IS IT OK TO LAUGH?

AS THE PANDEMIC ENTERS ITS THIRD YEAR, WE CHOP IT UP WITH POLITICAL COMIC FRANCESCA FIORENTINI

BY JOHN TARLETON — P10
WE’RE GOING INTO OVERTIME

We have raised $28,182 so far in our annual winter fund drive, or almost three-fourths of our original goal of $40,000. Thank you to everyone who has given to reach our goal. We’ve extended our final fund drive deadline to March 1.

Your support makes all the difference!

You can send a check to: The Indypendent // 388 Atlantic Ave., 2nd Fl. // Brooklyn, NY 11217. Or go online to Indypendent.org/donate.
ADAMS OKS SWITCHING RETIREES TO MEDICARE ADVANTAGE
Mayor Eric Adams announced Feb. 6 that he would go ahead with the de Blasio administration’s plan to switch the healthcare of almost 250,000 retired city workers from traditional Medicare to a private Medicare Advantage plan. The deal, which municipal workers’ unions agreed to last year, is projected to save the city $600 million a year. Retiree groups have filed a lawsuit that has delayed the change. It argues that the private plan will reduce their healthcare through copayments, bureaucratic delays, and providers not accepting it, and that the city doesn’t have the right to cut benefits for people already retired. “There should have been other ways to cut costs than to throw old and frail and sick retirees under the bus,” Sarah Shapiro, a retired United Federation of Teachers member and a Cross-Union Retirees Organizing Committee activist, told LaborPress.

NY DEMS DO THEIR OWN CONGRESSIONAL GERRYMANDER
With Republican state legislators in Texas, Alabama, and North Carolina “packing and cracking” congressional districts to slash the number of Democratic (and Black-majority) House seats, New York Democrats have countered with their own gerrymander. Their redistricting map, signed by Gov. Kathy Hochul on Feb. 3, would likely cut the Republican share of the state’s 26 seats from eight to four. Republican Nicole Malliotakis’s Bronx-Westchester district extended to include liberal Park Slope. Fellow Trump acolyte Lee Zeldin’s district on eastern Long Island would have several largely Latino and black towns added and white-majority areas excised. Democratic-held districts would also be contorted, with leftist Rep. Jamaal Bowman’s Bronx-Westchester district corkscrewing north as far as Putnam County. Republicans are challenging the map in federal court.

CITY COUNCIL REDISTRICTING BEGINS
Meanwhile, the process of redistricting New York City Council seats began Feb. 7, with the council naming eight mem-

bers — five Democrats and three Republicans — to a 15-member commission. Mayor Eric Adams will pick the other seven. The city’s redistricting process has much tighter rules than the state’s: Districts must be compact and not break up neighborhoods, and there are strict limits on when they can cross borough lines. All councilmembers will have to run in the new districts in 2023, with four-year terms resuming in 2023 and 2029.

FIRST WORLD PROBLEMS
A wealthy real-estate owner and his wife are suing a Brooklyn hotel for $5 million after the reception for their daughter’s wedding last September was suddenly moved from a large hall to a small party space due to noise restrictions. Russell and Marjorie Newman charged that the hotel had not informed them about the rules, and thus caused “infliction of emotional distress.” Their lawyer told the New York Post it was “corporate greed at its worst.” The Newmans had spent more than $150,000 just on flowers for the nuptials.

CUNY STAFF DEMANDS ‘NEW DEAL’
CUNY adjunct professors traveled to Westchester County Feb. 5 to protest outside City University of New York Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez’s home in Pelham. “We know that the eroding state of racist austerity at CUNY demands such ‘nuclear’ actions,” the Rank and File Action group posted on Twitter. The Professional Staff Congress, the union representing 30,000 faculty and professional staff, is calling for a “CUNY New Deal,” a five-year plan sponsored by Sen. Andrew Gounardes (D-Brooklyn) and Assemblymember Karines Reyes (D-Bronx) that would increase funding by $2.35 billion a year; hire more than 1,400 new full-time faculty and counselors; and eliminate tuition for undergraduates.

WINTER LIFE, P4
Tenant from Brooklyn to the Bronx are fighting to ensure landlords follow laws guaranteeing heat and hot water during winter months.

ERIC ADAMS, ARCHETYPE, P6
Nicholas Powers looks at how Eric Adams forged a deep bond with working-class Black New Yorkers and what he might use his power for.

LONG, BITTER STRIKE, P9
Oil terminal workers in North Brooklyn have been on strike against their billionaire boss for over nine months. And they aren’t giving up.

CAN WE STILL LAUGH?, P10
Amid a pandemic, a climate crisis and rising fascism, political comic Francesca Fioretti uses humor to spread her leftist values.

EMBRACE THE LABEL, P12
The controversy over critical race theory is a great opportunity for progressives if only they would embrace it.

SUPREMELY DANGEROUS, P13
The Supreme Court’s recent ruling against workplace vaccine mandates is a prelude to a broader assault on government regulations.

COVID & BORDERS, P14
Our correspondent in India reflects on how the pandemic has made it harder for the people of the Global South to move freely.

PAIN IN THE UKRAINE, P15
Most Americans couldn’t find Ukraine on a map. But the Biden administration could stumble into a war there against a nuclear-armed adversary.

RE-ENVISIONING HUMAN HISTORY, P16
Anthropologist David Graeber’s final book is an epic, ambitious romp through the past 30,000 years of social evolution.

TRACKING THE RIGHT, P18
What we can learn from Chip Berlet, who spent the past 40 years tracking the growth of far-right movements.

REVEREND BILLY’S REVELATIONS, P19
The good reverend revisits past efforts to unionize Starbucks and how the company co-opted the revolutionary flavor of coffeehouse culture.

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FEEL THE HEAT
FROM BROOKLYN TO THE BRONX,
TENANTS PUSH DEMANDS FOR
WINTER HEAT AND HOT WATER

BY STEVEN WISHNIA

The fire that killed 17 people in a Bronx subsidized-housing complex Jan. 9 was started by an electric space heater — something thousands of New Yorkers use when their landlord isn’t giving them enough heat.

“We know that building wasn’t heated properly because of the number of space heaters,” says Beverly Newsome, president of the tenant organization at the Ebbets Field Apartments, a seven-building complex in Crown Heights that has more than 1,300 apartments.

The heat was especially bad in January, “when it was 11° or 12° outside,” she says, and the landlord has a pattern of turning the heat up in the morning and evening and down during the day and later at night.

“This is a habit,” Newsome says. “It is a practice.”

At 367 East 163rd St. in the Bronx, Monica Acosta is living with a similar pattern.

“We get very inadequate heat. It only lasts five to ten minutes,” she says. “This has been going on for a while.”

She has a space heater, and other people in the building leave their ovens on to stay warm. “It’s dangerous, but they aren’t giving us what we need,” she says. “If it’s like 20 degrees outside, you have to find a way to keep warm enough. You know the risks. You don’t want your family to get sick.”

Acosta has asthma, and lives with her teenage daughter and foster children.

WHAT THE LAW SAYS

Under New York City law, building owners from Oct. 1 to May 31 must provide tenants with enough heat to keep the inside temperature at least 68°F from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. if it’s below 55° outside. At night, the inside temperature must be at least 62°.

The city Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) is responsible for enforcing the law. Tenants can call 311 to complain if there’s no heat or hot water in their apartment or building. When they do, HPD tries to notify the building’s owner or manager, and may also try to contact tenants to see if the heat’s back on. If it isn’t, the agency will send an inspector.

Lack of heat or hot water is an “immediately hazardous” Class C violation, which must be corrected “immediately.” If the landlord doesn’t, HPD can issue fines of $250 to $500 a day for the season’s first offense, and $500 to $1,000 a day for a second offense. It can also hire a private contractor through its Emergency Repair Program to fix the boiler or deliver fuel, billing the costs to the landlord.

Last winter, HPD received more than 114,000 separate complaints about lack of heat or hot water that resulted in 3,855 inadequate-heat violations, both numbers slightly up from four years before. Its inspectors tried to check out complaints 112,650 times, and also issued 5,454 violations for lack of hot water. The agency charged landlords $1.3 million for heat-related emergency repairs and collected about $850,000 in civil penalties, significantly less than in 2016-17.

HPD did not provide figures for this year’s heating season.

According to HPD complaints listed online, tenants at the Ebbets Field Apartments reported no heat in their entire building on six days between Jan. 1-25, and on nine other days in individual apartments — complaints that often indicate building-wide problems. In the 59-apartment building at 367 East 163rd St. that is part of, there had been complaints about heat for 11 days since Oct. 1, and in individual apartments six more.

The boiler there was replaced after a fire two years ago, but lack of heat is still a problem, Acosta says — and tenants were assessed a major-capital-improvement rent increase to pay for the new boiler, about $30-35 a month for her two-bedroom apartment.

There’s enough information out there for HPD to be proactive, Newsome continues, but “there has to be legislation that gives them teeth.”

In 2020, an audit by the state comptroller’s office said HPD “has incorrectly identified hundreds — possibly thousands — of heat and hot water complaints as duplicates and failed to respond to those complaints.” Residents of one Brooklyn building, it said, reported lack of heat 175 times from 2017 to 2019 without getting a single inspection, because they were all counted as part of the same complaint.

The audit found that it often took three days or more for an inspector to come, and that HPD does not notify tenants of roughly when they need to be home to let the inspector in.

Newsome is enthusiastic about heat sensors, which send temperature readings to a central computer. They are an objective device that can show patterns, she says, “able to relay the habit of how the heat is on.”

The complex of the demolished Brooklyn Dodgers stadium as part of the state’s Mitchell-Lama program for privately owned, publicly subsidized affordable housing. The landlord, Shalom Drezin’s Fieldbridge Associates, which has owned the building since 1980, was one of the earliest landlords to buy their way out of the program, which is allowed after 25 years.

It’s now a mix of rent-stabilized and market-rate tenants, says Newsome, and with Crown Heights and nearby Prospect-Lefferts Gardens gentrifying, “the landlord has begun in the last 10 years to be very predatory...the law is set up to allow that.”

The problem with HPD’s enforcement, she says, is that “currently, the system is reactive.” It generally depends on complaints from tenants, and the agency doesn’t issue violations unless an inspector visits the premises and confirms the lack of heat — and by that time, the tenant might be at work, or the heat might be back on. “In the wintertime, HPD is stretched really thin,” she adds.

“People have been killed or lost in these fires. They’re hurting people,” Newsome says. “It’s not right. They should give us what they’re supposed to.”
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with Amy Goodman
and Juan González

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IS ERIC ADAMS PLAYING BLACK VOTERS?

NYC’S NEW MAYOR TAPPED INTO THE HIGHLY CHARGED DREAM OF A STRONG BLACK FATHER FIGURE WHO CAN SET THE HOUSE STRAIGHT. WILL HE END UP BETRAYING HIS WORKING CLASS SUPPORTERS?

By Nicholas Powers

o we have a mayor or a shell game artist? Check Mayor Eric Adams at the microphone during a press conference. He’s two men in one. Sometimes, he’s New York’s proud son, guiding the city with chest out, dressed to kill. Peep him. He can be a shell game hustler, using a bodega coffee cup to hide the class warfare rich New York wages against us. He swirls it around until we lose track of the truth.

New York’s first Black mayor since David Dinkins is on a honeymoon. Brother can do no wrong. He wooed us. He put a ring on it. He told us he’ll protect us. But Adams is a conservative Democrat who won’t call out the real cause of crime. Yes, it’s guns. Yes, the city must track the violence. Mostly, it’s wealth inequality, intergenerational trauma and the in-your-face fact that working-class New Yorkers serve the city but are treated like shit by the rich.

And he won because of all of New York’s swagger, all the strut, all the cool that never reaches our radical activists. The left here, like the left everywhere, loves talking to the woke-ing class but not the working class. If it did, it’d learn what Adams did when he was coming of age in Southeast Queens. The Street has its own rules, its own language. The Street is brutal and beautiful too. If you want its love, you have to draw a heart in wet concrete. You have to love profanity more than you want its love, you have to draw a heart in wet concrete.

RUNNING GAME

Adams has game. He has more game than Monopoly. He knew what to say to us and how to say it. Be cool, he said. I got this. Felt good to hear it because we’ve been on edge for two years now. We got hit with COVID. We fell behind on rent. Our kids weren’t in school. Protests rocked the city. Teens smashed store windows and stole. Gang members shot other gang members in open daylight. Asian people were being beaten up in public.

All of these anxieties fueled a fear that was larger than the danger. The media put every dramatic crime under a microscope and shot the image into our brains. Of course, we panicked. We saw our neighbors shot. One rolled back his concrete. I saw my neighbors shot. One fired his heart on a concrete. Asian people were being beaten up in public. It’s hard to write that. How many times did I talk with neighbors torn between wanting to feel safe and wanting to feel loyal? When the cops put up a police surveillance tower, the auntie who ran a nearby restaurant told me, “Good. We need that.” The brother at the laundry was mugged by another Black man, who told him he only mugs Black people because the police don’t care enough to follow up. “I was mugged by a racist criminal.” He threw up his hands.

When I first moved to Bed-Stuy, gunshots woke me from sleep. I saw my neighbors shot. One rolled back his pants leg and showed me the scar. A Black lesbian was left to die in a pool of blood after a drive-by. Things are better now. But a bullet leaves pain in the soul that never fully heals. Even now, I wince at loud noises.

A STRONG BLACK MAN

“We need strong Black men.” I heard that damn near my whole life. A lot of us didn’t have one. The hunger for a father figure is deep and it gave rise to an archetype of the Strong Black Man. Adams banked on it. He showed up in the Bronx and South Brooklyn. When Adams blasted fellow mayoral candidate Maya Wiley’s plan to redirect $1 billion from the NYPD, he said, “Black and brown babies are being shot in our streets, hate crimes are terrorizing Asian and Jewish communities and innocent New Yorkers are being stabbed and shot on their way to work,” it rang true. Poor people of color never really escaped the Bad Old Days. The Sex and City New York, the Friends New York was a city that out-of-town gentrifiers enjoyed, but for a lot of us, life was a constant Law & Order episode.

Quiet as it’s kept, many Black and Latino folks are not feeling BLM. Yes, we marched. Yes, we shouted “I can’t breathe” but we also swallowed the painful fact that we wanted police to protect us from each other. Man… it’s hard to write that. How many times did I talk with neighbors torn between wanting to feel safe and wanting to feel loyal? When the cops put up a police surveillance tower, the auntie who ran a nearby restaurant told me, “Good. We need that.” The brother at the laundry was mugged by another Black man, who told him he only mugs Black people because the police don’t care enough to follow up. “I was mugged by a racist criminal.” He threw up his hands.

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The racial shell game

We voted for the mayor we loved, New York’s son made good, but we got a shell game artist. When a horrific crisis or a crime shocks the city, instead of pointing to the real longstanding class inequality behind most of it, Adams puts out bodega cups with “race” or “victim blaming” or “law and order” written in Sharpie over it. And the shell game starts.

When fire licked the windows of a building in the Bronx, killing 17 people inside, eight of whom were children, at the press conference, Adams told us to “close the door.” He didn’t mention the nearly 200 complaints and violations from lead paint to … wait for it … doors that did not self-close, which, under city code, is what they should do in order to stop fire and smoke from spreading. Or “LAW AND ORDER” written in Sharpie over it. And the shell game starts.

Adams, son of the city, a shorty born in Brownsville, Brooklyn and as Fat Joe rapped, came “all the way up.” The force is strong with this one. The identification is real. He speaks like we do. One time he straight up said, “Yo. Yo. Yo,” to reporters — which is Street for “shut the fuck up.”

In the coming year that identification may get stronger as Adams steers the city through terror and rage if Republicans win the 2022 midterm and steal the 2024 presidential elections. How would he handle a second Trump administration crackdown on civil liberties? Will he direct the NYPD to protect us from white supremacist terrorists emboldened to bomb subways or synagogues or mosques? From those who come to town to shoot protesters? Or will he stand aside and let a police department full of Trump sympathizers act on its own dark impulses?

And this is why the left is left behind. The activists and thinkers who should organize resistance to fascism, mobilize the working class to defend democracy and envision a “new” New York that honors workers can be petty as fuck. A recent low point was when AOC wagged her finger at Adams after he mangled a statement on getting office workers back so food truck vendors who rely on their business could again earn a buck. The optics of a fair-skinned, straight-haired Latina berating New York’s first Black mayor since Dinkins over a quote that working-class people understood perfectly fine was, well, just bad.

What the New York left’s obsession with identity misses is we aren’t just victims. We don’t want pity. We want power. The Street taught us that.

What maybe no one outside of the hood gets is that deep down, we want a Strong Black Man to come home and set things right. But aren’t just victims. We don’t want pity. We want power. The Street taught us that.

We should’ve remembered that when we voted.

The mayors who followed Adams in the late nineties either leaned on the police department or were soft-pedaling a problem that started with poverty, hunger, drugs, gun violence, incarceration that spews hardened men into the street. Add to it the endless flow of guns. A gun speaks louder than anything your mouth can say. A bullet is a scream traveling faster than the speed of sound.

To stop these rivers from feeding the “sea of violence,” we need, right now, a massive taxation of wealth to create new social programs. New housing. New trauma treatment centers. New jobs. A “new” New York. One that teaches its working-class youth to proof the city for climate change or build new subway lines that crisscross the outer boroughs. Big, bold projects by young people who realize the city for climate change or build new subway lines that crisscross the outer boroughs. Big, bold projects by young people who realize New York is their inheritance. It belongs to them, not the rich.

Will our mayor do this? Will he stop playing games? If he doesn’t, we will march with our children to City Hall and say, Brother man, time’s up, the Street has come for answers. If our mayor, who was born in these streets, raised by these folks, who relies on their business could again earn a buck. The optics of a fair-skinned, straight-haired Latina berating New York’s first Black mayor since Dinkins over a quote that working-class people understood perfectly fine was, well, just bad.

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Nicholas Powers is a professor of literature at SUNY Old Westbury. He has written for The Independent, Truthout and The Village Voice. He is the author of Theater of War (Orison Press) and The Ground Below Zero (University of Arkansas Press).

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By Amba Guerguerian

On Newtown Creek in industrial North Brooklyn, the Rockaway Pipeline emerges from the ground into an access terminal — essentially a filling station — on the property of United Metro Energy Corporation (UMEC). The facility also receives fuel from barges that unload on their icy docks. UMEC delivers millions of gallons per day in petroleum products that fuel hospitals, schools, residential apartment buildings, the MTA and more. These fuels, carcinogenic and highly flammable, have to be handled carefully before they are dispersed around the city. A mistake on the job could result not only in personal injury, but in an explosion or major contamination of the surrounding waterways.

The 21 highly-trained men who used to do this dangerous work now find themselves out in the cold on the other side of the chain-link fence that marks the private property of UMEC.

They are in the 10th month of a strike that has no clear end in sight. Billionaire owner John Catsimatidis has hired less-experienced scabs whom he pays $5 more an hour rather than agree to their union’s demand for parity pay with what other oil terminal operators and mechanics earn in the New York City region, the main prerogative for the strike. They are paid $27 an hour, 10 dollars less than the industry average.

On Feb. 1, the first Tuesday after a snowstorm, five striking workers and a couple of supporters stood under a sign that read: “John Catsimatidis and UMEC: Stop Hurting NYC Families.” The wind blowing off the creek made the already frigid temperatures unbearable. Most of the men had to take refuge in idling cars. “Every day, someone is here on the line showing that there’s a presence here, seven days a week from seven in the morning to five in the evening,” Strike Captain Andre Solyn told the Indy from his spot on the line, eyes on the oil terminal across the way.

“Well, it’s hard enough,” said Dennis Spence, a truck mechanic who worked at the company for seven years. “It’s tough, but you have to keep going. You have to fight for what you want.”

Three years ago, UMEC laborers decided to unionize with the Teamsters when the company started consolidating positions. In negotiating the workers’ first contract, Teamsters reps demanded the same protections their workers receive across the country: Parity pay, paid holidays off, night-differential pay, overtime pay, pensions and yearly raises.

As soon as all 21 UMEC workers went on strike last April, Catsimatidis began firing them, one by one, until eight were gone — all of whom still participate in strike activities. Solyn, strike captain and rabble rouser, was the first to be fired.

The scabs that keep the oil moving in and out of UMEC are not certified to work the lot and its docks, say the strikers. The year-long certification process, which all striking workers have undergone, is required by the city, they say. “They’re not qualified to do this job,” says Solyn. “This is downright dangerous,” says Solyn. “You could have a big environmental impact there,” he said, referring to an oil leak. When Solyn was hired, he had to learn the piping systems, valves and mechanics specific to UMEC’s terminal.

Other unions, such as the UPS workers with Teamsters Local 804, the United Federation of Teachers, the Amazon Labor Union, 1199 SEIU, and the Student Workers of Columbia (SWC), have shown solidarity on the picket line. The Democratic Socialists of America have also aided the strikers’ efforts. They made a list of clients serviced by UMEC, which indicated that 44% of the corporation’s revenue comes from residential buildings and households and its most lucrative customer is Shunting Hospital, followed by two gas stations — a Sunoco at 1188 Metropolitan Ave. and a Gulf at 53–26 Van Dam St.

Those active in the labor movement know that right now, solidarity is more important than ever. “This is a bigger fight than us,” says Solyn, who is encouraged to be a part of an upswing in the U.S. labor movement. “Wages have been stagnant for a long time … It’s worth it to pursue a fight where labor and capital can coexist. Now the relationship is totally one-sided in that the labor is being taken advantage of. We need representation.”

Readers interested in supporting the strike can go to 500 Kingsland Ave. on Tuesdays from 9–10 a.m. to participate in weekly picket rallies. For more info, including the strike GoFundMe, visit New York Teamsters on Facebook, @TeamstersJC16 on Twitter or @nyteamsters Instagram.
AMAZON UNION ELECTION SET ON S.I.

By Amba Guerguerian

On Jan. 26, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) certified that organizers with the Amazon Labor Union (ALU)—a group of Amazon employees leading the struggle to unionize the company’s Staten Island warehouses—had gathered enough signatures to force a union election at JFK8, the largest of the four warehouses.

This marks only the second time, following an effort in Bessemer, Alabama, that Amazon workers have forced a union election against their notoriously anti-union employer.

Then, on Feb. 2, the ALU filed a second petition to authorize a union vote. Organizers hope that the estimated 1,500 workers at the LDJ5 warehouse will soon join the roughly 6,000 JFK8 workers in having the chance to vote for union representation.

Amazon is proposing a March election for JFK8, while the worker-organizers want the vote to be delayed until the NLRB rules on unfair labor practices claim against Amazon that could make it easier for them to communicate with workers inside the facility in advance of a vote. Among the charges against Amazon are forcing workers to attend anti-union “captive audience meetings” disguised as required trainings and on Nov. 15 calling the NYPD on ALU President Chris Smalls and fellow organizer Brett Daniels, who were campaigning at the bus stop on Amazon’s premises.

The union has previously sought to organize from the parking lot outside the warehouses, but it is now taking a different approach.

“We’ve switched up our strategy,” Smalls told The Indypendent. “We’re playing the inside game. We’re occupying the break rooms and have domains in the cafeterias. We are disrupting the captive audience meetings that started back up this week. We are being more militant, a lot more aggressive on the front line; showing the workers that we have collective power.”

On Feb. 4, the NLRB mailed ballots to Bessemer workers in a “rerun election,” through March 25. In late November, the board announced a revote due to Amazon’s egregious anti-union tactics in last year’s election.

Meanwhile, Smalls says he’s in touch with 18 other Amazon facilities that are looking to emulate ALU’s worker-led unionization model at their warehouses. He hopes that if JFK8 wins its election, a domino effect will sweep the country, as is currently underway at Starbucks.

Follow the ALU at amazonlaborunion.org or on Twitter @amazonlabor.

LABOR BRIEFS

BY INDEPENDENT STAFF

STARBUCKS UNION CUP FILLS UP FAST

Labor organizing at Starbucks has mushroomed since workers at two of the chain’s stores in Buffalo, N.Y., voted for the Starbucks Workers United union in early January. As we go to press, Starbucks workers in at least 72 stores in 21 states have filed for union recognition. “Every workplace in America should be democratized, and it’s within our power to make that happen,” said Sam LaGow, a worker at its Reserve Roastery in Manhattan. The company’s Memphis chapter says it was inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s legacy “to carry on Memphis workers’ tradition of fighting union-busting and seeking social justice.” Meanwhile, Starbucks has retained a top union-busting law firm, Littlel Mendelson, to stall union votes by filing multiple challenges to single-store elections with the National Labor Relations Board. On Feb. 8, the company fired all seven members of the organizing committee in Memphis.

REI WORKERS SEEK UNION

More than 100 workers at the REI outdoor-goods shop in Manhattan have filed to be represented by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union. “We cannot continue to allow our job security, safety and well-being to be at stake,” worker Graham Gale told LaborPress, citing “unsafe working conditions during a global pandemic.” It would be the first union at the 168-store co-op chain, which bills itself as a progressive business: On Feb. 3, CEO Eric Artz opened a podcast to workers by saying he used he/him pronouns and was “speaking to you today from the traditional lands of the Coast Salish peoples.” Artz then argued that a union would be wrong for REI because it would “impact our ability to communicate and work directly with our employees.”

MEXICAN AUTO WORKERS REJECT COMPANY UNION

Workers at a General Motors plant in Silao, Mexico, voted overwhelmingly Feb. 1–2 to replace their employer-friendly union with the independent SINTTIA (National Auto Workers) union. The previous union was affiliated with the Congress of Mexican Labor (CTM), long tied to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which governed the Congress of Mexican Labor (CTM), long tied to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which governed Mexico as a one-party state for most of the 20th century. CTM affiliates have been criticized for signing employer-friendly “protection contracts,” without workers consenting to or even knowing about the deal, but a 2019 labor law requires workers to vote on whether to retain all current labor contracts by 2023.

A BRIDGE TOO FAR

If there’s anything that Jeff Bezos makes faster than money, it’s enemies. The Amazon founder and world’s second richest man (net worth $183 billion) faces not only an increasingly restless workforce, but the ire of the residents of Rotterdam, the major port city in the Netherlands.

Bezos’s newly built $500 million super yacht is stuck in port because it’s too tall to pass under Rotterdam’s iconic Koningshaven Bridge. When wood leaked that Rotterdam’s city government was going to disassemble the center section of the bridge to clear a path for the 417-foot-long Bezos boat, the backlash was quick. More than 3,500 people signed up on a Facebook event page to participate in egging the ship when it departs. “Rotterdam was built from rubble by the people of Rotterdam, and we do not just take that apart for the phallic symbol of a megalomaniac billionaire,” the description of the event reads, according to Google translate. “Not without a fight!”

Rotterdam Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb now insists that a decision has not been made.

— INDEPENDENT STAFF
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very weekday at 6 p.m., CNN viewers can tune into The Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer. The Wolf Blitzer “command center for breaking news, politics and extraordinary reporting from around the world”...
TIME FOR THE LEFT TO EMBRACE CRITICAL RACE THEORY DEBATE
PRETENDING CRT ISN’T REAL ROBS US OF THE CHANCE TO MOUNT A STRONG DEFENSE

By Linda Martín Alcoff

Critical race theory (CRT) is being attacked by the far right all around the country, with anti-CRT opponents filling school-board meetings. Florida, Tennessee, Idaho, Iowa, Arkansas, New Hampshire and Oklahoma have already banned or restricted its presence in the classroom, and 16 more states are currently debating whether to enact similar laws. A California school-board president told Fox News last August that CRT is trying to “drive a wedge between various groups in America, various ethnic groups, and to use that to absolutely ruin our nation.”

CRT supporters’ principal defense has been to claim that its opponents are simply ignorant: they don’t know what critical race theory is, or that it is only taught in law schools. Yes, strictly speaking, CRT began as an approach to reading legal judgments for their structural racism. But the concept is now being used interchangeably with any attempt to grapple with slavery, colonialism, genocide, and racism in the history of the United States. Opponents of CRT are concerned that addressing these histories will bring the country down, that it means cultural suicide. To counter this with simplistic logic is inadequate and even offensive. People need hope, a motive for patience and the ability to participate meaningfully in reframing their own understanding of who they are and who we together might become.

Fox News, despite its efforts, is not capable of making unicorns look like real horses. The opponents of CRT know that it claims that structural racism is embedded in U.S. history and current institutions. This topic is playing out in public classrooms. Teacher training for some years has beefed up segments on teaching racism; unlike a generation ago, textbooks today cover the history of slavery in some depth. Readily available classroom resources include units on racism and police violence, whiteness, and the Black Lives Matter movement.

If the youth of this country are regularly exposed to such content, they will begin to ask questions, and their patriotism may be at risk. In the best-case scenario, this could lead to a more multiracial democracy than we have ever had.

We need to recognize that this is a serious and legitimate debate. How do we create a meaningful democracy when large groups of people have such different historical relationships to the country? Thomas Jefferson suggested that slaves should be sent back to Africa after slavery was abolished, because he didn’t believe a united political community could be formed given the enmity slavery caused. But we haven’t given building that kind of community a real try yet.

The current debate over CRT is an opportunity. The harder of us should enter these Parent-Teacher Association and school-board meetings and organize more venues for open discussion. Invite the press; arrange for regular white folks (i.e. not professors) to speak to the issue, offer a reasoned counterview to the U.S.-can-do-no-wrong cheerleading; address concerns about children’s mental well-being with empathy; and complicate the category of “whiteness” with intersectionality.

Here are some suggested dos and don’ts:

1) Stop denying that critical race theory is being taught. Yes, strictly speaking, CRT began as an approach to reading legal judgments for their subtle racism. But the concept is now being used interchangeably with any attempt to grapple with slavery, colonialism, genocide, and racism in the history of the United States. Opponents of CRT are concerned that addressing these histories will bring the country down, that it means cultural suicide. To counter this with simplistic logic is inadequate and even offensive. People need hope, a motive for patience and the ability to participate meaningfully in reframing their own understanding of who they are and who we together might become.

2) Explore ways in which the past matters today. European and U.S. empire-building created the world as it looks today. Cumulative advantages accrue across generations even in the absence of racist intent. But the past is not all one unending story of crime and horror. We can also find moving stories of resistance in our national history, which can plant seeds of hope and inform concrete agendas. This country forfeited a huge opportunity for moral and political advance when Reconstruction was dismantled; studying that period and others can help us chart a way forward.

3) Admit that whites may experience these new educational initiatives differently. An important aspect of white American identity is the “American can identity” part, as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell’s recent gaffe indicates. For many, “America” connotes concepts like world leader, democracy and a charitable people. It looks different when we consider slavery, the genocide against Native Americans or the bloody imperial ventures that the United States has embarked on. Many white individuals are scared of blowback. But we need to think beyond individual responsibility, as CRT explains, and we need to recognize that we are all connected in some way, whether biological or not, to some pretty great people and traditions. We have many elements to build on as we revise the country’s history. We can still have peaceful parks and neighborhoods, integrated schools that sometimes work well, and

Continued on page 18

WE CAN ALSO FIND MOVING STORIES OF RESISTANCE IN OUR NATIONAL HISTORY WHICH CAN PLANT SEEDS OF HOPE.
SUPREME COURT RULES IN FAVOR OF COVID AND SETS THE STAGE FOR FURTHER EFFORTS TO DISMANTLE THE “ADMINISTRATIVE STATE.”

BY STEVEN WISHNIA

WASHINGTON—The case could have been called OSHA v. COVID — and the Supreme Court ruled in favor of COVID.

On Jan. 13, the Court ruled 6-3 to delay the Biden administration’s temporary emergency workplace vaccine regulations indefinite until lawsuits challenging them can be decided.

On strict partisan lines, it held that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) had overreached its authority to regulate workplace hazards when it ordered all employers with 100 or more workers to ensure that they are vaccinated against COVID-19 or get tested for it weekly.

The Court’s majority reflects that the Republicans have become fierce advocates of the right to spread COVID, with even those not in the anti-vaxx-quack faction denouncing vaccine and mask regulations as “tyrannical” and “Fascist.” Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has spent the past year battling to ban local safety measures, such as Austin’s Jan. 13 order granting businesses the right to require masks or bar unvaccinated customers. Governors Ron DeSantis of Florida, Glenn Youngkin of Virginia, and Kristi Noem of South Dakota have taken similar stances.

The far-right justices have also indicated that they want to undermine the legal bases for many government regulations. In a concurring opinion, Justices Neil Gorsuch, Thomas, and Alito argued that if OSHA’s interpretation of the law was valid, then Congress had unconstitutional delegated its authority to the agency. A key target is the 1984 precedent of Chevron v. Natural Resources Defense Council, which held that courts should defer to federal agencies’ interpretation of a law they administer as long as it’s reasonable and doesn’t contradict the statute.

When courts are deciding whether to issue a stay, one of the two main legal principles is which side will suffer more damage from the delay. The Court’s majority framed that question as a choice between a mandate that will force employers “to incur billions of dollars in unrecoverable compliance costs and will cause hundreds of thousands of employees to leave their jobs” versus OSHA’s projection that it would save over 6,500 lives and prevent hundreds of thousands of hospitalizations.

“If it is not our role to weigh such tradeoffs,” they concluded, ruling that Congress had not given OSHA the power to “regulate public health more broadly.”

Which constitutes more damage? Quitting your job or getting fired because you refuse to take a simple public-health precaution, or dying in agony from a virulent respiratory disease?

“As disease and death continue to mount, this Court tells the agency that it cannot respond in the most effective way possible,” Justices Breyer, Kagan, and Sotomayor concluded in their dissent.

A version of this article originally appeared at LaborPress.org
KOLKATA, INDIA—“I’ll see you soon.” We cast a spell and call it hope, waiting helplessly for “soon” to arrive. The ‘Rona years have held us prisoner, separated us from the ones we love, cleared our lives apart. Does the world feel smaller, borderless, when we wake up to our screens, and hold each other through language, across time and space? Do the borders between us dissolve in this virtual utopia-hellscape?

The borders enforced during COVID-19 hold us hostage, a stark reinforcement of colonial-era inequalities, a reminder that we are the most expendable, that separation may last far longer than disease. The pandemic reinforced the oppression of the historically disenchanted, us who lose our birthlottery.

My close friend Siddhartha’s father has touched death and survived for the third time. There won’t be a fourth. The pandemic rages on. His sister Chagan waits from San Francisco for travel restrictions to ease. She’s luckier than most. A U.S. permanent resident, she’s less likely to get indefinitely stuck in India. After two years of waiting, an anxious Chagan found a flight to Kolkata to see her father in January. Flights are hard to come by and incredibly expensive; travel restrictions shift every day.

June 2021: I got a text from my friend Sarika. Her aging grandmother, who struggles with hearing loss and dementia, was now alone in Kolkata after the death of her sister, her only living family in India. Snack in Maryland, Sarika’s mother tried to come to India and take grandma to the United States. But with embassies closed, emergency visas taking weeks or months to process, barely any operating flights and uncertain travel restrictions, they couldn’t afford to get stuck in a now-unfamiliar India. I helped them find a nurse to accompany grandmother in the case they’d figure out the necessary paperwork to get her into the United States.

In stark contrast, the global elite has spent these last two years buying superyachts and holidaying in countries that rely on tourism to survive like the Maldives: Boris Johnson threw a bunch of parties under his own lockdown and vaccinated folks with powerful passports have had the luxury of moving freely.

Western arrogance
India, 48.6% vaccinated, is now facing a vaccine shortage, and boosters are far from being accessible in public hospitals. When India — the leading country in vaccine production — produced the Astrazeneca vaccine locally under the name Covishield, we were legally bound to sell a percentage of those shots to the UK, leaving millions of us unvaccinated.

Human Rights Watch reports, “There are over 100 companies across Africa, Asia, and Latin America who have the capacity to make an mRNA vaccine … All they need is for the U.S. and German governments to end monopolies and share the valuable technology they funded and essentially created with them.” Western countries consistently undermined foreign vaccines. While millions of vaccines rot in their storehouses, they refuse to democratize technology by sharing vaccine patents so other countries can make and distribute low-cost vaccines to their people who were failed by the COVAX program, under which WHO and Unicef promised to redistribute vaccines they hoped rich countries would donate. All to reinforce the global oppression and Western arrogance I’ve known my whole life: Wealthy countries cure the longer on their terms — by distributing granola bars rather than stopping their corporate-interest-driven land rape, rather than globally canceling debts or redistributing wealth so the rest of the world can afford once again to reap the harvests of our own land.

If we can have McDonalds in every country, why pray tell, can we not have vaccines globally available? If our collective health and safety is truly a concern for world leaders, why are countries like Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States refusing to share vaccine patents? Why aren’t they sharing the extra doses they have rotting in storehouses?

WHAT TO DO

BORDERLESS DYSTOPIA/UTOPIA

Under COVID, governmental surveillance, border control and policing of migrants and citizens have increased. What is the incentive for governments to rein in surveillance when the pandemic is over? The pandemic has given birth to centibillionaires while the incomes of 99% of humanity fell and 160 million people were thrown into poverty. In what feels like an empathy-devoid dystopia where we hear the “post-truth” so often, our trust in the system has evaporated.

The pandemic shifted perceptions of time and space. The global lockdown sealed us into a shared moment that most everyone was suddenly trapped inside; lucky ones experienced each other in small groups or in the virtual world. As tightening physical borders drove us into isolation, emotional borders dissolved in our intimate lives as we reached out in search of love, community and connection. In the virtual realm, there are no borders, we converse across time zones to share space.

As we are isolated from physically collective experiences, our collective consciousness shrinks. Connecting in the virtual world is our way, perhaps, of trying to keep these connections alive. Paradoxically, virtual space offers more “global mobility” … does this experience of a borderless virtual world fuel a desire to manifest a more borderless world physically?

In poetic imagination, the pause has led some to confront their shadows, break down their barriers and shift focus towards empathy. Illusions of individualistic survival, of identity as defined by borders, are crumbling. Hope lies in imagining a better future. We need this nightmare to end, and to do that, collective action and open borders are necessary.

In my imagination, a utopic decolonization is one where everyone has the opportunity to move freely across open borders and create diverse communities across the globe. In my fantasies, we dose the most powerful with psychedelic medicine that forces them to peacefully return the billions they have stolen from us. The void created by their crumbling egos will be filled by an influx of universal love and realization of the fundamental truth that any system that denies people their freedom, is unsustainable.
THE U.S. IS REAPING WHAT IT SOWED IN UKRAINE

By Medea Benjamin & Nicolas Davies

W

hat are Americans to believe about the rising tensions over Ukraine? The United States and Russia both claim their escalations are defensive, responding to threats by the other side, but the resulting spiral of escalation can only make war more likely. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is warning that “panic” by U.S. and Western leaders is already causing economic destabilization in the country.

Not all U.S. allies support its current policy. Germany is refusing to funnel more weapons into Ukraine, in keeping with its longstanding policy of not sending weapons into conflict zones.

“The Minsk Agreement hasn’t been applied by both sides,” German Social Democrat Member of Parliament Ralf Stegner told the BBC Jan. 25, referring to the process agreed to by France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine in 2015 for the ending the civil war between the Ukrainian government and ethnic Russian separatists in the country’s east. “It just doesn’t make any sense to think that forcing up the military possibilities would make it better. Rather, I think it’s the hour of diplomacy.”

Most American politicians and corporate media, however, have fallen in line with a one-sided narrative that paints Russia as the aggressor, and support sending more weapons to Ukrainian government forces. The most critical events that have been airbrushed out of that narrative are the violation of agreements Western leaders made at the end of the Cold War not to expand NATO into Eastern Europe, and the U.S.-backed coup in Ukraine in February 2014.

Western mainstream media accounts date the crisis in Ukraine back to Russia’s 2014 reintegration of Crimea, and the decision by ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine to secede as the Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics.

But these were not unprompted actions. They were responses to the U.S.-backed coup, in which an armed mob that included the neo-Nazi Right Sector militia stormed the Ukrainian parliament, forcing the elected president, Viktor Yanukovych, and members of his party to flee for their lives. The remaining members of parliament voted to form a new government, subverting the political transition and plans for a new election that Yanukovych had publicly agreed to the day before, after meetings with the foreign ministers of France, Germany and Poland.

The U.S. role in managing the coup was exposed by a leaked 2014 audio recording of Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt working on their plans, which included sidelining the European Union (“Fuck the EU,” as Nuland put it) and shoehorning in U.S. protege Arseniy Yatsenyuk as prime minister.

Prime Minister Yatsenyuk was forced to resign after two years when a corruption scandal broke, and President Petro Poroshenko was ousted in a tax evasion scandal revealed in the Panama Papers. Ukraine remains the poorest country in Europe, and one of the most corrupt.

The Ukrainian military had little enthusiasm for a civil war against its own people in eastern Ukraine, so the post-coup government formed new “National Guard” units to assault the separatist-held areas. The infamous Azov Battalion drew its first recruits from the Right Sector militia and openly displays neo-Nazi symbols, yet it has kept receiving U.S. arms and training, even after Congress explicitly cut off its funding in defense appropriations for the 2018 fiscal year.

In 2015, the Minsk and Normandy negotiations led to a ceasefire and the withdrawal of heavy weapons from a buffer zone around the separatist-held areas. Ukraine agreed to grant greater autonomy to Donets, Luhansk and other ethnically Russian areas of Ukraine, but it has failed to follow through on that.

A federal system, with some powers devolved to individual provinces or regions, could help resolve the all-or-nothing power struggle between Ukrainian nationalists and Ukraine’s traditional ties to Russia that has dogged its politics since independence in 1991.

But the U.S. and NATO’s interest in Ukraine is not really about resolving its regional differences. The U.S.-backed coup in 2014 was calculated to put Russia in an impossible position. If Russia did nothing, post-coup Ukraine would sooner or later join NATO, as NATO members already agreed to in principle in 2008. That would mean NATO forces would advance right up to Russia’s border.

On the other hand, if Russia had responded to the coup by invading Ukraine, there would have been no turning back from a disastrous new Cold War with the West. To Washington’s frustration, Russia found a middle path out of this dilemma, by accepting the result of Crimean referendum to rejoin Russia, but only giving covert support to the separatists in Luhansk and Donetsk.

In 2021, with Victoria Nuland back in the State Department, the Biden administration quickly cooked up a plan to put Russia in a new pickle. The United States had given Ukraine $2 billion in military aid since 2014, and Biden has added another $650 million to that, along with deployments of U.S. and NATO military trainers.

Ukraine has still not implemented the constitutional
HUMANITY’S HISTORY, RETOLD

The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity
By David Graeber & David Wengrow
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Nov. 2021, 692 pages

By Steven Sherman

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For the 10 years before his death in 2020, Da-
vid Graeber was perhaps the most prominent
left public intellectual in the world. And un-
like other contenders, such as David Harvey
and Slavoj Zizek, he immersed himself in the
world of social movements, playing a concrete role in or-
tive on early human history, if such a thing were possible.

The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity, co-
authored with archeologist David Wengrow, is a major
event: A best-selling far-left text that is a direct challenge
to empires to utopian thinking that touches on many top-
ics unfamiliar to most readers. At the same time, for all
its ambitions, it sidesteps or avoids a few key areas.
The Dawn of Everything begins with a lengthy section of threat-
clearing, in which Grae-

ber and Wengrow hope
to make clear the inade-
quacies of an evolution-
ary perspective on human
history and the related
question of the origins of
social inequality. The evo-
lutionary perspective, in
which social organization was propelled forward by
productive advances, most notably agriculture, and
ascended from small, mo-
tile bands to chiefdoms to empires and eventually
nation-states, has been cri-
tiqued by anthropologists
for decades, but it remains influential. Wengrow’s
academic life and for public intellectuals like Stephen
Pinter and Jared Diamond.

This has long been related to the question, “What are
the origins of social inequality?” Graeber and Wengrow
offer plenty of evidence that the evolutionary process for
human societies was more uneven than has been suggest-
ed, and that centralized power by no means held a mon-
topoly on technological innovations. Ultimately, they of-
er a somewhat different account of the “fall from grace.”

In their view, humans have always been political animals,
reinventing their social relations. What were once con-

sidered as three fundamental rights, however — the right
to disobey, the right to flee, and the right to reinvent so-
cial relations — have largely been forgotten or cast aside.
So now, we are stuck with territorial states that enforce
order with guns and traduce any rights to fl ee or re-

vent ourselves.

This brings us to the book’s second orienting frame-
work, the substitution of the question “How did we
(essentially bears a certain resemblance to Graeber’s own
anarchistic societies and deliver powerful critiques
of European social organization. In Graeber and Wen-
grow’s view, the encounter with these views was crucial
to the shift associated with the Enlightenment, when elite
European thought began to celebrate freedom instead of
viewing it negatively. As they focus, more or less, on the rise of states, sever-
al other highly relevant topics get short shrift. Religion
is largely seen as the rituals deployed to hold things togeth-
er. Universal, expansion-
avy, proselytizing faiths like Christianity and Islam are
ignored, although they have implications for all the
questions Graeber and Wengrow are interested in.
The playful aspect of trade — collecting shells just be-
cause, or less — is emphasized, and proto-capitalist
forms, in which rulers and others seized upon opportuni-
ties to accumulate money ceaselessly, are ignored,
although there are many examples of that even in early
history.

The efforts to answer the question “how did we get
stuck with states now covering the entirety of the
world?” are disappoint-
ing. At times they seem
to argue that, as if in some dystopian nightmare fiction,
playful rituals unexpectedly turn deadly serious and im-
mutable; a person appointed king for a day becomes one.
Later they indicate that perhaps charitable efforts, such
as bringing widows or orphans into a temple, turn into
permanent power over the subjects being helped.

But the covering of the globe with territorial states is a
modern, recent feature. Two highly relevant dynamics go
unmentioned. First, constant warfare in Europe following
the collapse of the Roman Empire ultimately required the
rise of state-like structures to defend against neighbors,
and European power struggles tended to expand to cover
more and more of the globe. Second, for most of the 20th
century, there was a strong conviction among colonized
ties that having modern states of their own was the road
to modernity and prosperity. This conviction has been
shaken by the lackluster results of post-colonial indepen-
dence, and power has migrated up toward transnational
bureaucracies like the World Trade Organization and
downward toward non-state movements like the Zapatis-
ras in Mexico and Kurdish Rojava in northwest Syria.

It is in line with the spirit of this book to ponder what
future combinations of states, transnational organiza-
tions, and movements will emerge over the next century.
Whether they will reinforce or undo inequality and domi-
nation, is entirely uncertain.

It jumps around from hemisphere to hemisphere, con-
tinent to continent, region to region. It says little about Western European social structures af-

ter the heyday of the ancient Greeks, but in North
America, it traces some patterns through the con-

formity between Western imperialists and indigenous
peoples from the 15th through 18th centuries.

Nevertheless, the unifying vision is strong, and
their thematic emphasis is clear. Throughout,
they argue that self-consciousness about political
arrangements is pretty much the essence of humans, as
much a part of the consciousness of smaller groups with
little technology as it is for modern people, who often
lose sight of their own political capacity, as states seem
natural and unmovable. Whereas evolutionary perspec-
tives (including their own) unravel pependence, in which
in turn enables and even necessitates transforming social structures, for Grae-
ber and Wengrow, early humanity was far more playful.

They emphasize that some groups had seasonal social
structures, toggling between more egalitarian and more
hierarchical structures depending on the time of year.
States emerge but also dissolve — sometimes, they hint,
without providing much evidence, because of rebellious
rejection of hierarchy. Different peoples go in different
directions because of schismogenesis, literally “creation
for rituals than as centralized rulers’ grand schemes to
generate a surplus. Centers of power here aren’t the ini-
tiators of technology so much as the appropriators, after
bands of marauding men conquer the anarchistic cities.

States, which combine violence, administration
(knowledge as power) and charisma, contingently emerge
and sometimes fall apart. In one of the most vivid of the
many narratives sketched in the book, the pre-

conquest history of North America is depicted as one
where a centralized state rose and fell hundreds of years
before Europeans invaded, and was eventually replaced
by smaller groups that had nevertheless developed ways
to interact over vast distances. That state rule was
remembered in myth as despised memories of those who
sought to order people around. Ultimately, this was the
context for the European encounter in the 18th century
with indigenous people who could confidently defend
their anarchistic societies and deliver powerful critiques
of European social organization. In Graeber and Weng-
row’s view, the encounter with these views was crucial
to the shift associated with the Enlightenment, when elite
European thought began to celebrate freedom instead of
viewing it negatively.

As they focus, more or less, on the rise of states, several
other highly relevant topics get short shrift. Religion
is largely seen as the rituals deployed to hold things togeth-
er. Universal, expansion-
ary, proselytizing faiths like Christianity and Islam are
ignored, although they have implications for all the
questions Graeber and Wengrow are interested in.
The playful aspect of trade — collecting shells just because, or less — is emphasized, and proto-capitalist
forms, in which rulers and others seized upon opportuni-
ties to accumulate money ceaselessly, are ignored,
although there are many examples of that even in early
history.

The efforts to answer the question “how did we get
stuck with states now covering the entirety of the
world?” are disappoint-
ing. At times they seem
to argue that, as if in some dystopian nightmare fiction,
playful rituals unexpectedly turn deadly serious and im-
mutable; a person appointed king for a day becomes one.
Later they indicate that perhaps charitable efforts, such
as bringing widows or orphans into a temple, turn into
permanent power over the subjects being helped.

But the covering of the globe with territorial states is a
modern, recent feature. Two highly relevant dynamics go
unmentioned. First, constant warfare in Europe following
the collapse of the Roman Empire ultimately required the
rise of state-like structures to defend against neighbors,
and European power struggles tended to expand to cover
more and more of the globe. Second, for most of the 20th
century, there was a strong conviction among colonized
ties that having modern states of their own was the road
to modernity and prosperity. This conviction has been
shaken by the lackluster results of post-colonial indepen-
dence, and power has migrated up toward transnational
bureaucracies like the World Trade Organization and
downward toward non-state movements like the Zapatis-
ras in Mexico and Kurdish Rojava in northwest Syria.

It is in line with the spirit of this book to ponder what
future combinations of states, transnational organiza-
tions, and movements will emerge over the next century.
Whether they will reinforce or undo inequality and domi-
nation, is entirely uncertain.
UKRAINE

Continued from page 15

changes called for in the Minsk agreements, and the military support the United States and NATO have provided has encouraged its leaders to effectively abandon the Minsk-Normandy process and simply reassert sovereignty over all of Ukraine’s territory, including Crimea.

In practice, Ukraine could only recover those territories by a major escalation of the civil war. When it began shipping military equipment south and east towards Crimea and the Donbass region in March 2021, Russia responded by moving troops and conducting military exercises close enough to Ukraine to deter any new offensive.

In October, Ukraine launched new attacks in Donbass, Russia, which still had about 100,000 troops stationed near Ukraine, responded with new troop movements and military exercises.

Underlying all these tensions is NATO’s expansion in Eastern Europe, in violation of commitments Western officials made at the end of the Cold War. Russian officials are warning that U.S.-Russian relations are close to the breaking point. If the United States and NATO are not prepared to negotiate new disarmament treaties, remove U.S. missiles from countries within range of Russia, and dial back NATO expansion, Russian officials say they will have no option but to respond with “appropriate military-technical reciprocal measures.”

This expression may not refer to an invasion of Ukraine, as most Western commentators have assumed, but to a broader strategy that could include actions that hit much closer to home for Western leaders. For example, Russia could place short-range nuclear missiles in Kaliningrad (between Lithuania and Poland), within range of European capitals. It could establish military bases in Iran, Cuba, Venezuela and other friendly countries. It could deploy submarines armed with hypersonic nuclear missiles to the western Atlantic, from where they could destroy Washington in minutes.

It has long been a common refrain among American activists to point to the 800 or so U.S. military bases all over the world and ask, “How would Americans like it if Russia built military bases in Mexico or Cuba?” We may be about to find out.

Hypersonic nuclear missiles off the East Coast would put the United States in a similar position to that in which NATO has placed the Russians. So the revived Cold War that U.S. officials and corporate media hacks have been mindlessly cheering on could very quickly turn into one in which the United States would find itself just as encircled and endangered as its enemies.

Will the prospect of such a 21st century Cuban missile crisis be enough to bring America’s irresponsible leaders back to the negotiating table? We certainly hope so.

WAR IS A RACKET

Raytheon made $6.4 billion in profit in 2021 on $64.4 billion in total sales. During a Jan. 25 conference call with investors, Raytheon CEO Greg Hayes was asked about the possibility of “rising tension” among global powers boosting the giant military contractor’s earnings. This was his reply.

The answer is obviously we are seeing, I would say, opportunities for international sales. We just have to look to the last week, where we saw the drone attack in the UAE, which attacked some of their other facilities, and of course the tensions in Eastern Europe, the tensions in the South China Sea. All of those things are putting pressure on some of the defense spending over there. So, I fully expect we’re going to see some benefit from it.

— INDYPENDENT STAFF

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KNOW THY ENEMY

Exposing the Right and Fighting for Democracy: Celebrating Chip Berlet as Journalist and Scholar
Edited by Pam Chamberlain, Matthew N. Lyons, Abby Scher & Spencer Sunshine
Routledge — 2021 — 129 pages

By Eleanor J. Bader

Whenever a noted luminary dies, tributes quickly pour in to laud their contributions to society and pay homage to their character. It’s touching and meaningful, of course, but I always have mixed feelings about these testimonials, hoping the person being feted knew how valued they were and wishing they’d been able to read or hear the appreciative comments.

A newly-released anthology about the 40-plus year career of right-wing watcher, writer, activist and researcher Chip Berlet sidesteps this issue, since it was released in honor of his retirement, and I can only hope that reading Exposing the Right and Fighting for Democracy gives him reason to smile. Forty-seven contributors — personal friends as well as colleagues from Political Research Associates (PRA), the Massachusetts-based think tank where he spent the bulk of his career, join a host of appreciative fellow travelers to recognize his insights and thank him for his kind and patient instruction.

In sum, what emerges is a portrait of a true mensch, a man who recognized the importance of studying both the religious and secular right when others on the left thought it unnecessary or even silly. To his credit, Berlet sought to understand — rather than lampoon — those whose positions are anathema to progressive values, folks whose organizing props up racism, heteropatriarchy, antisemitism and homophobia.

Here’s an example. When Guardian reporter Jason Wilson consulted Berlet about the Ammon Bundy-led occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in 2016, Berlet helped him see that, despite being misled by far-right ideology, the protesters were responding to something real: Increasing disparities in wealth, a collapsing rural economy and the implosion of the American Dream. But Berlet did not stop at deconstructing the occupation. Instead, he schooled Wilson about the extent of the right’s reach, noting that a pervasive fear of change — terror that people of color, Jews, queers and members of the trans community would soon outnumber white Christians — form the crux of contemporary political backlash.

Satan who is working to lure the unsuspecting into sin and debauchery. Most secular people, like mainstream Protestants, Roman Catholics and Jews, have been blindsided by this proliferating worldview. To wit: We are now seeing “QAnon-ist” conspiracies about Joseph Biden and other Democrats as abducting child abusers,” while Christian Republicans label middle-of-the-road Dems as so “godless” that they must be fought at every turn.

Berlet was one of the first to sound the alarm about these movements and his output — hundreds of reports, articles, presentations and books, including Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort with Matthew N. Lyons and the edited volumes Eyes Right! Challenging the Right-Wing Backlash and Trumping Democracy: From Reagan to the Alt-Right, have made him a go-to source about any-and-all things conservative.

Exposing the Right and Fighting for Democracy offers an inspiring overview of Berlet’s prodigious career. At the same time, contributors to the book don’t shy away from reflecting more personally, offering keen descriptions of his gamer-cooking skill, generosity, sense of humor and generally upbeat personality.

A self-described Christian — and a Marxist — Chip Berlet has earned the right to rest on his laurels. Yet that seems unlikely. Even in the face of many retirement well-wishes, it’s hard to imagine him sitting back and watching as events unfold.

BERLET SOUGHT TO UNDERSTAND, RATHER THAN LAMPOON, RIGHTWING MOVEMENTS WHOSE VALUES ARE ANATHEMA TO PROGRESSIVES.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Continued from page 12

a sense of compatibility despite differences in the music we like or the religion we practice. We need to find those persons in our family tree, or those who simply share our ethnic or national identity, whom we can genuinely honor.

4) Don’t assume that guilt and shame have no positive role to play. This has been a dysfunctional assumption on the left, though it is often a reaction to dysfunctional practices. White guilt and shame can turn the focus onto white people’s feelings rather than toward racial justice. Yet these emotions a) are inevitable, b) are indicative of a functioning moral conscience and c) can, at least some of the time, motivate changed behavior. Do I want my grandchildren to go through this reckoning again because I didn’t have the courage to? No. Do I feel shame if I find a relative who played a bad role? Of course. Feelings are not irrelevant to political change, but quite central. We need to stop ridiculing the “psychological anguish” white parents express, and make spaces to express and explore these feelings without quick pedantic responses.

5) Go on the offense with a substantive counter-narrative. This is the most important point. By denying that CRT is being taught, we lose the ability to offer a different spin on the lessons of our national history. The way forward is not through social engineering by upper-class white liberals, but by real grassroots participation. There is a lot to build on, in the public-school system, the union movement, traditions of religious pluralism, community organizations (particularly around schools) and small-d democratic practices. We need to connect the dots between race and class without minimizing either one, as Ian Haney-Lopez argues in his recent book, Mere Left. Neither color-blind class politics nor antiracist agendas that downplay class will shift the country’s politics. The far right is endangering the future of the country, but as the Peruvian theorist Jose Carlos Mariategui argued in the 1920s, a rising fascism is the fruit of the failures of the left.

This is an important fight. Even if the bans are defeated, teachers will second-guess their curricular choices for fear of controversy. Graduate students I have worked with are already reconsidering their pursuit of research areas that may generate death threats and cost them jobs. Some people oppose bans because they oppose outright censorship, yet still dislike the teaching of CRT, and such sentiments will no doubt continue to spread the movement against it.

We need to get this right.

Linda Martín Alcoff is a professor of philosophy at Hunter College, She is the author of The Future of Whiteness (Polity, 2015).
Hi Billy,

I remember when you used to focus your ministry more on crusading against chain stores like Starbucks that suck the life out of the communities they plant themselves in. I feel you. So imagine my surprise at the news of Starbucks stores across the country starting to unionize. Who would have imagined these centers of empty capitalist consumption would become hubs of radical activism? These mostly younger workers insist collective action is the solution to their collective problems. The kids are alright as far as I’m concerned.

ROBERT
Jackson Heights

Well, Robert, your enthusiasm is important, and yet, here: The struggle to organize the retail behemoth with their bland monoculture and mean-ass treatment of baristas goes back almost 20 years. And these aren’t just kids, Robert — there are mothers and fathers steaming the milk at Starbucks. The National Labor Relations Board must have big files on the company for firing organizers, which is illegal. The union push back then was the century-old anti-authoritarian International Workers of the World (the IWW, or, affectionately, the Wobblies). Among the baristas harassed at work with changing hours and lurking yuppie goons were Daniel Gross, Suley Ayala (an Ecuadorian mother of four) and Sarah Bender — there were scores of sheroes and heroes from here to New Zealand facing down the proto-Bezos billionaire Howard Schultz.

This gentrification mogul — you have to admire in-broad-daylight theft — ripped off the history-making excitement of coffee culture. So many uprisings, including the founding of our “USA,” the cultural revolution of Cabaret Voltaire and the surrealists in Zurich and Paris, and so many anti-colonial uprisings — in Algeria against the French, in Egypt against the United Kingdom and in Greece against the Ottomans — created a prestigious revolutionary flavor. Now, and this is not ironic, here comes the resurrection of that revolutionary fervor in Buffalo and many animated coffee meetings around the world — against the depoliticized virtual reality coffee house — the neoliberal empire of Starbucks. In fact, the real-estate takeover by Starbucks is right-wing politics at its purest, with neighborhood diners upended by Wall Street-financed monoculture.

The Church of Stop Shopping supported the IWW efforts in 2005 and 2006 with in-store concerts and staged theatrical pieces by actors in the choir. We’re pulling for you folks in Buffalo and everywhere! Call us if you need a good radical choir to celebrate your bold move! You can sleep on our couches!

(We are banned from Starbucks so we might have to sing from the sidewalk…)

So, Robert, these are not kids, and this didn’t just happen. Even in 2005, Daniel Gross wasn’t claiming that he was the liberator of the Starbucks baristas. As he tried to get his job back, he listened patiently to the confessions of workers then working for $8 an hour, unable to pay for the subway fare, punished with reduced hours for tending to a death in the family. I remember Daniel talking about struggles by farmers against bank foreclosures in the 30’s, the Red Scare in the 50’s, IWW co-founder Emma Goldman’s children’s march in 1903 and Paul Robeson lifting his great voice with the songs of Joe Hill … We sip our cappuccinos on the shoulders of giants!

— R

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The appearance of Jacobin magazine has been a bright light in dark times.” —Noam Chomsky

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