says Young, that looks a lot like the past, "when higher education was the prerogative of the elites and was not available to all."

That makes whatever happens next a multi-front fight.

"Those of us who believe in education as a project and as important to a free and democratic society have to be in the fight now," says Hogan. "Because almost everything is out there to fight for." ITT

Fact-checking by Thomas Birmingham.

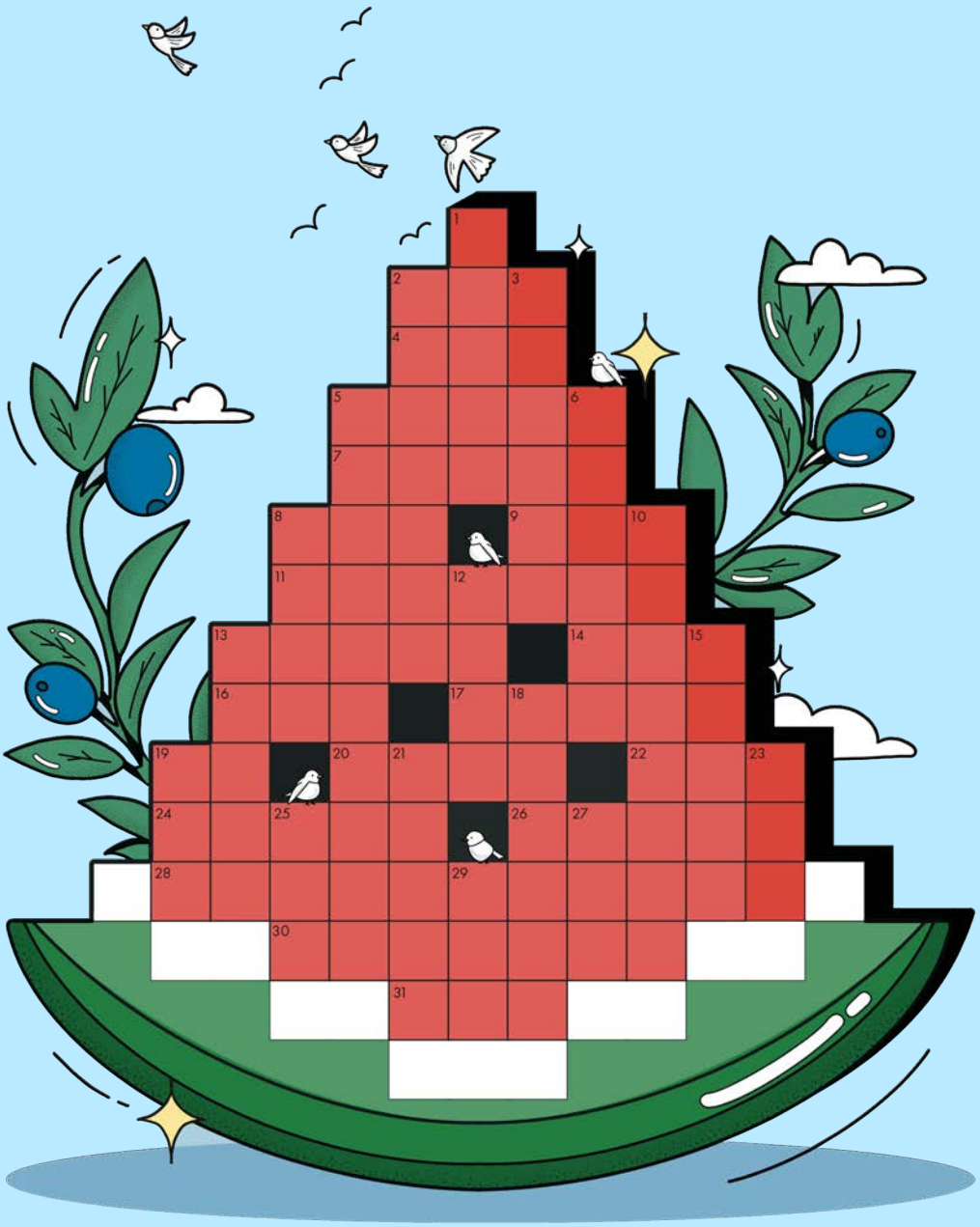
KATHRYN JOYCE is investigative editor at *In These Times* and author, most recently, of *The Child Catchers: Rescue, Trafficking and the New Gospel of Adoption*.

Crosswords for Change

BY KAITLIN HSU (徐欣)

During *The New York Times* tech workers' strike, which ended on Nov. 11, workers asked readers to forgo the paper's digital offerings. Similarly, the coalition Puzzlers for Palestinian Liberation (myself included) began a *Times* boycott in June, explaining in an open letter that "over 2.7 million of the *Times*' 10 million subscribers are only signed up for The Athletic, Cooking, Wirecutter or Games. ... The 'diversion' offered by *Times* puzzles is structurally central to the paper's business model; it directly funds the paper's disgraceful coverage of Israel's genocidal war."

An array of alternatives to the *Times* crossword are available for puzzlers to play instead— from outlets like Defector, Puzzles for Palestine and These Puzzles Fund Abortion, to protest publications like *The New York War Crimes*, independent outfits such as Juliana Pache's Black Crossword and, now, *In These Times*. Happy puzzling!



ACROSS

2 Soda
4 Color TV pioneer
5 Worker-owned businesses
7 Actor Oscar of "*Dune*" and "*The Force Awakens*"
8 Fuel additive brand
9 Still
11 Za'atar ingredient
13 *Little House on the Prairie* author Ingalls Wilder
14 Part of TGIF
16 ___ poetica (meta-poem about the "art of poetry")
17 Café con ___
19 Ave. crossing
20 Menacing dino
22 She-sheep
24 Chicago airport
26 Map within a map
28 Zapatista saying: "They tried to bury us. They didn't know ____."
30 Underwhelming drink (2 words)
31 Nintendo's Super ___

DOWN

1 Xocolatl ingredient
2 Flourish
3 Yellow tropical fruit used to make supo esi
5 Plant with a Jaffa orange variety (2 words)
6 Picturesque
8 Fly high
10 "From the river ___ ___ ___, Palestine will be free!"
12 Strong wind
13 Wood-shaping tool
15 Labored like garment and textile workers
18 Is
19 Piglet's mom
21 Aired again
23 UFO crew
25 "So cute!"
27 Fannie Lou Hamer ___ Townsend
29 Scrape (by)

VIEW THE ANSWERS ON PAGE 41

ILLUSTRATION BY SAMA GHEITH

BY MATT BORS

VOTE HARDER

AFTER KAMALA HARRIS' DISASTROUS LOSS, THE POPULAR SOCIAL MEDIA account @TheWapplehouse posted, "sorry guys I'll vote harder next time."

It's a sentiment that mocks what moved from pressure to cast a ballot for a deeply flawed candidate to a very real threat—to stop protesting, fall in line and go around telling everyone everywhere to vote for Democrats with more fervor, or else we would get a Republican in charge and it would be your fault.

The new graphic novel that I co-wrote with artist Ben Clarkson, *Justice Warriors: Vote Harder*, is a political thriller for our deranged online era that speaks directly to these sociopolitical dynamics. Our book isn't about blue states and red states; it's a far-future dystopia packed with mutants, cyberpunk hyper-inequality and sicko elites who tip the scales even further in their favor. So it rhymes with our present.

With disastrous debates, confounding registration forms for the poor and multiple assassination attempts, what can look like predicting the news is actually just studying the chaos of history, then adding weird mutants to the mix. Case in point: the main plot of *Justice Warriors* may seem ludicrous, but it's based on Cointelpro operations to infiltrate and upend radical movements.

President-elect Donald Trump, who hawked expensive NFT collector cards of himself during the campaign, has appeared more unhinged than ever. In our book's fictional Bubble City, the celebrity incumbent carves his face onto the sun with a space laser and sells people glasses so they can stare at it.

We're not trying to give anyone ideas, but one role of a satirist is to stay a step ahead of reality. Another is to critique the absurdity of the sociopolitical landscapes in front of us, and it's tough to think of many things more absurd right now than Democratic leaders thinking the only thing that went wrong in the 2024 election is that we didn't ... vote harder.

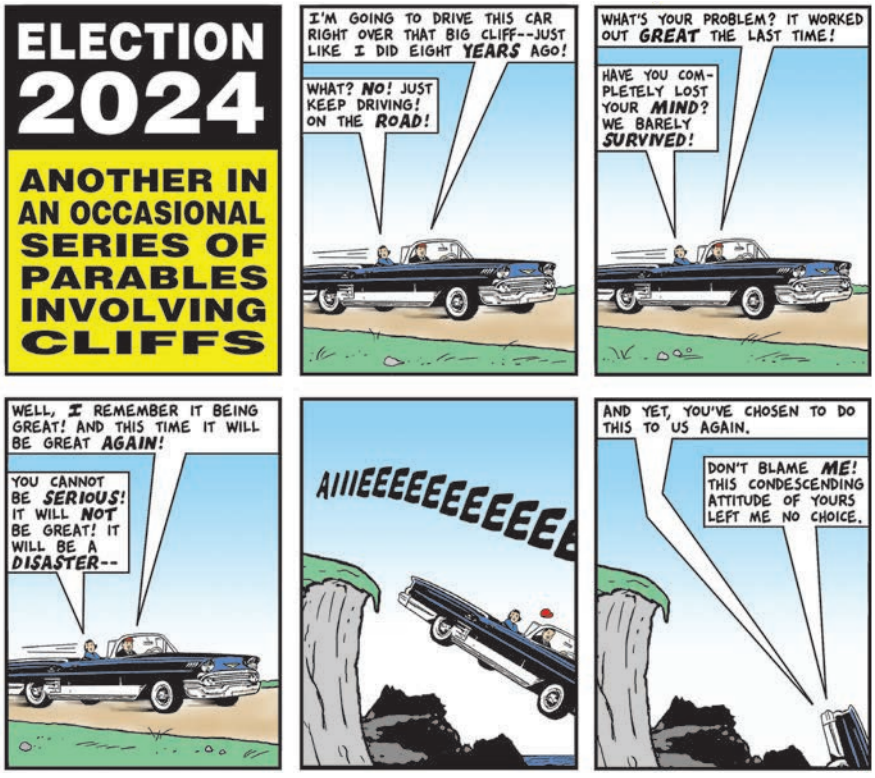
MATT BORS, a two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist, is comics editor at *In These Times*.

COMIC BY MATT BORS AND BEN CLARKSON

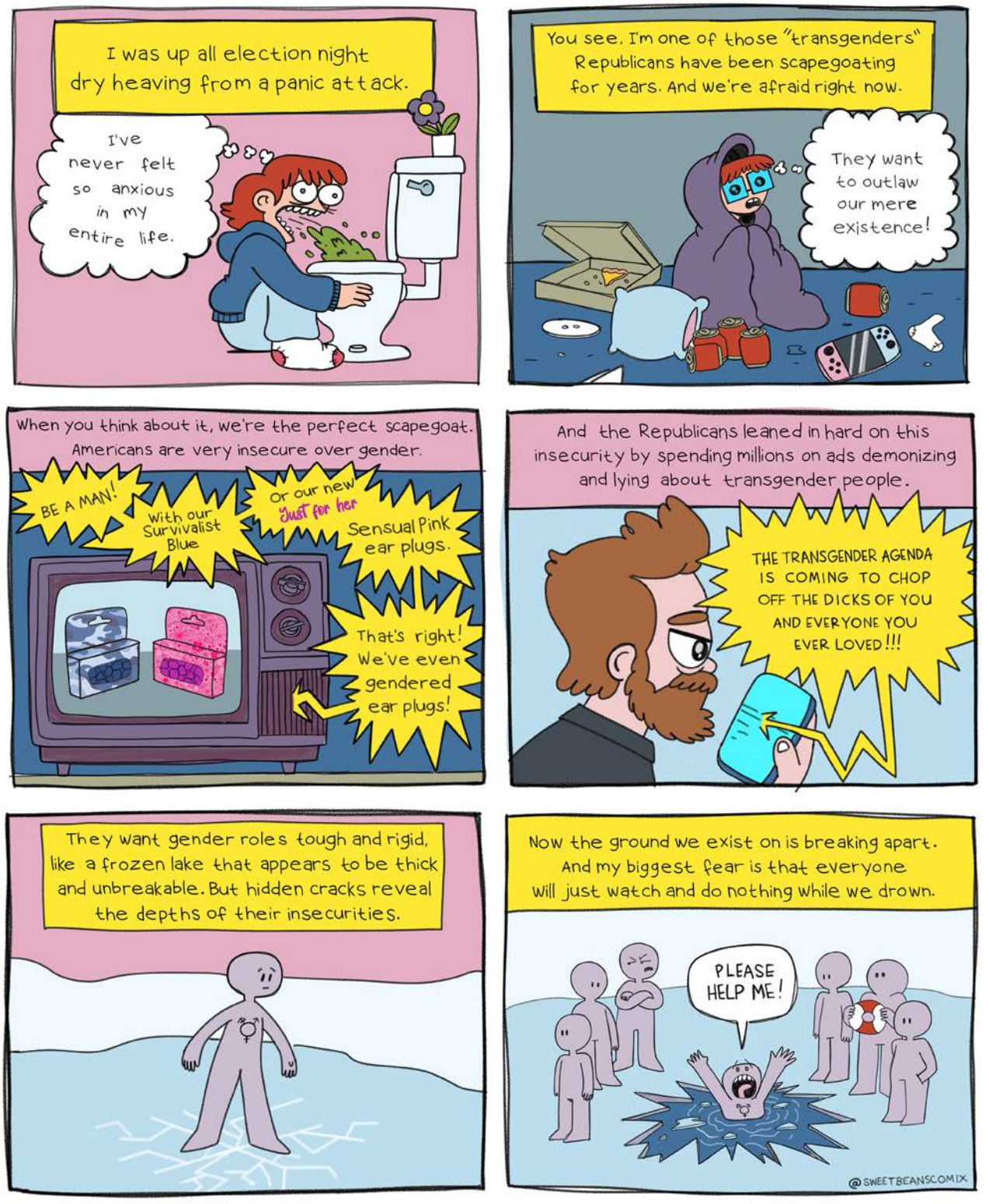
BRIAN MCFADDEN

JEN SORENSEN

TOM TOMORROW



MALLORIE UDISCHAS-TROJAN



PAGE 38 CROSSWORD ANSWERS

ACROSS

2 POP
4 RCA
5 COOPS
7 ISAAC
8 STP
9 YET
11 OREGANO
13 LAURA
14 ITS
16 ARS
17 LECHE
19 ST
20 TREX
22 EWE
24 OHARE
26 INSET
28 WE WERE SEEDS
30 WEAK TEA
31 NES

DOWN

1 COCOA
2 PROSPER
3 PAPAYA
5 CITRUS TREE
6 SCENIC
8 SOAR
10 TO THE SEA
12 GALE
13 LATHE
15 SEWED
18 EXISTS
19 SOW
21 RERAN
23 ETS
25 AWW
27 NEE
29 EKE