YOUTH UPRISING
HOW A LIVE-STREAMED GENOCIDE & TONE-DEAF LEADERS IGNITED A NATIONWIDE CAMPUS REVOLT
BY JOHN TARLETON — P10
CALENDAR

May/June

THURSDAYS • 7–9PM • FREE
YOGA EN MASSE: BROOKLYN FLOW AT PROSPECT PARK
Brooklyn’s finest yoga teachers from different studios around the park lead free, outdoor group yoga classes in a low-pressure, beautiful environment. Join hundreds of Brooklynites each week to celebrate yoga and wellness in Prospect Park. Bring your own mat or towel, a bottle of water and friends. Please RSVP and sign the waiver prior to your first class at brooklynflow.com/prospectparkyoga.
PROSPECT PARK
Long Meadow
BKLYN

WED MAY 15, 5PM & SAT MAY 18, 2PM
ALL OUT FOR GAZA NAKBA DAY PROTEST
Every year Within Our Lifetime holds a protest to commemorate the nakba, or "catastrophe" of 1947-48 when Zionists seized control of Palestine, killing 100,000 Palestinians, displacing 750,000 and depopulating over 400 villages in an act of ethnic cleansing that made Israel’s founding possible. This year’s nakba demonstration promises to be larger than ever. Follow Within Our Lifetime on Twitter and Telegram for specifics about the day of action.
WED @ 56 Ry Ridge Ave. & 5th Ave.
SAT @ Steinway St. & Aston’s Blvd.
BKLYN

WED MAY 15 • 6–8PM • FREE
READINGS: NAKBA/THANDA AND NOW: REFUGE SILENCE
Join The Polis Project at The People’s Forum for a night of readings to commemorate 76 years of the Nakba and to stand in solidarity with Palestine. The growing list of participants includes Libi Sam, Aziz, Nada Said, Mona Eltahawy, Suha Arar, Hafsa Kanjiwala, Emma Zghal, Christina Dhanunjai, Mukama na Nguyi, Anthony Alessandroni, Anna Arabindan Kesson, Zohra Saed, Sidi Barrault Del, Sean Jacob, Jee Leong Koh, Christopher Stone, Suchitra Vijayan and Bhakti Shringarpure. The Peoples Forum will be raising money for organizations fighting for Palestinian liberation. The PEOPLE’S FORUM
320 West 37th St.
MNHTN

MAY 24–27 • TICKETS START AT $25
FESTIVAL: BAM DANCEAFRICA
Celebrate the dance and music of Cameroon. The program, The Origin of Communities: A Callahash of Cultures, is a collaboration between the DanceAfrica Spirit Walkers and The Billie’s Youth Arts Academy Dance Ensemble, joined by Women Of The Calabash, an ensemble known for its mesmerizing polyphonic sound. The artistic vision is brought to life with costumes, set design, and music and sounds that create an immersive experience. Go to bam.org/danceafrica24 or call BAM at (718) 636-4100 for details.
PETER JAY SHARP BUILDING & HOWARD GROUND OBERON HOUSE
35 Lafayette Ave.
BKLYN

MAY 24–30 • $16 ADULT • $11 SENIOR/CHILD
BAM PRESENTS FILMAFRICA
This cinematic companion to the annual DanceAfrica celebration showcases the new narrative, documentary, and short films from across Africa and the diaspora, with a special focus on films from and about Cameroon. Curated by the 31st African Film Festival.
PETER JAY SHARP BUILDING
35 Lafayette Ave.
BKLYN

SAT JUN 1 • 4–10PM
BRONX NIGHT MARKET
This night of food and community comes with a remarkable lineup of 50 local vendors, bringing together cuisines that reflect the community’s pride, resilience and culture of the Bronx.
3 FORDHAM PLAZA
BK

WED JUN 5 • 6–8PM • SLS
THE ANDY STATMAN TRIO AT BARBÈS
Andy Statman began his career in the 70’s as a virtuoso mandolinist and became one of the main architects of a Klezmer revival. He has since influenced folk, jazz and improvisational forms of music. Andy draws equally from Hassidic melodies to folk tunes from new and old worlds alike, to Albert Ayler-influenced free-improv. Featuring Larry Eagle on drums, Jim Whitney on bass, and Andy Statman on clarinet and mandolin. Reserve tickets early at viewey.com/the_andy_statman_trio_25
325 9th St.
BKLYN

THE JUN 13 • 8–10PM • FREE
NEW YORK CITY PHILHARMONIC CONCERTS IN CENTRAL PARK
This summer Thomas Wilkins conducts the Orchestra in a program that ranges from classics by Beethoven, Elgar and Rimsky-Korsakov to Felix Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto, with Randall Goodsoy as soloist, to new music by Carlos Simon and NY Phil Very Young Composers.
CUNNINGHAM PARK
193 St. Field
QNS

WED JUN 19 • 5PM • FREE
MUSIC IN THE MIDDLE: JUNETEENTH:
BROOKLYN AND THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT
JUNETEENTH is a commemoration of the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in the United States. Join the Urban Park Rangers on a walk discussing Brooklyn’s significant history to the abolitionist movement in the United States. Contact Number: (646) 398-1479
BROOKLYN BRIDGE PARK
Furman St. & Old Fulton St., Pier 1
BKLYN

SAT JUN 22 • 12–4PM • FREE
THE FORTUNE SOCIETY’S CREATIVE ARTS FESTIVAL
Celebrate community, liberation and healing through the arts with the Long Island City-based non-profit dedicated to building people, not prisons. Enjoy family-friendly festivities, including hands-on art making workshops, live music, spoken word performances, food for purchase and more. Bring some suntick, grab a blanket or chair and hang out with us on the waterfront! SCULPTURE PARK
52-01 Vernon Blvd.
QNS

SAT JUN 29 • 5–8PM • FREE
32ND ANNUAL DYEKE MARCH
Thousands of Dykes take the streets each year to celebrate beautiful and diverse Dyke lives and in protest of the discrimination, harassment, and violence faced in school, on the job, and in their communities. The New York City Dyke March is a protest, not a parade. Any person who identifies as a dyke is welcome to march. The march begins at Bryant Park and goes down Fifth Ave. Washington Sq. Park. More at nyckemarch.com.
BRYANT PARK
MNHTN

make a splash!
On June 29, The 32nd annual Dyke March will go down Fifth Ave from Bryant Park to Washington Square (pictured above).

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City workers speak out

They describe how public services are being degraded by Mayor’s budget cuts

By Independent Staff

Since 2022, the Adams administration has imposed multiple budget cuts on all city departments except the NYPD and the Department of Corrections. In June the Mayor and the City Council will complete negotiations on next year’s city budget.

We’ve heard from city workers who described the devastating impact of previous austerity budgets amid concerns that another round of spending cuts will further degrade essential public services. We’ve withheld their names to protect them from retaliation.

Parks

I work for the City Parks Department in urban ecology, maintaining tree canopies and other natural areas in the large parks on the edges of the five boroughs.

Our work feels like an invisibilized essential service — yet we maintain the lungs of the city. In this urban environment, trees regulate the temperature, purify the air and maintain livable space. It’s something that my coworkers and I take pride in.

During nearly five years with Parks, I have benefitted from raises, more job responsibilities and creative freedom. But I’ve also been a seasonal employee the whole time, which means my job depends on the budget and a city council vote. We experience constant job insecurity, and we find out only two or three weeks before the fiscal year ends whether or not we will be able to keep our positions.

This makes planning life difficult, whether it’s signing a new lease, wanting to start a family or wanting to engage in anything that’s costly — like taking a trip to visit family. Someone already lost their whole crew to other jobs as a result of foreseeable income loss. We had to start from scratch training and building a team. Backfilling those positions can take months, if it happens at all.

This year is particularly stressful, because back in November we were told my program might lose funding when we were told my program might lose funding when Mayor Eric Adams threatened implementing across-the-board 15% budget cuts over the fiscal year — 5% three times — the worst the city has seen since the 1970s. He hasn’t fully enacted the cuts yet, so we’ve been uneasy ever since, wondering what’s gonna happen come June when the Mayor and City Council negotiate next year’s annual city budget.

City employment is touted as a stable means of supporting a family. But there is a notable work-around — the lack of opportunities for permanent positions. The City will hire non-union contractors instead of its own employees. The Parks Department hires many people under seasonal or temp positions that can’t really be considered reliable or “good union jobs.” It takes time to earn paid holidays, healthcare and sickdays.

There are around 25 employees in my department, and about 20 of us are on the seasonal lines. Almost all of the park rangers are also seasonal lines, and many of those who do public outreach at events are as well.

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We also have the Parks Opportunity Program, which hires people to maintain the parks; they say it’s a job opportunity for low-income and previously incarcerated New Yorkers. These are some of the lowest-paid workers at Parks. Their jobs are only six-month contracts, always ending before they gain access to full benefits!

Expanding the city’s tree canopy is long-term work. To put it simply, trees don’t mature in a year; they require maintenance to get to the point where they really benefit the city.

The short-sighted funding of our job makes planning difficult because we don’t know if there will be employees to maintain current projects or to carry our future ones. Just the other day I was with a team that did a beautiful planting, but there was tangible tension in the air: We don’t know if the new plants will be able to flourish with proper care — or if they will become unattended, overgrown by vines. Think about a patch of sidewalk in the city with no trees versus another one with old sycamores and oaks lining the streets. The temperature could be 10 to 15 degrees cooler on the tree-lined block. That feeling on a hot summer day when you walk into a park under the shade of trees and immediately feel the temperature shift — that’s what we’re trying to maintain and bolster.

Even if there isn’t a patch of trees right next to your house, plant growth affects the air and temperature of the city overall, the amount of water that gets absorbed when it rains, the wildlife and pollinators — the ecosystem as a whole — which, as urban as we are here in New York City, we are definitely a part of.

Our parks are a health service; they have economic value, raising the price of nearby real estate. They also absorb water: Areas that lack parks and trees are more likely to see infrastructure damage and basement flooding when there is a storm.

Imagine if we actually funded these programs more and developed more urban canopy in the city. Imagine if we had several crews in every borough that educated the public about the trees in the area and the ecology around them that serves us. Imagine if we had the manpower to ensure the longevity of the trees here and create a better canopy; we would be a more climate-resilient city.

Imagine if we included the economic benefits of our forests and natural areas when considering the budget.

Health + Hospitals

As a medical trainee, I find myself confronted with the stark reality of our understaffed healthcare system in New York City. “Why is SUNY Downstate Hospital shutting down?” I do not know where to take my kids. I’ve been going there for years,” one of my patients said as I was documenting their distress over the shutdown of Downstate, a facility they’ve relied on for years, echoes the sentiments of many in our community. The root of this issue lies in budget cuts and misaligned priorities. While essential healthcare services suffer, we see ample resources going toward policing pro-Palestine protests against genocide.

Day-to-day I witness the strain on our healthcare system firsthand. Understaffed facilities, overworked technicians and residents, long emergency room waiting time, and limited access to vital resources like imaging machines, among other challenges, demonstrate the dire consequences of these budget constraints. Outdated electronic medical records further compound our challenges. We see the brunt of the indypendent

PUBLIC SECTOR

S

The indypendent
of these deficiencies falling disproportionately on the most vulnerable members of our society: low-income individuals, immigrants, the elderly and children.

As a healthcare professional, I refuse to turn a blind eye to these systemic failures! It’s imperative that we advocate for proper funding and resource allocation to ensure equitable access to quality healthcare for all members of our community.

**HOUSING**

I am a city worker at the Department of Housing Preservation and Development. I help tenants learn about their rights, deal with abusive landlords and fight displacement. Our agency is launching the citywide Partners in Preservation program, which partners with tenant-organizing groups to assist people forming tenant associations. We provide funding, data and strategic support to organizers while also connecting them with code enforcement and legal services.

All tenants have rights, including the right to a safe home, to heat and hot water — and the right to organize —as well as protections against discrimination and landlord harassment.

However, many New Yorkers deal with poor living conditions and unresponsive landlords. Most affected are working-class tenants in communities of color, who are often the target of predatory investors, harassment and displacement as part of lucrative gentrification processes.

The creation of Partners in Preservation is a testament to the growing recognition in government that organizing is essential for helping tenants to uphold their rights.

**MAYOR’S OFFICE**

I work in the mayor’s Public Engagement Unit, a relatively new division in the Human Resources Administration (HRA). PEU is an outreach unit for the City’s public services and programs designed to lessen the bureaucracy in accessing these services. We’re expected to prioritize City Hall assignments on a rolling basis and to have near-constant flexibility when it comes to pivoting projects, clients, hours and often workdays.

Internally, budget cuts over time have created an accumulation of small slowdowns, such as outdated devices like Galaxy S10s for work phones and a notoriously slow intranet so unreliable it helped solidify a policy that forced employees to work from home. Larger impacts include the citywide hiring freeze that’s been indefinite for years, our agency switching pension plans to cut costs, and budgets going unapproved for some PEU teams.

At PEU we’ve been assigned work directly engaging migrant families in the city in various stages of the asylum process as they become new New Yorkers. Doing this work I notice the glaring contradiction when an entity, the City in this case, is openly hostile to much of the community it serves. While budget squeezes on vital services — libraries, schools, mental-health and social services — have been a reality for decades, this year’s heightened cuts have been framed as a result of the “migrant crisis.”

On top of the uncontrollable hours and unpredictability of work, being fed anti-immigrant propaganda has been frustrating and insulting and is inextricably tied to why so many city workers have begun to unite under this cause. Workers like me are increasingly connecting the dots between their workplace struggles, the clients they serve and the colonized lands our clients come from — which echo many of our own histories.

The struggle for a free Palestine is the first time I’ve seen employees and union members across so many sectors rapidly unite under one cause. We’re becoming aware that continuing to fund the militarization of the NYPD instead of providing critical resources that would see our communities thrive is the priority of the city elite, but not of its workers. Our voice is in the streets!
Nowhere to go
Migrants in flux after right to shelter repeal

By Ariana Orozco & Manuel Lopez

A new and unexpected wave of migrants is visiting New York City, as the number of arrivals from all over the world has increased significantly. The city is currently facing an influx of migrants from various countries, including those from Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. The sudden swell of migrants has put a strain on the city's homeless shelters, leading to the decision to restrict the right to shelter for single adult migrants.

The mayor of New York City, Eric Adams, announced a new policy that restricted the right to shelter for single adult migrants, stating that the city cannot accommodate the influx of migrants. The decision was made to protect public safety and ensure that resources are available for those in genuine need. The policy is expected to take effect on March 15.

The decision has sparked controversy, with some arguing that it will lead to an increase in homelessness and exacerbate the already dire situation in New York City. Others believe that the policy is necessary to protect public safety and ensure that resources are used effectively.

The change in policy comes as a response to the influx of migrants, which has put a strain on the city's resources. Over the past two years, New York City has been a destination for an influx of migrants from all around the world, especially from Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Many of these migrants are fleeing from a bad situation in their home country, and they are seeking safety and a better life in the United States.

The decision to restrict the right to shelter for single adult migrants is not without precedent. In 1981, the Callahan Decree established that the city was obligated to meet the “food and shelter needs” for needy individuals out of public concern. Under Adams’ new policy, single migrants will have a limited 30 days to secure long-term housing and will not be allowed to apply for a shelter extension except under extreme circumstances. Families are still guaranteed unlimited shelter. The decision comes following a lengthy 10-month negotiation between city officials and the Legal Aid Society.

Some say our budget shouldn’t go toward the migrants, but it will do little good to our city to shove thousands of asylum seekers out of public concern. Under Adams’ new policy, single migrants will have a limited 30 days to secure long-term housing and will not be allowed to apply for a shelter extension except under extreme circumstances. Families are still guaranteed unlimited shelter.

The decision comes following a lengthy 10-month negotiation between city officials and the Legal Aid Society. The decision comes following a lengthy 10-month negotiation between city officials and the Legal Aid Society.

The City has not created additional resources for migrants on weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., the new policy is preoccupying everyone. Many men declined to speak about it, saying their situations were too nerve-wracking to discuss. One spoke bluntly: “I have nowhere to go.” He was considering moving to Ohio, but with no English, no family here and no U.S. education, he is unsure of what new problems he might face if he leaves New York City.

Thirty days are not enough, especially for someone who is fleeing from a situation in their home country,” the Guinean student said about having such a limited buffer to acclimate to the United States. 

The City has created additional resources for migrants on this new expedited timeline. Further, while New York City has sued the bus companies responsible for taking the migrants up North, it is yet to be seen if Gov. Abbott will halt the exportations. If the buses keep coming, there will be even less resources to meet them.

Shelter conditions have also deteriorated. The City of New York City has led the nation in responding to a national humanitarian crisis, providing shelter and care to approximately 183,000 new arrivals since the spring of 2022,” Adams said in a statement following his announcement. “But we have been clear, from day one, that the ‘Right to Shelter’ was never intended to apply to a population larger than most U.S. cities descending on the five boroughs in less than two years,” said the mayor.

Shelter conditions have also been a major concern, even before the current migrant crisis. In 2021, The City found that 73% of 200 surveyed homeless individuals had been on the streets for at least a year; 38% of them decided to leave the shelters over safety concerns. Another migrant from Guinea escaping interpersonal violence attested to that trend, telling The Indypendent, “My living conditions have not been easy since arriving.” This 30-day limit puts added stress on people already living in precarious situations. At the Earth Church, where many African migrants gather on weekdays from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., the new policy is preoccupying everyone. Many men declined to speak about it, saying their situations were too nerve-wracking to discuss. One spoke bluntly: “I have nowhere to go.” He was considering moving to Ohio, but with no English, no family here and no U.S. education, he is unsure of what new problems he might face if he leaves New York City.

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Some say our budget shouldn’t go toward the migrants, but it will do little good to our city to shove thousands of asylum seekers who are still waiting for working permits onto the streets.

“I decided to seek asylum in the U.S. because I believe the U.S. respects the rule of law and the rights of man,” said a man at Earth Church surrounded by dozens of others, all waiting to learn where their next destination might be.
A life on ICE
Small business owner and father of three on verge of deportation three years after leading epic hunger strike against immigrant detention

By Amba Guerguerian

Before July 2018, I was basically free.” Marcial Morales explains that before his first encounter with the law nearly six years ago, he didn’t grasp how “illegal” his existence in the United States really was as an undocumented migrant.

“To be honest, I didn’t even know that was something you could go to jail for,” he tells me. “I was free! I could buy a car; I could decide in a moment, ‘Hey, I’m gonna go drive to a different state to visit someone in my family.’”

“I was just a regular guy,” says Morales. “You know, I liked cars; I liked to hang out with my family; I didn’t know really anything about the law.”

Much has changed. Morales, like so many of the migrants facing deportation I have met over the years, knows the details of the immigration system. They learn it, usually, through a combination of inadequate private attorneys and having to navigate things pro se, for they don’t have the right to representation in immigration court.

Morales takes time to walk me step-by-step through updates on the legal web he’s been navigating for years. He understands the system better, in a much more personal way, than I do as an immigration reporter.

We first met in the fall of 2020 when he led dozens of other detained migrants in solitary confinement on hunger strike. He eventually won humanitarian parole after a nine-day hunger strike brought him to the brink of death.

Morales and I catch up at Annabella Italian Restaurant, the pizzeria he co-owns with his brother near Hackettstown in North Jersey. He had murals of pastoral Tuscany, a place he can only dream of visiting, painted on the walls. The restaurant gets a call for an order of 300 slices. I scold Morales for offering the client to pay when they pick up. “Hey, this is a family restaurant; we all believe in God,” he laughs.

As we talk I notice a set of fine lines on his arm. They look out of place on a middle-aged man like Morales.

“Did you cut yourself?” I ask him.

“Yes, once when I was on the hunger strike in lock-up,” he says, referring to solitary confinement. “I just needed to know if things were real.”

Detention scarred Morales in other ways too. He can hardly sleep, still too panicked. His house is just a place where he stores things. “I probably only spent like three nights at my house last month,” he tells me, pointing to a booth across the restaurant and saying, “I have back pain because I slept over there.” Between Annabella’s and crashing with various friends and family members, he’s able to avoid the house that haunts him. That’s where he’s mentally at his worst. “At night, I see shadows and I’ll think it’s a guard passing by.” It also doesn’t help that it’s at that house where his

Continued on page 15
Shady Scarcella prosecutors untainted by false convictions

By Theodore Hamm

One became the district attorney of one of New York’s largest counties. Four became judges. Five assumed high-ranking positions in local DA offices. Several others moved on to successful careers in private practice.

One of above events spent four terms in the House of Representatives.

Meanwhile, a grand total of zero assistant district attorneys (ADAs) experienced any public repercussions for overseeing a flawed murder conviction that involved notorious Brooklyn detective Louis Scarcella.

As of mid-April 2024, 21 cases involving Scarcella have resulted in reversal of the original trial verdicts — and two more saw juries acquit defendants after judges raised red flags about the prosecution’s case.

The Independent’s preliminary review of the Scarcella prosecutors’ track records also reveals that at least six won convictions not involving the flashy detective that also resulted in overturned verdicts. Eric Bjorneby, currently a Nassau County judge, handled two dual-defendant cases that were reversed at the behest of the Brooklyn DA’s Conviction Review Unit (CRU), producing four exonerations.

Soon after Scarcella’s tactics were called into question by The New York Times in 2013, then-Brooklyn DA Joe Hynes announced the office would conduct an extensive review of murder cases in which Scarcella played an essential role. The DA’s office says that the inquiry — which continued under Hynes’ successors Ken Thompson and Eric Gonzalez, and included 77 cases that went to trial — is now mostly complete.

“You would think that at some point, somebody in the office might have said, ‘Maybe we ought to look at other convictions by the ADAs who handled Scarcella’s cases,’” says veteran New York City journalist Steve Fishman, co-host of The Barden, a podcast that includes extensive interviews with the notoriously theatrical detective and several exonerees.

But people familiar with the inner workings of the Brooklyn DA’s office tell The Indy that no ADA’s caseload was placed under the microscope. “We never found a pattern that merited an investigation of any individual prosecutors,” recalls Jessica Wilson, a former ADA who worked in the CRU from 2014-17. Wilson investigated cases including Darryl Austin and Alvena Jennette, two of the first three Scarcella exonerations by the Conviction Review Unit in 2014. Bjorneby won both convictions.

An inquiry into the Scarcella prosecutors’ track records likely would reveal patterns of police misconduct habitually condoned by the DA’s office. It would almost certainly show that Scarcella was not the only NYPD detective that used dubious tactics resulting in faulty convictions during the 1980s-90s. Regardless of how many reversals it produces, an inquiry would yield at least some measure of accountability for the Brooklyn DA’s office’s own misdeeds.

Persuaded by defendants, their lawyers and CRU investigators, the DA’s office has thus far exonerated 13 men and one woman convicted of murder in a case that involved Scarcella. After challenges by their legal teams in court proceedings, seven other defendants ensnared by the detective saw their convictions overturned by state judges.

Except for David Ranta, all of the Scarcella reversals have involved people of color, nearly all Black men. The CRU, meanwhile, has exonerated nearly two dozen more men with wrongful murder convictions in non-Scarcella cases (all people of color). Yet in most instances, the office has not identified the trial prosecutors.

In July 2022, Brooklyn DA Eric Gonzalez’s office announced it would exonerate three defendants in the notorious late 1995 murder of MTA worker Harry Kaufman, who was killed by a fire ignited in his token booth at the Kingston Avenue stop in Bed Stuy. Echoing NYPD Commissioner Bill Bratton, Republican presidential frontrunner Bob Dole linked the incident to The Money Train, a schlocky Hollywood flick that opened just before the murder. The case made Scarcella a tabloid celebrity.

As the CRU’s exonerated reports document, there were multiple problems with Scarcella’s actions. For starters, none of the three men that he and his longtime sidekick Detective Stephen Chmil reeled in — James Irons, Thomas Malik and Vincent Ellerbe — matched the descriptions of the assailants provided by Kaufman, who spent two weeks in the hospital before dying. The victim further said there were two culprits, not three.

Defendant James Irons had even called 911 to report the token-booth blaze, a rather unusual action by an alleged arsonist. Scarcella and Chmil eventually extracted a “confession” from Irons, who was 18 years old and not literate. That statement implicated Malik (18) and Ellerbe (17), both of whom gave similarly dubious confessions, with Scarcella and Chmil handling Malik’s interrogation. At a lineup, Malik was the only one wearing a red shirt.

After a lengthy investigation, the CRU concluded that the three confessions were faulty and that in the dual trials of Malik and Ellerbe, Scarcella “likely misled the key witness” named Jacqueline Robinson. According to defense lawyer Ron Kuby, who represented Malik at trial and handled the case while it was in the CRU, the Brooklyn ADA who recorded Robinson’s statement was none other than Mark Hale. From 2014 through 2021, Hale helmed the CRU.

In its three reports on the exonerations, the
Shady Scarcella prosecutors
Justice for none

Convicted in retrial in August 2022

Thomas Malik &
James Irons
Gerard Domond
John Bunn &
Shababa Shakur
Robert Hill
Darryl Austin &
David Ranta
Antowine Butts

CRU concluded by blaming Scarcella and
Chml, not the prosecutors, for Ellerbe’s wrongful conviction.

In a current federal lawsuit on be-
half of Thomas Malik, attorneys Ron
Koby and Rhya Trivedi highlight the ac-
tions of ADA Lori Grifa. After the over-
night grilling by Scarcella and Chml re-
sulted in Irons’ dubious confession, Grifa
showed up at the precinct around 6 a.m.
to videotape Irons’ statement.

“Rather than have Irons describe the
alleged events in his own words,” state
Kuby and Trivedi, “ADA Grifa primarily
asked yes/no questions and provided the
account herself.” Despite her “coaxing”
and “prompting,” Irons gave answers that
diverged from the version found in the
detectives’ report. Even though Ma-
lík’s name appeared frequently in the
CRU’s record, the CRU did not men-
Continued on page 19

23 FALSE CONVICTIONS

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TOTAL YEARS INCARCERATED

425+
the indypendent

The perfect storm

How a live-streamed genocide, clueless college administrators and heavy-handed policing ignited America’s college campuses

By Jesse tantalov

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As The Indypendent goes to press, Joe Biden has just announced as a television interviewer that he will withdraw the bombs and artillery shells that Israel could use in a full-scale invasion of Rafah, the southernmost city in the Gaza Strip where more than 1.2 million Palestinian refugees are sheltering in tents with little to no food or water and nowhere to go. “If they go into Rafah, they are committing a genocide. And still they have persisted. The protesters have faced violent police repression and attacks; they are held, in most cases, on a patch of grass or in a single place or building in the middle of the college campus. The violence begins when the police — the real outside agitators — attack the camp and, in some cases, when pro-Palestine trolls try to provoke confrontations.

I was in college in the 1980s when activate embers “shamestorms” on their campuses to pressure universities to divest from companies that did business with apartheid South Africa. College administrators weren’t happy about the shamestorms. But the violent repression nerve’s use was even more unacceptable then. In time, many universities ended up according to demands to divest their financial holdings from compa- nies that did business with South Africa, a Cold War ally that had outlawed its apartheid regime.

For protest-averse campus administrators who are always to be showered with gratitude for “ensuring” safety, Israel is an apartheid state built on the belief that the seven million Jews who live between “the river and the sea” have the right to subjugate the seven million people under Palestinian control,剥夺ing the land and resources and obliterating those who live there and rendering the city of a hundred thousand and sixty-six to the global movement to end apartheid.

In the United States, state troops on horseback channeled from extradition points in far-off Israel have been spending its money on while funding is cut to other campuses that enrich our lives. The massive George Floyd protests in the summer of 2020 were supposed to be a moment of reckoning with the post-9/11 security state has never stopped growing like a malignant tumor on the body politic.

Ten years of the brutality the Palestinians have endured for decades. The movement’s first escalation at Columbia University occupied our lawn in the campus quadrangle. The organizers were quite intent on maintaining a well-organized, peaceful vibe. It was easy enough for any student to walk by, and ignore the encampment on the way to class, or if the political drama was too annoying, put an earplug in. The hundreds of other campus encampments that have been launched in Columbia’s walls have been similarly peaceful venues where ideas are discussed, food is shared, art is made, and protest is held. There are bands, in most cases, on a patch of grass or in a single place or building in the middle of the college campus. The violence begins when the police — the real outside agitators — attack the camp and, in some cases, when pro-Palestine trolls try to provoke confrontations.

Meanwhile, politicians and the media have reluc- tantly conditioned the public to embrace “security” — as if it’s the ultimate problem to be addressed in order to create a “normal.” The men and women in uniforms who provide it are always to be showered with gratitude for our “freedom.”

One should applaud the usuality of this trend. The answer has emerged most dramatically in the days since the encampment got underway; I fell into a late-night maze of scrolling social media feeds to see where new Gestapo-style encampments had taken root — their dorm rooms sprouting like mushrooms following a spring rain shower — and where they were being ripped up and cast aside by author- itarian figures who refused to hear young people call for moral clarity in the face of a U.S.-backed genocide.

The scenes of brutality unfolded in a blur — pha- phents that did business with South Africa, giving a boost to the global movement to end apartheid.

One absurd example of this unfolded a few months ago when New York Gov. Kathy Hochul ordered 3,000 state police and officers from other states to show up to help with the protest on the University of Michigan campus. The massive George Floyd protests in the summer of 2020 were supposed to be a moment of reckoning with the post-9/11 security state has never stopped growing like a malignant tumor on the body politic.

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Youth movements, then & now

Today’s protests are bringing tears to aging radicals such as myself

By Linda Martín Alcoff

I was 22 years old before I experienced police violence up-close and personal. I was not naive or uniformed. I was a Marxist, working with veterans of the civil-rights and anti-war movements, and had been in numerous demos with armed troops pointing their guns toward us from roof tops. But until that day, I had never experienced a police charge on protesters.

Those prior demos were majority-white, while the one I was currently in was not, and the significance of this was not lost on me. Previously, we were threatened, photographed, yelled at. Not charged with clubs.

I confess that, when it started, I was shocked. These were Vietnam vets they were beating; some were disabled. They didn’t come after any of the women.

That is, until, to my own surprise, I decided to try to get the billy club out of a cop’s hands who was brutalizing a friend right next to me. I was six months pregnant.

Most importantly, there is no question that the first-hand experience of unprovoked police violence taught me something that day that could not be learned from books.

Today’s movements are bringing tears to aging radicals, such as myself, who remember our ‘glory days’ with fondness and nostalgia but also, sometimes, bitter disappointment.

The mass mobilizations and sacrifices made by young people in the ’60s and ’70s went a long way toward ending (overt) Jim Crow segregation and the Vietnam War. It shocked their parents, university administrations and the power brokers in every sector of society. But the movements folded too quickly — just as we were gaining steam. Reagan was elected with a landslide.

There is a tale that supports fatalism. The status quo seems even more empowered today by packed courts and the corporate media. Yet, today’s headlines — with more than 2,000 arrests in late April and early May from pro-Palestine encampments and marches rolling the country — are puncturing this attitude of resignation.

Is it a false hope?

My students at CUNY are certainly getting their own dose of first-person experience: unprovoked police violence. I had never experienced a police charge on protesters.

I see three reasons for hope in the current upsurge, reasons that go beyond ending the current war, that build a sentiment against the current form of capitalism we are suffering from.

First, the students and youth involved in the protests are learning a lot about strategy and tactics. Encampments have heightened the contradictions, provided a way to make commitment visible, and created a space where conversations can happen within groups as well as with others. Calls for divestment inspire an analysis of the political economy of higher education, revealing where students throughout their lives, giving an actual real-world glimpse of another way to make society work.

Second, student debts, even above $100,000 of some of these schools, has not proved to be a deterrent to action in the face of genocide. Political leaders in the United States saw the upsurges of the ’60s and ’70s as excessive democracy, and conservative think tanks plotted demobilization through tightening the options for career advancement. The exorbitant costs of law school and medical school (so different than in other countries) affects what kind of law and medicine students can choose; the costs of just a four-year degree keep kids working through school and willing to accept morally noxious work after college. Loan debt affects democratic participation, increasing the price of a middle-class life in moral terms.

Yet students have come out anyway, risking expulsion, arrest records, loss of family support. Ballooning tuition costs has not kept our students in line.

And third, and most importantly perhaps, in this upsurge personal stakes have not been necessary as a motive to mobilize. The encampments range beyond Palestinians and Jews to capture a generation that wants to be able to live a moral life, free of guilt.

The youth activism of the ’60s and ’70s was not admired by all leftists at the time. The Communist Party was critical of the focus on “bourgeois democracy,” and numerous academic leftists such as Theodor Adorno saw the movements as undisciplined, untheoretical, libidinous.

Adorno’s compatriot, Herbert Marcuse, analyzed the new movements with a more generous assessment, yet also astute. The surprise in the ’60s, he wrote, was that these movements involved middle-class students, young people with a future, at a time when economies were booming across the dominant nations of the Global North. These were not demonstrators driven by desperation as in the 1930s, but youth with a larger vision of the good life than fat salaries and homes in the suburbs.

In An Essay on Liberation that they were demanding no less than “new ways and forms of life.” He said “they have learned not to identify themselves with the false fathers who have built and tolerated and forgotten the Auschwitz’s and Vietnams of history.” They have learned that remembering these lessons is the way toward a moral life free of guilt.

The youth movement was not merely motivated by self-realization or individual freedom, Marcuse wrote, but by a commitment to “goals which enhance, protect, and unite life on earth.”

Those battles unite with today’s.

Linda Martín Alcoff is a professor of philosophy at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center. She is the author of five books including The Future of Whiteness and Race & Racism: A Decolonial Approach.

CUNY FOR PALESTINE: The Gaza solidarity encampment at the City College of New York in Harlem.

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We need an exodus from Zionism

Let’s claim our freedom from a project that commits genocide in our name

BY NAOMI KLEIN

I’ve been thinking about Moses and his rage when he came down from the mount to find the Israelites worshipping a golden calf. The ecologist in me was always uneasy about this story: What kind of God is jealous of animals? What kind of God wants to hoard all the sacredness of the Earth for himself?

But there is a less literal way of understanding this story. It is about false idols. About the human tendency to worship the profane and shiny, to look to the small and material rather than the large and transcendent.

What I want to say to you tonight at this revolutionary and historic Seder in the Streets is that too many of our people are worshipping a false idol once again. They are enwrapped by it. Drunk on it. Profaned by it.

That false idol is called Zionism.

It is a false idol that takes our most profound biblical stories of justice and emancipation from slavery — the story of Passover itself — and turns them into brutalist weapons of colonial land theft, road maps for ethnic cleansing and genocide.

It is a false idol that has taken the transcendent idea of the promised land — a metaphor for human liberation that has traveled across multiple faiths to every corner of this globe — and dared to turn it into a deed of sale for a militaristic ethnostate.

Political Zionism’s version of liberation is itself profane. From the start it required the mass expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and ancestral lands in the Nakba.

From the start it has been at war with dreams of liberation. At a Seder it is worth remembering that this includes our Judaism.

That false idol is called Zionism.

From the start it has produced an ugly kind of freedom that saw Palestinian children not as human beings but as demographic threats — much as the pharaoh in the Book of Exodus feared the growing population of Israelites and thus ordered the death of their sons.

Zionism has brought us to our present moment of cataclysm, and it is time that we said clearly: It has always been leading us here.

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Zionism has brought us to our present moment of cataclysm, and it is time that we said clearly: It has always been leading us here.

It is a false idol that has led far too many of our own people down a deeply immoral path that now has them justifying the shredding of core commandments: Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not covet.

It is a false idol that equates Jewish freedom with cluster bombs that kill and maim Palestinian children.

Zionism is a false idol that has betrayed every Jewish value, including the value we place on questioning — a practice embedded in the Seder with its four questions asked by the youngest child.

Including the love we have as a people for text and for education.

Today, this false idol justifies the bombing of every university in Gaza; the destruction of countless schools, of archives, of printing presses; the killing of hundreds of academics, of journalists, of poets — this is what Palestinians call scholasticide, the killing of the means of education.

Meanwhile, in this city, the universities call in the NYPD and barricade themselves against the grave threat posed by their own students daring to ask them basic questions such as, “How can you claim to believe in anything at all, least of all us, while you enable, invest in and collaborate with this genocide?”

The false idol of Zionism has been allowed to grow unchecked for far too long.

So tonight we say: It ends here.

Our Judaism cannot be contained by an ethnostate, for our Judaism is internationalist by nature.

Our Judaism cannot be protected by the rampaging military of that state, for all that military does is sow sorrow and reap hatred — including against us as Jews.

Our Judaism is not threatened by people raising their voices in solidarity with Palestine across lines of race, ethnicity, physical ability, gender identity and generations.

Our Judaism is one of those voices and knows that in that chorus lies both our safety and our collective liberation.

Our Judaism is the Judaism of the Passover Seder: the gathering in ceremony to share food and wine with loved ones and strangers alike, the ritual that is inherently portable, light enough to carry on our backs, in need of nothing but each other. No walls, no temple, no rabbi, a role for everyone, even — especially — the smallest child.

The Seder is a diaspora technology if ever there was one, made for collective grieving, contemplation, questioning, remembering and reviving the revolutionary spirit.

So look around. This, here, is our Judaism. As waters rise and forests burn and nothing is certain, we pray at the altar of solidarity and mutual aid no matter the cost.

We don’t need or want the false idol of Zionism. We want freedom from the project that commits genocide in our name. Freedom from an ideology that has no plan for peace other than deals with murderous theocratic petrostates next door, while selling the technologies of robo-assassinations to the world.

We seek to liberate Judaism from an ethnostate that wants Jews to be perennially afraid, that wants our children to be afraid, that wants us to believe the world is against us so that we go running to its fortress and beneath its iron dome, or at least keep the weapons and donations flowing.

That is the false idol.

And it’s not just Netanyahu, it’s the world he made and that made him — it’s Zionism.

What are we? We, in these streets for months and months, are the exodus. The exodus from Zionism.

And to the Chuck Schumers of this world, we do not say, “Let our people go.”

We say, “We have already gone. And your kids? They’re with us now.”
Fly a kite for Rafaeet Alareer

BY ABBA GUEGUERIAN

On Dec. 6, an Israeli airstrike on a family home in northern Gaza killed Rafaeet Alareer, his brother, sister and her four children.

Alareer was a beloved Palestinian writer, professor and activist. A public critic of Israel’s occupation of Palestine, he worked with young writers to foster textured and nuanced literature from Gaza.

According to Geneva-based human rights organization Euro-Med Monitor, the apartment Alareer and his family were in on Dec. 6, which belonged to his sister, “was surgically bombed out of the entire building where it’s located.”

Israel has destroyed every university in the Gaza Strip and as of Jan. 20 had killed at least 94 professors. “Many of their ideas served as cornerstones of academic research in the Gaza Strip’s universities,” writes Euro-Med Monitor.

“Nothing happens by accident,” an Israeli intelligence source told a +972 Magazine in November. “When a three-year-old girl is killed in a home in Gaza, it’s because someone in the army decided it wasn’t a big deal for her to be killed … We are not Hamas. These are not random rockets. Everything is intentional. We know exactly how much collateral damage there is in every home.”

On Feb. 26, Alareer’s daughter Shymaa, his wife and three-month-old son Abd al-Rahman were killed by Israel in Gaza City. The Electronic Intifada reported they were the only people at the international relief charity Global Communities building when it was airstrike, the other occupants having vacated a few days prior.

Shortly after the birth of her son, Shymaa posted a message addressed to her father on social media:

I have beautiful news for you, and I wish I could tell you while you were in front of me, handing you your first grandchild. Did you know that you have become a grandfather? … This is your grandson Abd al-Rahman, who I always imagined you holding. But I never imagined I would lose you so early, before you saw him.

A poem Alareer wrote for Shymaa in 2011 when she was a child has been translated into dozens of languages and seen written on subway platforms and protest signs around the world lately:

IF I MUST DIE

If I must die, you must live
To tell my story, to sell my things
To keep hope alive, to keep hope alive
To keep hope alive.

So that a child, somewhere in Gaza
While looking for you in the eye,
Making it blurt under his gaze,
Awaiting his Dad who left in a blaze—
And bid no one farewell
Not even to his flesh, not even to himself—
Sees the kite, my kite you made, flying up above
And thinks for a moment an angel is there
Bringing back love.

If I must die, let it bring hope.
Let it be a tale.

In the following excerpt from Gaza Writes Back: Short Stories from Young Writers in Gaza, Palestine, a compilation edited by Alareer in 2014, he writes that during the time of Israel’s offensive 2008–09 Operation Cast Lead, he discovered that “if Israel’s apartheid has to be fought, Israel’s narratives have to be challenged, and exposed.” Alareer continues:

*It was then that I realized much of my mother’s wisdom.
Life on ICE

Continued from page 7

wanted to do direct action in detention, and organized net-
worked of people on the outside that were willing to do the same. He helped us get hunger-strikers on the phone so we could talk to them through a megaphone when we rallied in front of detention centers demanding the migrants be re-
leased and the height of W2ID.

Morales was the first of 11 hunger strikers to be released on humanitarian parole, but “basically everyone else who got released is also in the same situation as me right now” — fighting imminent deportation. Morales is now making his final appeal to the Board of Immigration to have his case re-reviewed by an immigration judge. He is arguing he should remain in the United States because his deportation will cause irreparable harm to his children and because he is an active member of his community in Hackettstown, where he has lived for 25 years.

“I can’t make any plans right now,” Morales says, “not for the future — for the restaurant, the kids, I wanted to buy a house — I don’t know where I’ll be in a couple months.”

GUATEMALA

“Does it matter that the charges against me were dismissed? That I was a DACA recipient? That it wasn’t ever my choice to come here? No,” says Morales.

He exists in a limbo — accepted neither as American nor Guatemalan.

When Morales was 15, his father sent for him to come to New Jersey to take his place washing dishes in Italian re-

taurants. The eldest of nine children, he would now be the family breadwinner. His father returned home.

He never got a high-school degree, but made up for it by being a fast learner and dedicated worker. Over the years he had steady jobs in the restaurant business, got married and had three kids, and has helped all but one of his siblings come to the United States.

People ask us why my [one remaining] brother doesn’t come,” jokes Morales. “We’re all working like crazy up here! We send money home, and he doesn’t have to work at all! Why would he leave?” he laughs.

“We were so poor there was a point where my clothes were ragged,” Morales tells me when I ask why his dad left for the States.

It hadn’t always been that way; his father was a farm-

er; they had some land and were getting by. Then two of his brothers were seriously injured, and the medical fees wrecked the family’s finances.

Morales said, “When I first came here, I always planned on moving back,” but now he’s not so sure.

He returned to Guatemala for the first time not long before his 2018 arrest. Initially planning to stay for a month, but he left sooner, feeling disconnected from his childhood home.

The way I spoke Spanish was different; my haircut was different. I was from the village, but everyone saw me as a foreigner,” explained Morales.

Still, he remains proud of his native land. “My kids say they’re Guatemalan, you know, that makes me feel good.”

OUT OF JAIL, NOT FREE

For now, home for Morales is Annabell’s in Parsippany, NJ. It’s the only place where he feels he has agency. Being under ICE’s Intensive Supervision Appearance Program (ISAP) is taking its toll. He’s under constant surveillance by a soft-

tware called BI SmartLINK. ICE has the right to track him and listen in on him whenever they want. He’s not allowed to travel outside a 200-mile radius without putting in a request two weeks ahead of time. And even though ICE can access his location anytime they want, he still has to do regular check-ins. Sometimes he has to go to the local ICE office, sometimes an ICE agent comes to him, but often he has to do an at-home check-in. This entails taking the day off work and staying home for an eight-hour period during which an ICE agent will videochat him at any point just to show he’s in his apartment.

“Taking multiple days off a month is hard,” Morales ex-

plains, “because I just make enough money each month to pay for rent and the $20,000 in legal fees I have to pay off.”

The combination of his uncertain future and the trauma he experienced behind bars has caused Morales to struggle with his mental health for the first time.

“I used to be able to work around any problem that did come up,” he says. “Now, the smallest things can throw me off.” For anyone experiencing anxiety, it’s a familiar story.

When Morales and I first met, he still couldn’t eat regular meals because his body was readjusting from hunger strike. He almost never slept. But shortly thereafter, he had a little more pep in his step. He and his brother bought Annabell’s from their old boss; he was coordinating a network of peo-
ple that had committed themselves to ending ICE detention in North Jersey. In ways he felt more liberated. He had just — after being told by countless jail and ICE staff he would fail — freed himself from behind bars through direct action. Now, after two years fighting deportation from the out-
side, you can see in Morales’ hardened expressions the hells-
cape he’s been navigating. But he’s still fighting.

“I am free — I mean, I’m walking here, but I basically — I still have a jail cell. I have fencing around me, so I still am not completely free. I cannot say. ‘Alright, today is Wednes-

day, I want to spend the weekend in Ohio.’ They’re tracking me. So I don’t have my freedom back yet.”

Campus protests

Continued from page 11

complex known as Cop City to train police in more urban battlefield techniques so that fu-
ture revolts can be more quickly suppressed. While the struggle in Atlanta has drawn na-
tional attention, scores of other cop cities are now being built across the country.

Continued from page 7

The National Labor Relations Board. She was

happy to hear the news, but it wasn’t going to

change how she voted in the fall. “If I vote for

him,” she lamented, “I would be supporting a
genocide.”

Biden has lost many many voters, like my
friend, who don’t want to have to walk over
the bodies of dead children to get a president
who supports unions, is willing to enforce
antritrust laws against monopolies and who
will support a woman’s right to choose in
post-Roe America. These are just a few of
the accomplishments of the most progressive
president on domestic issues since the 1960s.

With the exception of abortion rights, Biden’s
domestic record is barely noticed.

Taking an off-ramp from Gaza would allow
him to make his case to disenfranchised
supporters. He could also start mending the fractures in the broad coalition that’s needed to
defeat Trump and the openly fascist move-
ment that has coalesced around him.

In his long political career, Biden learned
that no U.S. politician has ever suffered for
having supported Israel while many have seen
their careers abruptly end when they didn’t.

The rules of that game are fast changing.
For both moral and political reasons, Biden

could no longer support Israel while many have
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UAW WINS BIG IN TENNESSEE, ALABAMA NEXT?
The United Auto Workers scored a major victory in April when more than 70% of the employees at Volkswagen’s Chattanooga, Tenn., plant voted for union representation. The vote, the first union win at a foreign-owned auto plant in the South, came after defeats in 2014 and 2019. After winning large raises last November after a strike against General Motors, Ford and Stellantis, the UAW launched a campaign in February to organize 150,000 workers at 13 nonunion manufacturers, primarily in the hostile environment of the South. “Once they won their contract, it changed a lot of people from anti-union to pro-union members,” VW worker Yolanda Peoples told Labor Notes.

STARBUCKS UNION & COMPANY BEGIN BARGAINING
More than two years after Starbucks baristas formed their first union, the company held its first bargaining session with Starbucks Workers United, which now represents workers at more than 425 of the company’s 9,000 U.S. stores. The April 24–25 session “made significant progress,” the union and Starbucks said in a joint statement. The talks began after Starbucks dropped its refusal to let any workers participate in the talks remotely, instead of in person. “The road has been a long one, but it’s finally happening!” Starbucks Workers United said April 29. The next session is scheduled for late May. Contracts will be negotiated and ratified separately at individual stores, but the union said it wants to achieve “a foundational framework” that would be the basis of each single-store contract. Meanwhile, on May 7, workers at Starbucks stores in Downtown Brooklyn and Port Jefferson on Long Island filed petitions to have their unions recognized.

LEGAL-SERVICE WORKERS’ STRIKE ENTERS 11TH WEEK
Members of the Mobilization for Justice Union called on the City Council May 7 to cut off funding to the legal-services organization until their 11-week-old strike is resolved. Mobilization for Justice, which represents low-income people on civil issues such as eviction and immigration, receives more than one-third of its $25 million annual budget from the City Human Resources Administration. The 109 union workers (members of UAW Local 2320, the Legal Services Staff Association) walked out in late February after overwhelmingly rejecting a proposed contract. Their main issues are winning pay raises that keep up with inflation instead of the 2% or 3% management has offered, management’s use of temporary workers, and reducing burnout. The strike is the longest in New York City legal-services history since a 15-week walkout in 1991.

SUPREME COURT EYES MAKING UNION-BUSTING EASIER
Starbucks is asking the Supreme Court to make it harder for the National Labor Relations Board to get federal courts to order employers to reinstate workers it has “reasonable cause to believe” were illegally fired for union activity. The company, challenging an order to reinstate seven Memphis workers it fired in 2022, argues that federal labor law which gives the NLRB that power is unconstitutional, and that the workers should have to wait until federal courts rule they were illegally terminated. The NLRB’s administrative judges have found that Starbucks illegally fired 59 union leaders and supporters, a group of current and former baristas stated in an amicus brief. In oral arguments Apr. 24, the Court’s far-right justices appeared unsympathetic.

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Bigger than ever
An exhilarating Labor Notes Conference shows the working class is standing up

By Eric Dohrach

Recently in front of a standing-room only crowd of more than 4,000 labor activists, United Auto Workers (UAW) President Shawn Fain said, “Something is happening in this country. Something we haven’t seen in a long, long time. The working class is standing up!”

That spirit was everywhere at the recent Labor Notes conference. Labor Notes is a monthly labor newsletter and organizing training project that was founded in 1979. It also hosts a conference every two years, and it’s getting bigger. This year in Chicago, over 4,700 people attended, and the energy was intense. I have been to a half dozen Labor Notes conferences, and this huge gathering of the left wing of the labor movement is always electrifying.

At over 300 packed workshops and panel discussions throughout the weekend, attendees discussed workplace organizing basics, effective collective bargaining, union democracy, and how to push on aggressively with the revival of the labor movement that feels very real. Labor Notes has made recordings of the main sessions available.

The conference is happening amidst what may be the beginning of a union upsurge in the United States. The number of union elections, workers organized through elections and union strikes have risen in the last few years. The popularity of unions is at a near-record high of 67% approval, according to Gallup’s latest annual survey.

Younger Gen Z workers in particular are interested in unions, as a response to economic uncertainty exposed so well by the recent pandemic. Union contract settlements won first year raises of 6.6% last year — the highest in decades. These trends are all encouraging, but we have yet to see them translate into an increase in the union membership rate, the percentage of all workers who are union members. Last year it continued to drop and is now about 10% of the workforce.

Decades of defensive and complacent unionism has enabled this loss of membership. The folks at Labor Notes are the union members and activists that most urgently want to reverse this decline with a bolder unionism that features democracy, and how to push on aggressively with the revival of the labor movement that feels very real. Labor Notes has made recordings of the main sessions available.

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At the conference, I facilitated a session on “Pre-Majority Organizing,” which is an organizing strategy where workers have a union and win improvements even without official employer recognition and a contract. One of our panelists, organizer Allison Becha, discussed how the United Campus Workers (UCW), affiliated with CWA, has organized for wins at many public universities in over a dozen states. They have accomplished this without a contract, as they are organizing in many states without collective bargaining rights for public employees. As part of an EWOC research project, I wrote a report with case studies on this strategy, including one of UCW.

The UAW had a heavy presence at the conference, and it’s members are on fire right now. After their “Stand Up” strike! The general strike, where many unions and potentially tens or hundreds of thousands of workers strike together, is a concept usually encountered in history books or other countries. The fact that it’s a live conversation in the United States today is amazing.

The “Organizing the South” session was in a large packed room and featured a teacher, call-center worker, nurse, retail worker, and a worker from a non-union auto plant that is organizing with the UAW. Indeed, whether the UAW and other union campaigns can revitalize large-scale union organizing in the South is a crucial question. Eleven states, mostly in the South, have union membership rates below 5%, which results in more conservative policies that have national ramifications.

At a session called “Be the Union You Want to Be,” members from a number of unions discussed their efforts to inject more militant strategies into their unions. The facilitator was Jackson Potter, Vice President of the Chicago Teachers Union. CTU inspired the whole labor movement when a reform slate took over the union and led a huge strike in 2012 to fight off education austerity in Chicago. This influenced other teachers unions, leading to the famous “Red for Ed” strike wave in 2018-2019. Former CTU member Brandon Johnson is now the mayor of Chicago, and he also spoke at the conference.

During his speech, Fain mentioned that he travels with his grandmother’s bible, but at work his other bible has been Labor Notes’ Troublemaker’s Handbook. Fain said, “This Bible taught me another kind of faith. It taught me how to push on aggressively with the revival of the labor movement that feels very real. Labor Notes has now made it available for a free download.

The next Labor Notes conference may be even larger, and I hope so. Labor Notes staff estimated that thousands were on the waiting list and that with a larger venue, they could have had 8,000-10,000 people in attendance. If you’re interested in the 2026 conference, register early!
REVEREND BILLY’S REVELATIONS

REVEREND BILLY & THE CHURCH OF STOP SHOPPING CHORUS are touring the country this spring as the warm-up act for Neil Young and Crazy Horse. We recently received this dispatch from Reverend Billy after the first week of the tour. We look forward to our wayward advice columnist returning to his familiar perch when the tour is over.

Two shows in San Diego and one in Phoenix so far — 27 shows to go. Writing from the Love Earth Tour bus in Texas, on the edge of New Mexico. Wednesday night we are back on stage in Austin, Texas, near the Austin Gaza Solidarity Encampment. As I write this, the singers and our director Savitri D have gone to the border bridge from Juarez to El Paso to sing and meditate on our neighbors’ long walks of hope.

The powerful thing about this experiment is that we are talking directly to people about the Earth’s crisis. It’s not graphics, mass mailings or social media’s pixels. In the first three shows, the choir and I played to 21,000 people. Our job is like an opening act, but we are also hosting the event of the LOVE EARTH tour. Neil and his partner Daryl Hannah are serious environmentalists, and they came to us to help them dramatize the meaning of the tour before Neil and Crazy Horse emerge with “Rockin’ in the Free World.”

Moving from our storefront Earth Church in the East Village, we gasped at the shift in scale, like a pleasurable version of getting the bends. When we wake up in the bus the morning after a show, the joy we feel is that we have blasted into the sweeping landscape of people messages like “Let’s make new kind of activism for the Earth!” …and “Can we be strange enough to change enough?” …and “Love is the Earth’s radical gift.” Earthalujah!

REVEREND BILLY TALEN IS THE PASTOR OF THE CHURCH OF STOP SHOPPING. HAVE A QUESTION FOR THE REVEREND? EMAIL REV-BILLY@REV-BILLY.COM AND UNBURDEN YOUR SOUL.
Poetry from behind the walls

No Moon
Performed by Spoon Jackson
Produced by Nicholas Snyder
FREER RECORDS, 2023

By Moira Marquis

"As artists, we have to change the narrative." Spoon Jackson's voice comes through the phone like an old record, vaguely scratchy and deep. He's calling from the California prison where he's been incarcerated for the last 47 years. The narrative he's talking about is the story the United States tells about the people we punish with this isolation — that they're irreversibly dangerous and we're safer because we throw them away. Jackson's poetry, and now music, push back against this facile understanding asking us to complicate ideas of harm and healing.

The people who've gathered at P.I.T. in South Williamsburg to listen to Jackson's newly released album, No Moon, stand rapt. FREER Records founder Fury Young holds the phone to a microphone as the album's composer and producer Nicholas Snyder asks Jackson about their collaboration. Jackson's voice replies it "came about like the wind." Snyder quips to the crowd that Jackson waxes nothing but poetics.

FREER is the only record label in the United States that publishes music by currently- and formerly-incarcerated musicians. Young met Jackson 10 years ago, and the two have collaborated on various projects, but No Moon is Jackson's first album created collaboratively with Snyder, a composer based in California who saw FREER's Instagram post seeking composers and producers willing to work with incarcerated musicians.

Snyder says after responding to the Instagram post, Young "sent me a phone recording of Spoon reciting his poem 'Sag,' which is not what I expected, but I felt its power. I built up music around it and play it to him just holding the phone up to my studio monitors." After listening to the poems, Snyder crafted sonic soundscapes around them.

These barriers to communication with the outside world, designed to silence incarcerated people, have been artistically used to create complex and rich lo-fi sound quality that is a welcome relief from the overly produced audio we hear so often today. The pops and crackles of the phone line are interspersed with "computer lady" — also the name of one of the songs — a pre-recorded voice of the telecom giant JPay, one of the two major companies that profit from and control carceral communications. This canned voice announces the limited time of the call, that it's being recorded and that your conversant is incarcerated.

At the listening party, the computer lady interrupts Jackson mid-sentence, her volume causing feedback on the mic, making attendees cringe. On the album, Snyder has levied her interruptions so they form part of the background to Jackson, but in person, you realize anew the arrogance of this audio assault. "It's designed to never let you forget you're talking to someone who's incarcerated," Snyder tells the crowd.

After Jackson's last phone call — he gets cut off every 15 minutes and has to call back, per prison rules — Young puts on the album. Images of the lyrics and Jackson are projected on the wall of the space. People stand and watch the lyrics change, following the flow of words and images Jackson and Snyder have created. People line up to purchase a tape of the album.

This would be a great album to have on tape. Sonically, it fits. The tape is a little piece of history in more ways than one.

P.I.T.'s space is welcoming, and the mood created with Jackson's words and Snyder's music leaves people lingering — not wanting to step into the Brooklyn night rumbling with trains and cars, devoid of poetry. It's a good thing. A silence has been broken; a connection made and perhaps a narrative shifted.

You can pick up a tape of the album at P.I.T. or stream it via freerrecords.com/no-moon-buyn-stream. Follow FREER Records on Instagram @freer_records to listen to some amazing music and get involved in supporting incarcerated musicians. For more events at P.I.T., check out their Instagram @the_p.i.t., or their website, propertyisbief.og.
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the film

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