FIGHTING FOR HIS FREEDOM

IN QUEENS, PRAKASH CHURAMAN RISKS IT ALL TO BEAT A RIGGED JUSTICE SYSTEM

BY JULIAN GUERRERO & DANNY KATCH, P8
REMEMBERING CHARLIE AGRINSONI
THE INDY’S DISTRIBUTOR DIED UNEXPECTEDLY. HE HELPED MAKE OUR RAPID GROWTH POSSIBLE IN RECENT YEARS. HIS DAUGHTER VOWS TO CARRY ON.

By John Tarleton

I s the paper going to be ready tomorrow? My guys need to work. If they aren’t working, they’re not happy.”

It was Charlie Agrinsoni on the other end of the call — persistent and always straight to the point. The company he founded, Gendis Marketing, has delivered every issue of The Indy over the past four years as the paper grew faster than anytime in its history. Sending over last-minute updates to our route sheets and confirming with Charlie that the paper was ready for pickup, has been as much a part of our monthly publishing cycle as writer deadlines and the final night of production. And then he was gone.

Charlie died unexpectedly of a heart attack on January 24. He was 57. A good man had fallen. He’s survived by 7 children and a grandson. His daughter Emily, 33, is now running the company when needed and handling payroll while her father focused on managing clients and pursuing new ones. She hopes to grow the company further once she becomes comfortable in her new role. For now, the pressure of carrying the full weight of the company on her shoulders is unrelenting. Moreover, she notes, “it’s a male-dominated industry and I’m the new kid on the block. I have a lot of eyes on me.”

Still, she wouldn’t have it any other way. “When I can do the things he loved, it makes me feel a little closer to him.”

“Do good. Be good.”

Charlie’s favorite thing to say was, “Do good. Be good,” she recalled. “Now that I’m the one making the decisions, I think ‘Do good. Be good’. It was Charlie Agrinsoni on the other end of the call — persistent and always straight to the point. The company he founded, Gendis Marketing, has delivered every issue of The Indy over the past four years as the paper grew faster than anytime in its history. Sending over last-minute updates to our route sheets and confirming with Charlie that the paper was ready for pickup, has been as much a part of our monthly publishing cycle as writer deadlines and the final night of production.

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Charlie died unexpectedly of a heart attack on January 24. He was 57. A good man had fallen. He’s survived by 7 children and a grandson. His daughter Emily, 33, is now running the company after working with him for the past 10 years.

“My father’s favorite thing to say was, “Do good. Be good,” she recalled. “Now that I’m the one making the decisions, I think ‘Do good. Be good’.

Born in the Bronx and raised in Bushwick, Charlie built a family-run distribution company over the past 36 years that began with him delivering circulars door-to-door on the Lower East Side for a single C-Town grocery store. He would add many more grocery store clients. After a decade, he would expand into delivering dozens of newspaper and magazine titles. At the time of his death, his business encompassed every borough except Staten Island as well as parts of Long Island, Westchester and Putnam Counties.

When The Indypendent was ready in 2016 to place outdoor news boxes for the first time and more than double its print circulation to 40,000 copies, Charlie approached us about taking over our distribution. We had experimented once before with an outside distributor, and it had gone badly. Otherwise, we had always done our own distribution knowing that members of our group would always do a good job and would notice fluctuations in how the paper was moving.

We were becoming too big to continue as we had before. But, could we find an outside company to do the job right? Happily the answer turned out to be yes. Charlie’s guys — many of whom had worked with him for more than a decade — moved The Indy in the blazing heat of summer and amid the cold and slush of winter without cutting corners. They took care of the small details that make a big difference in whether potential readers see the paper and take it.

In this business, people want to know you are honest, that you have a loyalty to service,” Emily Agrinsoni says.

Larger corporate competitors had made seven-figure offers to Charlie for his company, but he turned them all down, Emily said. After burying her father, she held an informal wake at Gendis’s Astoria warehouse. Stories were told. Tears and laughter were shared among the workers she describes as “my family.” Then, she had to sit down with the company’s 32 employees who feared losing their jobs in the middle of the pandemic and chart a course forward.

“I had the option of saying ‘he’s gone and we’re closing,’ Emily recalled. ‘But that’s not what he would have wanted.’

The work doesn’t stop. Emily said she hasn’t had time to process her grief. Sleep remains elusive. Before her father’s death, she was already responsible for day-to-day logistics, driving routes when needed and handling payroll while her father focused on managing clients and pursuing new ones. She hopes to grow the company further once she becomes comfortable in her new role.

For now, the pressure of carrying the full weight of the company on her shoulders is unrelenting. Moreover, she notes, “it’s a male-dominated industry and I’m the new kid on the block. I have a lot of eyes on me.”

Still, she wouldn’t have it any other way. “When I can do the things he loved, it makes me feel a little closer to him.”
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THE INDYPENDENT
MERCURIAL ANDREW YANG JUMPSTARTS SLEEPY MAYORAL RACE

HIS IDEAS ARE ALL OVER THE MAP, BUT HE’S FORCING OTHER TOP MAYORAL CANDIDATES TO COME FORWARD WITH THEIR OWN PLANS

By Theodore Hamm

Andrew Yang has generated an incessant stream of headlines since entering the race for mayor in mid-January. Some stories have questioned his credentials, focusing on his lack of a voting record in local elections and residency upstate in New Paltz during the pandemic; others have highlighted his dubious definition of a bodega. How much the initial negative coverage will hurt Yang in the June 22 primary is unclear. But given the scale of the current crises the city faces, may force other candidates to compete for attention by putting forth their own signature policies—yes, as with de Blasio in 2013, by adopting rivals’ positions. The race certainly could use an infusion of animating ideas. As of Jan. 25, the front page of the Indypendent’s campaign website offered no link to an agenda or platform, whereas the “Vision” section of Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams’ site continued to ask voters to check back “in the coming weeks” for his policing policy. Nobody who follows city politics would say that Stringer is devoid of plans or that Adams, a retired NYPD officer, lacks ideas regarding policing. But Yang is already forcing at least one of the two perceived front-runners to take a clear stand. Rather than support civilian control of the NYPD, Adams recently vowed to appoint the first female NYPD commissioner (quite possibly the department’s current Chief of Patrol, Juanita Holmes). Asked by The Indypendent to single out the candidate’s most distinct policy positions, Stringer’s team pointed to his Green New Deal agenda, which is indeed quite comprehensive. According to the environmental group 350.org, “From phasing out fossil fuels and prioritizing environmental justice, to creating tens of thousands of family-sustaining union jobs … Stringer’s platform sets the new bar for climate ambition in the U.S.” Stringer’s housing plan, which among other things calls for the city to build 100% affordable units on 1,000 city-owned sites, has garnered similarly effusive praise from a wide range of housing activists.

Stringer, however, can’t exactly match Yang in terms of showmanship—or its corollary, salesmanship. “I want to manage the hell out of this city,” Stringer assured a recent forum of Democratic clubs. How much excitement such earnest declarations will generate remains to be seen.

Adams’ chief consultant Evan Thies, meanwhile, identifies three of the candidate’s proposals as most unique, a web portal called MyCity, which is akin to 311, and would cut down on the paper trail for anyone receiving SNAP benefits or dealing with the Department of Buildings; a plan to bring city-run healthcare services to low-income residential sites including NYCHA; and an expansion of earned-income tax credits for frontline workers. The proposals certainly seem worthy, although none are likely to become the new universal pre-K.

There is no shortage of candidates in the race, and no shortage of ideas most voters haven’t yet heard much about. Progressive Maya Wiley’s team highlights her “New Deal New York” plan that calls for $10 billion in capital funding to be spent over five years with a focus on NYCHA upgrades, climate resiliency upgrades, and rectifying the digital divide. Letist Dianne Morales advocates a “social housing” plan that includes turning empty commercial space and hotels into permanent residences for the homeless. And technocrat Shaun Donovan has an extensive transportation agenda that prioritizes improved bus service.

The activist left has good reason to be quite skeptical regarding Yang, whose grab-bag of positions makes him a bit hard to peg. That stands in contrast to his primary campaign advisor, Bradley Tusk, who was Michael Bloomberg’s campaign manager in 2009 and then a businessman who made $100 million by helping Uber infiltrate New York City. Yang’s launch event also featured Congressman Ritchie Torres, a Wall Street-friendly “progressive” and fellow BDS-basher who will serve as Yang’s campaign co-chair.

But on MLK Day, Yang announced that his other co-chair is Martin Luther King III, who praised Yang for carrying on his father’s goal of establishing universal basic income. Yang also has the enthusiastic backing of Queens Assemblyman Ron Kim, a staunch progressive. Many of Kim’s left-wing allies in the legislature—including State Senators Jessica Ramos, Julia Salazar and Alessandra Biaggi, and Assemblies members Yuh-Line Niou and Bobby Carroll—endorsed Stringer last September.

In explaining his support for Yang to The Indypendent, Kim emphasized Yang’s recent pledge to decriminalize sex work, a left-wing stance shared by Morales, Carlos Menchaca, and Stringer. In Kim’s view, Yang’s position may help destigmatize the issue in his Flushing community. Yang says, “understands that the conditions of poverty” imperil many sex workers and that de-criminalizing will allow “access to basic rights to healthcare, safety and other government services.”

Yang’s constant changes in positions—including his left-field, then right-field—nonetheless lead many to wonder where he’s coming from. Unlike the other prominent business candidate in the race, longtime City Council executive Ray McGuire, Yang’s track record outside politics is amorphous. He made a bundle on the growth of his chain of GMAT test prep centers (for aspiring MBA students), but there’s nothing particularly innovative about such an enterprise.

Yang’s manifest love for the spotlight also may remind many skeptics of an New York City businessman who’s now a disgraced former president. But there again, everyone familiar with Trump’s long career in NYC and Atlantic City knew that he would use the White House to entice himself. By contrast, no one really knows what Yang would do—or how he would handle an aggressive city council and the mundane tasks of providing city services.

Yang is a wild card, for sure. But now it’s up to the other candidates in the race to play their hands.
WE CAN DEFUND THE POLICE — HERE’S HOW

A FORMER CITY COUNCIL STAFFER-TURNED-DSA CANDIDATE EXPLAINS HOW WE CAN BEGIN REDIRECTING RESOURCES FROM COPS TO COMMUNITIES.

BY BRANDON WEST

A bolitionist Mariame Kaba famously stated, “Let this radicalize you rather than lead you to despair.” Following her words, I can only comprehend what we have endured in 2020 as a calling to radicalize, to rethink ineffective public safety policy and to revitalize our communities by defunding the police.

2020 was a year that felt like a decade, a time of deep stress and distress, challenges beyond measure, and enormous personal tragedy. I saw my home, New York City, fall into a series of crises, I lost friends and relatives to the pandemic, and I, along with millions of Americans, watched Black men murdered on video.

Beginning in June, after months of lockdown, I was in the streets fighting for Black lives and for the end of the carceral state. I organized with the Free Black Radicals and members of VOCAL-NY at the Occupy City Hall encampment to defund the NYPD. Months later, and only days after a white supremacist insurrection in the capitol, the NYPD brutalized peaceful protestors on MLK Day in that exact same location.

But when I feel despair, as I did during almost the entirety of 2020 and already many times since the start of 2021, I know it is time to turn to action. Whenever asked why I'm running for City Council, I speak about my experiences fighting against over-policing and the carceral state. I tell voters that I’m running to defund, and to abolish, the NYPD. Having the experiences of an organizer on the streets and as an analyst in the NYC Office of Management and Budget and City Council Finance means that I know it is possible to do these things and to radically re-envision public safety.

So how do we do it? Defunding the NYPD requires being bold and standing up in the budget process and also, critically, to articulate a vision of community safety that is not carceral. We have to do both, and the latter is harder than most people think. We are so used to treating the police and policing as the solutions that they most clearly are not. Even in conversations with progressives and leftists, it’s hard to shake the language and framework around incarceration. But I know we can do it if we are intentional and clear about how we want to do this work.

First, there is a lot we can cut in the next budget. It’s pretty easy to make reasonable cuts and hit $2 billion. There is no reason we couldn’t hit at least $1 billion last year. It’s a shame the outgoing council didn’t. Communities United for Police Reform put out a well-researched report last summer showing just how easy it is to slash NYPD’s budget by over $1 billion. This includes over $200 million in a hiring freeze and cutting the cadet class, $100 million in removing NYPD from schools and social service-related roles, almost $300 million in for police misconduct settlements/judgments and not firing abusive officers, at least $219 million by reducing the NYPD uniform headcount to FY2014 level, and almost $400 million in cutting boat like surveillance technology and overtime. Not to mention that if you include all the fringe benefits associated with these positions, it adds up considerably.

Critically, it doesn’t mean we abandon workers like school safety officers or traffic officers, who are often BIPOC folks. We can and will engage in a just transition as we decarcerate jobs that should never have fallen under NYPD’s purview. Police do not keep people safe, but community services and economic stability does.

CREATING AN ALTERNATIVE

The other part of this work is creating the vision for the alternative. Many people I talk to cite victims of violence as a rationale for the brutal incarceration of those who engage in forms of violence. But deterrence is just punishment, our basest instinct, and it doesn’t work. Incarcerating people—destroying people’s lives—results in only devastated communities, not safe communities.

No single person can design a perfect system to eliminate violence in all aspects of life in New York tomorrow. But many have done this work for years and we must empower them to begin to build this alternative. In December 2020, Brownsville engaged in a pilot program where the community removed beat cops and instead had community members present in the streets, including nonprofits and city agencies setting up booths to offer city resources for folks. There wasn’t a single 911 call during that stretch of time. This pilot was just that: a pilot, it was a bubble within the world of a carceral state, with the normal over-policed stretch of the city a few blocks away. But it was a start, and seemingly a success, and we need to engage and fund programs like these and see to it that they are successful.

If we are not laser-focused on Defund and making it the goal of the next class of councilmembers and the next budget, we will not get there. We absolutely can build on the work that was already done to get to this vision. I have often remarked that if 2020 didn’t radicalize you, then you cannot be radicalized. It is for my fellow radicals that I run for City Council in District 39 and why I run to defund the police.

Brandon West is running for City Council in District 39 which encompasses Park Slope, Carroll Gardens and parts of Sunset Park. He is a member of the 6-candidate DSA for the City slate.
MARIJUANA REFORM

By Steven Wishnia

Once again, New York State’s legislative session has begun with strong support for legalizing marijuana — and two competing bills with different approaches to how to do it.

The two measures, as in 2019, are Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s Cannabis Regulation and Taxation Act (CRTA), which takes up more than half of his 415-page budget proposal, and the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act (MRTA), sponsored by Assembly Majority Leader Crystal Peoples-Stokes (D-Buffalo) and state Sen. Liz Krueger (D-Manhattan).

Both would license growing cannabis and selling it to people 21 or older. The main differences, once again, are that the Cuomo bill is more restrictive and would give a smaller share of the sales, tax revenues, and business opportunities created to “social equity” and a community reinvestment fund.

Those are basically separations for the people and communities worst affected by marijuana prohibition, by heavy-handed policing and violent illicit-business disputes. From 1998 to 2014, an average of more than 100 people a day were arrested for misdemeanor pot possession in New York City, six out of seven of them black or Latino, and at one point Brooklyn’s Brownsville and East New York accounted for 10% of those busts. The racial disparities were sometimes even more extreme upstate, says Melissa Moore, state director of the Drug Policy Alliance.

The MRTA would earmark half of the estimated $350 million a year in tax revenues for the community reinvestment fund, says Moore. The CRTA would establish a $10 million social-equity fund for “communities which have seen disproportionate and unjust enforcement of cannabis prohibition,” State Director of Cannabis Programs Norman E. Birenbaum said in a statement to The Independent.

There’s “a quite a deep difference” between those two amounts, says Moore. According to the CRTA text, that fund would start at $10 million a year and gradually rise to $50 million in 2027. However, the bill says other pot-tax revenues can be used to develop and run social and economic-equity programs.

Both bills would regulate adult use under the three-level structure New York uses for alcohol, putting production, distribution, and retailing into separate businesses. “Microbusinesses,” however, would be allowed to do all three, much as wineries and craft-beer breweries are allowed to have bars on their premises.

The MRTA, however, would license “on-site consumption,” cannabis coffeehouses, which would not be allowed to sell alcohol. It would also permit individuals to grow up to six plants. The CRTA would not allow either home-growing or pot-delivery services.

Delivery, notes Moore, has been “one of the few business models viable” during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also often cited as the part of the industry that requires the least capital to enter.

“The proposed CRTA and the MRTA are largely aligned and share the goals of ensuring a safe, equitable, and accessible cannabis industry for consumers and businesses,” Birenbaum said. “The CRTA reflects lessons learned and best practices from jurisdictions across North America.”

Like the state’s medical-cannabis law, both bills list “labor peace” agreements requiring employers to stay neutral in union-organizing campaigns among the criteria for granting licenses. But for applicants that have 25 or more employees, the MRTA would have the state licensing agency give priority to those that have union contracts and had their facilities built by union labor.

“To make the bigger guys have to have a collective-bargaining agreement,” says Brad Usher, Sen. Krueger’s chief of staff, is a good way to balance the interests of protecting workers in the industry with expanding opportunities for small businesses.

The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, which represents about 300 workers in the state’s medical-cannabis industry, sees a possible 30,000 new jobs if New York legalizes marijuana sales to adults — and it hopes those jobs are union.

“Our priority is that the jobs have a pathway to unionization,” says Nikki Kateman of RWDSU Local 338. The RWDSU has collective-bargaining agreements with four of the 10 companies in the state’s medical-cannabis industry, and is negotiating with three others. It represents about 300 workers “across the entire supply chain,” from cultivation to processing to dispensaries, she says.

In New York, Kateman says, the union’s goal is to have the industry build social equity, racial justice, and careers that pay enough to support a family. One way to bring in people from the neighborhoods hit hardest by prohibition, she adds, would be by doing targeted hiring and recruitment and collaborating with community organizations.

How the differences between the bills will be resolved, says Brad Usher, is far beyond his predictive powers. The Legislature could pass the MRTA before approving the state budget. It could pass the budget with Gov. Cuomo’s CRTA included. Or it could work out a compromise between the two measures — or fail to, as happened in 2019.
NEW YORK ROLLING OUT VACCINE... SLOWLY
New York City finally began vaccinating people against the COVID-19 virus in earnest in mid-January, administering up to 43,000 doses a day. With health-care workers, essential workers, and people 65 or older now eligible, 767,500 people had received their first dose and 230,000 their second by Feb. 8, according to city Department of Health figures, and 72% of hospital workers in the city had also been vaccinated, according to the state. But there have been significant racial disparities: Black and Latino people 65 or older have received the vaccine at a rate less than half their proportion of the state’s elderly population. Making an appointment, such as through the city’s vaccinefinder.nyc.gov link or the state’s 833-NYS-4-VAX phone line, remains complicated, and supplies for the future are still uncertain. The state warns that it could take 14 weeks to get a shot scheduled, which could prove dangerous as more contagious variants of the virus spread.

BROOKLYN ABOLITIONIST HOME NAMED HISTORIC LANDMARK
After several years of struggle, the city on Feb. 2 designated a former Underground Railroad stop in downtown Brooklyn as a historic landmark. The three-story house at 227 Duffield St. — renamed 227 Abolitionist Place — was once the home of abolitionists Thomas and Harriet Truesdell, who used it to hide enslaved persons who could have been extradited back to bondage in the South under the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. In 2007, the city moved to seize it to build a parking garage, but “Mama” Joy Chatel, a Black amateur historian who owned the house, sued to block that. Her family and Brooklyn activists continued the struggle to save it after she died in 2014, but its current owner, developer Samuel Hanasab, applied for permission to demolish it last year. Friends of Abolitionist Place, co-founded by Chatel’s daughter, hopes to turn the building into a museum about abolitionist movements in Brooklyn.

STATE REPEALS ‘WALKING WHILE TRANS’ LAW
Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed a bill Feb. 3 that repeals the state’s 1976 law against loitering for the purpose of prostitution, which critics had dubbed the “walking while trans ban.” State Senator Brad Hoylman (D-Manhattan), the measure’s lead sponsor, said that according to state criminal-justice figures from 2018, 91% of people arrested for violating the law were Black or Latino, and 80% were identified as women. “The Walking While Trans ban enabled the profiling and arrest of transgender New Yorkers for doing nothing more than standing or walking on the street,” Human Rights Campaign President Alphonso David said in a statement. The Legal Aid Society said it had represented women who were arrested because they were wearing a “short dress” or “a skirt and high heels.” Brooklyn District Attorney Eric Gonzalez, who stopped prosecuting loitering-for-prostitution charges in 2019, in January dismissed 262 warrants against people arrested for it.

CITY PENSION FUNDS TO DIVEST FROM FOSSIL FUELS
The two largest pension funds for New York City employees announced Jan. 25 that they will get rid of about $4 billion in fossil-fuel securities. The boards of the $91.4 billion New York City Teachers’ Retirement System and the $77.4 billion New York City Employees’ Retirement System both voted to approve divestment over the next five years. Comptroller Scott Stringer and Mayor Bill de Blasio had pledged in 2018 to move the funds’ investments out of coal, oil and gas used for energy, and into renewable energy and related businesses, for both environmental and financial reasons. Stringer said in a statement that the move was both “fiscally prudent and environmentally responsible.” A third pension fund, the $7.8 billion New York City Board of Education Retirement System, is expected to divest soon. The other two funds in the city’s $239.8 billion retirement system, for police and firefighters, are not participating.
**Gamble of His Life**

**Prakash Churaman First Murder Conviction Was Overturned. Now, He’s Risking Everything on a Second Trial Before the Same Queens Prosecutor-Turned-Judge Who Railroaded Him Before.**

By Julian Guerrero & Danny Katch

"Hi, my name is Prakash Churaman. I am currently incarcerated on Rikers Island. I was arrested in December 2014 for a crime I did not commit and I’m still on this day, awaiting a fair trial. It’s been almost six years now. I was arrested at age 15. I’m now 21 years old. I go to Queens Supreme Court and basically, I’ve been voiceless and silenced since the day my freedom was taken from me. Ever since my freedom was taken from me, over the last six years, I’ve been experiencing nothing but injustice and inequality. I need your help, please."

That was the message we received on the hotline of our WBAI-FM radio show, Working Class Heroes. And that’s how we discovered the case of a 21-year-old Guyanese immigrant who has been locked up in Rikers Island since he was 15 on a murder charge — even though his conviction has been overturned.

"Since his arrest on December 9, 2014, Prakash has been waiting for a fair trial while incarcerated," says his lawyer, Jose Nieves. "His years of incarceration have in fact rendered his right to a presumption of innocence meaningless and the right to a fair trial merely a mirage."

Churaman’s case exposes many of the problems with the Queens criminal-justice system — including not only the failure to provide speedy trials, but also coerced confessions and impunity for judicial misconduct — that were brought to public attention in 2019 by public defender Tiffany Caban in her nearly successful underdog campaign to become the borough’s new district attorney.

But as that initial message on our voice mail indicates, Prakash Churaman’s story is also about how a young man has endured the trauma of youth incarceration and built a defense team for himself inside and outside the courts to win a conviction reversal and bail release from a Queens machine that has resisted every move toward justice.

Last year, Churaman was offered a plea deal that would have allowed him to get out of jail soon, but he refused to admit guilt for a crime he says he never committed. He is risking many more years of life in a cage with a new trial that will be presided over by the same judge whose misconduct in the original case led to a wrongful conviction.

He knows that he’s taking a tremendous risk, but he feels he has no choice. "That’s me accepting guilt for a crime I did not commit," he says. "I can’t do that. I can’t be a victim to the system, another statistic for the system. All they care about is the conviction rate. They don’t care about whether a person is innocent or not."

**A Brutal Murder, A Questionable Confession**

In 2014, three men staged a home invasion in Jamaica, Queens. During the robbery, 21-year-old Taquane Clark was shot to death, and his uncle, Jonathan Legister, was wounded. One of the assailants was also shot, leaving behind DNA evidence that was traced to 28-year-old Elijah Gough, who was found guilty in 2018 and sentenced to 65 years to life.

Also in the home that night was Olive Legister, Jonathan Legister’s mother, who was held hostage during the robbery. After the incident, she told police that she believed that the voice of one of the assailants belonged to Prakash Churaman, a friend of Taquane Clark.

Taquane and Prakash met playing basketball in the neighborhood, not long after Prakash had moved away from his father in Florida to stay with his mother in New York. "I introduced myself and we got to know each other and our bond just grew naturally," Churaman says. "My father was constantly abusing me and beating on me, so when I turned 11 or 12, maybe, I called Children’s Services down in Florida and I told them, ‘Listen, I don’t want to live with my father anymore. I want my mother to have custody of me.’"

Prakash also found his way into trouble and the Queens criminal-justice system. "I’m not an angel," he says. "Sometimes I would cut school, hang out with friends, you know, normal teenager stuff."

In early 2014, police responded to a call from Prakash’s mother that he was running away from home and found what he says was a little knife in his apartment. He was arrested and sent to a Bronx juvenile facility for seven months. He was released on good behavior that November, not long before the home invasion and murder of his friend Taquane Clark.

Acting on Olive Legister’s tip, police arrived at Prakash’s door early on the morning of December 5, 2014. "They came to my apartment without any warrant and they put me in cuffs," Prakash says. "They had me in a minivan for about three hours — mind you, from where I live to the 113th Precinct, it’s only about 10 minutes." When he finally reached the police station, the 13-year-old was put in a small room, where he says he was handcuffed to a pipe on the wall and interrogated by Detectives Daniel Gallagher and Barry Brown.

"Barry Brown was the one that was doing all the cursing and yelling at me," Churaman recalls. "He did most of the manipulation. The other one, Gallagher, was mostly quiet, acting like he was my friend, and he really wasn’t. They both tag-teamed, played good cop/bad cop."

"I really did not know what to do," Churaman continues. "I was lost. I didn’t know what they were talking about. I don’t even know why I’m here. Eventually, I broke down. At one point in the interrogation tape, I said, ‘I’ll say whatever you want me to say.’"

"Mind you, at the time I was taking psych medication. I was taking Wellbutrin because I suffer from depression and anxiety, so they definitely took advantage of me. They didn’t allow me to take my medication or anything."

Churaman’s mother was present during the interrogation, but she now says she wasn’t aware of the consequences, given the language barrier. She emigrated from Guyana with Prakash and his father when Prakash was a little boy. Worried that her boss might lay her off if she didn’t get out of the precinct and get to work, and perhaps not understanding the stakes of the situation, she urged her son to cooperate with the police.

"My mother was present, but she’s illiterate," Churaman says. "She doesn’t have no educational background, nothing. She folded just as I did, basically."

With no physical evidence connecting him to the crime scene, Prakash’s confession would be a crucial element in his conviction for “felony murder” (a uniquely American statute directed at those who commit a serious crime while a homicide takes place) in December 2018.

His conviction came one month after Detective Brown
made the news during the highly publicized trial for the murder of jogger Karina Vetrano, which resulted in a hung jury over concerns that Brown had improperly coerced a confession out of the defendant, Chanel Lewis. But Prakash Churaman’s jury never got the opportunity to learn about Brown’s tactics, thanks to the actions of Judge Kenneth Holder.

TRAPPED INSIDE THE QUEENS MACHINE

In his 2018 trial, Churaman was represented by the noted civil-rights lawyers Ron Kuby and Rhiva Trivedi. But Judge Holder refused to allow them to present an expert witness on the subject of juvenile forced confessions — despite the fact that Churaman’s confession was the prosecution’s primary evidence in a case with no physical proof linking him to the scene of the crime. Denied this crucial information, the jury found Churaman guilty and sentenced him to nine years to life.

“When I went in front of [Holder] to get sentenced,” Prakash says, “he told me that had I been 16 years older, he woulda made sure I’d never see daylight again.”

Like many Queens judges, Kenneth Holder is a former prosecutor who worked in the Queens District Attorney’s office from 1985 to 2005. For most of those two decades, the office was headed by Richard Brown, infamous in the office from 1985 to 2005. For most of those two decades, the office was headed by Richard Brown, infamous in criminal-justice circles for pushing “tough on crime” policies long after crime rates plummeted across the city.

“Historically, the Queens DA’s office has shown deference to the NYPD,” wrote journalist Ross Barkan in 2019, “failing to aggressively pursue police brutality cases. Queens prosecutors are unusually punitive, employing tactics unseen in other city offices … Assistant district attorneys will join police to interview defendants before they are even arraigned, hoping to secure incriminating statements that will lead to quick convictions.”

In the story, the judge engages in improper police interrogations “because what the cops invariably do in felony murder cases is tell the defendant, ‘We know you didn’t kill anybody, we know that you didn’t intend for anybody to get hurt, we know you’re not a murderer, but just admit that you were there for the robbery.’ And even innocent people, under those circumstances, will say, ‘Yeah, I was there, I was down with the robbery,’ not knowing that they just confessed to felony murder.”

“Some lawyers said the [Queens DA] office’s pretrial plea policy was coercive and manipulative,” New York Times journalist Eli Rosenberg wrote in 2015. “They said that the script used to interrogate suspects before their arraignments, wording that was declared unconstitutional in 2014, was still troublesome, despite revisions.”

Issues such as these led to the groundswell of support for Tiffany Caban’s 2019 campaign to succeed Brown after he died in office that year. She came within a few votes of pulling off a remarkable upset over Melinda Katz, the preferred candidate of the Queens Democratic Party bosses, who have long handpicked candidates for elected judicial and prosecutorial positions.

But while Caban’s campaign and those of other progressive aspiring DAs nationwide have drawn attention to the issue of prosecutorial abuses, the issue of judges’ misconduct and impunity deserves just as much scrutiny. The system is premised on the idea that judges like Kenneth Holder will be unbiased, even though many of them have benefited from or been advantaged by the same offices as the prosecutors now arguing before them. And when they seem to fall short of that ideal — since 2008, Holder has had 27 cases overturned, almost all of them for pro-prosecutorial abuses such as excessive sentencing and improper jury instruction — there seem to be no consequences.

Six months after Churaman’s conviction, Kuby and Trivedi won a reversal in a state appellate court, on the grounds that the jury should have been allowed to hear testimony about false confessions. But the overturning of his conviction has had surprisingly little impact on his life. Because judges aren’t removed from cases in which their decisions have been reversed, his new trial will be presided over by Kenneth Holder.

Until this January, when his new lawyer, Jose Nieves, finally won his release on bail, Prakash remained in Rikers Island, because Judge Holder continued to deny him the chance to prepare for his second trial from the home he was taken away from when he was 15.

FIGHTING FROM THE INSIDE

Life inside Rikers has taken an enormous toll. Churaman has attempted suicide twice, and at one point was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. A victim of anxiety and depression even before his arrest, he now believes that he is also suffering from PTSD.

Despite his struggles, Churaman became friends with other incarcerated youth on Rikers Island and met people who continue to provide him with support and friendship. One of his most important early allies was Jacob Cohen, who ran a music program in Rikers Island for adolescents and young adults.

“One has horrible situations in there,” says Cohen, “but Prakash’s was a particularly sad case, because he said he was innocent and locked up for a crime that occurred when he was 15 years old. And he had basically no support.”

“Eventually, he asked me to help him organize a Kickstarter campaign to help him raise funds so he could hire a lawyer,” says Cohen. “I made a one-minute video for Instagram that included drawings of him that I did, and we recorded a phone call that was basically him saying ‘I’m accused of a crime I didn’t commit, I’m poor, I need funds because I don’t have a lawyer, I don’t have legal representation.’”

Jacob’s advocacy for Churaman eventually cost him his job, but it brought the case to the attention of Kuby and Trivedi. Churaman was eventually able to pull a small support team together, including members of the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, which started to build publicity around his case.

Day after day, Churaman left the same kind of messages we received at Working Class Heroes for anyone who thought might help. By December 2020, those efforts started to pay off as his support team organized a rally in the snow outside the Queens courthouse.

A new wave of publicity in the aftermath of that rally resulted in a campaign to call on Queens DA Melinda Katz to drop the charges. Jose Nieves got bail granted, and his expanded support team raised the money. On January 19, Prakash, 21, was able to come home under conditions of house arrest.

THE FIGHT IS FAR FROM OVER

When Prakash Churaman turned down a plea deal that would have drastically reduced his remaining prison sentence, he was taking a massive gamble that it is possible to fight for a poor immigrant of color to win a measure of justice from the Queens criminal-justice system. His lawyers at the time, Kuby and Trivedi, advised him against it. At the same time, the District Attorney’s office’s willingness to offer such a seemingly lenient deal for the serious crime of felony murder indicates that it might not have been very confident about its case. Churaman remains confident that justice will prevail, and that has inspired supporters to rally to his cause.

“I’m someone who grew up in Queens and walked out of this courthouse many days as a young person,” said Cory Greene of How Our Lives Link Altogether (HOLLA) at the December 9 rally outside the Queens courthouse. “So when I got that call from a young person who had been in prison since they were 15 and that person still had the audacity to fight to want to be free, that spoke to my spirit personally. It didn’t matter if it was raining, sleeting, or snowing, if I had an inch or energy to be here today to speak to the courtrooms, to speak to you all out there—but really to speak to my little self that was 15, that was 16, that was 17 in there, and I didn’t have the heart that Prakash had. I didn’t know how to fight like he knew how to fight.”

But with his case still in the hands of a judge who suffered no consequences for his improper conduct in the first trial, Churaman still faces long odds.

“Prakash faces a second trial,” Nieves says, “in a broken criminal-justice system that is dysfunctional because of institutional racism, coercive police interrogation tactics, prosecutors that are more focused on getting a conviction rather than doing justice, and a global pandemic that has brought our system of justice to a grinding halt forcing criminal justice-involved citizens to wait in a perpetual purgatory until they can have their rights as citizens acknowledged.”

When Melinda Katz narrowly defeated Tiffany Caban to become the new Queens district attorney, she responded to the cries for reform by creating a conviction integrity unit to investigate wrongful convictions. But Prakash Churaman has already had his conviction overturned, and he still spent much of his adolescence in jail. He would get his case reviewed by the conviction integrity unit only if he’s convicted a second time.

Katz’s office said its policy is not to comment on ongoing cases. As the February 10 date for his retrial approaches, Prakash is home with his mother and grandmother, but his transition to civilian life, as brief as it may have been, remains a struggle.

“They robbed me of everything, man, everyone who was in my life,” he says. “All that mental anguish and trauma, it took a toll on me, especially in regards to my mental health. I was kidnapped for six years. The wrong that’s been done to me is irreparable. No matter how much compensation I receive for getting wrongly convicted, I’ll never get back the time I spent behind those bars.”

“I’m going to prove my innocence and continue freedom fighting and fight for those who are in my situation,” he continues. “There are lots of juveniles in the system, just like me. The system is really cruel and nothing’s going to happen and if we sit around and let them continue their cruel and unusual punishment.”
SEX WORKERS & COVID: MANY ARE FINDING NEW WAYS TO MAKE A LIVING, BUT IT'S NOT EASY

By Olivia Riggio

Definitely leave me alone who are still selling and are not really being cautious. The threat or operation is a lot more significant than the threat COVID, for a lot of undocumented people. For some people, they have fewer options than ever before. The pandemic has been catastrophic for undocumented people in the United States, and it has been a catalyst for the emergence of new forms of labor exploitation.

One avenue that has been explored is the use of OnlyFans, a social media platform where users can share content, such as photos or videos, in exchange for a fee. The site has been used by sex workers to continue earning money during the pandemic, as they are unable to work in-person due to the risk of transmission.

Sinnamon is immunocompromised, as is her grandson, who was diagnosed with cancer before the pandemic, but supplemented it by selling photos or videos online. She says that the pandemic has forced her to find new ways to work and that she has had to learn to work remotely.

She says that the pandemic has also created more demand for online content, as people are more likely to stay at home and watch content online. This has led to an increase in the number of people creating online content, which has also led to an increase in the number of people creating OnlyFans accounts.

People who are not in a position to work online are struggling, however. Some sex workers are not able to work online due to a lack of equipment or internet access. Others are not able to work due to a lack of demand.

There are people who enter sex work because it’s their passion and they enjoy it, but for others, it’s their only way to make a living, and now it’s not always a viable option. The pandemic has led to a decrease in demand for sex work, and it has also led to an increase in the number of people seeking sex work.

There are also concerns about the safety of sex workers during the pandemic, as they are vulnerable to violence and abuse, and they are often unable to wear protective equipment due to the nature of their work.

There is a need for more support for sex workers during the pandemic, and there are organizations working to provide this support. These organizations are helping sex workers find alternative ways to make a living, and they are also helping to raise awareness about the issues facing sex workers during the pandemic.

It is clear that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on the lives of sex workers, and it will be a long time before they are able to make a living in the same way as before. However, there is hope that the pandemic will ultimately lead to a better future for sex workers, and that they will be able to find new ways to make a living.
THE “Storm” never happened. No round-ups of Satanic pedophile Democrats. No ripping off the masks of alien lizard people. The QAnon conspiracy theory fell flat but for a few days in January, the danger was real.

“Thinking about heading over to Pelosi,” Cleveland Meredith Jr. told police. “And putting a bullet in her noggin on Live TV.” During Biden’s inauguration, he drove to Washington D.C. as rage burned in his brain. A Matrix level stash of weapons was in his truck. He had an assault rifle with telescopic sight, an American flag and a Glock, 2,500 rounds of ammo and at least 320 armor piercing bullets.

Three years earlier, in August 2018, Meredith Jr. paid for a QAnon sign to be put up a mile away from his Car Nutz Car Wash in Acworth, Georgia. The local newspaper, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, asked him about it. He replied that he was, “a patriot among the millions who love this country.”

Meredith Jr. is one face in a growing rank of incendiaries inspired by the conspiracy theory QAnon to commit acts of violence. The FBI cited it as a source of domestic terrorism. From its start on 4Chan, the conspiracy theory mobilized the right wing, especially after their defeat by neoliberal centrists in the presidential election. It recycles anti-Semitic tropes to drive an eliminationist ideology. The tragic irony is that QAnon also puts its own believers at risk.

BEHOLD THE PALE WHITE LIE

“‘There’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take this global cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles out,’” said Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene during her campaign for Georgia’s 14th Congressional District. She said Muslims in Congress were an “invasion,” Blacks and Latinx were held back by drugs and gangs.

She finished with the classical rhetorical flourish of white males being the most “mistreated” group in America. She is not alone. Alongside her is Rep. Lauren Boebert, who flitted with QAnon, and the nearly 60 former congressional candidates who either slyly promoted it or gave it a very public bear-hug. Behind the politicians are hundreds of thousands online devotees and die-hards who showed up at Trump rallies hoisting giant “Q” signs. By time the election came, the demobilization of the Democratic party had been complete.

Politicians rode the wave of hatred into office. At least two made it. The wave hit a climax at the Capitol Hill insurrection. The toxic ideological brew, Blob-like, gooey and acidic rolled through halls of power, and left dead people in its wake. The Republican party gave a wink-wink tacit approval of QAnon, and with each step closer to respectability, its followers were emboldened to act out on the apocalyptic plot.

The cruel calculation of conspiracy theories is that the powerful use them, while the faithful believers pay the price. In December 2016, Edgar M. Welch charged into a Washington, D.C., pizzeria, armed with an AR-15 and a handgun, hired and demanded to know where the sex-trafficked children were. The alt-right conspiracy theory that high-ranking members of the Democratic Party were running a child sex ring out of the Comet Ping Pong pizza parlor was a precursor to QAnon. Welch is serving a four-year sentence. In 2018, Matthew Wright was proved that Trump had not started The Storm, and blocked a bridge to the Hoover Dam with an armored truck, two military grade rifles plus 900 bullets. He was arrested and will be in prison for at least 10 years. Other QAnon followers were found with bomb-making material, one killed a Gabino crime family boss, another detailed a freight train. The list goes on and on.

The dual victims of QAnon are those targeted by it and those who believe in it. The former run in a panic as armed conspiracy theorists show up looking for crimes that don’t exist. The latter grip the bars of a jail, maybe realizing they have been fooled into losing their freedom.

FREEZE THE BLOB

Conspiracy theories are a permanent part of our politics. Before it was The Blue Book of the John Birch Society, with its bogyman of the “Communist conspiracy,” or the 1964 A Choice Not an Echo by Phyllis Schlafly, which called our shadowy kingmakers blocking Sen. Goldwater’s disaster of a presidential campaign, or that the 1969 NASA moon landings were “faked,” or FEMA is building concentration camps, or the Sandy Hook mass murder of kids was staged, or that alien lizards are secretly taking control of government.

The major difference is that QAnon came at the worst time. The U.S. is at a tipping point. The pandemic, the new crushing debt, the loss of cultural status for whites as America becomes more diverse, and the new Trump-led Republican party turn to fascism all add up to a highly explosive moment. QAnon is a lit match. It ignites what Richard Hofstadter called in his 1964 essay “The Paranoid Style of American Politics” that “chronic mental disorder characterized by systemized delusions of persecution and one’s own greatness.”

How does one beat it? One tactic is to deplatform QAnon. Twitter canceled accounts linked to the conspiracy theory. Amazon cut QAnon products. It is an attempt to cut them off and cut them out. The problem is newer platforms, more conservative or at least libertarian-leaning like Gab will scoop them up. What is the solution?

Let’s take a cue from Hollywood. In The Blob, the relentless acid goo monster is killed by the cold. The small-town hero lures it to eat a snow truck of liquid nitrogen, it blows up and freezes the Blob. It couldn’t eat any more.

Starve QAnon by taking away what it feeds on; the psychological hunger for a way to cope with loss, and a need for community. The Left can do that. Use media against media. Show us as we are not who are imagined to be. A promising example is Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s use of Instagram while drinking beer and building Ikea furniture. She led a social media workshop and more progressive politicians are demystifying politics.

Link the personal to the political. Take the scenes of every day life, and build upon them to make the case for progressive policy. Visit food pantries. Visit homeless shelters. Visit families losing a home to foreclosure. Visit people without healthcare. Show the seemingly endless horizon of faces watching that is who we are.

Make fun of the conspiracy theory. It would be hilarious to see a democratic socialist tug on their face and say, “I was trying to show you my real alien lizard body but this human mask is too tight. Oh well, let’s go check out this tent city and ask what they need.”

Democracy needs an informed electorate. Right now that means more than facts and statistics about policy. It means the millions of Americans who don’t vote or look askance at poli
tics, need to know we are regular everyday people, trying the best they can to put the pieces of our world back together.
By Linda Martín Alcoff

Donald Trump is no longer President, but the political crisis in this country will not subside. It will get worse before it gets better, and the Democratic Party will not save us. January 6 was quite the event for leftists to watch from the safety of warm living rooms. Tens of thousands of protesters strategically organized enough to crack the halls of power. Chanting, “Whose house? OUR house!” Whaaat?

Pundits continue to fuss over the proper terminology to describe the events of the day, but none I’ve seen want to call it what it truly was: a social movement.

2020 made it more apparent than ever that the United States is riven by two major social movements engaged in a war with each other. Each movement represents a large and diversified coalition that strenuously rejects status quo politics and wants significant structural, systemic and lasting change. And each movement has inspired thousands to set personal interests aside and engage in the struggle in the streets to advance their side in the fight.

The Democratic Party mainstream would like to equate these movements even while they endeavor to co-opt the analysis and recruit from the left. In public, they focus on the right wing’s movement tactics as a way to generate wide support for what must be done: militarized control of public space, carceral threats, replace protests with an electoral focus.

The left needs to maneuver around this by returning the focus onto the competing agendas of these warring movements. The question of violence can never be approached as a stand-alone issue; violence against the Nazis in Germany was entirely justifiable. The question of violence is moral, yes, but it is also always strategic: Will it advance our aims or hurt them? This is the question now being debated on the right, given the way that their January 6 events weakened their coalition.

Trump has been a galvanizing force, a useful tool, a mouthpiece, and a visible example of the angry, assertive, racist and unapologetically selfish emotions that have been generated in reaction to social movements especially from people of color. But his leadership has been strategically weak: The coalition is in trouble because Trump’s strategic direction is too self-interested. He may well be replace in his position as figurehead by someone more dangerous.

But the left needs to be clear: We have a two-front war against both the right-wing movement that has been allowed to flourish and grow over the last several decades into a force of 74 million voters, but also against the weak-kneed and ineffective policies and rhetoric of the right’s only serious, viable opposition, the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party does not want fundamental, structural change in the economy, and because of this, it cannot address racial injustice either in the wage structure for low-wage workers or in the carceral system that manages injustice.

Our first task must be to develop an updated understanding of what we are fighting against. The storm troopers of the right are not all patsies: they used the “Stop the Steal” slogan for their own purposes: to stop the demographic takeover, and protect their political and economic resources from further erosion. And they are not all white or white nationalists. What united many Trump voters was that they do not want to live in the third world country they see on the horizon. They want to live in an imperial nation with global power it can exert to protect and enrich its citizens. And this includes some people of color.

Our second task must be developing the sort of fusion politics of the Poor People’s Campaign, with race and class united in every proposal. Without attending to class, we risk a neoliberal multiculturalism, but without attending to race, we may continue the white left’s tendency to downplay the white nationalist danger.

There is reason for hope, as long as we continue to center our own social movements.

For a review of the early days of the Biden administration, see “Joe Biden’s First Report Card” on Page 20.
Aspirational: Raised in the slums of Kampala, Uganda, Bobi Wine has become a symbol of hope in Africa which has the world’s youngest population and many of its oldest leaders.
This system has been navigated best by farmers in Punjab and Minimum Selling Price (MSP) so they aren’t left with losses. Farmers producing certain major produce like wheat and rice, table. This longstanding system also provides a security net for distributors and facilitate the movement of food from farm to farmers sell to licensed distributors who in turn sell to private 
The Mandi system consists of regulated trade markets where the middlemen take advantage of small farmers. Farmers selling at Mandis are accorded a fixed rate, called Minimum Support Price (MSP), which is a government guarantee for a fair payment. The farmers are paid more than the prevailing market price, ensuring a minimum return on their crops. The system also provides a safety net for farmers, ensuring they are paid a fair price even if market prices are low.

On January 26, tensions escalated, with protestors storming the barricades of the historic Red Fort in Delhi, at the annual Republic Day parade. The protestors were met with tear gas, batons and water hoses. Disputed reports of violence blistered across news platforms, surrounding the death of one farmer and many injured.

In September, three agriculture-related laws were approved, skewing the agricultural sector towards privatization, threatening the erosion of the ‘mandi’ system, which provides a safety net for farmers under state law. The laws, hurriedly passed by a majority voice vote, led the opposition to criticize the process as fundamentally unconstitutional.

A REGULATED MARKET

The Mandi system consists of regulated trade markets where farmers sell to licensed distributors who in turn sell to private distributors and facilitate the movement of food from farm to table. This longstanding system also provides a security net for farmers producing certain major produce like wheat and rice, who can sell their unsold produce to government officials at a Minimum Selling Price (MSP) so they aren’t left with losses. This system has been navigated best by farmers in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh who own larger farms, more sophisticated equipment and produce major crops like wheat. They seem to have personal relationships with distributors who’ve formulated an unofficial credit system. In all fairness, the Mandi system hasn’t been perfect. With most small farmers owning less than five acres of land, and outdated or absent storage facilities, the farming community is barely scraping by. Small farmers have all the odds stacked against them and about 10,000 per year commit suicide. The call for reform, some economists say, has been long overdue.

They argue the enactment of these new laws will give the farmers more freedom — the freedom to sell out of state, to sell directly to private buyers and benefit from a free-market economy in the midst of a flawed system where the middlemen take advantage of small farmers.

The protestors clearly disagree. They fear that greater privatization will lead to an eventual dissolution of the ‘mandi’, leaving thousands of distributors out of jobs as private corporations undercut their prices, and then over time, lead the farmers with no one else to sell to. Their fears are not unfounded. P. Sainath, a prominent advocate for farmers, points out that in the event of a legal dispute between a farmer and a private corporation, the farmers, NGOs, unions or anyone else for that matter won’t have the legal right to go to court. The farmer gets the shorter end of the stick. In the absence of state regulation, chances grow that vast private monopolies will take root and the small farmer will be subject to much larger forces than the middlemen he presently contends with.

This law has already been enacted in the state of Bihar. Reports show that while it helped some farmers, it also led to more disorganization and a crumbling of regulated markets. Whole farmers were able to travel shorter distances to sell, new problems arose with small farmers having to sell at half their profit margin. The logistical problems faced by the farmers today, some argue, could’ve potentially been solved by adapting the current system, instead of reforming it.

In the shadows loom the Ambani-Adani group, two of India’s richest and most powerful corporations who stand to double their wealth in the next five years, by breaking into the prized agricultural market. The farmers’ fear this corporate behemoth will use vast resources and stealthy strategy to smooth all competition as they did with the telecom industry. The group inadvertently became the symbol for the resistance against privatization, with protestors boycotting their products and services by the thousands.

THE SIKH CULTURE OF SERVICE

At the root of the protest lies the Sikh culture of service. Every passerby, protester and farmer passing through the encampments has been fed full-course meals or langad (meals blessed after prayer), given free medicine, and welcomed into the community. The Sikhs are a religious community mostly residing in Punjab. Right-wing propaganda paints the Sikhs as separatists and serves up reports of violence and lurid conspiracy theories. As it stands today, it seems unlikely that the government will permanently repeal these laws while the protestors are prepared to continue until their demands are met. One thing is clear — the distrust between the government and its people runs deep.

India’s government thought it could sneak the new agricultural laws through amid chaos and disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and could not foresee the farmers’ unrelenting protests. The protestors are fighting to keep democracy alive not just for farmers, but for us all, for at the heart of these laws, is a clause taking away the right of farmers and anyone else to sue the government or corporations so long as they have acted in “good faith.” Our government seems to be consistently choosing profit over its people, and even if the profit eventually cycles back into our economy, it’ll be at the cost of our democracy.

Manvi Jalan is an India-based independent journalist.
two recent biographies of prominent writer-activists, Adrienne Rich and Andrea Dworkin are a study in contrast in how to tell the story of a life. However, both books do a good job in reminding readers that though their respective subjects may be simplistically perceived as mere polemists, as well as posited at opposite ends of second-wave feminism, both women are in fact far more complex and allied than that.

Interestingly, both prominent feminists initially knew each other closely to the point of conversion. Born in Baltimore in 1929, Rich quickly achieved mainstream literary success. She was just 22, a senior at Radcliffe College, when W. H. Auden chose her first book for the Yale Younger Poets prize. At 24 she married Alfred Haskell Conrad, a Harvard economist, bearing three sons by age 30.

Similarly, Dworkin, born in Camden, NJ in 1946, was only 22 when she entered into a physically abusive marriage to Dutch anarchist Cornelius Dirk de Bruin. What’s more, both women were very close to their fathers, who fostered their intellectual development, and estranged from their mothers.

Of the two books, Martin Duberman’s biography is far more sympathetic to its subject. Readers can understand Dworkin’s motivations and feelings even while not necessarily agreeing with her views or methods. Simply put, Dworkin became such a strong foe of “woman-hating” — the title of her first and arguably most well-known book, with which she sprung onto the political scene in 1974 — because misogyny devastated her life. She was repeatedly traumatized at the hands of men, barely recovered from one incident before the next. Besides the abusive husband, she was subjected to a brutally invasive vaginal exam at 18 in New York’s Women’s House of Detention after being arrested protesting the Vietnam War, and sexually assaulted on multiple occasions throughout her life, from childhood molestations to being slipped a date-rape drug at 33. She never really healed from the trauma, her life partner John Stoltenberg said that if he woke her unexpectedly, her immediate instinct was to perceive even him as a threat.

Yet despite Dworkin having plenty of good reason to be a “man-hater,” as she was stereotyped by everyone from her fellow feminists to Playboy magazine, Duberman emphasizes that Dworkin saw not just the worst but the best of men. This is brought out in painful detail in her fierce, almost ungraceful, battle with her father.

Despite her fame as lesbian separatists, both women actually had great affection and attraction for the men in their lives, and their lesbianism was in part a political choice. Rich left her husband shortly before his 1970 suicide, having affairs with a juicy roster of characters including June Jordan, Susan Sontag, and her therapist, Lily Engler, for whom she wrote the famous sequence Twenty-One Love Poems, one of the book’s most unexpected revelations. Rich did rebuff the advances of poet-activist Audre Lorde; sadly Hilary Holladay only glances upon their close friendship, along with Rich’s involvement in the women’s community. A similar veil is drawn over Rich’s 36-year relationship with fellow writer Michelle Cliff, which lasted until her death. (Cliff died just four years after Rich, despite being 18 years her junior, of liver failure related to regime drinking.)

Dworkin and Rich’s lives intersected in the anti-pornography movement of the early 1980s. While Rich was a vocal member of Women Against Pornography, alongside such feminist luminaries as Susan Brownmiller, Robin Morgan and Gloria Steinem, Dworkin arguably remains the movement’s most prominent face. After her 1981 book Pornography: Men Possessing Women, in which she implicates porn as a major factor in violence against women, Dworkin and attorney Catharine MacKinnon drafted a municipal ordinance that passed in some cities and was rejected by others that would allow women to sue for the harm porn had caused them — receiving serious backlash from other segments of the feminist movement, who were concerned that the ordinance could too easily be used by the religious right against women and queers. Duberman stresses that censorship was never Dworkin’s intent, but what came to be called the feminist “sex wars” were on. (The measure was ultimately overturned by an appeals court as unconstitutional.)

In 1985, a new group, the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force (FACT), submitted a “friend of the court” brief objecting to the ordinance, signed by who’s-who of lesbian writers including Barbara Smith, Rita Mae Brown, Kate Millett, Joan Nestle — and Rich. Dworkin and others in the anti-porn movement saw this as a huge betrayal on Rich’s part, as if she were “switching sides.”

In hindsight, this sense of betrayal seems like energy better spent elsewhere. What’s more, Rich was increasing taking an intersectional view of feminism, and FACT was an explicitly multiracial coalition while the anti-porn movement was merely single-issue.

Despite this “split,” Rich and Dworkin continued to have much in common. Late in life, both explored their relationships with Judaism, coming to terms with it as the first “Other” identity that undergirded much of their activism. What’s more, both women were prodigious writers despite struggling with crippling forms of arthritis (osteo for Dworkin, rheumatoid for Rich). Dworkin’s health and weight struggles contributed to her early death from myocarditis at 58. Fortunately Duberman does justice to Dworkin’s legacy, honoring her as a surprisingly sympathetic figure, not only as an intellectual who wrote 10 books of political theory, but a literary artist who also wrote three novels and a book of poems.

If only Rich were so honored. Hilary Holladay respects Rich’s stellar reputation as a literary giant, whose body of work (a dozen books of poems and six of essays) won everything from the National Book Award to her famously rejected National Medal of Arts from the Clinton administration. However, Holladay’s startlingly mean-spirited biography is studded with odd barbs and inappropriate judgments. This may relate to Holladay’s egregious overreliance on Rich’s sister Cynthia, from whom Rich was estranged, as a source. For instance, Holladay accuses Rich of being “ungrateful” for resigning from a teaching position in order to write; calls her “cold” for discussing her sons’ privilege; and when Rich writes a detailed letter to friends helping her after spinal surgery, characterizes her as a “martyr and boss” demanding “maid service.” Holladay even has Rich’s neighbors report on what they said and heard from her adjoining yards, like a tabloid journalist picking through Rich’s garbage. Rich died at home at 82, at the end of a long and illustrious life that deserves a more respectful biography than this.
WAR NO MORE

I Ain’t Marching Anymore: Dissenters, Deserters, and Objectors to America’s Wars
Chris Lombardi
The New Press, 2019

By Eleanor Bader

Almost 250 years ago, in 1777, Jacob Ritter, a member of the Pennsylvania militia, assessed the carnage surrounding him on the battlefield and decided, right then and there, that he would never take up arms again. “The rest of Jacob Ritter’s life was shaped by that moment of conscientious objection, a term invented a century before,” reports Chris Lombardi, author of I Ain’t Marching Anymore: Dissenters, Deserters, and Objectors to America’s Wars.

What’s more, Lombardi notes that while Ritter’s position was not particularly popular, it was also not unique, and in the centuries since, scores of people have not only opposed war, but have resisted other aspects of militarism, from paltry wages paid to servicemembers, to opposition to the racism, sexism, homophobia and imperialism that have long been endemic to U.S. policy.

This big-picture overview makes Lombardi’s meticulously researched text essential reading. Beginning with Ritter’s revolutionary act of conscience, she covers every armed conflict the United States has engaged in and zeroes in on the many principled acts of courage that have turned flag-waving patriots into anti-war activists. The result is both harrowing and inspiring.

That said, there are some odd omissions, among them the sidestepping of Vietnam-era resisters who fled to Canada, choosing to uproot themselves from their friends, families and communities rather than face imprisonment or ascend into harm’s way. But this is a small criticism in an otherwise sweeping look at an important piece of under-reported history.

Among the most interesting nuggets in the book is Lombardi’s deep dive into the role that social class—poverty—has always played in determining who enters military service. Prior to and during the Civil War, for example, Lombardi writes that virtually every recruit had been “wooed in advance by promised signing bonuses of three months’ pay...Many enlisted for the sake of their families, having no employment, and were promised that they could leave part of their pay for their families to draw in their absence.”

Sadly, then, as now, promises made were not promises kept and thousands of men deserted, walking away in fury and despair when the money did not materialize. This, Lombardi notes, was particularly glaring for soldiers of color. “The Army’s refusal to give Black soldiers equal wages caused some to desert rather than work without pay. A few even chose execution rather than return to duty,” she writes.

As enraging as this was, Lombardi adds that not every desertion was motivated by principle, with some warriors going AWOL because they were too psychologically damaged to continue fighting, suffering from what was then called nostalgia or soldier’s heart. We now know this condition as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. In fact, between 1861 and 1866, she writes, government reports acknowledged “5,213 cases and 58 deaths attributed to nostalgia among white troops, with 334 and 16 deaths among colored troops.”

“The Civil War is where the emotional damage of war became an area of medicine,” Lombardi explains. The war also created “the first generation of writers for whom that damage yielded dissent,” including Marine veteran Herman Melville and Army nurse Walt Whitman.

In subsequent generations, writers Kurt Vonnegut, Howard Zinn and Ron Kovic; filmmakers John Houston and Oliver Stone; and cartoonist Bill Mauldin used their military experience to create art with an explicitly antwar message, finding in creative expression a way to affirm that war is hell.

Not surprisingly, this message is repeatedly hammered in I Ain’t Marching Anymore, but Lombardi also tackles voluntary enlistment and interviews dozens of soldiers who signed up only to later discover that they’d made a huge mistake. The many organizations that assist them—from Veterans For Peace to the War Resisters League to the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors—are showcased and Lombardi paints an ardent portrait of their day-to-day efforts. In addition, our era’s most prominent resisters — Daniel K. Choi, Stephen Funk, Chelsea Manning, and Reality Winner — are introduced as exemplars of bravery and integrity, committed veterans-turned-activists who are willing to speak truth to power and assert that peace is possible.
Sports teams with Native American-themed names and images have come under intense pressure in recent years to cut out the cultural appropriation that many Native Americans find racist and demeaning.

In July, the Washington Redskins dropped their longtime team name in the aftermath of demonstrations around the murder of George Floyd. The move followed years of protest. In December, the Cleveland Indians announced they would adopt a new team name in time for the 2022 season.

The Atlanta Braves, Kansas City Chiefs, Golden State Warriors and the Chicago Blackhawks of the National Hockey League can all expect more scrutiny in the coming years.

As for the Braves, they could skip the predictable cycle of protest, intransigence and, finally, capitulation by simply honoring a legendary ballplayer with a catchy new team name.

It’s time for the Atlanta Hammers.

Henry Aaron’s death on January 22 at the age of 86 was met with an outpouring of love and reverence for the Home Run King. “Hammerin’ Hank,” as he was known, played 21 of his 23 seasons with the Braves, first in Milwaukee and then in Atlanta, where the team moved in 1966. Late in his career, he faced down a deluge of death threats and racist hate mail and broke Babe Ruth’s all-time home run record of 714 in 1974. He finished his career two years later with 755 dingers. He was one of baseball’s all-time greats, as well as a great human being.

“He swung, his smile, his spirit, they were all beautiful,” former Brave Chipper Jones said at a memorial service for Aaron.

Forward-looking Braves fans have started a petition on change.org to change the team’s name to the Hammers. Dale Murphy, who starred on the Braves teams of the 1980s, has heartily endorsed the change. So far team officials have demurred.

To help visualize the change we want to see, the Indy’s Leia Doran has created a new Atlanta Hammers logo that maintains the same color scheme as the current team logo and deftly replaces the tomahawk with a hammer. She also created an Atlanta Hammers baseball card featuring an image of Aaron and his home-run swing.

Pro sports teams are loath to alter their brands, which are worth millions of dollars and build fan loyalty across generations. Baseball can be especially change resistant. But in this case, the team name is a no-brainer. Leave behind the racially insensitive imagery and embrace an enlightened, snappy-sounding new name that will put a smile on the faces of baseball fans everywhere. Expect those “Atlanta Hammers” caps and jerseys to fly off the shelves.

To the front office of the Atlanta baseball team, you’re welcome. And please cut us a check when you reap the windfall.

IF I HAD A HAMMER

By John Tarleton
Dear Billy,
My grandfather started watching lots of Fox News about five years ago and became noticeably angrier. Since the election, he’s fallen down the rabbit hole with QAnon and there’s no counterpoint I can make that he doesn’t call “fake news.” Is there anything I can do to bring him back to reality?

ELIZA
Crown Heights

Dear Eliza,
Just walk up to the TV, turn off Tucker Carlson, and before Gramps says “What?” read some Octavia Butler right point blank.

God is Power / Infinite / Indestructible / Indomitable, / Indestructible, / Indomitable,
And yes, God is Pliable —
Trickster / Teacher / Chaos / Clay,
God exists to be shaped. God is Change.

And then turn his show back on and leave. Don’t try to persuade. Conspiracy theorists make alternative realities. Don’t try to get in there with logic or even love. Your grandpa is imitating the White Male God that Doesn’t Change.

Give him 24 hours to absorb the Parable of the Sower. Then next day Song of Myself, then Resolution for the Hell of It and keep this up every day, then Wangari Maathai, Yoko One, James Baldwin, Lorca, AOC. … and then on the seventh day turn off Murdoch and stand there and ask him, “What do you want to hear?” If he’s ready, he’ll say, “Well alright honey, go ahead, read something.” Or it might take him many seventh days. But if he gives you some daylight, then go back to Octavia: Change is inevitable. Like Ecclesiastes says, “to everything there is a season …” Change is a part of life, of existence, of the common wisdom. But I don’t believe we’re dealing with all that that means. We haven’t even begun to deal with it.

Billy

Rev. Billy,
Winter always bums me out — the cold, the short days and lack of sunshine, having to get all bundled up to go on the simplest errand. I look forward to moving someplace warmer and sunnier in a few more years when I retire. In the meantime, do you have any tips for how to get through winter when warmer days seem so far away?

PAUL
Jamaica, Queens

Dear Paul,
The old consumer-is-king days when the main thing was individual comfort, those days are long gone, Paul. We’re in a suicidal slide towards a permanent heat wave. Hundreds of species are disappearing weekly. We are in too much of an emergency for you to get depressed from cold weather, Paul. That’s not this present moment in history. Right now, you cancel your retirement and get to work for the survival of the next generations.

Maybe I’m the advice columnist from Hell, which is a warm place, but I’m concerned that your personal comfort, especially your own personal warming, would be pleaded for without irony. Paul, the thousands of as-yet unreleased viruses are surging inside hot bats in Wuhan … So the bat scientists say. So Paul! Stay cool while you can … The heating planet has a very large natural disaster called the Sixth Extinction, coming to Jamaica, Queens, and coming to your retirement village outside Phoenix too.

When your own comfort isn’t the first consideration, and the survival of life itself is the new ultimate intersectional justice, then you won’t be bummed with some cold weather, Paul, you’ll be glad it still exists.

Very brisk day outside, think I’ll bundle up, don my mask, and take a walk in Prospect Park.

— Rev.

Reverend Billy is pastor of the Church of Stop Shopping. Have a question for the Reverend? Just email JRVBILLY@INDEPENDENT.ORG and unburden your soul.
# Joe Biden’s First Report Card

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The Biden administration has begun with a flurry of action including dozens of executive orders. Keeping up with what Biden is doing (and not doing) can be overwhelming. So here’s an early report card for the 46th president.

- Ignores deficit hawks and go big on a stimulus package.
- Disregards bad advice about “targeting” stimulus checks.
- Supports scrapping the filibuster.
- Reverses the U.S. withdrawal from the World Health Organization.
- Requires mask wearing in airports & on certain modes of transportation.
- Directs FEMA to create federally supported community vaccination centers.
- Establishes Pandemic Testing Board to expand U.S. coronavirus testing capacity.
- Shows commitment to Medicare For All.
- Rejoins the Paris Climate Accord
- Cancels the Keystone XL Pipeline
- Shows commitment to restoring scientific integrity across federal agencies.
- Embraces Green New Deal
- Reverses Muslim travel ban
- Halts construction on border wall
- Fortifies DACA protections for undocumented people brought into the country as children
- Requires non-citizens to be included in the Census count
- Shows commitment to abolishing ICE
- Extends pause on student loan payments and interest
- Shows willingness to use power he already has to abolish $1.7 trillion in student loan debt
- Extends the existing nationwide moratorium on evictions and foreclosures
- Cancels rent for tenants + mortgage payments for small landlords
- Prevents workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation
- Directs OSHA to enforce worker health and safety requirements.
- Restores collective bargaining power and worker protections for federal workers
- Shows willingness to follow through on his stated commitment to a $15 / hour minimum wage.
- Vocalizes his support for labor unions by publicly backing Amazon workers trying to unionize.
- Reverses ban on transgender Americans joining the military.
- Ends U.S. support for Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen.
- Is willing to reduce U.S. support for Israel.
- Shows interest in returning U.S. to the Iran nuclear deal.
- Is willing to reduce $740 billion annual military budget by at least 10%.
- Directs attorney general not to renew federal contracts with private prisons.
- Revokes Trump’s policy justifying family separation at the border.
- Is willing to end system of mass incarceration of immigrant detainees in private prisons.
- Rescinds Trump policies that limit refugee admissions including for LGBTQ+ refugees.
- Rescinds ban on government funding for foreign nonprofits that perform or promote abortions.
- Appoints competent technocrats to his Cabinet & other senior positions
- Appoints visionary progressives with deep ties to social movements to his Cabinet & other senior positions

**Teacher Notes:** Joey has gotten off to a faster start than many of us expected. He tries very hard to make friends with the kids who clearly don’t like him. At the same time, he can still be very stubborn about accepting help with some of his most challenging assignments from the bright kids in the class like Bernard, Elizabeth and Alexandria.