"The End of the American Dream" by former ICE detainee Marcial Morales is based on his time in the Essex County Jail in Newark, NJ.

COLD AS ICE
LOCAL NEW JERSEY GOVERNMENTS ARE MAKING MILLIONS OFF OF RUNNING IMMIGRANT DETENTION CENTERS.
WHAT HAPPENS ON THE INSIDE IS SHOCKING.
BY AMBA GUERGUERIAN, P12

TUNE IN & TURN ON
NEWS, INTERVIEWS & MORE!

UPCOMING SHOWS:
MAY

THROUGH MAY 2
10am-5pm
EXHIBIT: GOYA’S GRAPHIC IMAGINATION
Regarded as one of the most remarkable artists from the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Francisco Goya (1746-1828) is renowned for his prolific activity as a draftsman and printmaker, producing about 900 drawings and 300 prints during his long career. Through his drawings and prints, he expressed his political liberalism, criticism of superstition and distaste for intellectual oppression in unique and compelling ways.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
1000 5th Ave., Manhattan

THROUGH MAY 31
10:30am-5:30pm • $14-$25
EXHIBIT: RECONSTRUCTIONS: ARCHITECTURE AND BLACKNESS IN AMERICA
How does race structure America’s cities? MoMA’s first exhibition to explore the relationship between architecture and the spaces of African-American and African diaspora communities, “Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America,” presents 11 newly commissioned works by architects, designers and artists that explore ways in which histories can be made visible and equity can be built.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W 53 St., Manhattan

EXHIBIT: GOSHA RUBCHINSKIY’S GRAPHIC IMAGINATION
This traveling exhibition, which is the first of its kind to be organized by an American museum, presents a collection of Gosha Rubchinskiy’s graphic work from the past 10 years, covering fashion, music, and visual culture.

MAY 1
7pm • FREE
JAZZ: KEYON HARROLD AT THE BREATHING PAVILION
The Breathing Pavilion, Ekene Ijeoma’s public sculpture, will host a series of site-specific musical performances. Grammy-winning trumpeter, singer and composer Keyon Harrold has played with artists such as Beyoncé, Common, Erykah Badu, Rihanna, Eminem and D’Angelo.

THE PLAZA
300 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn

MAY 5 & 12 • 15-16
9:30pm • $22
ADRENALIN
The Brooklyn Navy Yard’s annual music festival, Adrenaline, returns with a variety of live music, food and drinks.

BROOKLYN NAVY YARD
141 Flushing Ave, Brooklyn

MAY 6-7
8pm • FREE/Low cost
PERFORMING ARTS: RESTART STAGES
Lincoln Center is opening a giant outdoor performing arts center that will include 10 different performance and rehearsal spaces. Audience members can expect free and low-cost events, an outdoor reading room and a wealth of family programming. Enjoy a concert and cabaret series, film screenings, summer concerts, dance workshops and more.

LINCOLN CENTER
Lincoln Center Plaza, Manhattan

MAY 10-SEP
9am-12am • FREE/Low cost
PERFORMING ARTS: OUTDOORS: GOVERNORS ISLAND
Governors Island, a 172-acre island in the heart of New York Harbor, is reopening to the public. In addition to the 43-acre public park, Governors Island includes free arts and cultural events, as well as recreational activities. Brookly ferry from Pier 6 or Red Hook, Manhattan ferry from the Battery Maritime Building

MAY 10-NOV 14
6am–11pm • FREE
OUTDOORS: GOVERNORS ISLAND
In nature, a ghost forest is the evidence of a dead woodland that was once vibrant. Maya Lin’s Ghost Forest, a towering stand of 50 haunting Atlantic white cedar trees, is a newly-commissioned public art work at Madison Square Park. The 40-foot trees serve as a memory of germination, vegetation and abundance, and as a harsh symbol of the devastation of climate change.

MADISON SQUARE PARK
11 Madison Ave., Manhattan

ONGOING
7:30pm • $50
JAZZ: SMALLS REOPENS
A true New York jazz lover’s favorite, Smalls Jazz Club has featured some of the most talented players in the city since it opened in the ‘90s. The club is still running its first sets as online streaming only but has returned to live, COVID-friendly performances for second sets at 7:30 p.m. If you’re vaxxed and able to splurge, go enjoy the soundwaves. Show listings are available at www.smallslive.com/events/calendar/

SMALLS
130 W 70 St., Manhattan

EVENT CALENDAR
STAGE LEFT, P4
Off-Broadway theater workers fight for their labor rights and win.

REEFER GLADNESS, P5
How New York won the dopiest marijuana legalization law in the country.

9/11 LEGACY, P6
The last publicly-owned parcel of land at the World Trade Center site could provide an oasis of affordable housing.

WHO PLANS THE CITY?, P7
Corey Johnson wants to change how NYC land use decisions are made. Critics hear the ghost of Robert Moses stirring.

ERASE THE TEST, P8
It will be a lot easier for public school students to avoid participating in standardized tests this year. And that’s a good thing.

STRINGER THEORY, P9
City Comptroller Scott Stringer has embraced NYC’s ascendent left in recent years. Will it embrace his run for mayor?

MANHATTAN DA RACE, P10
The race to be the next Manhattan DA is wide open. Will the three decarceral candidates cancel each other out?

THE BUSINESS OF DETENTION, P12
Three Democratic-run counties in northern New Jersey earn millions running ICE detention centers inside their jails. They want to keep it that way.

THE VAXX OF LIFE, P16
Once you’re vaccinated, who’s ready for a hug?

LEFTIST AT THE MET, P18
Alice Neel believed everyone deserved a great portrait, not just the rich. Now, her work is on display at the Met.

BEWARY THE MAGA TRAP, P20
Superstar economist Thomas Piketty warns of the perils of inequality and false solutions proffered by right-wing nativists.

SPREAD THE WEALTH, P21
The U.S. ‘s vast riches will never be widely shared until we overcome a system based on zero-sum racism, says Heather McGhee.

EDUCATION FOR LIBERATION, P22
Queer Studies should be about liberation not accommodation, a CUNY prof writes in his new book.

REVEREND BILLY’S REVELATIONS, P23
Tips for rebuilding trust and openness after a year’s lockdown + how to make learning fun again for your child.

A Daily Independent
Global News Hour
with Amy Goodman and Juan González

DEMOCRACY NOW!
Tune In Live Every Weekday 8-9am ET

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Join us to celebrate the life of
FRANCES GOLDIN
activist and literary agent who died last year, at an online memorial.

Date and time:
Saturday, May 15, 2021,
at 2:00 p.m. EST.

The event will be live-streamed on YouTube:
bit.ly/CelebrateFrancesGoldin

If you cannot make it at that time, the link will remain active and you can watch it at your convenience.
International Publishers
New items from IP

This month International Publishers has brought out new editions of two classic works on topics of immediate interest and of great importance. One on labor history and the other on labor organizing—Roger Keeran’s unique and previously untold history of unionization in the US Auto industry, and a “Bible” of union organizing, written by the great labor and political leader, William Z. Foster, who drew from his own long experience as a union organizer in the United States in writing this book.

Both are “must have” additions to the libraries of both students and organizer of labor in the United States.

SUPPORT OUR TROUPES
WORKERS AT SMALLER THEATERS WIN PAY & LABOR EQUITY

BY DEREK LUDOVICI

A s of April 2, entertainment venues in New York have the green light to resume operations at 33% capacity, with a limit of 100 indoor seats and 200 outdoor seats. Broadway theaters probably will not reopen until September, as they don’t see a limited opening as viable, but this is welcome news for smaller theaters and their workers who were laid off in March 2020. These professionals won a significant victory in late March, when the Playbill and BroadwayWorld Websites agreed to require clear pay rates on their job listings.

Costume Professionals for Wage Equity (CPfWE) and On Our Team, two organizations advocating pay and labor equity in the theater industry, released an open letter on March 5 requesting that Playbill require clear rates of pay on all job listings posted on its site. After a 21-day online campaign, Playbill announced it would on March 26.

Playbill’s website now states: “For Paid jobs, the AMOUNT field is now required. Please enter a numerical value or range; leaving the field blank or entering TBD or similar will result in a delay in approval or rejection.”

Clear pay rates also make it easier to compare what the company is offering different workers. “About three or four years ago I was working on a project and I got a phone call from the lighting designer who I had previously worked with,” says Genevieve Beller, another CPfWE organizer. “He said, ‘Hey, do you want to compare contracts and see who’s getting what?’ Nobody had ever done that with me before. On the surface, we were getting the same design fee, but the work requirement was

Continued on page 22

SUE BRISK
VICTORIOUS: Genevieve Beller (left) and Jeannette Ault of Costume Professionals for Wage Equity in the Theater District.
**SMOKED OUT**

**HOW NY PROGRESSIVES CORNERED CUOMO TO WIN BEST-IN-THE-NATION MARIJUANA REFORM LAW — AND WHAT COMES NEXT.**

**BY STEVEN WISHNIA**

ate on a warm April afternoon in Manhattan, the breeze on a side street southwest of Midtown wafts the aromas of joints and cigar-tipped blunts. The duos and trios sparking up in the afterwork sunshine no longer have to worry about being arrested. New York State legalized pot on March 31, when Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed the Marijuana Regulation and Taxation Act, one day after it passed by votes of 40–23 in the Assembly and 31–29 in the Senate. “Today is an historic day for New Yorkers,” Sen. Liz Krueger (D-Manhattan), the bill’s lead sponsor, declared on the Senate floor March 30. “The bill we have held out for will create a nation-leading model for legalization.”

Eighteen states now allow growing and selling cannabis for non-medical use. New Jersey legalized it in February, and New Mexico and Virginia followed New York within a week. But it is unlikely that reefer retailers will open before late next year, as there are no rules, says Nancy Udell, a longtime activist with NoJustice PRLDEF, Desis Rising Up & Moving, and two large labor unions — 1191SEU and 32BJ SEIU.

There was some opposition. Sen. Philip M. Boyle (R-Suffolk) said marijuana is a “gateway drug” that leads to heroin, and “rates of addiction are skyrocketing.” Sen. Anna Kaplan (D-Greenburgh), one of three Democrats to vote no, said legalization and homelessness. The exceptions are that the companies in the medical system will be allowed some retailing — with the proceeds going to social-equity programs — and “micro-businesses” can do all three, much like a craft brewery can sell six-packs. The law sets a goal that half of new licenses should go to social-equity applicants, including small farmers. It earmarks 40 percent of tax revenue for reinvestment in communities most affected by the drug war. It also automatically expunges convictions for marijuana offenses that are no longer illegal, and the smell of weed will no longer be probable cause for a police search except as evidence of impaired driving.

Pot sales will face a 15% tax, plus a half-cent per milligram on THC content; for a 7-gram bag of buds that’s 15% THC, that tax would be $5.25. Individuals may grow up to six plants at home. Local governments will be allowed to ban retail sales if they do so by Dec. 31, with sentiment for that appearing strongest on Long Island.

Employers will be barred from penalizing workers for marijuana use off the job, unless it impairs their performance or violates licensing regulations or federal law. The law also requires that applicants to agree in writing not to interfere with union attempts to organize. For applicants that have 25 or more employees, the state Office of Cannabis Management (OCM), the agency that will be created to oversee the industry, must give priority to those who already have labor-peace agreements or used union labor to build their facilities. New Jersey and California also require labor-peace agreements. Colorado’s pot industry is completely nonunion.

How the state will reach its social-equity goals, however, remains up in the air. Key issues, such as whether the state will limit the number of licenses and how it will define and enforce the 50-percent requirement, will be up to the OCM.

“We’re going to try to influence the OCM, but right now, there are no rules,” says Nancy Udell, a longtime activist with Empire State NORML. But, she adds, “we’ve seen what happened in other states. We know what to do.”

Illinois, she notes, has social-equity provisions in its law, but “didn’t really put in a mechanism to make it happen.” “Obviously, we don’t know what will happen until licenses are issued,” says Williams. But, he adds, the law has enough specifics to define “what their job is.”

“We don’t get to win and walk away,” he concludes. “We have got to keep an eye on them.”

**WHAT CHANGED POLITICALLY?**

How did New York politics evolve from the days when Mayor Michael Bloomberg, whose stop-and-frisk policing policies put petty pot busts of young Black men at their core, was regularly lauded for running New York City with unprecedented efficiency, to legalization winning an almost two-thirds majority in the Legislature? Activists identify four main factors.

First, organizing. The Start Smart Coalition, founded about six years ago to advocate legalization and social equity, grew to more than 70 organizations from Long Island to Buffalo, including the Working Families Party, the state NAACP, LatinoJustice PRLDEF, Dads Rising Up & Moving, and two large labor unions — 1191SEU and 32BJ SEIU.

Second, the ethnic disparities of pot busts were so extreme that their racist overtones were “painfully obvious,” says Udell. It wasn’t like marijuana was “effectively legal” for white people, but it was also obvious that they made up a lot more than 15% of the pot smokers in New York City. The racial disparities were also extreme on Long Island and in Albany, Buffalo, and Rochester, says Moore.

Third, the growth of public support for legalization. More than 40% of the U.S. population now lives in states that have legalized it, says Wolfe. New Jersey legalizing made it “undeniable” for New York to retain prohibition, says Moore, as pot shops would be open a short PATH train ride from Manhattan or a quick drive from Rockland County.

Finally, political changes in Albany. Democrats won a solid majority in the state Senate in 2018, ending decades of control by Republicans. And Gov. Cuomo, who opposed legalization until a few years ago and had proposed a separate bill with much vaguer social-equity provisions, was weakened by the COVID nursing-home and sexual-harassment scandals.

Cuomo “was not interested in repairing the structural harms,” says Williams, and also wanted to maintain peripheral criminalization such as keeping public smoking illegal and having the smell of pot be a justification for police searches. The governor won concessions on the THC-content tax, says Udell, but overall, “he wasn’t in a position to say, ‘no, my way or the highway.'”

Williams credits years of “consistent organizing.” Yes, Cuomo was weakened, he says, “but also, we were ready.”
Housing for Whom?

State, City Nix Proposal to Build 1,000 Affordable Housing Units at World Trade Center Site. Will Biden Go Along?

By Todd Fine

Twenty years after September 11, 2001, President Biden is seeking to end the U.S. military deployment in Afghanistan. At the World Trade Center site, our own never-ending battle over real estate is coming to a close.

In February, a complex set of public entities controlled by Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio reached a deal to make 5 World Trade Center, the last unallocated lot owned by the public, into a luxury residential skyscraper developed by a joint venture of Silverstein Properties and Brookfield Properties. Located at 130 Liberty St. south of the September 11 Memorial, Site 5 would become the first official World Trade Center building to contain residences. With the two partners controlling at least 10 buildings in the immediate vicinity, the decision would cement a mixed-use megacomplex in Lower Manhattan comparable to Hudson Yards.

Although many other social and commercial possibilities for the site had been floated over the years — such as an office building, public housing, a hospital or university — the ultimate decision confirms the continued government devotion to the luxury residential skyscraper boom in Lower Manhattan, despite its questionable economics both before and after COVID-19. Consistent with de Blasio’s approach to “affordable housing” that relies on private-sector incentives, the deal calls for 25% of the 1,325 rental units in the 900-foot tower to be priced as “affordable,” with the actual meaning of that pledge remaining unclear.

This conclusion to the World Trade Center reconstruction saga occurs at a time when affordable housing has declined significantly in the surrounding area south of Chambers Street. This is not because of a lack of construction. Data published by Community Board 1 indicates that 13,862 new residential units were constructed between 2000 and 2016, although some of the brand-new buildings don’t appear to be fully occupied or even completed after years of work. For example, 125 Greenwich St., the 912-foot residential tower across the street from the Site 5 lot, briefly entered foreclosure in 2019 and is languishing in an unfinished state. Yet, because most of those new units are at the extreme high end of the market, the high vacancy rates are unlikely to result in greater affordability.

In 2011, Community Board 1 published the findings of an affordable-housing task force chaired by Battery Park City resident Tom Goodkind. The report revealed how key protections that supported affordability in Lower Manhattan had been dismantled, and that the relatively modest post-September 11 disaster funds that supported housing were often not focused on the immediate area. Alarmed by the growing recognition that low- and middle-income tenants could no longer afford to move to Lower Manhattan, the report advocated that 5 World Trade Center (130 Liberty St.) include affordable housing.

Goodkind later advocated that 5 World Trade Center should include over 1,000 affordable units, with some possibly set aside for artists and for catastrophically injured veterans and first responders. In 2017, he arranged meetings with the public corporation responsible, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, to present this vision. Sadly, however, he died of a chronic degenerative illness in February 2019, at age 65. That June, Gov. Cuomo announced a developer competition for Site 5 that made financial return a more important criterion than affordability.

If Goodkind’s plan had been pursued, the building conceivably would have been able to match the 800 units of affordable housing promised by the Department of City Planning’s controversial upzoning of historic districts in SoHo and NoHo. In recent months, the constest refrain from the mayor’s office and its supporters in the pro-developer group Open New York has been that we must build affordable housing in wealthy Manhattan districts that have access to transportation or are otherwise “amenity-rich.” Deputy Mayor Vicki Been, in charge of the mayor’s housing initiatives, even stated that the SoHo rezoning was prompted by the killing of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests.

Yet, if achieving a minimal amount of affordable housing was truly the goal, why didn’t the government pull out all the stops, especially when the site is on public land and the remaining federal disaster money could have subsidized construction?

Vicki Been hasn’t said much about 5 World Trade Center, and Open New York has now telegraphed that it won’t contest the ratio of affordability. Although Gov. Cuomo’s scandals have enabled his opponents to gain the upper hand over Empire State Development Corporation’s megaproject with Vornado around Penn Station, there hasn’t yet been any comparable reaction to the plans for 5 World Trade Center.

The idea of having affordable housing be part of the September 11 reconstruction has a long history, although it largely came to naught in the early years after the attacks, there was strong sentiment to include housing. Dozens of organizations had partnered in the Civic Alliance to Rebuild Downtown New York with a demand that, since September 11 was considered “an attack on all New Yorkers,” the reconstruction should benefit all classes of people. David W. Woold’s book Democracy Deferred: Civic Leadership after 9/11 documents how new affordable housing was often the most popular demand at the dozens of “listening sessions” organized by civic organizations and government agencies in 2002 and 2003. As a result, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation, which was designated to spend federal disaster funds, originally listed affordable housing as one of its core objectives.

Twenty years later, despite the population south of Chambers Street almost tripling since 2001 to around 61,000 residents, many of whom live in new office-to-residential conversions, there is not much that is affordable. The reconstruction at the World Trade Center was delayed so long that most of the civic organizations wound down before key government decisions were made. Many low- and middle-income buildings have been demolished, or their tenants have been harassed into leaving. Out of the billions of dollars in federal funding, including nearly $3 billion from HUD, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation’s “Partial Action Plan 6” for affordable housing only subsidized the design process for a mere 13 new low-income units in a mixed-income building at 270 Greenwich St. The plan spent just $41 million in total, in comparison with the over $1 billion spent on the September 11 Memorial and cultural grants.

Now, in 2021, there is one last chance to construct something that could possibly redeem the World Trade Center and be a signature achievement for the Biden administration. Site 5 will be the last skirmish of the reconstruction fight, and the battle lines of activism remain to be formed.

Todd Fine is president of the Washington Street Advocacy Group, an organization that uses creative, guerrilla advocacy tactics to promote historic preservation and historical memory in Lower Manhattan and across New York City.
URBAN PLANNING

By Emlyn Cameron

The speaker's bill is meant to modify the city's Uniform Land Use Review Process, commonly known as ULURP, in which the 59 local community boards have only an advisory voice on rezoning plans or major developments in their neighborhoods, and the City Council, which approves or disapproves them, traditionally defers to the opinion of the local member. In the de Blasio administration’s rezoning of neighborhoods like Inwood, Highbridge, East New York, and Chinatown for high-rise luxury housing with a trickle-down amount of “affordable” apartments, this has often played out as community boards opposing the rezoning, and the administration dismissing their ideas, but offering enough concessions for the local councilmember to vote yes.

Johnson’s legislation would set up a 10-year plan, and the council could vote on which land-use scenarios to adopt for each district in the plan. The choices would be meant to reflect community needs established in meetings, hearings, and suggestions from institutions such as the community boards, as it moves along the path from a “preliminary citywide goals statement” to the adoption of the eventual long-term plan.

Council Communications Director Jennifer Fermino says plan-aligned applications would go through ULURP, but the council reviewing them would be discretionary rather than mandatory. Councilmembers could have them “called up” for a hearing and vote by obtaining the signatures of seven other members, and the applications would be able to cite relevant portions of a “generic environmental impact statement” to supplement studies of the environmental effects.

Angotti, however, believes the bill misses a key part of planning’s renaissance: communities’ desire to take the initiative themselves in determining land use. Community boards would still be understaffed, underfunded, and only able to offer advisory opinions, he points out. He hopes to see an alternative that would give communities more substantive lead, such as increasing community boards’ resources to develop and propose plans themselves.

“It’s a matter of an ongoing conversation with these communities,” he said.

THE SPEECHER OF ROBERT MOSES

Angotti is not alone in thinking planning under the proposed bill may end up being imposed from above. The ULURP process is “not perfect by any stretch of the imagination,” says Kirsten Theodos of the People’s Citywide Land Use Alliance, which organized a March rally against the bill in front of City Hall, “but what this legislation does is create essentially a Robert Moses.”

The bill would empower a director of long-term planning to propose three land-use scenarios for each district in a draft long-term plan, and give the director authority to select one of those three if the City Council does not vote for a land-use to include in the final long-term plan.

This evokes the specter of Moses, who autocratically ruled development decisions in the metropolitan area from 1924 to 1968, from building Jones Beach to ramming the Cross-Bronx Expressway through the heart of working-class neighborhoods.

Opponents of the bill say that the legislation would give the planning director final say what proposed land uses make it into the final long-term plan, and, by extension, which types of proposals are subject to discretionary review and can use the generic environmental impact statement.

Fermino says the council wouldn’t have to adopt any of the land uses put before it, and that the local institutions involved in the review — community boards, borough presidents, the long-term planning steering committee — could create their own suggested land uses and submit them as part of their recommendations to the council. The council could also conceive land uses to vote into the long-term plan, with the director only stepping in if it doesn’t select any land use.

Opponents respond that this isn’t explicit in the bill’s text. It says that the steering committee, borough presidents, and community boards “shall each submit ... a recommended preferred land-use scenario for each applicable community district” to the speaker. The council must “adopt a single resolution establishing one preferred land use scenario for each community district,” but the bill doesn’t specify if it must be one of the director’s proposals or can be their own.

POWER IMBALANCES

Other activists believe the bill will reduce power imbalances in the land-use process. The Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development, whose work ranges from helping tenant coalitions organize against harassment to advising nonprofit developers, is backing the bill with caveats. Emily Goldstein, the group’s director of organizing and advocacy, believes it will give councilmembers more resources to assess land-use proposals, putting them on a more equal footing with developers and city agencies such as the Department of City Planning and the City Planning Commission. (The Department of City Planning is opposing the bill on the grounds of expense, practicality, and predicted outcomes. Director Marisa Lago said in written testimony to which the Indy was referred by DCP).

At a February hearing of the council’s subcommittee on Capital Budget, Johnson asked that the bill not substantially alter the ULURP process or reduce the role of community boards or other representatives. He emphasized that its purpose was to create a system robust enough to respond to systemic inequalities and climate change.

“We have worked hard as a council to advance equity and justice and to undo the city’s harmful and exclusionary policies, but we, as a city, have not acknowledged — let alone reformed — the ways in which our city’s fundamental failure to plan has upheld the status quo,” Johnson said.

The hearing did not inspire confidence in everyone. Philip Simpson, a lawyer and member of Inwood Legal Action, which unsuccessfully challenged the de Blasio administration’s rezoning of the neighborhood, believes the city government showed its true attitude about community input elsewhere: Three community boards submitted testimony saying that they had not learned about the bill until shortly before the hearing.

Fermino responded that the bill was going through the normal legislative process and feedback was being solicited from communities and community boards. Simpson and other opponents say they will need to see more proof that the administration is truly committed to comprehensive planning that is responsive to communities, instead of imposing top-down planning.

“I think the whole bill should be scrapped. We need citywide planning, but it needs to start at the bottom and filter up,” he said.
PENCIL US OUT
IT’S GOOD NYC MADE STANDARDIZED TESTING ‘OPT IN’ THIS YEAR. NOW, LET’S CANCEL THE TESTS.

By Alexa Avilés

This spring, I will not be giving my daughters the “test pep talk.” I will not be reminding them that they need sharpened #2 pencils, nor will I be giving them the candy that will get them through the day. They won’t be sharing nervous stares with their friends, and teachers won’t be giving them Smarties while anxiously drilling testing rules and quick strategies to use over the next several hours. My girls aren’t taking the state’s standardized exams this spring. And yours shouldn’t either.

In a year in which my daughters have lost loved ones and suffered through the uncertainty and confusion of our education system’s bungled response to COVID-19, I cannot fathom putting them through the additional anxiety of standardized testing. These tests don’t help our kids or our schools. Instead, they perpetrate injustice.

The NYC Department of Education recently announced that the standardized tests given to students in grades third through eighth will be offered on a voluntary basis, where parents who wish to have their children tested must opt them in. Making the tests opt-in is a start, but now is the moment to talk about ending them entirely. We know that standardized tests have reinforced the inequities inherent in our school system and perpetuated the de facto segregation of our schools, placing pressure and stigma on the students and teachers of underserved schools. Students from poor and working-class communities and communities of color are set up to fail.

Even when the system tries to accommodate students who face learning challenges, it falls short. For students who have a hard time paying attention, for example, substituting them to a six-hour test instead of a two-hour one does nothing to address their needs. And teachers are caught between teaching exclusively to the test, at the expense of a more enriching curriculum, or risking the career consequences and lifelong impact on students that come with poor standardized test results.

I speak from personal experience. As a Puerto Rico-born kid growing up in East New York, I was originally placed in a Spanish-speaking class, but my mother had me moved to an English one when she discovered that the bilingual classes were a full year behind their grade level. This kind of gap would be unacceptable anywhere, but it’s especially egregious in a city where 49 percent of households speak a language other than English at home, according to census data from the New York City Department of City Planning. In Community District 7, which is comprised of Windsor Terrace and Sunset Park, that number is even higher — 75 percent of residents speak a language other than English at home.

I’ve lived in Sunset Park for nearly two decades, and I’ve helped countless parents opt their kids out of state testing for this very reason. Despite this flawed system, we know why high-stakes testing proliferates: It’s big business. Nation-wide, the standardized testing industry makes over $1 billion per year on state contracts, and just last week, New York State agreed to pay Questar Assessment roughly $72 million to develop new tests for grades third through eighth. This is state money that goes to private testing companies like Pearson and McGraw-Hill instead of going to our schools.

This year, we have the opportunity to do something different. We have a chance to send a clear message to the DOE that we want a reimagined system of assessment for students and teachers. Allow me to paint a picture for you of an alternative system, one that treats our students and educators like the complex, talented and unique human beings they are. Instead of basing educational decisions on test scores, we could listen to teachers, who understand their students better than any test. We should take their advice when they report on students’ development, lowering class sizes and ensuring that our students get more individual attention at school.

Instead of spending money on testing contracts, we could use those funds to hire more teachers, lowering class sizes and ensuring that our students get more individual attention at school. Freed from the constraints of teaching to what they often refer to as that damn test, our teachers could tailor their curricula to the needs of their students.

Building a better world for our children starts with making our public schools into world-class learning environments. That’s what I’ve spent my life fighting for, and why I’m running for City Council in District 38, a beautiful and vibrant community that deserves better than the overcrowded, underfunded and over-tested schools we currently have. We’ve got a lot of work to do, but I know we can get there. That means putting into place more child-centered, appropriate ways of assessing kids’ learning and progress and in the case of standardized testing, opting out for good.

Alexa Avilés serves as a Parent Representative of the M.S. 88 School Leadership Team and as Chair of the New York City Youth Board. She is running as a democratic socialist for City Council in District 38 in Sunset Park.

WE NEED TO REIMAGINE HOW WE MEASURE STUDENT SUCCESS.

WE MEASURE STUDENT SUCCESS.
IS ‘READY ON DAY ONE’ ENOUGH?
SCOTT STRINGER WANTS TO REALIGN HIMSELF WITH THE MOVEMENT, NOT THE MACHINE. CAN HE PULL IT OFF?

By Ron M. Katz

O

n Jan. 24, 1977, The New York Times ran two letters under the header “The Youth Input.” One short note by a seventh-grader reads: “I was indignant to note that [Manhattan Borough President] Percy Sutton appointed two boys to the Community Planning Boards. Why should boys represent New York teenagers when girls constitute more than one half of this age group? Ideally there should be equal representation of both sexes.”

The second, longer note praised Sutton’s decision to place two 16-year-old high-school students on a pair of Manhattan community boards. “I believe we will bring a different viewpoint to our respective community planning boards,” wrote one Scott Stringer, a student at John F. Kennedy High School in Marble Hill who was one of the two adolescent appointees.

Stringer would go on to be an assemblymember and then Manhattan borough president, and is currently city comptroller. The child of well-connected liberals (his mother was a city councilmember and a cousin of ’70s feminist hero Rep. Bella Abzug; his father was a senior aide to Mayor Abe Beame), he fundraised like a well-connected Manhattan liberal. A 2013 article in Vogue magazine described TV star Lena Dunham introducing the middle-aged politico at a Maritime Hotel cocktail fundraiser, where a crowd of socialites, luxury fashion designers, and cosmetics entrepreneurs gathered to hear how Stringer planned to be “a mature steward of a $140 billion pension fund.”

The question is: Why should Scott Stringer, a mainstay of local politics for 30 years, preside over a progressive, majority-minority city in the midst of profound post-pandemic change — and rapid political realignments across the five boroughs’ Democratic parties?

Stringer has cultivated an impressive collective of endorsers from New York’s ascendant left to help answer that question in his favor. They include Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D-Bronx/Westchester), Assemblymember Yuh-Line Niou (D-Manhattan), and state Senators Alessandra Biaggi of the Bronx, Jessica Ramos of Queens, and Julia Salazar of Brooklyn, all of whom Stringer endorsed early on in their outsider campaigns.

Stringer’s platform has metey policy planks. His NYC Under 3 early childhood plan, lauded by Bowman, a former middle-school principal, aims to triple the number of infants and toddlers in city care. He’s launch “the largest teacher residency program in the country” and put two teachers, a mentor and a resident, in every classroom from kindergarten through fifth grade. He’d make the City University of New York tuition free. His climate plan is ambitious, calling for a ban on all new fossil-fuel infrastructure, converting Rikers Island into a renewable-energy hub, and advocating a Green New Deal for public housing, modeled after the bill introduced by Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Many of these promises meet demands popularized by organizations on the left over the past decade.

“I think there was excitement in seeing someone like Scott Stringer who didn’t come out of the [Democratic Socialists of America] or something, who wasn’t some far-left politician from back in the day, seeing how powerful progressives have become in the city,” said Gabe Tobias, an alumnus of the left-leaning national organization Justice Democrats, which played a key role in electing Ocasio-Cortez to Congress. “It’s to our credit as a movement that someone like Scott is uplifting positions and things that we want to see happen.”

Tobias now heads Our City, an independent-expenditure committee that supports progressive candidates in districts where they face strong corporate-backed opponents. They intend to focus on races in about a dozen districts along with the mayoral and comptroller contests, and want to ensure a progressive trifecta.

Still, Stringer has hesitated to embrace the much more controversial movement to dramatically reduce the Police Department’s $6 billion annual budget. Where he previously called for defunding the NYPD by $1 billion over four years during the protests after George Floyd was killed last year, his online mayoral platform bears little resemblance to that outspoken posture, only calling for capping overtime use and removing overtime bonuses for arrests, and focusing on “investments” in social services and moving responsibilities away from the police.

Organizations like VOCAL-NY, NYC-DSA, and the Working Families Party have been demanding that between $1 billion and $3 billion be redirected from the NYPD budget into social services like public education and homeless outreach, which they believe would reduce crime.

Nonprofit executive Dianne Morales, who has steadily built a base of young left-wing activist support in recent months and recently unlocked public matching funds, took advantage of that daylight between Stringer and the left’s racial-justice demands when she announced her pledge to defund the NYPD by $3 billion.

More contradictions come with Stringer’s jumping into the “movement politics” lane after a career of carefully calculated triangulation. He has morphed into a critic of real-estate interests and pledged to reject any new real-estate donations he received before developer support became taboo — more
COURTING THE LEFT
THREE DECARCERAL CANDIDATES ARE VYING TO BE NEXT MANHATTAN DA. BUT WILL WALL STREET’S FAVORITE PREVAIL OVER A FRACTURED FIELD?

By Theodore Hamm

A
lthough the Manhattan district attorney’s office is the second largest in the United States (after Los Angeles), it is far and away the most prominent. During his three terms, outgoing DA Cy Vance made international headlines because of his controversial handling of cases involving Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Harvey Weinstein and Donald Trump.

On a much lower-profile level, Vance’s office routinely outpaced its city counterparts in terms of prosecuting misdemeanors, a practice that ensured the city’s Black and Latinx residents. But anytime Vance announced a new policy regarding prosecu-

tions, it got plenty of media attention.

Over the past few years, a wave of progressive prosecutors has taken over district attorneys’ offices across the country, including recently in L.A. and New Orleans. But no office can match Manhat-

tan’s media influence. If he were shaking things up here, Philadelphia’s radical DA Larry Krasner would be a household name outside of the criminal justice world right now.

As the June 22 primary race takes off, many crim-

inal justice activists nonetheless fear that Tali Far-

hadian Weinstein, the candidate most similar to Cy Vance, may emerge victorious in the crowded field.

“Progressives need to coalesce against a billion-

aire [Farhadian Weinstein] so there’s no continua-

tion of Vance’s legacy of discriminatory prosecu-

tion against people of color and in favor of the wealthy,” says Tahanie Aboushi’s campaign manager Jararah Hayner, who recently handled George Gascón’s successful left-wing run to become L.A. district attorney.

In recent weeks, Aboushi, one of three decarceral candidates (along with Eliza Orlins and Dan Quart), has picked up high-profile endorsements, including from the Working Families Party, Jamaal Bowman, Cynthia Nixon, and Yuh-

Line Niou. How many votes such support will yield remains to be seen.

Several campaigns tell The Independent that the winner in the June 22 Democratic primary will need approximately 70,000 votes. Because the district at-

orney is a state office, the ranked-choice voting pro-

cess currently being rolled out in NYC elections does not apply in the race.

Farhadian Weinstein, the leading fundraiser (with over $2.25 million), has a base of support among the city elite. Her campaign’s media team answers to Stu Loeser, former press secretary for Michael Bloom-

berg, the figure most responsible for Vance’s ascent in 2009.

Alvin Bragg, running as a reformer, has the clear-

est traction thus far among the left-of-center can-

didates. As of the January campaign finance filing, Bragg has the most individual donors (nearly 2,000) from Manhattan of the eight candidates (Orlins is second, with roughly 1,300). In addition to his support from Black leadership in Harlem, where he grew up and still lives, Bragg has been endorsed by more than a dozen Democratic clubs, a reliable source of Manhattan votes.

Quart, meanwhile, is backed by seven clubs, and he has the support of several Latinx elected officials representing Upper Manhattan, including Jose Ser-

rano, Carmen de la Rosa, Robert Rodriguez and Di-

ana Ayala. Votes from Washington Heights (where Quart was raised) through Inwood could play a piv-

otal role in the race.

In the 2018 primary for attorney general, Zephyr Teachout defeated Tish James in Manhattan by 20,000 votes (105,000-85,000). Both candidates carried stretches of Washington Heights and In-

wood, trouncing centrist Sean P. Maloney. Running as the “anti-Teachout,” Maloney collected 42,000 votes, largely in Chelsea and Hell’s Kitchen.

Orlins, a longtime Chelsea resident, views her campaign as playing well with LGBT voters in the area. Her pre-public defender career in the enter-

tainment industry likely will appeal to many West Village and Tribeca residents. While Orlins has the backing of the Downtown Independent Democrats, the Chelsea Reform Dems are backing Quart and the Village Independent Dems are supporting Bragg.

Aboushi’s strategy is to pick up swaths of votes across Manhattan, starting with younger Black as well as Muslim residents of Harlem, where she lives. Yuh-Line Niou will help rally support in Chinatown and Jumaane Williams will bring out NYCHA residents downtown and elsewhere. Like all the contenders, Aboushi hopes to grab a solid chunk of support on the Upper West Side through Morningide Heights.

Aboushi’s edge in institutional endorsements ap-

pears to be the handiwork of her consultant Ca-

mile Rivera, co-founder of New Deal Strategies. As Jeff Coltin of City & State reported, the Manhat-

tan chapter of the Working Families Party voted to endorse Orlins, only to be overruled by higher-ups. Sources tell The Independent that Rivera’s husband Jonathan Westin of NY Communities for Change, a leading organization within the WFP, was pivotal. Rivera’s close ties to city labor leaders likely helped influence the decision of the executive com-

THE MANHATTAN DA’S MANY POWERS

With its nearly $170 million budget and 500 prosecutors, the Manhattan district attorney’s office is the second-largest in the United States (after Los Angeles), but it is far and away the most prominent.

The Manhattan DA’s office has the power to:

• Fully target white-collar fraud, includ-

ing tax evasion and money laundering in real estate deals (e.g. Trump Soho).

• Become a national leader in reducing the number of people prosecuted for nonviolent crimes.

• Establish new direc-

tions for prosecuting violent crimes (e.g.

away from excessive sentencing).

• Hold the NYPD ac-

countable to expos-

ing cops who provide false information.

• Initiate crackdowns on wage theft and other forms of worker exploitation.

— THEODORE HAMM
The UFT also revealed in mid-April that the four finalists for its support are Bragg, Aboushi’s supporters to object to her exclusion. This will be a good one for the candidate who scores it, because the UFT has many members (particularly retirees) living in places like Stuyvesant, although there are aliens in Upper Manhattan, where she has struggled to gain traction. After a dispute over her misconduct in a large construction fraud case, Diana Florence is most certainly not Vance’s pick; and, as with Lang, it’s hard to see a lane for Florence. Liz Lenny, after her legal battles, has a lane open on the right, but she may lack the resources to pursue it.

In DC 37 selection process, Orlins was again slighted. Despite being the only active union member in the race (Legal Aid Society public defenders are represented by UAW 2325, which endorsed Orlins), the candidate was never sent a questionnaire or interviewed. At least three other campaigns say they were given such opportunities. DC 37 delegates ratified the Aboushi endorsement in late March.

In mid-April Bragg snagged the high-profile backing of Zephyr Teachout and Janos Marton, leaders in both the fight for decarceration and against public corruption. Earlier in the month Bragg scooped up the support of 32BJ, which represents building service workers throughout the city. That should help Bragg pick up support in Upper Manhattan, although there are many members who live throughout the borough. Aboushi recently gained the backing of UNITE HERE Local 100, which represents food service workers at Madison Square Garden and several larger Midtown restaurants, among other venues. As Politico noted, it is the first time the union has endorsed a Manhattan DA candidate. Quart, meanwhile, has the support of CWA Local 101, which bargains for telecommunication Union support can be pivotal in competitive races, and backroom maneuvering is how the game is played in city politics. While it’s hard to forecast how it will play out, the fact that the splintering left factions could allow Farhadian Weinstein to emerge victorious remains an alarming prospect.

### MEET THE CANDIDATES

**Eliza Orlins**
Profile: Legal Aid Society public defender in Manhattan throughout Vance era.
Distinctiveness: Most highly-voted candidate by Five Borough Defenders, a network of fellow progressive public defenders; most outspoken regarding the need to end “trial tax,” which coerces guilty pleas (via threat of a much longer sentence upon trial conviction); committed to fully decriminalizing sex work.

**Dan Quart**
Profile: Assemblyman representing Upper East Side for past decade.
Distinctiveness: Leader in Assembly fights for bail reform, repeal of 50-A (shielding NYPD disciplinary records), and weed legalization, highest marks from Five Borough Defenders in terms of accountability for both police and prosecutorial misconduct.

**Tahanie Aboushi**
Profile: Civil rights lawyer in private practice since 2010.
Distinctiveness: Successfully sued NYPD for discrimination against Muslim officers and currently represents Donna Zaya, who was assaulted by police at last year’s BLM protest outside Barclays’ Center; committed to never charging juveniles as adults; won’t seek sentences that exceed 20 years (and will review past sentences exceeding that length).

**Tali Farhadian Weinstein**
Profile: Former federal prosecutor who served as counsel to AG Eric Holder and then as general counsel to Brooklyn DA Eric Gonzalez.

**Alvin Bragg**
Profile: 15 year career as a prosecutor, including as chief deputy attorney general of New York State.
Distinctiveness: Co-counsel in current case that seeks full transparency regarding the NYPD’s handling of the Eric Garner case; wide range of experience regarding white-collar prosecutions; pledges to review all cases handled by Central Park Five prosecutor Linda Fairstein.

**Rest of the Field**

Note: All are former prosecutors in the Manhattan DA’s office.

*Lucy Lang* is widely considered to be Vance’s preferred successor, but she has struggled to gain traction. After a dispute over her misconduct in a large construction fraud case, Diana Florence is most certainly not Vance’s pick; and, as with Lang, it’s hard to see a lane for Florence. Liz Lenny, after her legal battles, has a lane open on the right, but she may lack the resources to pursue it.

**Drawback:** Not getting much institutional support (see article).

**Drawback:** Path to victory remains unclear (see article).

**Drawback:** Benefits from split among left candidates.

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THREE NEW JERSEY COUNTIES ARE RAKING IN MILLIONS FROM THE FEDS WHILE HOLDING IMMIGRANT DETAINES IN SUBHUMAN CONDITIONS

A WAY OF HUNGER STRIKES

Marcial found himself in ICE detention at the Essex County Jail when he took a plea deal after being served 21 months in the Warren County Jail over a that resulted in a hang jury. 

By Amba Guerguerian with John Tarleton

Marcial was released from ICE detention in January. After a week during which he was put in solitary confinement and threatened with force-feeding as punishment, Bonilla was transferred to a federal detention facility in Rikers Island, New York. “The two things they needed to move me, a negative COVID test and legally valid reason, they didn’t have,” he said.

Bonilla and Marcial are among the hundreds of ICE detainees who have gone on hunger strike over the past year to protest the conditions at the Essex, Hudson and Bergen county jails and ICE's inhumane treatment of detainees. Only 11 have been released.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

Since 2009, the federal budget has financed an “immigration and customs enforcement” line item of $40,000 to $60,000 a year to detain immigrants in the United States. In 2019, ICE detained a record high of more than 130,000 inmates. That required shifting the budget even further to fund the federal mandate.

The federal mandate funds more beds than private prisons can create, meaning facilities are empty. This is critical for them to maintain as many empty beds, as federal procurement process, it would likely be more difficult for them to maintain as many empty beds, as many contracts.

In 2019, Essex County made $13.4 million from its ICE contract. That dropped to $21.8 million in 2020 after the release of some detainees due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The office of County Executive Joseph “Joe J.D.” DiVincenzo did not reply to questions from The Indy about how the additional revenues from ICE were allocated.
COLD AS ICE

Continued from previous page

“The money they [Essex and Hudson] get from the ICE contracts is often more than what was planned for in the bud-
get,” says Inani Oakley, an Essex County-based political orga-
nizer and former legislative director for the New Jersey Work-
ing Families … she had been aware of how little there is that they can use to do extra things, whatever that may be. But
it’s blood money. There are other ways they can get money to the count-
y.”

Advocates and activists are unsure to discern how the mon-
ey is being spent. In a secret recording provided to The Indy of an August 2018 meeting between ICE abolitionists and Essex County freeholders (New Jersey’s term for county legislators) Michael Parlavacchio and Wayne Richardson, one of the activ-
ists asked, “If I take my kids to the zoo, am I supporting or seeing something that was built using money from $117 per
night per detainee? Or no?” Parlavacchio explicitly con-
firmed that ICE money “is certainly part of it” — in reference to the funding for the Essex County Parks and Zoo.

Richardson defended the conditions of the detention fac-
tory following a federal inspection that found conditions at the site to be so bad that even the Trump administration’s Department of Homeland Security condemned it.

Hudson County has long been notorious for corruption. Since the 1970s, it has seen a county executive, two Jersey City mayors and two Jersey City Council members convicted. “Our politicians still take money in brown paper bags,” the editor
of the now-defunct Hudson Dispatch told a newly hired re-
porter in 1990, during a three-year period in which the mayors of eight of the county’s 12 cities and towns were indicted or
convicted. From 2014 to 2016, Jersey City police officers par-
ticipated in a no-show job scheme.

In 2019, the county earned $19.8 million from its ICE con-
tract. It did not respond to The Indy’s request for information on how much it made from ICE in 2020.

On March 11, the state Senate’s Law and Public Safety Committee held hearings on a bill that would keep ICE from ex-
panding or renewing its contracts in New Jersey. Anthony
Vainieri, chair of the Hudson County Board of Freeholders, testified against it, bemoaning the revenue that would be lost
if his county left the contract, on top of the money it has already lost due to fewer people being incarcerated during the
pandemic. About an hour later, he attended a meeting where the commissioners voted a raise for themselves and other
county officials.

Bergen County gave out $2.4 million in bonuses to county employees during the pandemic, despite a COVID-tightened budget. One of the beneficiaries was the wife of Sheriff Antho-
ny Cureton, who has come under scrutiny for his ICE contract, from which the county says it took in $14.4 million in 2019.

‘BERGEN IS A BLACK BOX’

The Bergen County commissioners, unlike those in Hudson and Essex counties, do not vote on the county’s ICE contract. Instead, Sheriff Cureton approves and signs it. The seven coun-
ty commissioners have not demanded more power to review the
contract.

“We provide the best quality care with a clean environ-
ment, nutritious food, accredited medical staff and a robust compliant reporting system,” the Bergen County Sheriff’s Office claims.

Morales begs to differ. “There are mosquitoes and rats all over the place. I would fill plastic bags with the water, and it would be filled with debris and metal. And a lot of time the
sinks don’t even work, so you have to drink out of the toilet,” he told The Indy. “In one week, one guy killed seven rats. They
don’t want to be rat hunters but they have to be. As soon as the
lights are turned off, all the rats start coming out and going into the dark. Even if I’m inside my room at home, I feel that something is around me. I feel rats around me. They’re not there.”

He can’t say much for the medical staff, either. He, like Ver-
gara, was put on suicide watch despite not having shown sui-
cidal tendencies. “I asked him why I was there, and that’s when
they started to strip me. They said the doctor said I was Level One suicide watch. I told him I hadn’t talked to the doctor.”

“Bergen is a black box. There’s no information going in or
out,” says Chia-Chia Wang. “The sheriff said that there’s noth-
ing they need to improve and his jail is like a hotel.”

In January, the Legal Aid Society, the Bronx Defenders and Brooklyn Defender Services wrote a letter to ICE, saying they
had received “alarming” reports from detainees that there was no
heat in various detainee cellblocks. “At least one detainee
has been told ‘the cold will kill the coronavirus, so we’re not turning it on,’” read the letter.

PARTY MACHINES

Bergen County has been under Democratic control since 2015. Old-school Democratic Party machines have ruled Essex and Hudson counties for decades, going back at least to the 1930s
when Jersey City Mayor Frank “I Am the Law” Hague was
party boss, and have wielded outsized power in state govern-
ment as well. At the same time, New Jersey’s machine-friendly
ballot rules make it almost impossible for progressives to pri-
mary Democratic incumbents successfully.

“Party machines build a patronage mill that creates tremen-
dous power, but also further limits public accountability,” says Kathy O’Leary, the New Jersey regional coordinator for Pax
Christi USA. “The political power is great enough that party bosses can then wield it outside their borders. The jails and the
federal contracts play an important role in providing jobs and
subcontracts that can only be gained or maintained through
loyalty to the party machine.”

In 2018, when public outrage over former President
Trump’s policy of separating families and caging immigrant
children was at its height, Hudson County Executive Tom
DeGise announced that he would initiate a “path to exit” from the county’s ICE contract.

Later that year, when the county’s 10-year contract with ICE was expiring, DeGise extended it for only two years,
promising the county would end its relationship with ICE af-
ter that. Instead, in November 2020, after a 10-hour Board of
Freeholders hearing in which none of the roughly 100 speak-
ers favored renewal, Hudson County signed another 10-year
contract with ICE. Unlike the previous agreements, the new
contract gave DeGise full authority over contract negotiations.
Under the system, the candidates backed by the local
county machine all appear on the ballot as a single slate,
from President down to the lowest office, and are placed on a
prominent part of the ballot. Their opponents, if any, are
scattered around less visible parts. A study of 2020 prima-
ry results by New Jersey Policy Perspective, a nonpartisan
think tank, found the average vote margin between candi-
dates appearing on the county line and their opponents was
35 percentage points. Another recent study by the Commu-
nications Workers of America, which represents more than
55,000 state and local government workers in New Jersey,
found that no incumbent state legislator on the line had lost
a primary between 2009 and 2018.

“New Jersey has the most corrupt ballot design in the
entirety of the country,” Oakley says. “It basically makes it possible for anybody that wants to challenge, to move
and replace these old machine-elected officials who are per-
fectly fine with ruining people’s lives for some money to the
county.”

Joel Torres, a Hudson County freeholder who voted
against the 2020 contract renewal, was taken off the county
line, and has since been replaced with someone more to the
candidate’s liking. “They politically murdered him,” said
Hector Oseguera, an anti-money laundering analyst and former congressional candidate.

Both Oakley and Oseguera say the only way to get politi-
cians elected in New Jersey who would never tie with ICE
would be to abolish the county line. In January, a coalition
of progressive organizations and candidates joined a law-
suit to end the system, arguing that it violates their constitu-
tional rights to freedom of association and equal protection
under the law.

Advocates to end ICE detention have called on Governor
Phil Murphy, a Democrat who ran on a progressive, pro-

DON’T CROSS THE ‘COUNTY LINE’

Organizers pushing for an end to ICE detention in New Jer-
sy face an uphill battle. County officials in Bergen, Essex and
Hudson are content to rake in the revenues. And New
Jersey’s unique ballot configuration — known as the ‘county
line’ — is a formidable barrier to outsider candidates run-
ning against entrenched incumbents.

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Advocates to end ICE detention have called on Governor
Phil Murphy, a Democrat who ran on a progressive, pro-
immigrant platform in 2017 and rode a wave of the anti-Trump resistance, to cancel ICE contracts. He has remained silent on the issue.

“He just didn’t pay attention to us,” says Oseguera, who is a member of the Abolish ICE NJ-NY Coalition. “Murphy is up for election, and he needs the high-density vote from Hudson County. And Hudson County has been known to be spiteful towards Democratic governors running for reelection if they don’t play nice with the machine,” he explains.

Gov. Murphy’s office did not reply to an Indy request for comment.

PEOPLE VS. PROFITS

In 2020, ICE released a Request For Information (RFI), exploring the possibility of building two new 900-bed detention facilities in New Jersey.

In January, after weeks of hunger strikes and escalating protests against ICE’s presence in New Jersey, Assemblymember Gordon Johnson (D-Bergen) introduced legislation that would bar local governments from renewing expiring agreements with ICE and prevent public and private detention facilities in the state from signing new contracts.

“Separating people from their families because they overstayed their visa is not what we should be doing,” Johnson said.

Forcasing ICE revenues remains unthink-

able to others. “If we don’t have the con-
tract,” Hudson County Commissioner An-
thony Vainieri told NorthJersey.com, “can he sponsor legislation to give the counties that will lose $20 million a year [something] to help us out?”

Johnson’s bill, however, would not af-
fect Bergen County’s open-ended ICE con-
tract, and might not affect Hudson Coun-
ty’s contract either.

The struggle continues. “My goal here is to let the world know what happens inside of these jails. Where the greatest justice in the world should be is the worst place to be,” said Marcial Morales. “And I won’t shut up. I had a couple unknown calls threatening me and saying I should stop. I said, ‘you’d have to cut my tongue out or kill me’.”

All sources of ICE revenue are figures pro-
vided by Bergen, Essex and Hudson counties.

For more detailed accounts of conversations, testimonies and jail conditions referenced above, go to indypendent.org/njicesources.

John Tarleton contributed to this article.
THE WALGREENS NURSE jabbed me with the needle and it felt like a key opening a jail cell. After a year of being locked inside the apartment, locked inside fear and guilt, I was free, free, free.

“You gave me my life back.” I smiled.

He gave me a fatherly pat and said to wait 15 minutes, in case of a reaction. I paced the aisles and when time was up, sprinted outside, and thrust hands to the sky. On an empty street I ripped off the mask and leaned on a fire hydrant. The sunlight held my face like a pair of hands. A great relief cleansed me. I no longer worried about accidentally killing people.

In that moment, I realized the toll of grinding, relentless fear. The vaccine was the first step in relearning how to live in the aftermath of a pandemic. It threw out the future we took for granted. Now, we have to reimagine the 21st century.

THE CORONATION

Last year, COVID-19 blew over the planet like fatal pollen. First Wuhan, China, reported a virus but from a distance, it seemed more crazy news in a year of Hong Kong protests, Amazon rainforest burning, and President Trump impeached. But headlines blared loud panic. On CNN, Dr. Sanjay Gupta was grim.

Each day the coronavirus spread to more places, killed more people and, like an invisible army of microscopic spiky balls, thinner than the width of a single human hair, it floated through the air. Rolling down the esophagus, the virus inflamed lungs and cut off oxygen. Most who got it became sick and then recovered. But a lot died.

The deaths electrified our conversations. At the bar, we drank as overhead a TV blared more COVID-19 news but disbelief won against fear. I sat with my friend Gabriel, we sipped on beers and asked each other if liberals were hyping the virus to defeat President Trump. I mean Russiagate didn’t work. We laughed and clinked glasses.

“To the coronavirus,” I said.

“To the coronavirus,” he said.

The jokes lasted until the lockdown. A funeral pall hung over New York. I stood at my window and watched ambulances pick up the dead and dying. The flashing red lights painted the neighborhood blood red.

My downstairs neighbor died. My friends got sick. My best friend said his mom texted photos from the ICU of her on a ventilator. And then I got a message from him, “My mom died.” I pressed the phone to my heart and blinked back tears.

Later, we met at an outdoor café. His eyes were filled with grief. He said he killed his mom. His marriage was a cold war and, hungry for love, he took up with a younger woman. They met at hotels. They did not get tested and weeks later his family got COVID-19. I wanted to tell him it wasn’t his fault. I wanted to say, don’t let guilt transform a far-fetched chance of infection into a murder verdict. His hands shook. I squeezed them as if pumping his mother’s heart back to life.

LOSE YOUR ILLUSION

The coronavirus stole from us our bodies and our innocence. We could not take for granted a touch or kiss or hug. We could kill those we loved just by loving them. In order for us to save our lives, we had to suffer in the most difficult way, we suffered alone. We walled ourselves in apartments, binged on Netflix and porn, ate too much, worked out too much, got stimulus checks, and tried not to collaborate with the virus.

No matter how hard we tried, we lost loved ones. We lost jobs. We lost homes. We lost whole futures. We lost dreams. We lost fresh air.

We also lost illusions, like who kept our cities running. Turns out it was not the CEOs, hedge fund managers or Wall Street. It was the invisible workers. It was the delivery men, who rode scooters with boxes of steaming takeout. It was the nurses with dark bruised faces from wearing masks at the hospital, who broke down in their cars after their shifts because they could not stop people from dying. It was the immigrant bodega men, teachers, the truck and train...
grant kids in cages. American cruelty took so many shapes, so many forms that it was a mythical Hydra with a thou-
sand snapping jaws. It bit our skin color. It bit our gender. It bit our youth and sex and paychecks. When Chauvin killed Floyd, it was another Hydra head that leered at the camera as it sniffed fresh kill. We saw the monster, picked up signs, and trampted it under our feet. Black Lives Mattered. Black Trans Lives Mattered. Black Love Mattered.

After the protest, I bicycled with friends though Brooklyn, saw activists openly drinking, playing music, set on curbs and handrails, smoking weed and, for the first time, passionately talking about race. Pride radi-
ated from Black people. Whites had an easy open body language. They shopped for beers and under the street lights, it looked like Rembrandt had painted urban portraits of young revolutionaries.

New expressions flowed over faces. Raw empathy. Eyes reflected eyes. Long caring stares. Trusting arms encircling shoulders. Heads touching. It was beautiful because for the first time in the pandemic, really for the first time in years, I saw strangers take off their masks.

THE LIGHT IN THE TUNNEL

“I got vaccinated!”

“You did? How?” I squinted my eyes at her.

“I’m a service provider.” She held up my coffee and muf-
fin. “Jealous?”

“Yes. We laughed. Wouldn’t you too? It’s like being in jail and seeing another prisoner walk out of the door. I walked back home, thumbing my cellphone for the NYC/vaccine site, entering my name, age, zip code. Nothing. All the appoint-
ments were taken.

On Facebook, friends posted photos smiling as they got the jab. They could re-
join the world, not at once, the vaccine was not a cure-
all and we have

A WORLD APART

Since Dec. 14, 2020, over 127 million people across the United States have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the rollout continues to reach more eligible groups nationwide.

The country is on pace to meet President Joe Biden’s doubled goal of 200 million ad-
mnistered doses by April 28, his 100th day in office, in some states with perfect delivery. All U.S. residents could get a shot in 2021.

This high level of vaccine access, however, is a reality only in wealthy countries. The vast ma-

majority of the world’s people are experienc-
ing vaccine apartheid, due to pharmaceutical monopoles on COVID-19 vaccines that lay bare the value placed on corporate profit over ending the pandemic on a global scale and providing lifesaving, essential care for those who are most vulnerable.

The artificial scarcity of COVID-19 vac-
cines is created by Big Pharma and its

licensing agreements, which heav-
ily restrict the global production and consequent distribution of vaccines to poor countries. Take the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine, which is currently being produced by the Serum Institute in In-
da and was originally intended for 92 low-income coun-
tries that are home to 4 billion people – half the global population. Amid a surge in COVID-
19 cases this spring, India has hoarded the vaccines for its domestic population, keeping significantly more than its fair share of 35% of the doses.

In the midst of the stall in shipments, AstraZeneca has exported millions of doses to wealthy countries that are not included in the 92 intended recipients, such as the United Kingdom. These countries, prior to their pur-
chase of AstraZeneca vaccines from India, were among the first to oppose requests to the World Trade Organization for patent waivers to expand vaccine production globally.

“That, the UK which has vaccinated nearly 50% of its adults with at least one dose, should demand vaccines from India, which has only vaccinated 3% of its people so far, is immoral,” writes Achal Prabhala, a coordinator of the Ac-
cess2SBA Project, which campaigns for equal vaccine access, in The Guardian. “That the UK has already received several million doses from India, alongside other rich countries such as Saudi Arabia and Canada, is a travesty.”

Vaccine apartheid is exacerbating the dis-
proportionate impacts of COVID-19 in low-
income countries and prolonging the risk

poor for billions of people, as well as further spread of highly infectious variants. A third of the world’s countries have had no public money to deal with the effects of COVID-19, ac-
cording to an Oxfam report, and the Americas, the world’s hardest-hit region, have seen an acute rise in gender-based violence and deadly attacks on people defending land, labor, and human rights. China and Russia are practicing vaccine diplomacy by selling or donating vac-
cines to dozens of low-income countries in Afri-
can, Asia and South America, while Cuba, known for its commitment to universal healthcare and international medical solidarity, is nearing the end of its two-stage clinical trials for its own COVID-19 vaccines. These are

examples of pushback against the cri-
ppling monopoly on vaccine production: but

in order to truly end the spread of COVID-19 and en-
sure equitable recovery from the devast-
ation of the pandemic, pat-
ent monopolies must be waived, as many medical experts and progressive organizations continue to demand.

One hundred and seventy-five former heads of state and Nobel laureates have signed an open letter demanding Presi-
dent Biden waive intellectual property rules for COVID-19 vaccines. A waiver would end monopoly-held supply shortages and expand manufacturing capacities, and priori-
tize the health of people everywhere. Without it, 9 in 10 people in poor countries could go without a vaccine in 2021; and by not vacci-
nating people globally, the whole world will continue to suffer due to the ongoing spread of COVID-19.

“If this last year has taught us anything, it is that threats to public health are global, and that strategic government invest-
ment, action, global cooperation, and solidarity are vital,” the letter reads. “The movement must boldly meet these challenges, and neither can narrow nationalism.”

— JULIA THOMAS

May 2021

THE INDEPENDENT
The following two years were an unspeakable catastrophe. She lost two daughters — Santanna, who died in 1928 of diphtheria at the age of one, and Isabatta, whose care was assumed by her husband’s family in 1930. Her suicide attempts led to prolonged stays in psychiatric hospitals. These harrowing years explain her many portraits of pregnant women and even more often, children.

Neel then settled in Greenwich Village. There she became immersed in leftist politics. She gained employment in the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Arts Program, where she earned a small but steady income working in its coveted brush-and-easel section until the WPA was disbanded in 1943 due to the war.

In stark contrast with the upper-class Enríquez, Neel fell in love with Kenneth Doolittle, a sailor. While living with Doolittle, Alice produced shameless drawings of their love life. “Her intimacy is sexual,” one critic noted. These and subsequent works speak to Alice’s liberation from patriarchal norms. However, these paintings lacked the犀利 features that would become her stylistic signature.

In 1934, Neel first met José Santiago Negron, a Puerto Rican younger than her at a club, where he was singing and playing Latin guitar music. It was José who would provide her with passage to Spanish Harlem, where she would stay for more than two decades. Her sunny apartment was large enough to serve as a studio and sufficient space to raise two sons, Richard and Hartley. Neel wasn’t an outsider in the Barrio — she spoke Spanish with her neighbors and interacted with storekeepers. Like so many others, she raised two sons on her own, one of whom was born there. El Barrio was also a leftist community where a majority of its residents voted for the American Labor Party, who elected Vito Marcantonio to Congress. It was in El Barrio where she painted what have been called her “essential portraits.”

Negron became the subject of some of her earliest East Harlem paintings. He was not the only man she painted erotically, but he was the only one she painted with love. Some of her best portraits are compositions of members of his family. T.B. Harlem, for example, shows his brother in bed in a tragic-erotic pose, where white bandaging covers wounds caused by the removal of ribs to treat his tuberculosis. It was in East Harlem where she began painting children in classics such as The Spanish Family and Dominican Boys on 108th Street. There were the people in a place that best matched up with her art and her politics. Michael Gold, the Communist writer, best summed up the meaning of Neel’s East Harlem portraits: “Some of the melancholy of the region counts over her work … . But there is a truth and unquestionable faith. Neel embodies her sitters in their quiet dignity.”

In 1960, Neel moved to a larger apartment on the Upper East Side. From there she painted a much wider spectrum of subjects: a fuller brush salesman, pregnant women, Communists, gays and lesbians. While the social circumstances of their lives still shine through in paintings like Margaret Evans Pregnant, they seem to be more psychological than social. But her work remained unmistakable. Neel didn’t flinch from creating her own nude self-portrait at the age of 80. Shortly before she died, Neel said that the world was divided in a great struggle between socialism and capitalism. There never was a doubt which side she was on.
Alice Neel, (American, 1900–1984)  
Mercedes Arroyo, 1952  
Oil on canvas  
25 × 24 1/8 in. (63.5 × 61.3 cm)  
Collection of Daryl and Steven Roth  
© The Estate of Alice Neel

Alice Neel, (American, 1900–1984)  
Geoffrey Hendricks and Brian, 1978  
Oil on canvas  
30 × 30 in. (76.2 × 76.2 cm)  
National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay  
© The Estate of Alice Neel

Alice Neel, (American, 1900–1984)  
James Farmer, 1964  
Oil on canvas  
43 3/4 × 30 1/4 in. (111.1 × 76.8 cm)  
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Gift of Hartley S. Neel and Richard Neel  
© The Estate of Alice Neel

Alice Neel, (American, 1900–1984)  
Margaret Evans Pregnant, 1978  
Oil on canvas  
57 3/4 × 38 1/2 in. (146.7 × 97.8 cm)  
Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Gift of Barbara Lee, The Barbara Lee Collection of Art by Women  
© The Estate of Alice Neel

Alice Neel, (American, 1900–1984)  
The Spanish Family, 1943  
Oil on canvas  
34 × 28 in. (86.4 × 71.1 cm)  
Estate of Alice Neel  
© The Estate of Alice Neel

Alice Neel, (American, 1900–1984)  
T.B. Harlem, 1940  
Oil on canvas  
30 × 30 in. (76.2 × 76.2 cm)  
© The Estate of Alice Neel
A V O I D I N G  T H E  M A G A  T R A P

Capital and Ideology
By Thomas Piketty
Translated by Arthur Goldhammer
Belknap Harvard 2020

By Bennett Banmer

I n a 2019 campaign video, Bernie Sanders appeared hugging a crying single mother outside her hardware store trailer in the Deep South. The video, called “Trapped,” introduced us to a mother living on less than $1,000 a month in an impoverished rural Black-majority county, in a home that badly needed repairs and sat next to a polluted lagoon, in a rich country where the national minimum wage is a mere $7.25 per hour. Sanders’ distinctive Brooklyn accent in voiceover explained that this same scene could be in a Latino community in California or in white West Virginia. During the tearful embrace, he told the woman, “we won’t forget you.”

Sanders did not forget. But in March, eight Democratic senators, including Joe Manchin of West Virginia, voted against adding a minimum wage increase to $15 per hour into the COVID relief bill—a hard kick to the millions of low-wage service workers risking their health during the pandemic.

You won’t find direct references to impoverished trailer courts in French economist Thomas Piketty’s latest work, Capital and Ideology, but their specter is all over this massive tome. You will find those trailer parks, urban neighborhoods and small towns in the “dramatic collapse” of the lower half of American households’ income. The bottom 50 percent’s share of national income went from 20 percent in 1980 to just above 12 percent today, and the miserly federal minimum wage is partially at fault. “This reversal attests to the magnitude of the political-ideological changes that took place in the United States since the 1970s and 1980s,” writes Piketty.

Capital and Ideology is check-full of graphs with nifty explains and statistics that show historical income and wealth distributions. This is the “capital” aspect of the book, but it is the “ideology” portion that illuminates how wealth was distributed away from the bottom 50 percent and towards the one percent at such magnitude.

Postwar politics in the West generally pitted conservative parties (Britain’s Conservatives, the Republicans, Charles DeGaulle in France) with wealthier and more educated constituencies against less educated, working-class left-wing parties. The left-wing parties generally voted for democratic socialism — labor rights, universal healthcare and a greater degree of progressive taxation. Piketty terms these politics as a “classist” formation, but it loses steam around the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The 1930s New Deal proved the power of government action to create jobs and alleviate poverty, and the civil rights and women’s movements of the 1960s and 1970s mobilized masses to dismantle Jim Crow and challenge the old boys’ network. The far-right response, Barry Goldwater’s unsuccessful 1964 presidential run and reaching power in Ronald Reagan’s 1980s counterrevolution.

Capital and Ideology traces this shift in politics across the world’s democracies over the past 50 years. Left parties such as Britain’s Labour and India’s Congress shifted from robust representation of their working-class constituencies to become parties led by an educated, professional and more highly paid elite — the “Brahmin left.” This realignment reconfiguring global economics and politics, and everything appears up for grabs.

In the United States, Barack Obama’s anemic response to the Great Recession gave the seeds for Trump’s bigoted and America First economic appeals to lower-earning and less-educated voters. Piketty suggests that today the democracies there are four roughly equal electoral camps. The left consists of the Brahmins but also a rising internationalist, pro-wealth-redistribution activist faction embodied in the United States by figures like Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. On the right, the pro-market “merchant right” favors global trade and cooperation, joined uneasily by an empowered nativist and nationalist far-right that talks about wealth redistribution.

Piketty warns of the “social-nativist” trap — where elites can rally the bottom 50% to a platform of redistributive politics to the “native” population, with violent exclusion of immigrants and national minorities. But can a MAGA-infused GOP deliver economic gains to its working- and middle-class nativist base? One-term Trump’s lone legislative victory was a massive tax cut for the rich. His inconclusive trade war with China and disastrous COVID-19 response mostly alienated the merchant right, with notable exceptions like the MyPillow guy and the CEO of the Goya food company.

Polls show the Biden administration’s $1.9 trillion COVID-relief package is widely popular across the political spectrum, yet not a single Republican voted for it. The bill avoids repeating Obama-era mistakes: It will provide thousands of dollars in direct relief to tens of millions of families, and, in a clear blow against populist politics and a win for the Bernie Sanders wing of the Democratic Party. Critics note that the aid is temporary and wonder how we will pay for it. The Biden Administration is eyeing higher corporate taxes and making it harder for multinationals to shift profits to tax havens. But if democracy is to avoid falling into a social-nativist trap, this relief bill is a positive first step.

The Indypendent
May 2021

SCOTT STRINGER

Continued from page 9

than $800,000 since 2014, much of which he has rolled into his mayoral campaign coffers. Stringer defends his decision to keep the money as a pragmatic necessity when facing well-financed rivals. (He has compiled a strong pro-tenant record, including backing a proposed state law to prohibit evictions without “good cause.”)

Adolfo Abreu, the organizing director of Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition and a City Council candidate backed by the Democratic Socialists of America, credited Stringer for being “extremely strategic” in endorsing progressive outsiders when it was risky to do so, but was skeptical about the likelihood that he would intentionally incorporate social-movement demands into his governance.

“You think Scott Stringer will be a bad mayor? I don’t think so,” Abreu said. “I just think that there will be multiple times where we’re going to have to hold him accountable … We’re trying of having to consistently do protests and rallies and all these other mechanisms to hold people accountable to the things that they ran on. It think it’s just more of, who’s going to be committed to ac-

Polling for this year’s race has been sparse but consistently shows entrepreneur Andrew Yang as the frontrunner, with Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams running second. A March 24 poll by Fotonis Advisors and Core Decision Analystics placed Yang at 16% and Adams at 10%, with Stringer lagging at 5%, ahead of Mo-

As The Independent goes to press, the Working Families Party has just tapped Stringer as its top endorsee, followed by Morales and Wiley. And the United Fed-

Chronicle of Inquiry
By Thomas Piketty

The Brahmin left values interna-

tional trade, celebrates the winners (managers, tech entrepreneurs) and risks pittingary to the losers (factory-

Workers and daycare caregivers, is soon expected to announce its pick.

At the UFT’s final endorsement forum, Stringer was raring to make a good impres-

sion. As comptroller, he has been a strict and outspoken auditor of the Department of Education, and often joined UFT President Michael Mulgrew at press events. On this occasion, he would contrast his educational platform with the charter school-friendly pasts of Ad-

ams and Yang, make a few jokes, and avoid the fire that was about to be trained on Yang.

In a moment of picturesque excitement, Mulgrew asked the candidates if they had “done their homework.” (“You mean, when I was a kid?…”) Stringer then noted, “I’ve done my homework, sir!” The question is, will a lifetime of preparation and a late-career shift to the left pay off for this scion of New York’s liberal establishment?
WHY AMERICANS CAN’T HAVE NICE THINGS

The Sum Of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone And How We Can Prosper Together
By HEATHER MCGHEE
ONE WORLD BOOKS, 2021

By Teddy Ostroy

In the summer of 2010, 15-year-old Dekendrix Warner slipped out of a public pool bank in a shallow recreation area in the Red River in Shreveport, Louisiana, falling into 20-foot-deep waters. Spotting Warner in distress, five other teenagers drowned. The incident was tragic but not new to Black America. In 1953, when Baltimore’s seven public pools were all segregated, a 13-year-old Black boy drowned in the Patapsco River while swimming with three friends, two of whom were white. The group couldn’t go to any of the city’s pools together, so they opted for the rougher open water.

A NAACP lawsuit desegregated Baltimore’s pools just three years later, though what followed was far from friendly integration. Whites violently intimidated Black people who sought to use public pools in white neighborhoods, and many white people just stopped going to them. As other public pools across the country desegregated, instead of becoming hubs of interracial amusement, many of these gems of early 20th-century public infrastructure were drained, filled with cement, forgotten or replaced with (white) private pools. If whites couldn’t have the pools to themselves, then no one but the white elite could have them at all.

The result of segregation and the closing of public pools is that today white Americans are twice as likely to know how to swim as Black Americans, and Black children are three times as likely to drown.

But, as Heather McGhee argues in her new book, The Sum Of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together, draining pools in the name of white supremacy doesn’t just hurt Black people, whether they’re literal ones or other “pools” of public investment, like Medicaid or federal Pell grants for students. Rather, they hurt everyone, including white people. “Racism got in the way of all of us having nice things,” McGhee writes bluntly.

Indeed, whites lost those public pools too. The Sum Of Us is in many ways a personal tale. An economic policy wonk, McGhee left her post as president of the liberal think tank Demos in 2018, frustrated with many progressives’ lack of engagement with race in their economic justice programs. She views the biggest obstacle to a more just America as the zero-sum ideology widespread among white Americans that their own prosperity must come at the expense of people of other races, and that improving the status of racial minorities means worsening the status of white people.

For the book, McGhee journeyed across America to understand how this zero-sum paradigm emerged and how it functions. What she found was a white populace manipulated by elites who stoke racialized fears and tensions to fragment the working classes for their own gain. “The zero-sum is a story sold by wealthy interests for their own profit, and its persistence requires people desperate enough to buy it,” she writes.

White slaveholders’ status in the pre-Civil War United States quite literally was zero-sum, as they benefited from the cruel system of African slave labor. She draws from W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept in Black Reconstruction of the “public and psychological wage of whiteness,” whites’ elevated social status over enslavable Blacks, which sabotaged the clear economic benefit both groups would reap from interracial solidarity against the exploitative, propri- eted class.

In the following chapters, McGhee illustrates how the aftereffects of America’s original sin and the zero-sum racism that it bred have harmed all of us. She convincingly argues that racism foreclosed social democracy in the United States.

Another striking example of racism’s what-comes-around comes-around nature is in the housing sector. McGhee traces banks’ predatory lending practices against African-Americans in the decades leading up to the subprime mortgage boom that precipitated the financial crisis of 2008. Those practices were the cancer in the coal mine for a much broader crisis, which harmed Black people and other racial minorities disproportionately, but did not spare millions of white people.

“Such financial malfeasance was allowed to flourish because the people who were its first victims didn’t matter nearly as much as the profits their pain generated,” McGhee writes. “But the systems set up to exploit one part of society rarely stay contained.”

Central to McGhee’s proposed path forward is the “re-filling of the public pool,” the formation of a social democracy, but with targeted programs and stopgaps to make sure universalized policies are truly universal. McGhee spurns repeating the exclusion of predominantly African-American groups of workers from New Deal programs such as Social Security and the minimum wage. Further, she suggests a national, govern-ment-funded process of consciousness-raising to rewrite the ill-informed dominant narrative about race in the United States.

The Sum of Us is a readable work, packed with compelling history, personal narrative and heart-wrenching stories of both white and Black people whose lives were upturned by the discriminate and indiscriminate nature of structural racism. But McGhee also presents empowering tales of multiracial solidarity bringing significant victories, or “Solidarity Dividends” as she calls them — from the national Fight for $15 movement to organizing for a “just transition” in Richmond, California.

Bernie Sanders’ 2020 presidential campaign was perhaps the closest the United States got in decades to refilling the pools. Sanders built a young, multiracial coalition on a platform of social-democratic reforms and a commitment to solidarity. But the movement failed to cajole enough working-class voters. Meanwhile, older Black and white voters alike stuck with their establishment gut, at least in part because they didn’t trust that zero-sum America would vote for the candidate of “nice things.”

In this way, among the American left’s many political obstacles is not only a white majority steeped in that self-sabotaging zero-sum ideology, but a substantial number of would-be allies unconvinced that that majoriy would ever take their hands in solidarity. The Sanders campaigns unveiled the dividends in waiting. Only organizing, together, will allow us to start cashing the checks.
By Matt Brim

Duke University Press, 2021, 247 pages

Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University

It’s a well-documented fact that the US system of higher education steers all but the most exceptional Black, Brown and low-income students into two-year and unranked four-year colleges and universities. It’s a system that promises real-world job training and placement to graduates. It’s also well known that many students who enroll never earn a degree. Instead, they drop out when it becomes too difficult to juggle course completion with family and financial responsibilities.

Still, as common as this scenario is in public universities throughout the 50 states, another parallel academic universe exists. In this one, top-tier—rich students attend top-tier schools and have the luxury of focusing on their studies and social lives to the exclusion of all else.

Call it the rich school/poor school divide.

Matt Brim, an associate professor of Queer Studies at the College of Staten Island (CSI) of the City University of New York has taught at both types of institutions so he has the expertise to compare and contrast them. Indeed, his reflections on the frustrations and joys of teaching queer studies classes to poor and working-class students at the chronically underfunded CSI are heartfelt and enraging. Nonetheless, Poor Queer Studies may be off-putting to readers unfamiliar with the many texts he references and the jargon used.

That said, the book is at its best when chronicling the many obstacles facing CSI’s students, many of whom live at home with parents and siblings, have children of their own, and more-likely-than-not hold down full-time jobs while enrolled.

Grabbing a candy bar from a vending machine in lieu of a meal, then sitting in an overheated, underheated, or leaky classroom—with a computer and overhead projector that may or not be working during a particular class—will be appallingly familiar to many CUNY students and instructors.

Likewise, they’ll recognize the restrictions on students whose ability to access readings are stymied by limitations on how many total copies they can print for free each semester—at CSI it is 350.

Unlike richer schools where such conditions are unheard of, Brim posits that these deficits, however frustrating, also have an upside. By integrating with community, “Poor queer studies at a public commuter college makes its way home, into houses, neighborhoods, and into workplaces by traveling with its dynamic students,” he writes. This, he explains, can provoke questions and discussions amongst those who glimpse titles such as Punks, Bulldaggers, and Whores: Queers Being Real. Add in the benefits of an inter-generational student body and the richness of the personal and political exchanges that are fostered becomes evident. What’s more, it becomes clear that poor queer studies classes—like classes in other disciplines—can provide a richer tableau than is found within more homogenous student populations.

This crossover, Brim writes, allows students “to create and practice speaking in a shared, nonstandard queer studies tongue... My students translate our classroom discussions, filed as they are with standard and queer academic languages and rhetoric, into non-academic and non queer languages and rhetoric: cross cultural ones, religious ones, familial ones.”

Black queer studies classes raise the ante further, he writes, by centering stories that might otherwise be dismissed or forgotten.

Brim finds this inclusiveness exciting and sees significant potential in the ability of poor queer studies to straddle the class divide and push a more egalitarian politics forward. “Poor queer studies refuses to pit race, class, and queerness against each other,” he writes, “even as it necessarily asks how rich queer studies participates in class stratification in the academy in its own ways and with its own impacts and with its own race-queer-class negotiations.”

Brim further believes that poor queer studies instructors can reject classism “as part of their intersectional work.” As the same time, he concedes that while “cross-class ferrying” is possible, “class and race contradictions abound.”

The stakes of eliminating these contradictions are, of course, extremely high. “As long as higher education operates from the current system of race and class sorting, as long as the rich get access to one kind of education and the poor get access only to another,” he writes, “as long as queer studies follows the line of educational hierarchy rather than steps out of line to form collective resistance,” the status quo will be maintained. As someone who taught at Kingsborough Community College-CUNY for 16 years, I know that creating an egalitarian academy will require a complete reorganization, with a redistribution of resources to ensure that every student has full access to the materials and financial supports that are necessary for them to thrive. To do less betrays the long-deferred dream of education as a universal race-class-gender equalizer.

Eleanor J. Bader taught in the English Department at Kingsborough Community College from September 2004 until June 2020.

SUPPORT OUR TROUPES

Continued from Page 4

that be on site for an additional two weeks.”

When the fee was calculated per day, she was making less. She talked to the theatre and increased her pay. “How many times had I missed out on that opportunity to have that negotiation by not discussing the pay?” Beller asks.

“Requiring a clear rate of pay for all jobs listed on these popular job sites will promote pay transparency, help to reduce pay gaps based on biases, and combat deeply rooted pay inequity that saturates the industry and undermines the field’s potential diversity, sustainability, and artistic vitality,” says CP-FWE co-founder Elizabeth Wilsar.

Requiring clear rates of pay is part of a larger movement by On Our Team and CP-FWE to remove gender and racial pay disparities in the theatre industry.

“The largest subsidy for the arts comes not from governments, patrons, or the private sector, but from artists themselves in the form of unpaid or underpaid labor,” stated a 2019 report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. “This requires new thinking to reverse labor and social protection frameworks that take into account the unique and atypical manner in which artists work, especially female artists.”

“Concealment surrounding pay exacerbates the gender and racial pay gaps by rewarding job seekers who are able to aggressively negotiate or who have a history of a higher wage — a system that leaves women and marginalized populations at a serious disadvantage,” the letter calling on Playbill to require pay rates in job postings said. “Playbill’s continued facilitation of pay secrecy perpetuates an arts community made up of the few who are privileged enough to have a low (or no) personal bottom line. Transparency of pay will help organizations fulfill their missions of diversity and inclusion by leveling the playing field and eliminating unconscious biases.”

Nonwhite actors also tend to have lower salaries as plays featuring them tend to be relegated to smaller theaters, according to the Visibility Report: Racial Representation on New York City Stages, released in September 2020 by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition and based on data from 18 nonprofit theaters in the city. It said that while salary figures for Broadway way are not published, it is “highly likely that a significant wage gap exists.”

Playbill is not the first theater Website to require job listings to include clear rates of pay. The Chicago-based OffStageJobs became one of the first major theater job posting sites to do so in 2018, with its “Post-The-Pay” rule. This required employers to include the numeric pay rate, starting pay rate, or potential pay rate range of the job, or state that there is no pay.

“We are celebrating the changes Playbill and BroadwayWorld have made and the transparency it will lead to,” says Elsa Hiltner, cofounder of On Our Team. “And beyond this campaign, we’re inspired by all the action and activism by theatre workers that is leading to positive systemic change.”
Dear Billy,
I’m fully vaxxed. I’m in my mid-40s and in good health but going back out into the world still seems scary, especially the thought of being indoors around lots of people or taking off my mask in the company of other people. How do I unlearn the fear of this past year?

Donna
Sunset Park

Donna,
Your fear is real and reasonable. But “unlearning” it isn’t realistic. Our fear of the coronavirus will be with us all of our days.

In your first indoors experience with unmasked folks, all of you will be dealing with the fear and all of you will be bringing your own antidote for it, which is openness and trust.

This reunion we’re going through, well, we need each other, because we are threatened in 2021 with virus, flood, fire and pestilence … all the extreme events spinning out of the larger extinction of the Earth. Accepting all this, Donna, is not unlearning fear but relearning it. The time we live in tells us we must learn to live with fear.

Some of us had the privilege to feel safe for much of our lives. People of color, noncisgender people, women living with sexist violence — think of those who find in COVID something to add to years of living in fear. They are our teachers now, as we go forward into the unknown. Oh, what a time we live in!

Courage, Donna!

— BILLY

Rev Billy,
My 12-year-old daughter is bored and miserable with life in the pandemic. Whether she goes to school (assuming it hasn’t closed again due to COVID) or stays at home, her classes are conducted via Zoom. She sees less of her friends and when they are together, the 6-foot rule applies. How do I convince someone so young that it won’t be this way forever even if it feels that way?

Oliver
Washington Heights

Oliver,
The big old institutions are not our leaders. You act as if you let schools make your young one’s educational choices. There is home schooling, neighborhood schooling, Coney Island schooling and Greta Thunberg schooling, which is striking every Friday for the Earth. Millions of students did just that and it impacted the curriculum, at least it did in our 11-year-old’s Brooklyn school. Oliver! Bring the change! Radicalized individuals and families have the education in them, with or without COVID. If parents are realistic about the world they are leaving their children, then they will share a political conscience with their children.

Time for a teach-in!

— REV

Rev. Billy is pastor of the Church of Stop Shopping. Have a question for the Rev? Just email revbilly@indypendent.org and unburden your soul.
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