BLACK LIVES MATTER BACKLASH
THE NYPD’S WAR ON PROTESTERS INTENSIFIES
BY AMBA GUERGUERIAN & JOHN TARLETON, P4

STILL STANDING
IT’S THE MOMENT WE’VE BEEN WAITING FOR.

Donald Trump is trudging across the White House Lawn one last time. The Marine One helicopter awaits with its rotor blades whirring. Two Marine Corps guards stiffly salute as Trump walks up the stairs. He turns and gives the thumbs up sign to his supporters. He’s wearing his trademark red-and-white MAGA hat.

And then he disappears into the belly of the giant metal insect, is lifted up into the sky and carried far, far away to gilded exile at Mar-a-Lago. Or, he could barricade himself in a White House bathroom madly tweeting. Or, he could skulk away in criminal convictions.

Truth is, we don’t know what Donald Trump’s final moments as President will look like. He could skulk away in the dark of night before the inauguration. Or, he could barricade himself in a White House bathroom madly tweeting at his supporters to come to his aid even as his successor is sworn into office. However it goes down, Trump’s presidency will be over on 12:01pm on January 20, 2021. Nonetheless,

- Trumpism won’t be over.
- The D.C. swamp now drained will go on living.
- The need for visionary social movements and candidates striving for transformative change both inside and outside the system won’t be over.
- For New York City, the scourge of austerity won’t be over.
- And the need for a media outlet like The Indy that combines shoe-leather reporting and incisive analysis of the issues and the grass-roots movements that matter most certainly won’t be over.

2020 has been a year like no other. We’ve persevered through a once-in-a-century pandemic — continuing to publish our print edition while expanding our online presence, launching a weekly one-hour radio show on WBAI and hosting monthly Zoom discussions with prominent progressive organizers and thought leaders. And we continue to provide a unique space where young progressive journalists can hone their skills while going out and covering our wounded but still amazing city.

Over these past two decades, The Indy has emerged as a unique New York City institution. Think of it as a vaccine against the corporate propaganda and the lazy conventional wisdom that is commonplace in much of the media. In June, shortly after we came out with a special edition amid the George Floyd protests, one of our readers, Priscilla Feix, sent us a handwritten note describing her reaction to seeing the new issue in one of our red-and-white outdoor newsboxes.

“I nearly jumped out of my sandals,” she wrote in a neat, handwritten script. “I was so excited I had to take extras for friends.”

We hope to give Indy readers many more reasons to leap out of their shoes in 2021. But to do that, we need your support now more than ever.

Our ad revenues have dropped due to the pandemic. Some of our major funders have had to scale back their support. We’ve tightened our belt accordingly, but we can only take that so far. We know not everyone is able to give during these difficult times. But if you can do so, please give generously this year. With your support, anything is possible.

In Solidarity,
JOHN TARLETON
The Indy
The Indy during this year’s annual winter fund drive.

IN THIS ISSUE

NYPD PAYBACK, P4
The NYPD continues to attack Black Lives Matter activists and their allies.

TRAIL OF VIOLENCE, P5
An Indypendent investigation has found at least 18 incidents since July of non-violent protesters being attacked by the NYPD.

FEAR FAILS, P7
Suburban Democratic state legislators survived an onslaught of negative ads bankrolled by police unions.

QUEENS SPECIAL ELECTION, P8
Democratic socialist Moumita Ahmed could set the tone for this year’s City Council races by winning her Feb. 2 special election.

BROOKLYN HOSPITAL REMAINS OPEN, P9
A nurse-led campaign to keep Kingsbrook Hospital open during the pandemic’s second wave has won a temporary reprieve.

EVICTION CRISIS, P10
From NY to California, millions of tenants are at risk of being evicted in early 2021.

LESSONS LEARNED, P12
We invited progressive activists, organizers, journalists and scholars to help us make sense of the past four years.

ORGANIZE TO WIN, P15
The left is gaining strength, says author Jonathan Smucker. But can it go the distance?

MEXICO AFTER TRUMP, P16
No country has been villainized more by Trump than our southern neighbor.

STRAIGHTMAN UNLEASHED, P17
Tanzania’s recent presidential election showed what can happen when an autocrat is fully in charge.

NEXT LEVEL NEWS JUNKIE P18
Elise Engler has been turning headlines into a daily painting every day for the past five years.

50-YEAR FRIENDSHIP, P20
The amazing story of former Black Panthers Paul Coates and Eddie Conway.

MUTUAL AID FOR DUMMIES, P21
Dean Spade shares his hard-won knowledge about how we can learn to “work together on purpose.”

HOLIDAY LOCKDOWN HOTLINE, P22
The Good Reverend’s healing tips for holiday loneliness and how to approach holiday shopping.

STILL STANDING

BRIEFING ROOM
BY INDYPENDENT STAFF

13,000 VOLUNTEERS FOR AOC’S HOMEWORK-HELP PROGRAM
More than 13,000 people have volunteered for an online-tutoring program that Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez sponsored to help pupils in her Bronx-Queens district.

13,000 VOLUNTEERS FOR AOC’S HOMEWORK-HELP PROGRAM
More than 13,000 people have volunteered for an online-tutoring program that Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez sponsored to help pupils in her Bronx-Queens district.

MTA PULLS THE BRAKE ON ‘DOOMSDAY BUDGET’
The Metropolitan Transportation Authority has delayed voting on a proposed “doomsday budget” that would raise fares, cut service by 40 percent, and lay off more than 9,000 bus and train workers. Instead, the authority’s board on Dec. 16 approved a budget that assumes it will get $4.5 billion in federal aid in 2021. But MTA chair Patrick J. Foye said during the meeting that if it didn’t receive that money by the end of January, it would have to take “severe actions to balance the budget.”

COPS, DRIVER HIT IMMIGRATION PROTESTS IN NJ, NY
Six people were injured in Manhattan Dec. 12 when a car turning a corner rammed into demonstrators supporting a hunger strike by immigrants detained at the Bergen County Jail in Hackensack, N.J. The driver was charged with reckless endangerment.

NY STATE PENSION FUND VOWS TO RETIRE FOSSIL FUEL INVESTMENTS
The pension fund covering more than 1 million New York State employees has begun rearranging its investments in order to reach “net zero greenhouse-gas emissions” by 2040, State Comptroller Thomas P. DiNapoli announced Dec. 9. The state Common Retirement Fund, the third largest in the United States with an estimated value of $226 billion, has already divested from 22 coal companies. It plans to evaluate within four years whether other fossil-fuel businesses, such as oil-sands extraction and oil and gas storage and transportation, “are on viable low-carbon transition pathways.” If not, the fund would divest “where consistent with fiduciary duty.” Investing for the low-carbon future is essential to protect the fund’s long-term value, DiNapoli said in a statement.

CONGRESSWOMAN ALEXANDRIA OCASIO-CORTEZ

QUEENS SPECIAL ELECTION

The Good Reverend’s healing tips for holiday loneliness and how to approach holiday shopping.

upport the Indy — Today! P24
More great reasons you should give to The Indy during this year’s annual winter fund drive.

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021

December 2020 / January 2021
POLICING

By Amba Guerguerian & John Tarleton

On the evening of September 17, a group of 60 immigrant rights protesters left Foley Square in lower Manhattan heading toward the 9/11 Memorial. They were trailed closely by 50-60 police officers including 11 white shirts — lieutenants, captains and inspectors — who were ready to rumble.

When the protesters turned onto Broadway, they were chased down and tackled in the street by the police within 10 minutes of having set out. Shortly after, protesters were kettled in front of the 9/11 memorial, where additional police units showed up: 50 additional riot cops, bike cops, plain-clothed officers, detectives and a helicopter.

Tameer Peak, a Black Lives Matter organizer, was filming live on Instagram when the cops pulled him from the sidewalk into the street. He soon found himself face down on Broadway with a half dozen police officers piling on top of him as they put him under arrest.

“They kept trying to rip my fucking arm off,” Peak recalled. “One put his fucking foot in my back. It’s ridiculous to even think that you can’t walk on the sidewalk and record them.”

Following the videotaped murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in late May, massive Black Lives Matter protests erupted across New York City. They continued a near daily basis over the next month. The NYPD was frequently overwhelmed and, like many other embattled police departments across the country, responded to protests against police violence with more violence — shoving peaceful protesters to the ground, clubbing them with batons, driving police SUVs into crowds, kettling protesters and then arresting them en masse even when they tried to comply with police orders.

Here in New York, large Black Lives Matter protests subsided by the end of June. As about the same time City Council approved an annual budget that pretended to cut $1 billion from the annual police budget while doing no such thing. The media spotlight moved on.

Since then, protests for racial justice and other progressive causes have still been taking place in the City, usually multiple days of every week. But they are much smaller, averaging 50-200 participants, and present little to no threat to public safety. Yet, over the past four months, an Indypendent investigation has found that on at least 18 occasions peaceful protesters have been violently attacked and/or arrested by police (See sidebar). These crackdowns receive fleeting coverage at best and are invariably treated as one-off incidents — not as a part of an ongoing pattern of police repression.

Continued on page 6

WHEN NOTED AT ALL, THE NYPD’S VIOLENT ACTIONS ARE TREATED AS ONE-OFF INCIDENTS.

Levin co-sponsor bills that would bring their wages and benefits into line with what security workers receive who are under direct contract with the City.

A 2007 parade ordinance enacted in response to the Critical Mass bicycle protests makes it illegal for protesters to march in the street without a permit. But kettling protesters, telling them to clear the roadway but not giving them a chance to leave before arresting them, and using excessive force to make arrests is also illegal.

“If you’ve already been kettled, the legality of your arrest is in question. If you can’t actually leave, then you’re not ‘free to leave.’ There is a problem once people aren’t free to leave,” explains Gideon Oliver, a lawyer who has been defending protesters’ First Amendment rights in New York City since the 2004 RNC protests.

Continued on page 6


BLUE WALL: A phalanx of cops await their orders.
By Amba Guerguerian

This is How You Stymie a Movement

There were countless instances of police brutality against protesters catalogued during the month of June, when mass protests erupted in NYC and around the country and world in reaction to the murder of George Floyd. Here is a chronicle of unnecessary police force or police presence which has continued through the summer and fall as the NYPD tries to thwart any resurgence of a movement that seeks to defund and ultimately abolish policing as we know it. The online version of this article at independent.org has hyperlinks to video footage of the incidents described here.

Anti-Ice Protests: Immigration advocates and BLM activists protest after news hit that women were being sterilized in an ICE detention center in Georgia. NYPD rapidly kettles these protests.

- 9/17/20 — 9/11 memorial/Greenwich St. and Fulton St., Manhattan: Protesters are heavily outnumbered (30 to an est. 150 at one point) and violently kettled. Tackling arrests are made even once protesters move to the sidewalk, as instructed to do by NYPD.
- 9/18/20 — Washington Square Park, Manhattan: Protesters are chased and kettled into Washington Square Park, where some are arrested.
- 9/19/20 — Times Square, Manhattan: Protesters are kettled and arrested in Times Square by a large number of police before beginning to protest in the roadway. 87 arrests are made. Then cops attack holding a jail support vigil.
- 9/26/20 — 6th precinct/W 10th St. and Hudson: Protesters were in front of 6th precinct to collect confiscated sound equipment at an earlier “Celebration of Art of Protest.” Cops abruptly attack and arrest the protesters after one person steps off the curb. The police knock over outdoor dining tables and chairs in front of stunned customers.
- 10/13/20 — Trump Tower/5th Ave. and 57th St., Manhattan, pro-Trump protest: At the unveiling of the world’s largest known Trump flag, a BLM counter-protester is beaten up by Trump supporters. The NYPD joins in and arrests him.
- 10/25/20 — Times Square, Manhattan: Altercation between pro-Trump caravan and counter-protesters begins. Police have MAGA leave, then arrest counter-protesters.
- 10/27/20 — Boerum Pl. and Brooklyn Bridge Blvd., Brooklyn, protest killing of Walter Wallace by Philadelphia police: Some BLM protesters loot corporate businesses in Downtown Brooklyn, then police kettle the whole group of protesters, arresting people who attempt to exit the protest or get onto the sidewalk.
- 10/29/20 — Downtown Brooklyn — Cops kettle and arrest protesters immediately after making dispersal orders, including a legal observer.

Election Week: NYPD uses excessive force and kettling to make arbitrary arrests of non-violent protesters.

- 11/4/20 — Washington Square Park, Manhattan: Massive showing of police, violent arrests are made, many protesters are arrested on the sidewalk. One protestor goes unconscious after 10 cops seize her.
- 11/5/20 — Stonewall Monument, 7th Ave. and Christopher St., Manhattan: At the weekly Black Trans March organized in conjunction with election protests, an est. 100 officers attack the non-violent marchers, brutally arresting a lead organizer.
- 12/1/20 — 26 Court St., Brooklyn, Eviction Defense Protest: The NYPD violently kettles protesters on the sidewalk in front of an eviction lawyer’s office, shoving, punching and arresting them. Protesters who had entered the building and tried to leave after 15 minutes were also kettled without warning and arrested. One arrestee was an 80-year-old tenant organizer who was put in an NYPD van with no open windows and not permitted bathroom breaks or water once in the precinct.

Excessive police presence and intimidation, but no physical violence:

8/16/20 — Prospect Park, Brooklyn, All-day housing protest: 9 arrest vans intimidate and follow housing activists into Prospect Park where they are having free dinner, shows, and teach-ins.
- 10/6/20 — Maspeth, Queens, Anti-cop union protest: 30+ NYPD vans and SUVs, SRG (bike) cops, and unmarked cops cars follow an est. 100 protesters.
- 11/13/20 — Atlantic Ave. and Bond St., 32BJ SEIU Workers’ demonstration: 24 cops, a white shirt, and four arrest vans present at a rally of about 20 SEIU sidewalk protesters who had called ahead to see if they needed a permit.
- 11/10/20 — South Ferry Station/Whitehall St. and South St., Manhattan: A march starting from South Ferry Station was cancelled due to heavy police presence. At one point there are 80+ officers for a group of 20 protesters.
- 11/17/20 — Barclays Center/Atlantic Ave. and 4th Ave., Brooklyn, People’s Liberation March: Hearty police presence, 60+ cops and 10 arrest vans follow a group of about 150 protesters who are surrounded several times.
NYPD ABUSES Continued from page 4

Three of the city’s five police unions endorsed Donald Trump’s re-election while more than 70 percent of New Yorkers voted to cancel Trump’s presidency. Given that and how the police respond to those who question their authority, it’s not unreasonable to think of the NYPD as a highly armed group of counter-protesters.

“They feel like we hate them specifically on an individual level when that’s not the case, we just hate what they represent,” said Peak, who was the housing coordinator at Abolition Park, a nearly month-long protest encampment on the sidewalk outside City Hall this summer that drew hundreds of participants.

Not all protesters have been treated badly by the NYPD. Over the summer and fall, there have been various Back the Blue and pro-Trump protests, all of which have been attended by Black Lives Matter counter-protesters.

During one instance at Times Square on October 25, the NYPD used armed officers to leave the premises after a scuffle broke out and then proceeded to arrest their leftest counterparts.

On October 13, Peak was beaten up by a group of pro-Trump protesters who had just unveiled the world’s largest Trump flag. When he started to defend himself, the NYPD intervened only to arrest him. He was held in jail for 26 hours before being without a charge.

“Have you ever spent time in central booking for 26 hours? Peak asked. “If you’re not strong minded, then it can break you. So people don’t want to deal with that. And people are afraid of ending up in Rikers.”

Following the presidential election, the NYPD carried out mass arrests of protesters demanding all votes be counted in key swing states. The first incident occurs at Washington Square Park on November 4 and the second on November 5 outside the Stonewall Inn. For many, it wasn’t their first arrest. Since the winding down of the mass marches in early July, many demonstrations have been frequented by the same core group of protesters. Being body slammed to the pavement or barely escaping the grasp of a cop gets old after a while.

“The suppression tactics have been working,” said Peak, who also noted the economic hardship imposed by the federal government’s stingy response to the economic crisis is sapping the movement’s energy.

“People are trying to look for jobs and go back to work,” he said.

While the NYPD’s war on protest may be new to young activists, it’s been a recurring feature of the department throughout its history — from crackdowns on 19th century labor strikes to movements of the unemployed during the Great Depression and again with the rise of the Black Panthers and the Young Lords in the late 1960s. In more recent times, the NYPD’s heavy-handed treatment of protesters can be traced back to the militarization of the department that took place after 9/11, says Jennvive Wong, lead attorney for the Cop Accountability Project of the Legal Aid Society.

The impact of that militarization would become evident in the following years when the NYCPD mustered overwhelming force to suppress protests against the 2002 World Economic Forum and the 2004 Republican National Convention as well as Critical Mass, an anarchist-led initiative to make bicycling safer and more popular for New Yorkers at a time when there were no bike lanes or Citi Bikes. During the week of RNC protests, more than 1,800 people were arrested and held in pens at a contaminated MTA bus depot including bystanders who were kettled and swept away with everyone else. The city ended up paying out millions of dollars in legal settlements to hundreds of people whose rights were violated.

Critical Mass — an unpermitted, monthly Friday evening bike ride — drew first hundreds and then thousands of participants during the runup to the RNC. Payback from the NYPD came in the form of beatings, arrests and stolen bicycles. Over the next few years, Critical Mass shrank back down to a few dozen participants who were nimble enough to be able to escape from the cops.

During the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011, New York City saw a similarly brutal police response. An investigation led by NYU, Fordham, Harvard and Stanford concluded that the NYPD violated OWS protesters on numerous occasions. Then when Mayor Michael Bloomberg called the NYPD “my own army” that fall, he wasn’t kidding.

It was under de Blasio and his first Police Commissioner William Bratton that the NYCDP “army” developed a specialized battalion of 800 cops tasked with the dual mission of responding to terrorist attacks and handling protests.

“It’s an interesting combination of job functions for that particular group,” Wong said. “They’ve been particularly problematic because we’ve seen them in video after video in their fancy suits and their mountain bikes being really aggresive. You have to wonder why that is. Because what is their training really focused on?”

The overall level of resources the NYPD can deploy is formidable — 36,000 officers and 19,000 civilian employees working with a $6 billion annual budget.

In 2021, New Yorkers will elect a new mayor and City Council. A number of organizers who marched for black lives in June are now running for City Council seats in their communities. If there is a sizable leftwing contingent in the next council, it could move to slash the NYPD’s budget and redirect funds to social services that address the causes of crime. However, it’s the mayor who has the sole power to appoint the police commissioner, who in turn runs the department on a day-to-day basis. So far, the leading mayoral contenders have shown little interest in imposing deep, structural changes on the police department.

For Alex Vitale, now is the time in New York for a surge of community organizing and base building around alternatives to policing that had already been done before the George Floyd protests in places such as Minneapolis, Austin, Los Angeles and Portland, laying the groundwork for big victories that followed “Street protest is not enough,” Vitale said. “Hopefully what we will see in the next six months is a kind of increase in that base-building, people talking to their neighbors and family members and friends about what these alternatives to policing would look like, the ways they would make communities safer than they are today and then that sets us up for a very different kind of politics where elected officials are getting pressure from their base for less policing.”
Democrats were able to win several open ground districts they targeted. Meanwhile, seats and defend one of the six senate battle- publicans still only managed to flip two added. “And [they] lost substantially.”

Hoping to capitalize on that backlash, Republicans argued bail reform had led to rising crime and a state in disarray.

“Despite [the law’s alterations] … opposition to bail reform was the primary thing that many of the Republicans around the state ran on during the 2020 elections,” Schaffer added. “And [they] lost substantially.”

After spending millions of dollars, Rep- ublicans still only managed to flip two seats and defend one of the six senate battle- ground districts they targeted. Meanwhile, Democrats were able to win several open races for a net gain of three seats. Their two-thirds supermajorities give them the ability to pass legislation over Gov. Cuomo’s veto, though it’s unclear how willing they will be to clash with a three-term governor from their own party.

For criminal justice advocates like Schaffer, these results prove that progressive stances on criminal justice are not radioactive.

“There has been in New York state a move in a more progressive direction,” they said. “And that includes in some somewhat more conservative districts.”

Schaffer also argues that this year’s elec- tion victory also solidifies previous progressive gains while paving the way for more extensive future pushes.

“We and other [advocates] will continue to push for decarceration,” they said. “I think the reality of this election is that it has made clear that bail reform was not, in fact, a political liability, and that sort of greatly reduces the chance of a future threat to it.”

Additionally, some elected officials see a validation of their grassroots organizing poli- tics in the results.

“We have an exact supermajority … to pass legislation over Gov. Cuomo’s veto, thirds supermajorities give them the ability to clash with a three-term governor from their own party.

Now with full control of the legislature, New York Democrats are floating propos- als for several progressive policies, including higher taxes on the rich, rent forgiveness and cannabis legalization.

“Now that we’re battle-tested, we need to push,” said State Senator Ramos.

However, with the party divided between an aggressive left and more moderate leadership, it remains unclear what form much of this legislation will take.

“We have an exact supermajority … you know what Cuomo is thinking, he’s going to try and pick off one or two of the usual suspects,” said Ramos. “We have to be strategic.”
At fruit stands, handing you your cup of coffee at the neighborhood deli. Ahmed would be the first member of her community to serve on the City Council and the first Southeast Asian to do so as well.

District 24 was previously represented by Rory Lancman, who took a job in the Cuomo administration this fall. To win, Ahmed will have to stitch together a multiracial coalition in a district that spans Kew Gardens Hills, Pomonok, Elsleche, Fresh Meadows, Hillcrest, Jamaica Estates, Briarwood, Parkway Village, Jamaica and Jamaica Estates and encompasses both well-to-do homeowner enclaves and working-class immigrant communities like her own.

Former City Councilmember James Gennaro is the presumptive frontrunner in a field of seven candidates. Gennaro served three terms from 2002 to 2013, before joining Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s administration as a deputy commissioner in the Department of Environmental Conservation.

Special elections tend to be low-turnout affairs dominated by older voters who are more likely to come out to vote. This will likely favor Gennaro, as many older voters in the district will have already voted for him before. However, Ahmed insists the electorate in her district has changed dramatically since Gennaro last ran for office in 2009 and that her campaign can reach those new voters just as Ocasio-Cortez did in her run against Crowley.

“Just because Jim Gennaro ran for City Council 10 or 15 years ago doesn’t mean he can win now,” Ahmed says. “We have a huge chance. The district has changed. This is the future. This is AOC and Bernie’s political revolution. This is the edge of the ripple effect.”

One sign of the generational dynamics at work can be found online, where, as The Independent goes to press, the Gennaro campaign’s twitter page (@ElectJimGennaro) has four followers, while Ahmed (@disruptionary) has more than 13,000 followers and saw a recent campaign video quickly gain more than 60,000 views.

Another marker in this Boomer v. Millennial contest is that Gennaro is a homeowner in upscale Jamaica Estates (the same neighborhood where Donald Trump grew up), while Ahmed is a renter who calls for a “whole new approach to housing” that jettisons the whole neighborhoods and market-rate construction for the rich preferred by Mayors Bloomberg and de Blasio for a model that relies on nonprofit developers and community land trusts to create housing for the working class. Ahmed is also calling for defunding the police and reinvesting the money in community services and for relief for small businesses battered by the pandemic.

Ahmed has been endorsed by progressive luminaries Ro Khanna, Zephyr Teachout and Cynthia Nixon, local elected officials — State Senator Julia Salazar, Assemblyman Ron Kim, City Councilmember Jimmy Van Bramer — and a number of civic groups including the Asian American Chamber of Commerce, the Muslim Entrepreneur Association, the Hispanic American Voters Association and Sister Diaspora for Liberation.

“We have to change the culture of organizing and of politics. Right now capitalism has the hegemony over mainstream politics, our institutions, our way of life,” Ahmed says. “There’s a pandemic and people are losing faith in the current system and so this is an opportunity for people like me who believe in compassion, believe in human rights to remind folks that there is hope.”

For our full interview with Moumita Ahmed, see independent.org.
KINGSBROOK HOSPITAL GETS A REPRIEVE

By Amba Guerguerian

Despite the growing second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and calls from Mayor Andrew Cuomo to maximize hospital capacity around the state, Kingsbrook Jewish Medical Center in East Flatbush was slated to close all its hospital beds by December 31, continuing as a collection of ambulatory and outpatient-care clinics.

Then on December 15, at a Zoom town hall meeting with management, Kingsbrook healthcare workers learned that the hospital’s closure will be delayed until January 31. Closure evaluation will then ensue on a month-to-month basis.

Located in East Flatbush, Kingsbrook serves a largely Caribbean and Black population. It is a safety net hospital that provides care regardless of a patient’s ability to pay. Like many safety net hospitals, it operates at a loss due to low Medicaid reimbursement rates, which makes it a target for budget-cutting politicians.

An average 60 percent of Kingsbrook’s hospital beds were being used prior to the pandemic. At the height of the pandemic in New York City, 125% of the hospital’s beds were in use. As The Indypendent goes to press, the hospital hosts 14 COVID-19 patients. That number will likely climb, as the positivity rate in the city is on the rise and a spike is predicted to follow winter holiday celebrations.

Jo Ann Brown is a registered dietician who has worked at Kingsbrook since 2017. “If Kingsbrook does close after the public health situation stabilizes, then no, nobody has really learned anything,” she said, pointing out the necessity of having vacant beds.

Before the phased closure began, the hospital had 248 beds that were suited for COVID-19 patients. As of August 13, it had 142. Following management’s decision to delay closing Kingsbrook, at least 41 extra beds were reopened.

The official decision to delay the closure was likely made by the New York State Department of Health, which is the architect of the reorganization and closure of hospitals.

“My hope is that the community and staff pressure had an effect on how the administration is viewing the importance of the hospital,” Jo Ann Brown told The Indypendent.

Since August, when they got their bearings back after fighting for PPE during the hardest months of the pandemic, Kingsbrook workers organized and spoke out against the plan. They got local community board members on board, conducted an oral history project, hosted rallies, fliered in the community and reached out to local media outlets.

“The Indypendent did a great job of bringing often ignored grassroots community voices to the fore on this issue,” said Julie Keefe, a nurse at Kingsbrook and another one of the leaders of the campaign to keep the hospital open.

With the hospital going month-to-month, its workers are grappling with the uncertainty of not knowing when their lives could be turned upside down and a lack of communication from both management and their union.

“Now I’m pivoting to organizing the staff,” Brown said.
HURRICANE WARNING
FROM NEW YORK TO CALIFORNIA, MILLIONS OF TENANTS
NATIONWIDE FACE A LOOMING WAVE OF EVICTIONS

By Steven Wishnia

The United States could see a Hurricane Katrina of evictions next month, as the federal Center for Disease Control’s limited moratorium on evictions and two programs expanding unemployment benefits are scheduled to expire by Dec. 31.

In late September, the National Council of State Housing Agencies projected that by January 2021, up to 8.4 million renter households containing more than 20 million people could have eviction cases filed against them. It estimated that would include more than 1 million people in California, $600,000 in Texas, and 730,000 in New York.

The crisis has been looming for months as back rent piled up for people who lost jobs or income during the epidemic, but tenant organizers around the country say the breaking point will come if the federal eviction moratorium and the expanded unemployment-benefit programs—a 13-week extension for people who have exhausted the six months of regular benefits, and the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance Program, which provides benefits to freelance and gig-economy workers—are not renewed.

The CDC’s order, which prohibits evicting people who have lost income from pandemic-related causes for nonpayment of rent if they would likely end up homeless, is scheduled to expire Dec. 31.

“For us, the breaking point is going to come when these people start losing benefits,” says Rich Amedure of City Life/Vida Urbana in Boston. “We’re facing down a new year with no protections. It’s hard to put words to how scary it is.”

In April, Massachusetts enacted “one of the strongest eviction moratoriums, because we organized and fought for it,” she says, but it expired in October. Since then, she adds, almost 3,000 nonpayment eviction cases have been filed, along with thousands more “no-fault” cases, such as when the tenant’s lease has ended and the landlord wants to replace them with someone who can pay much higher rent. (Landlords in Boston and Cambridge could not refuse to renew leases without good cause until 1994, when a state bar initiative prohibited local rent-control laws.)

City Life/Vida Urbana has had some success organizing tenants to bargain collectively for lower rent, however. In November, when a California real-estate investment firm bought an apartment complex in the Mattapan neighborhood, the newly formed tenant association negotiated a deal that gave all residents five-year leases with rent increases limited to 3-3.25 percent a year.

CALIFORNIA

In California, the COVID-19 Tenant Relief Act, enacted in August, sets complicated rules to protect tenants who can demonstrate COVID-related hardship: If they owe rent from before Aug. 31, they can’t be evicted for nonpayment, but can be taken to small-claims court for the debt. Then, they can pay 25 percent of rent owed since then by Jan. 31, when the law expires, and will have to begin paying the rest by March 1.

The law “seems to have pushed back the tidal wave we still think is on the horizon,” says Larry Gross of the Coalition for Economic Survival, a Los Angeles housing-rights organization. But it’s so complex that “it even confuses me,” he adds.

While 80 percent of apartments in Los Angeles are rent-controlled, he says, the city already had the highest rate of overcrowding and “rent burden” as a percentage of residents’ incomes in the nation even before the epidemic hit. And tenants’ knowledge of their rights, he laments, is so low that “sometimes all the landlord has to do is file an eviction notice and people will move.” The epidemic has made it much harder to reach people; CES’s tenant-rights clinic is now being conducted on Zoom.

“I spend my days from morning until night dealing with tenants who are panicked,” Gross says. “It’s like someone lit a huge bomb under us, and we’re watching the fuse get closer and closer.”

In Alameda County, the East Bay jurisdiction that includes Oakland and Berkeley, courts have decided not to process most eviction cases, but there have been more evictions in Contra Costa County to the east, according to the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment.

Eviction “doesn’t make sense when we’re asking people to stay inside,” says ACCE board chair Sasha Graham, who lives in the East Bay city of Albany. Both ACCE and CES are calling for the state to pass a law canceling rent debt accrued during the pandemic.

“We need to forgive people for not paying the things they cannot pay,” says Graham. But the two groups also want that coupled with aid for small landlords, so they don’t lose their buildings to foreclosure and being snapped up as “distressed assets” by corporate and private-equity owners like Blackstone and Invitation Homes.

“We could end up with the Wall Street guys coming in and grabbing up properties,” says Sandy Rollins of the Dallas-based Texas Tenants Union.

TEXAS

Lone Star State tenants have almost no rights, Rollins says. Rent strikes are illegal, tenants can be held in default if they’re even one late with the rent, and the most commonly used lease form says they can be evicted within 24 hours after a court orders them out.

Eviction cases in Texas dropped dramatically when the state Supreme Court imposed a moratorium last spring, but have since crept back up. In Dallas, the number of eviction cases, only 30 in April, was close to 1,500 by June, says Rollins. According to state court records, 107,000 new landlord-tenant cases had been filed as of Sept. 30, slightly more than half the number filed during the same period in 2019.

Some tenants have been able to fend off eviction using the CDC moratorium, and Dallas and Austin have enacted laws to give tenants more time to respond to an eviction notice and to arrange pay—“but we’re seeing all these things come to an end at the end of the year,” says Rollins.

The state’s Eviction Diversion Program, established in October to offer rental assistance to low-income tenants financially affected by the pandemic, is scheduled to be expanded statewide on Jan. 1, from 19 to 254 counties—but it will expire Feb. 1.

KANSAS CITY

Tenants in Kansas City, Mo., also have minimal rights. Earlier this month, when the tenant union in an apartment building where the landlord had ordered all 68 residents to move out by Jan. 31 demanded free rent for December and January, he responded, “LOL.”

Since the city allowed evictions to resume June 1, landlords have filed more than 2,400 eviction cases, and judges have ordered more than 650 tenants thrown out, says Kansas City Tenants director Tara Raghuvare. Many eviction hearings are held as online teleconferences, she adds, and the courts provide no guidance about how tenants are supposed to join if they don’t have Internet access or speak a language other than English.

KC Tenants has responded with creative Zoom-bombing. The group says it has delayed more than...
365 evictions since July by disrupting teleconference hearings, and in late November, one judge cancelled her entire eviction docket for the rest of the year.

“We are mucking up a process that prioritizes landlords’ profits over tenant lives,” Raghuvir said in an email message. “We are buying critical time for tenants who, like all of us, need to stay home in order to stay alive during the pandemic.”

CHICAGO
In Chicago, more than 1,500 eviction cases had been filed in Cook County courts as of Dec. 4, and will proceed if Gov. J.B. Pritzker does not extend the state’s moratorium when it expires Dec. 12, says Antonio Gutierrez, an organizer with the Autonomous Tenants Union. The group, based in Albany Park, a multicultural but gentrifying neighborhood on the Northwest Side, has seen landlords become aggressive about trying to oust tenants, he says—although the state’s moratorium gave it leverage to help stop the new owner of a seven-apartment building from evicting it.

The ATU had been campaigning to repeal the state’s ban on local rent-control laws and for a law to prohibit evictions without “just cause,” but is now concentrating on “creating the infrastructure for eviction support,” Gutierrez says. That means connecting tenants with legal services and helping immigrants with income and legal documents.

“We’re preparing for the worst,” he says.

NEW YORK
In New York City, the first known eviction since the beginning of the pandemic took place Nov. 20. Gov. Andrew Cuomo had extended the Tenant Safe Harbor Act, which largely prohibits evicting residential tenants if they can prove they lost income from the pandemic, until Jan. 1, but the state court system’s moratorium on evictions expired Sept. 30.

The city’s five Housing Courts reopened in September and October. In early November, they ended their moratorium on issuing “default judgments,” allowing evictions warrants against tenants who don’t reply to eviction notices or don’t show up to court hearings. The courts, which had been telling tenants who’d received notices that their landlord is trying to evict them not to respond— they normally have to be answered within three days— but to wait until they got a letter from the court, suddenly did an about-face: The state Office of Court Administration sent letters to 40,000 tenants informing them that they now had to answer.

Met Council on Housing chair Kenny Schaeffer, a longtime tenant lawyer, paraphrases those letters’ message as, “You have to answer, and if you can’t access electronic filing and can’t get through to our [overwhelmed] phones, you have to answer in person, and if you don’t, you might be evicted, but if you come in person you might not be able to get in, but if you can’t get in, that won’t be an excuse for not answering, and you might get evicted anyway.”

A tenant at Met Council’s Spanish-language tenant hotline said she’d received a call from a 90-year-old woman in a wheelchair who’d tried to call the court to explain her defenses, but got no answer and the voicemail box was full. She couldn’t respond online or in person because she doesn’t have a computer and can’t walk.

The situation is much worse in Rochester, a city of about 205,000 people where two-thirds of the residents are renters. As of Dec. 4, according to Rochester City-Wide Tenant Union organizer Allison Dentinger, judges had issued 100 eviction warrants, 65 for nonpayment and 35 “holdovers”— generally owners refusing to renew the leases of tenants who complain about lack of repairs.

“Evictions are happening quickly and aggressively,” she says. On Dec. 8, a tenant reported that a city marshal had climbed into through the window of his home to change the locks after he refused to answer the door. In another case, the landlord changed the locks in a woman’s apartment while she was in the hospital with a heart attack, claiming she’d “abandoned” the unit.

That’s illegal, Dentinger says, but “it’s sort of the Wild West up here. There’s very little accountability.”

In mid-November, a quickly organized blockade— “we alerted everybody”— stopped city marshals from evicting a single father who’d lost his job in the pandemic. A judge had ruled he wasn’t covered by the CDC moratorium because he’d been on rent strike when the pandemic hit. The landlord had refused to accept government rental-assistance payments.

That was a victory, but “an individual solution to a systemic problem,” Dentinger says. “We need to cancel rent and mortgage payments, house our homeless, and pause all evictions immediately.”

Bills to do all three have been introduced in the New York State Legislature, and Dentinger hopes it makes them a priority when it returns on Jan. 6. Those, along with just-cause evictions and helping small landlords avoid foreclosure, are common threads in tenant groups’ legal and legislative agitation around the nation.

Gutierrez is encouraged by the growth of “organic” tenant networks. The ATU is now part of the Chicago Tenants Movement, a coalition of 15 groups that includes the Chicago Teachers Union. The coronavirus crisis seems to have accelerated the recent development of tenant organizing outside its traditional strongholds in New York, Boston, the Bay Area, and Los Angeles.

In Boston, City Life/Vida Urbana, which did a number of eviction-blockade sit-ins during the foreclosure crisis of 2008-10, is again trying to organize an eviction-defense network. “We are prepared to do direct action and blocking and evictions on a mass scale if we have to,” says Helen Matthews.

For Sasha Graham, the basic issue is fairness. “People don’t have any money. It’s just not possible to ask people to pay the last nine months of rent when there was already a housing crisis before the pandemic,” she says. “The money is there. It’s about having the courage to tax people who have it. It has to be about the collective.”

WHAT TO DO IF YOU GET AN EVICTION NOTICE

If your landlord is trying to evict you, they must first send you a written warning that they intend to take you to court. Then they serve you court papers saying they want to evict you.

You may have a housing issue such as your door or yard being personalized, or it may be under more than one. But you must respond to the court papers in time order in order to defend yourself. It’s the first step in a process.

There are two types of evictions: nonpayment and holdover. In a nonpayment case, your landlord must first issue a demand that you pay what you owe. If you don’t pay within 14 days, they can then start a court case by serving you with papers. You will have to respond within 10 days. The best way is to call the court at the number listed. You can avoid eviction by paying rent. Many cases are settled by a “stipulation” in which the landlord and tenant agree to a payment schedule, or by tenants getting a “one-shot deal” from public assistance to cover the back rent.

A holdover case is where your landlord wins a case for other reasons, such as no repairs or complaints. In these cases, you do not need to respond until you get papers alerting you of an actual court date.

You can either represent yourself or get a lawyer. Right now, under special COVID rules, any tenant who has an eviction case on the Housing Court calendar can get representation through the city’s Right to Counsel law. For now, the city is waiving the income and neighborhood requirements. Call 311 if you have been given a court date. Your landlord does not have the right to force you out, change the locks, or remove your property without a court order. This is a common threat, but it’s illegal.

There are also temporary limits on evictions because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For more information, call the Metropolit an Council on Housing’s tenant hotline at (212) 797-0611, or go to Housing Court Answers at housingcourtanswers.org. You can also call Housing Court Answers 212-962-4795.

— STEVEN WISNIA

UNHOUSED

A woman in San Antonio contemplates her future after being evicted from her home.

GOING TO THE SOURCE: Crown Heights Tenant Union member...
Gerald Meyer

As Trump's presidency comes to an end, what stands out in our minds as the most surprising and troubling decisions of this administration? As the dust settles on four years of extreme division, we can begin to reflect on what has truly mattered in the Trump era and how it has left its mark.

The Trump era has been characterized by its unorthodox approach to governance. Donald Trump, a real estate mogul turned politician, entered the political scene in the 1980s, using his wealth and influence to build a political base.

The goal of the Democratic Party should be to reverse this slide — calling Trump a racist and fascist isn’t good enough. If the next generation of Democrats don’t prioritize broad, ambitious, and popular economic programs that can uplift millions out of working class precarity and poverty, they will not have the financial control of the federal government for a very long time.

In my household, both of us were suddenly unemployed in December 2020.

When Donald Trump declared victory over Hillary Clinton in November 2016, corporate media began soul-searching, wondering how they could have missed this.

For years there has been an outcry by Latinos journalists that they, who are increasingly prominent in newsrooms of all kinds, are not given the attention of their white counterparts.

Four years of Trump have exposed the fault lines of inequality, both in income and political power. For years there has been an outcry by Latinos journalists that they, who are increasingly prominent in newsrooms of all kinds, are not given the attention of their white counterparts. They will surely do everything in their power to codify the rules that keep them in power.

In the early 2000s, in the Obama era, organizations were condemned by the mainstream media for being radicals or for being too extreme.

The morning after Trump’s election, a wave of fear swept across the country and around the world. The largely multicultural black press and the left-wing newspapers were among the few voices that stood up against these injustices.

If Trump’s administration was successful in anything, it was in delegitimizing the role of government and institutions in our society. They will surely do everything in their power to codify the rules that keep them in power.

For years there has been an outcry by Latinos journalists that they, who are increasingly prominent in newsrooms of all kinds, are not given the attention of their white counterparts. They will surely do everything in their power to codify the rules that keep them in power.

In my household, both of us were suddenly unemployed in December 2020.
THE INDEPENDENT
December 2020 / January 2021

the virus and made the experience of caring for people during science denialism very much helped further the spread of net as a subset of the pernicious and opportunistic anti- Blasio saying opening schools was safe. The bipartisan enough personal protective equipment and Mayor Bill De- saying Covid-19 was under control, Cuomo saying we had then there’s the intransigence nationally and locally of both political parties to anything resembling universal Medicaid spending in New York. And then there’s the insurrectionism nationally and locally of both political parties to anything resembling universal healthcare access.

As a nurse, I got to see first hand the entire spectrum of pathological lying to the public during this crisis — Trump saying Covid-19 was under control. Cuomo saying we had enough personal protective equipment and Mayor Bill De- Blasio saying opening schools was safe. The bipartisan lack of commitment to public health and a public safety net as a subset of the pernicious and opportunistic anti-science denialism very much helped further the spread of the virus and made the experience of caring for people during this pandemic an unmitigated holocaust.

This denialism of course has been mirrored in the larger, more existential crisis of our generation — climate change. While Trump denies its existence, the Democrats practice a different form of denial in the idea that there is compatibility between supporting fracking and profit-driven climate denial with the future of human existence on the planet earth.

Sean Petty is a nurse at the Jacobi Medical Center in the Bronx and a member of the executive board of the New York State Nurses Association.

SEAN PETTY

The lack of respect for science has been a hallmark of these past four years. It is accurate, although one-sided, to place primary responsibility on Trump for the historic and intentional failure to prevent hundreds of thousands of American deaths from COVID-19. Years of favoring privatization and defunding public health infrastructure by both political parties was never going to be overcome overnight once the pandemic hit. Indeed, Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s central political legacy in healthcare prior to COVID19 was decreasing the amount of hospital beds and decreasing Medicaid spending in New York. And then there’s the intransigence nationally and locally of both political parties to anything resembling universal healthcare access.

As a nurse, I got to see first hand the entire spectrum of pathological lying to the public during this crisis — Trump saying Covid-19 was under control. Cuomo saying we had enough personal protective equipment and Mayor Bill De- Blasio saying opening schools was safe. The bipartisan lack of commitment to public health and a public safety net as a subset of the pernicious and opportunistic anti-science denialism very much helped further the spread of the virus and made the experience of caring for people during this pandemic an unmitigated holocaust.

This denialism of course has been mirrored in the larger, more existential crisis of our generation — climate change. While Trump denies its existence, the Democrats practice a different form of denial in the idea that there is compatibility between supporting fracking and profit-driven climate denial with the future of human existence on the planet earth.

Sean Petty is a nurse at the Jacobi Medical Center in the Bronx and a member of the executive board of the New York State Nurses Association.

DANNY KATCH

Starting the day after the 2016 election, people decided they had to get more involved with...something. Whether expressed through volunteering, running for local office, or going to a protest, millions shared an understanding that Trump’s shocking victory was an indictment of a dangerously broken political system that could no longer be trusted to function without their active participation.

Many named that system capitalism, and the result has been a sudden revival of American socialism — with scores of elected officials, a thriving subculture of publications and podcasts, and an 87,000 member strong Democratic Socialists of America—has been almost as stunning as Trump’s election.

When a marginalized idea goes mainstream, there is always the danger of diluted demands and co-opted leaders. Will the price of socialism’s further growth be its re-definition—as many liberals would prefer—as a handful of mild measures that leave arrogant billionaires mildly annoyed but still firmly in charge? The answer will likely be determined less by what is said in Congressional debacles, Twitter rants, or even voting booths than by what is done in workplaces, schools, and highways.

The heart of socialism is that the working class majority should run society, and the emergency siren of malignant incompetence blaring from the White House for the past four years has pushed the populace to maintain its 2016 vow to start taking matters into our own hands.

Increased voter turnout was one result, butather were student walkouts over gun violence and climate change, bomb-ed-out police stations and toppled Confederate statues, teacher strikes demanding wealth redistribution from billionaires to poor Black and Brown students, and tech worker rallies against sexual assault and employer collaboration with the Pentagon and ICE.

“We’re still a long way from having the infrastructure of parties, unions, and community organizations that can seriously raise the possibility of socialist transformation that 2020 has shown we desperately need. But the last four years showed us that another world just might be possible.

Danny Katch is the author of Why Bad Governments Happen to Good People (2017) and Socialism...Serious-ly: A Brief Guide to Human Liberation (2015), both from Haymarket Books.

SARAH JAFFE

We knew at the beginning of the Trump era that the labor movement was in trouble, and the number of voters from union households who went Trump was one big signal of how bad things were. That number hasn’t improved much in four years: 40 percent of voters from union households still backed Trump in 2020. In other words: things are still bad, and the narrow margin of victory reminds us just how bad they are.

It’s because of this that the big union victories of the Trump era stand out all the more: by and large, they were won by teachers’ unions, notably in Los Angeles and once again in Chicago, though many people probably think of the first of the “Red for Ed” movement kicked off in 2018 in West Virginia. But in both “red” and “blue” states the fights contained many important lessons: that the public sector is worth fighting for and a ground on which labor can win; that teachers across ideological backgrounds can come together to fight for their students and themselves; that parents and students will stand with their teachers if it’s made clear that the gains are for all; that teachers are well positioned to win gains for the broader working class in what’s called “bargaining for the common good”; and perhaps most importantly in the Trump years, that fighting racism, xenophobia, and sexism are part and parcel of union struggles. The Chicago teachers, whose 2012 strike provided the model that education unions have drawn from ever since, put racial justice at the forefront of their demands, and from St. Paul to Los Angeles, teachers have incorporated the lessons of movement struggles to demand defunding school police, protections for immigrant students, and even access to housing at the bargaining table. These demands helped the teachers win where other unions were losing.

Sarah Jaffe is a labor journalist and reporting fellow at Type Media Center and the author of Necessary Trouble and Work Won’t Love You Back (Jan. 2021).

KAREN MALPEDE

Democrats inherit catastrophe from Republicans—illegal invasions, economic collapse, a pandemic, the denial of truth and science. Obama patched things up. The Biden Administration is tasked with saving organized life on earth. Of course, they are not up to it. But, just maybe, we are.

Having joined forces to elect a man who went along with stuff—the crime bill, Clarence Thomas, Iraq—we need him, now, to go along with us: 350.Org, Extinc-
**“WE’RE IN A RACE AGAINST TIME”**

**THE LEFT IS GAINING STRENGTH, SAYS AUTHOR/ORGANIZER JONATHAN SMucker. BUT CAN IT GO THE DISTANCE?**

By John Tarleton

Jonathan Smucker’s first book — Hegemony How-To: A Roadmap For Radicals — was an unlikely hit that enjoyed the gift of good timing.

Equal parts memoir, field manual and work of a trained sociologist, Hegemony How-To was released in January 2017, just as millions of previously complacent Americans joined “The Resistance” to Donald Trump’s presidency. The book delivers a tough love diagnosis of the left’s self-defeating behaviors that is informed by Smucker’s Forrest Gump-like journey through various radical subcultures and identities: Catholic Worker, anarchist tree sitter, punk rock enthusiast, global justice activist, antwar arrester, Occupier.

Smucker also makes a demand of the left: Get serious about contending for power. “We’re in a race against time to build the movements that can win big,” he says.

Since returning from Berkeley, Calif., to where he grew up in Lancaster County, Pa., Smucker has been busy following his own advice, co-founding Pennsylvania Stands Up, a grassroots organization that has elected a slew of leftwing officeholders and played a key role in narrowly flipping Pennsylvania from Trump to Biden in the presidential election.

Smucker’s second book, F*ckers at the Top, will be released in 2021. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**INDYPENDENT:** After several years of intense political engagement spanning the Trump presidency and the defeat of Bernie Sanders as well as Elizabeth Warren, many people on the left are feeling disoriented right now. Watching the same old swampy corporate Democrats land important posts in the Biden administration isn’t easy to stomach either. Yet, you remain optimistic. Why is that?

**JS:** When I think about how Bernie won the first three caucuses and primaries, I really believe we could have won and transformed the direction and the leadership of the Democratic Party. But we lost. We didn’t do it. That’s profoundly disappointing. But we have to see this moment for how dynamic it is.

The ground is quickly shifting beneath the feet of the Democratic establishment. Across the country, electorally, we have a bigger foothold than anything working people and progressive people’s organizations have had in decades. There’s AOC and the Squad in Congress. There are scores of progressive people’s champions that have been winning offices across the country including many we’ve backed here in Pennsylvania.

After 40 years of progressive infrastructure atrophying, we’re experiencing a renaissance of social movements. It’s going to take time to build up the leadership, to build up the bench of skilled candidates, campaigners and organizers to support that. Still, we’re leaps and bounds ahead of where we were just four years ago.

**What has changed?**

For decades, there was this chasm on the left between electoral work and movement work. I’ve always been on the movement side of it. I thought elections were important, but my line was that our work is to build the movement and wield that power to pressure whoever is in office. That chasm between electoral work and issue work or movement work evaporated overnight with Trump’s election.

When we held our first meeting for Lancaster Stands Up right after Trump’s election, there were 300 people in the room and 80% of them had not been involved with politics other than voting. For them, it was just clear, we’re going to have to contest for power to do something to push back and mitigate the damage of a Trump administration — but also who gets elected matters, we’re going to have to beat him electorally. We’re gonna have to run other candidates. The old chasm doesn’t make sense to people. The common sense shifted.

Many on the left urged support for Biden, arguing that a Democratic president could be held accountable in a way that isn’t possible when the Republicans are in power. That really didn’t happen with Obama. Why will it go differently this time?

Our movements and organizations are much more powerful, much more developed than they were when Obama came to power. Also, there’s the crisis we’re in as a country. We’re going to lead lots of campaigns, some of them are going to work, some of them aren’t, but the bottom line is we have to build people power and frame popular issues that are hard for politicians to resist.

**Do you foresee another upsurge in left populist candidates running in 2021 and 2022?**

I do, but it’s not automatic. We have popular majoritarian positions on the issues. But, the quality of the candidates, their campaigning skills, and their staff really matters. It’s not enough to just have an analysis of the objective situation; learn relevant skills to help build the capacity that we need to outmaneuver the establishment.

You’ve had quite a journey through the left over the past quarter-century. How do you look back on your transition from engaging in political activism on the margins of society to what you’re doing today?

It was clear to me from when I was 17 and went to my first protest that this is not going to do anything unless we get much bigger. That was intuitively clear to me. But at the same time, I found a deep sense of community and belonging in activist subcultures that nourished me. So I would often suspend my better judgement. I was holding out hope that something would shift someday.

I did have this epiphany when I was 25 and an activist spoke at a class I was taking. When he presented what his group was doing, it just struck me, “Oh! It’s a ritual!” What they’re doing is ritual. It is not aimed at winning or changing the political terrain. It is aimed at affirming an identity and building a community. That’s when I started writing about collective rituals versus strategic engagement. Later I developed that into the “life of the group” versus “what the group accomplishes beyond itself.”

**Why do you think the left’s tendency to create insular subcultures has weakened in recent years?**

The big reason is just what’s at stake for people. Movements are no longer dominated by the children of an expanding upper middle class who are figuring out their political expression. This is a precarious generation that has real material concerns that need to be addressed, and instead the system is failing them. The other factor is people on the left are getting a taste of winning and it whets the appetite for more.

**You have a new book due out in 2021 called F*ckers at the Top. What’s it about?**

It’s about the political realignment that’s under way amid a system-wide crisis of legitimacy that status quo forces cannot resolve. It’s very practical too. It’s about the organizing and the rhetorical tactics of groups like the Sunrise Movement and Justice Democrats and candidates like AOC — how they won. But also how Trump won.

We’re in a race against time to build the multiracial, urban and rural working-class movements that can win big and transform the Democratic Party into a party that fights for working people and delivers something like the social-democratic reforms of the New Deal. If we don’t name the culprits who have rigged the economic and political system and pick the fights we’re picking right now for universal economic and social rights that lift up everyone, the authoritarian right will consolidate power and define the bottom v. top populist struggles of the next 10–20 years with devastating consequences.

A longer version of this interview appears at indypendent.org.
REACHING ACROSS BORDERS
FOR U.S.-MEXICO RELATIONS, THE REAL HOPE POST-TRUMP LIES WITH ENERGIZED SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

BY LAURA CARLSEN

If any country on earth should be breathing a huge sigh of relief about now, it’s Mexico. Four years of bashing, bullying, trade threats and White Supremacist machinations will presumably end with the ignominious exit of Donald J. Trump. That’s got to be good news.

Yet Mexico, for the most part, did not respond with cheering in the streets. There was a marked absence of the universal enthusiasm for the post-Trump reset on U.S.-Mexico relations that one might expect, considering that more than 90% of the population held a negative opinion of Trump, according to polls. That’s even higher than Trump’s 79% disapproval rating among Hispanics in the U.S.

The mixed reaction had much to do with the response of Mexico’s president Andrés Manuel López Obrador. López Obrador, known by his initials as AMLO, refused to recognize the winner after the vote count in six of those nations. Second, because the reason given — to prioritize the poor and target corruption — keeps Mexico’s center-left leader still in power.

AMLO’s Trump-appeasement policy has created obstacles and oriented to human rights and common principles. It’s an opportunity for movements to build common cause.

energetic nation. So where does that leave us now? The Biden administration is reportedly miffed, but has nothing to gain by punishing Mexico. Biden will have to move fast to undo Trump’s deals and make the relationship more transparent and oriented to human rights and common principles. AMLO’s Trump-appeasement policy has created obstacles to future efforts to rebuild badly damaged US-Mexico relations, but not insurmountable ones.

Biden comes into office with a divided country and party, but a strong and mobilized base for social change. He also takes office with a political debt to Hispanics, and to progressive grassroots organizing. The massive participation of the Latino population in the elections—not just in terms of record voter turnout, but also in mobilization—was in general a targeted campaign to oust Trump in order to move forward on a much broader, longer-term program. United We Dream, the 400,000 strong immigrant youth led network based on DACA students, stated shortly after the election. “We rolled out one of the largest electoral programs ever led by immigrant youth in the United States... This decisive victory is a mandate by voters and those of us who couldn’t vote but energized and mobilized others to the polls, to reject greed and white supremacy, and to vote for policies that value people over profit. But our win doesn’t end here.”

The surge in grassroots mobilization in the US is an opportunity for movements to build common cause. Immigration obviously links the two nations, but so do other issues. The Movement for Black Lives’ calls for racial justice, defunding the police and ending brutality should find easy echo with Mexican demands to withdraw the military from public safety, end the war on drugs and reform prisons. Movements in defense of indigenous people’s rights and lands, to end violence against women and stop global warming, and for labor rights and drug policy reform (Mexico just legalized marijuana) already know each other, but they have an uncharted history of joint efforts.

As the leaders retool the relationship, it’s time for movements to do the same. Stale arguments on how progressive the presidents are lead to nowhere. They will always have limitations.

Laura Carlsen is the director of the Americas Program of the Center for International Policy based in Mexico City.
AUTHORITARIANISM WINS BIG IN TANZANIA
RECENT ELECTIONS SHOW HOW A FULLY EMPOWERED AUTOCRAT CAN DEMOLISH A COUNTRY’S CONSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM

By Sophie Neiman

When veteran opposition leader Tundu Lissu returned to Tanzania in August, after three years in exile and with a daring plan to challenge incumbent John Magufuli in the October presidential elections, he was cautiously optimistic.

There were few reasons to be hopeful. In 2017, gunmen fired 16 bullets into his body in broad daylight in a harrowing attempt on his life. Lissu, a human rights lawyer, former parliamentarian and vice chair of Chadema, the leading opposition party, was airlifted to Kenya and then to Belgium for a lengthy recovery, all while the Tanzanian government refused to investigate his would-be killers. During Lissu’s absence, Magufuli of the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi party cracked down on critics, shuttering newspapers and nonprofits.

But upon his arrival at the international airport in Dar es Salaam this summer, Lissu was greeted by cheering crowds waving green palms fronds. Those supporters followed him everywhere he went on the campaign trail, as he bluntly criticized Magufuli and promised to lead an administration guided by its respect for freedom of expression.

As the crowds around him swelled, he thought he might have a fighting chance.

He was wrong. Just a few months after his arrival in his homeland, Lissu was back in exile in Belgium, having fled for his life. Magufuli had won in a dubious landslide, with 80% of the vote, the opposition called for massive protests demanding the election be annulled. But with fear of violence still high, these demonstrations never materialized. Magufuli’s victory was swiftly recognized by China, which has long-standing diplomatic and economic ties with the Tanzanian government and is locked in a great-power rivalry with the U.S. for influence across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Regional leaders were also quick to congratulate Magufuli, including President Yoweri Museveni who has ruled Uganda for more than three decades, and who even traveled to Tanzania to attend his counterpart’s swearing-in ceremony.

Meanwhile, Lissu was running for his life. He’d received two telephone calls telling him the President planned to finish him off once and for all, and the security detail assigned to him during the campaign had disappeared. He hid first in the house of friends, and was briefly detained at the international airport, and charged with illegal assembly.

In the lead-up to voting day, both Lissu and Seif Sharif Hamad, the opposition presidential candidate for Tanzania’s semi-autonomous Zanzibar Archipelago, were accused of violating election rules and were banned from campaigning for seven days.

The worst was yet to come.

A BLOODSTAINED ELECTION

Amidst reports that security forces had shot and killed at least 9 people protesting planned ballot stuffing in Zanzibar ahead of Tanzania’s October 28 elections, the internet was shut down on the island and on the mainland. With communications obscured, violence continued on the election day and the days that followed.

“I was very scared,” said one woman who asked to remain anonymous, citing safety concerns. “I couldn’t even go and vote myself, because I was scared for my life.” Photos seen by the Indypendent show people with bullet wounds, and with bruises, burns and cuts. Ismail Jussa, a representative of ACT-Wazalendo in Zanzibar, was so badly brutalized that his shoulder and leg fractured in multiple places.

Jussa was beaten in police custody. He had already arrested him. There was no reason to beat him,” said Kabwe, the ACT-Wazalendo leader.

With these attacks came allegations of rigging. Chadema reported that a number of its polling agents, previously mobilized to monitor the vote, were blocked at gunpoint, and accused the ruling party of stuffing ballot boxes with papers pre-ticked for Magufuli.

Frederick Ssempebwa, a Ugandan lawyer and member of Human Rights Watch, an international panel independently monitoring the vote, also confirmed allegations of vote tampering. “Glarig facts” show the election was neither free nor fair, Ssempebwa said.

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

After Magufuli was declared the winner with more than 80% of the vote, the opposition called for massive protests demanding the election be annulled. But with fear of violence still high, these demonstrations never materialized. Magufuli’s victory was swiftly recognized by China, which has long-standing diplomatic and economic ties with the Tanzanian government and is locked in a great-power rivalry with the U.S. for influence across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Regional leaders were also quick to congratulate Magufuli, including President Yoweri Museveni who has ruled Uganda for more than three decades, and who even traveled to Tanzania to attend his counterpart’s swearing-in ceremony.

Meanwhile, Lissu was running for his life.

He’d received two telephone calls telling him the President planned to finish him off once and for all, and the security detail assigned to him during the campaign had disappeared. He hid first in the house of friends, and was briefly detained at the police before finding refuge at the home of a European ambassador and deciding to return to Belgium.

“I intend to carry on the struggle from outside the country, to denounce this regime, expose its crimes [and] demand the international community take action to punish these criminals,” Lissu said. “I have no intention of staying quietly in Europe.”

Some of this work has already begun, with Tanzanian activists submitting formal letters to the International Criminal Court in the Hague, asking it to probe violence and electoral misconduct in Tanzania.

Back home, however, the President has secured not only a personal victory, but a super majority in Parliament, ensuring a pliant legislature. The political opposition has been dealt a series of near-fatal blows. It has been effectively shut out of government, and claims that more than 100 of its members and supporters were temporarily detained during the chaotic election period. Lawyers for the opposition also told Amnesty International that the death toll had risen to at least 22 by November 11.

The exact numbers of deaths, attacks and arrests are difficult to determine, but both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have called for independent investigations into Tanzania’s elections.

In the wake of a bloody vote, the threat of future violence and increasingly anti-democratic policies loom over Magufuli’s next term in office.
O n the morning of Nov. 4, Elise Engler woke up early on her couch after falling asleep while watching the presidential election results play out on a computer screen. She’d reminded herself that the results might not be immediately known, that the long election season might carry on for an undetermined number of additional days.

She felt bowled over with uncertainty and a visceral fog. She then sat down and drew the story that spoke to her from the morning’s headlines, as she had done on each of the previous 1,836 days. Engler’s “Diary of a Radio Junkie” project, where she draws the day's current events, had begun on Nov. 21, 2015, as an experimental “year of watching the news.” The drawings are a personalized, immediate response to the news cycle, and a mode of reflection that is at once a time capsule and a mode of reflection that is at once a time capsule and a mode of reflection that is both constantly changing and simultaneously repetitive, devolving into a ritualistic documentation of the news in all its messiness and intensity. To look at Engler’s work is to witness a personal and political journey through the cycle of current events, the push and pull of different moments across the United States and the globe.

A 64-year-old artist and educator in New York City, Engler normally turns immediately to the radio in her studio to listen to news. On the morning after Election Day, she looked at her phone with trepidation. When she saw that Trump had fewer electoral votes, it gave her a glimmer of hope.

“November 4, 2020,” she wrote in pencil on a white square of paper. “U.S. presidential election remains undecided.” Using watercolors, she painted a murky and pale version of the presidential seal, with the eagle submerged in blue, and gray streaks breaching the traditional yellow boundaries of the symbol of American democracy.

“The whole fact of the presidency had become this gray area,” this messy, this dripping, oozing [thing],” Engler told The Independent. She painted over the presidential seal repeatedly, blotting it with a rag again and again, adding white to the image to heighten the bleakness of the gray color. Normally, she likes to start with a fresh slate by replacing the water in the yogurt container she uses to dip her brush into when painting. On that day, however, she opted to use dirty water.

During the first year of her experiment, she set out to draw one story per day about whatever topic she encountered first when she turned on the radio. But when Trump was declared winner in 2016, Engler resolved to keep the project going. “I realized that I really had to keep going, because I was going to be chronicling probably a very extraordinary and frightening experience,” she said.

“Diary of a Radio Junkie” now spans more than five years of documenting the events of each day in ink or watercolors. Her chronicles of the last year will be published as a book, entitled A Diary of the Plague Year: An Illustrated Chronicle of 2020, by Metropolitan Books in November 2021.Engler has drawn these artworks from her home studio, in transit and when she’s far away from New York. With the exception of 11 days when she enlisted the help of guest artists, friends and colleagues, she has not missed a day of painting since.

“I try and think, ‘Okay, how am I going to make this drawing really represent today and not think about what was yesterday?’” Engler says. “Today I’m going to figure out what today is.”

In many ways, the project is an extension of her daily practice and a challenge that flowed naturally out of her artistic approach, which often centers around ritualistic and hyper-focused documentation. Before she decided to focus on the news, Engler illustrated all 13,197 objects in her Upper West Side apartment, her home of almost 40 years; she painted the contents of 75 women’s handbags, a project she describes as a mode of “portraiture”; while on an artist fellowship to Antarctica with the National Science Foundation, she drew all the items necessary to support life at the research stations; and for almost one year, she documented all 252 blocks of Broadway in Manhattan, partly as a reaction to being hit by a truck while riding her bicycle.

As with all of her projects, Engler was curious to deeply explore the environments she — and others — inhabited, from angles known and overlooked, documenting the many modes of existence and ways of being. Once she decides who and what she is drawing, she searches for an image online and does the painting based on that.

“Most of my work starts out in small increments,” she says. “Then, because there’s so many components, it becomes massive.”

The act of listening to current events, rather than watching or reading about them, was a rule from the get-go for Engler, who is a self-described “news addict.” She started reading The New York Times when she was 11, and remembers hiding the transistor radio under the blankets at night, listening to campaigns to get stations to play Arlo Guthrie’s “Alice’s Restaurant.”

Had she not become an artist, she envisions that she might have become a reporter or radio producer. She grew up in a progressive, politically engaged family, her mother an accountant and her father a political economist. Her parents’ fields and worldviews, she says, significantly influenced how she thinks about art.

“The premise behind a lot of my work is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts,” Engler reflects. “Between the two of them, I feel like I’m sort of assembling and counting and combining and counting and combining and counting and..."

For many years, she painted with the radio on, enjoying the dynamism of human voices as opposed to silence or music. That didn’t change when she began “Diary of a Radio Junkie”; like she always had, Engler tuned in as early as 4 a.m. to 8 a.m. She listened to local stations, like the NPR affiliate WNYC or community radio WBAI, and to national and global outlets like NPR, the BBC, and Democracy Now! The drawings take anywhere from 30 minutes to six hours, depending on her availability, energy and vision for them.

Her process of choosing how and which stories to depict, processing current events.

The drawings, which are illustrated in a patchwork, comic style, are pinned across the walls of her studio in a collage of vibrant colors punctuated by black-and-white scenes, detailed sketches, and recurring images. Most recently: the blue-gloved hands of doctors, a map of the United States glowing orange to represent the latest spike in coronavirus cases, and COVID-19 particles signifying the pandemic. Engler’s work details the story of the last five years with consistency, in a news cycle that is both constantly changing and simultaneously repetitive, devasting and exhausting.
pict in drawings has evolved significantly. In the first few days of Trump's presidency, Engler decided it was necessary to draw more than one news story per day, since it was becoming increasingly overwhelming to select just one topic to paint. She first decided to draw multiple stories on Jan. 15, 2017. Trump had verbally attacked Rep. John Lewis on Twitter, and the same day, the Ringling Brothers announced the end of their touring circus.

“I thought, ‘Oh my God, this is perfect. I can do a painting of these cavorting elephants, and Trump insulting John Lewis,’” Engler said. Now she incorporates multiple headlines into each painting, though she tries to limit the number of stories she draws to seven.

She has also focused increasingly on portraits. While she has training in drawing figures and anatomy, she hadn’t spent a lot of time drawing faces before “Diary of a Radio Junkie.” Over time, she’s noticed improvement in her own skills and chosen to be more intentional about who she draws. She hasn’t drawn a full-on image of Trump in over a year and a half; instead, she’s gravitated toward sketching his profile or using orange to represent him. However, Engler has chosen to draw some Trump administration figures, such as Rudy Giuliani. “I certainly do not hesitate to make him as hideous as he is, including putting a lot of green in his skin,” Engler told me.

Engler has spent lots of time on certain portraits to capture significant moments in the national news cycle — the nomination of Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court, the fly on Mike Pence’s forehead during the vice-presidential debate and the death of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. Protesters, doctors, and everyday people also make frequent appearances in her work.

Each day is a mix of intertwined scenes and overlapping disasters, an inked quilt of color. But a few images, such as one from last Sept. 13, focus on one story: a growing fire and mass of apocalyptic sky around the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

Engler is obsessively curious and open to drawing anything, but often finds herself particularly drawn to stories about climate change, health care, the Middle East, Israel-Palestine and Ecuador. These are issues close to her heart and places she has familial roots or has spent significant time in. She consistently follows stories throughout their time in the national news cycle and weaves them into her drawings as they evolve.

She’s also drawn herself when the story is directly related to her own life. For last Sept. 17, she appeared in a blue mask amid a sea of COVID-19 particles, surrounded by Attorney General William Barr, the Centers for Disease Control’s Dr. Robert Redfield, and Michael Caputo, the Trump loyalist installed as spokesperson for the Department of Health and Human Services. Trump had refuted Redfield’s warning that a COVID-19 vaccine would not be readily available by November and that masks would save lives. Engler’s expression is obscured by her mask, but her eyes convey a residual exhaustion. And yet, she does not look away.

Over the last eight months, Engler has told me that she alternates between exhaustion and gratitude. She’s consistently lost sleep, waking up in the middle of the night thinking of the news or rising unintentionally at 4 a.m., unable to go back to bed. This rhythm was a part of her life before the pandemic, and in a sense, the hyper-focus on the news felt familiar. While she admits to looking forward to the project’s end and being able to focus on other things, she also recognizes what it’s taught her about her own craft.

“I really have more stamina than I thought,” she said during a conversation in her studio in November 2019.

This spring, Engler taught classes to students at City College on the art of inquiry and asking questions. She adjusted to teaching via Zoom and is learning how to find a way both to ask people to reflect on the current moment and to recognize the myriad challenges that many of her students face. This summer, she also returned to working for the city at Battery Park. After securing a book deal, she’s spending more time thinking about her work as a collective whole.

“It’s a matter of sort of gluing together all the pieces,” she says. “But everybody sort of finds their own place within it.”

WORKS OF ART: A sampling of Elise Engler’s paintings from the past five years. Her 2020 paintings will be released as a book in 2021.
FIFTY YEARS OF A BLACK PANThER FRIENDSHIP

The Brother You Choose: Paul Coates and Eddie Conway Talk About Life, Politics, and the Revolution
By Susie Day, afterword by Ta-Nehisi Coates, Haymarket Books, August 2020

By Eleanor J. Bader

Fifty years ago, when Eddie Conway was the Lieutenant of Security for the Baltimore Chapter of the Black Panther Party, he was accused and later convicted of killing police officer Donald Sager and attempting to kill two other law enforcers. His sentence? Life plus 30 years.

At the time, Paul Coates was also a member of the Panthers, and like many activists, believed that Conway had been railroaded, a victim of the false—if stunningly detailed—testimony of a known informant who claimed that Conway had confessed to the shootings.

Conway had not known Conway well before the trial, and actually thought him pompous and arrogant, but his comrade’s mistreatment during the proceedings—including the court’s refusal to allow movement attorneys Charles Garry and William Kunstler to provide pro bono representation to Conway—rankled. In response, Coates vowed that he would do whatever he could, for as long as he could, to free Conway from prison.

Forty-four years later, in 2012, when he was in the 42nd year of his sentence. “With my partner, Laura Whitehorn, I visited him in the Jessup Correctional Institution, just outside Baltimore. The Jessup visiting room was bleak and fluorescently lit, with the usual din of conversation from other visits going on. Yet even amid all the standardized grimness, it was actually fun to talk to Eddie.”

Day describes Conway as “hearty and personable, with a keen sense of humor.” Coates, on the other hand, is presented as less laid back, more rule-bound and rigid. Nonetheless, the men’s decades-long relationship has given both of them a solid foundation and the book provides readers with an edited transcript of their conversations. As the subtitle of the book indicates, topics include love, loss, child-rearing (Coates has seven children; Conway one), education, professional advancement, the state of American politics, strategies for achieving progressive social change, racism, and of course, prison conditions. Their dialogue is honest, often revelatory, as they debate, discuss, laugh, and argue. In addition, while the pair don’t always see eye-to-eye, their banter is always lively and forthright.

Anger and violence are frequent topics. “Every year 600,000 prisoner are released,” from jail, Conway reports. “In almost every state, those people who are released are angry.” After years of abuse at the hands of prison personnel, he explains, once they are re-

leased “they explode.” That is, unless positive channels are afforded them.

For Coates, attaining an education is key, and sees formal and informal educational channels as equally beneficial, whether one is inside or outside of the prison system. This has been Conway’s life’s work. As founder of Black Classic Press—now in its 42nd year—he publishes books and articles about a variety of political issues, including racial justice. “His commitment to this work, he told Day, was initially stoked by his desire to keep Conway and other inmates well-stocked with reading materials; since the Press’ 1978 creation, BCP has published hundreds of
Mutual Aid for Dummies

By Dean Spade
Verso, 2020

By Renée Feltz

Out of both compassion and necessity, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted many of us to engage in mutual aid projects or who are already in them and want to see them flourish. Fortunately, Dean Spade has written an accessible primer with practical tips for people who want to start mutual aid projects or who are already in them and want to see them flourish. At just over 150 pages, his book can easily live in your day bag in order to be consulted regularly. It is broken into two parts. The first defines mutual aid as “collective coordination to meet each other’s needs” and examines key elements. Mutual aid tends to expose the reality that people lack what they need, while also creating spaces to meet those needs and build a shared analysis. As one historical example, Spade explains how the Black Panthers welcomed many people into their struggle through survival programs like free breakfasts for school-age children as well as a free ambulance program, free medical clinics, a service offering rides to elderly people doing errands and schools aimed at providing a rigorous liberation curriculum for children.

Like the projects people started more recently after Superstorm Sandy to clean out homes and share food, mutual aid efforts focus on solidarity, not charity that is designed to “improve the image of the elites” and “put a tiny, inadequate Band-Aid on the massive social wound that their greed creates.” They aim to be participatory and solve problems through collective action, while building movements. In a four-page chart, Spade drives home the characteristics that distinguish mutual aid from charity, such as supporting people who face dire conditions without imposing eligibility criteria that divide them into “deserving” and “undeserving.”

If practiced sustainably, Spade argues mutual aid can be an on-ramp for people who want to get to work right away on the things they feel urgent about. He devotes most of his attention to explaining how to “work together on purpose,” and perhaps even more importantly, ways to avoid common pitfalls like saviorism and cooptation, noting that mutual aid projects “have to work hard to remain oppositional” to the neoliberal status quo, and cultivate resistance to privatization and criminalization.

Spade is a lawyer and longtime trans activist who, with eyes wide open, acknowledges in the wonderfully named chapter “No Masters, No Flakes,” that many challenges mutual aid projects face come from within, like overwork and burnout. Paraphrasing civil rights activist and author Tonie Cade Bambara, he emphasizes we must “make resistance irresistible.” But since most of us are not used to participating in decision making, he uses more charts to summarize tendencies that can harm groups and lead to conflict, such as secrecy and exclusiveness. Other charts detail the difference between domineering and cooperative leadership, or between working compulsively versus working joyfully. His discussion of conflict as “pervasive” feels validating. His tips for addressing it, as well as tendencies like perfectionism — both as a group and as an individual — seem in some cases like therapy for those of us in the trenches.

The abolitionist activist and author Miriam Kaba said she “cheered after I read this book,” and other readers may join in her enthusiasm for its helpful guidance and useful framework for our mutual aid projects. If we improve our ability to focus on “solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors,” we can better face the challenges presented by this pandemic, and the next crisis. As Spade argues, “more people are learning how to organize mutual aid than have in decades. This is a big chance for us to make a lot of change.”
“Too often unheard above the sirens, the desperate gasping for breath, is the consistent language of love, of tenderness, of support between men.”
—asha bandele

Dear Billy,
I miss being around other people. I don’t see my friends anymore, except on Zoom. Same with my co-workers. I also miss being around crowds of people. Now it’s holiday season, and I can’t travel to see my family. This sucks. Do you have words of wisdom to share?

MARIA,
Sunnyside

Dear Maria,
I believe that you can use what you’ve been given. Don’t be impatient with me now, hear me out. We all have this challenge. But loneliness can be the gateway, an opportunity. There is much that can be gained in this trying time.

Here’s a mistake a lot of us have made lately, and maybe this warning will help some of you readers. In late 2020, consumer spending rose as folks bought things that they couldn’t really use in a lockdown, but they wanted the act of shopping, giving a new dress a twirl in a mirror. Don’t do this! Stop Shopping! Shopping doesn’t solve loneliness...

Here’s an idea, Maria. Take the train from Sunnyside to Coney or the Rockaways. Find where the planet pokes through our megalopolis. The Earth will come to you in thoughts and dreams if you go to it, walk along the ocean, and listen. The wildfires and super storms and the virus come from the Earth, but she also gives us a quiet joy that is the antidote. Earthalujah!

• • •

Dear Carl,
Smaller capitalism vs. the larger capitalism? That’s a false dilemma. The two are apples and oranges. My corner grocery, Seeley Market down on the corner, is not a smaller version of Whole Foods. Everyone in Seeley knows everyone else’s name and what kind of story, joke, lament, flirtation, or explanation of the universe to expect from the familiar parade of personalities.

The owner-operated companies often have loving, helping relationships within their communities. The Seeley folks, Amanee and Abbot and their family and employees - they are unsurveilled. They don’t wear corporate uniforms. They are allowed to have their own home-made pace, personal slang and belief systems. They can have emotions that are not coming from the policy of some focus group study.

Small shops, cottage manufacturing and call-and-come service companies — such are the building blocks of healthy neighborhoods and towns. And this makes a higher quality of life, where the exchanges of skills and products are leavened, at least partly, by a gift economy. There is a lot of “pay us when you can.” Being together in a community, you can feel how Wall Street, Silicon Valley, Washington and Hollywood, and yes, Amazon, are farther away. The drama and the fun is right here! We’re smiling a lot right here! (in our masks).

Love-a-lujah!
REV

Hey Rev Billy,
I’m on one of the fortunate ones who still has a steady, good-paying job. I will give money to charities and some of my favorite activist groups. Question: You frequently extol the virtues of small neighborhood stores and urge us to spend our shopping dollars there. Yet, most small businesses pay low wages and provide little or no benefits for their workers. What we really need is socialism. Until then, I don’t see what the difference is between buying from a small capitalist or a large capitalist especially if the latter has better selection and cheaper prices.

CARL
Fort Greene

REV BILLY IS PASTOR OF THE CHURCH OF STOP SHOPPING. HAVE A QUESTION FOR THE REV? JUST EMAIL REV@INDYPENDENT.ORG AND UNBURDEN YOUR SOUL.
REVOLUTIONARY THINKERS FOR TODAY

Since its founding in 1924 the mission of International Publishers has been to serve the progressive community by publishing and distributing books to help understand and change the world. Now International Publishers is providing these books to a new generation of activists, a task of vital importance in this age of Trump.

INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHERS
In 2020, we’ve persevered through a once-in-a century pandemic — continuing to publish our print edition while expanding our online presence, launching a weekly one-hour radio show on WBAI. We look forward to doing more great work in 2021 and beyond. But, we need the support of our readers now more than ever.

Our revenues have declined due to the pandemic. We’ve tightened our belt while maintaining a blistering pace. We understand not everyone can give during these difficult times. If you can do so, please give generously this year.

What has taken 20 years to build could unravel if our finances weaken further.

The money you give now will not only support more great Indy journalism in 2021, it’s an investment in the future. The pandemic will end someday, most likely by the end of 2021. When that day comes, we will all emerge from the wreckage into a different world — one where the struggles for economic, racial, social and environmental justice will be more urgent than ever. If you want the Indy to be there too, we need your support now more than ever.

To keep the Indy going strong, we need to raise $40,000 during our annual year-end fund drive. Please give today. Whether you can give $27, $50, $100, $250, $1000 or more, it all helps.

In Solidarity,

THE INDYPENDENT TEAM

Go to indypendent.org/donate to contribute!