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THE INDYPENDENT

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OF PEOPLE. NYC IMMIGRANT RIGHTS LEADER RAVI
RAGBIR COULD BE AMONG THE FIRST, P4
BY RENÉE FELTZ**



THE INDEPENDENT

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ENVIRONMENT

A VICTORY 50 YEARS IN THE MAKING

AFTER DECADES OF PROTEST, INDIAN POINT TO BE CLOSED

BY ALICE SLATER

A decades-long drumbeat of lawsuits, petitions, letters and public testimony has forced the closure of the Indian Point nuclear facility outside of New York City. Gov. Andrew Cuomo — together with Attorney General Eric Schneiderman and the environmental watchdog Riverkeeper — struck a deal in January with Entergy Corporation to shut down its two nuclear reactors at Indian Point. One reactor will go offline in 2020 and the other in 2021, with a possible extension to 2025.

“It’s a win for the safety of our communities, a win for the Hudson River and all the rich variety of life within it, and a win for a clean, sustainable energy future,” said Riverkeeper president Paul Gallay while local officials expressed concerns about the impact of the closing on workers and the area economy.

Licenses for the power station had, in fact, already expired in 2013 and 2015, respectively, but the reactors continued to generate electricity under a Nuclear Regulatory Commission rule that allows operators to continue running reactors while their applications are under review. Under the new deal, Entergy abandoned efforts to re-license the reactors, which would have permitted them to operate for 20 more years.

In return for the promised shutdown, New York State and Riverkeeper agreed not to object to Entergy’s application for a six-year license extension through 2025, and to drop their active lawsuits against Entergy for various safety and environmental violations. The state will maintain legal authority to bring new cases, if needed.

The increased utilization of wind, solar and hydroelectric power, together with energy efficiency measures, mean the plant closure will have little to no effect on New Yorkers’ electricity bills and would create no increase in carbon emissions.

Entergy also agreed to establish a \$15 million fund for environmental restoration. Also under the terms of the deal, Entergy will provide continued employment through the closure process and offer workers jobs at other facilities. New York State will assist workers seeking jobs at other power facilities and the state’s Energy and Research Development Authority (NYSERDA) will provide training in new skills in renewable energy technologies.

Most critically, the agreement provides for vigorous continued state inspections and a long sought directive to transfer irradiated spent fuel rods from vulnerable cooling pools to dry cask storage containers.

Spent fuel rods exit reactors with more lethal radioactivity than when first loaded to produce power. Currently the rods are packed in water-filled ponds, a structure with no more protection than a public swimming pool. The ponds must constantly

be replenished with cool water from the Hudson River to prevent a Fukushima-like meltdown — a process that winds up killing more than a billion fish and their eggs every year, as heated water is recycled back into the river.

Spent fuel remains lethally toxic for some 300,000 years and putting the rods in guarded dry cask storage is considered the safest possible option at this time by most nuclear experts.

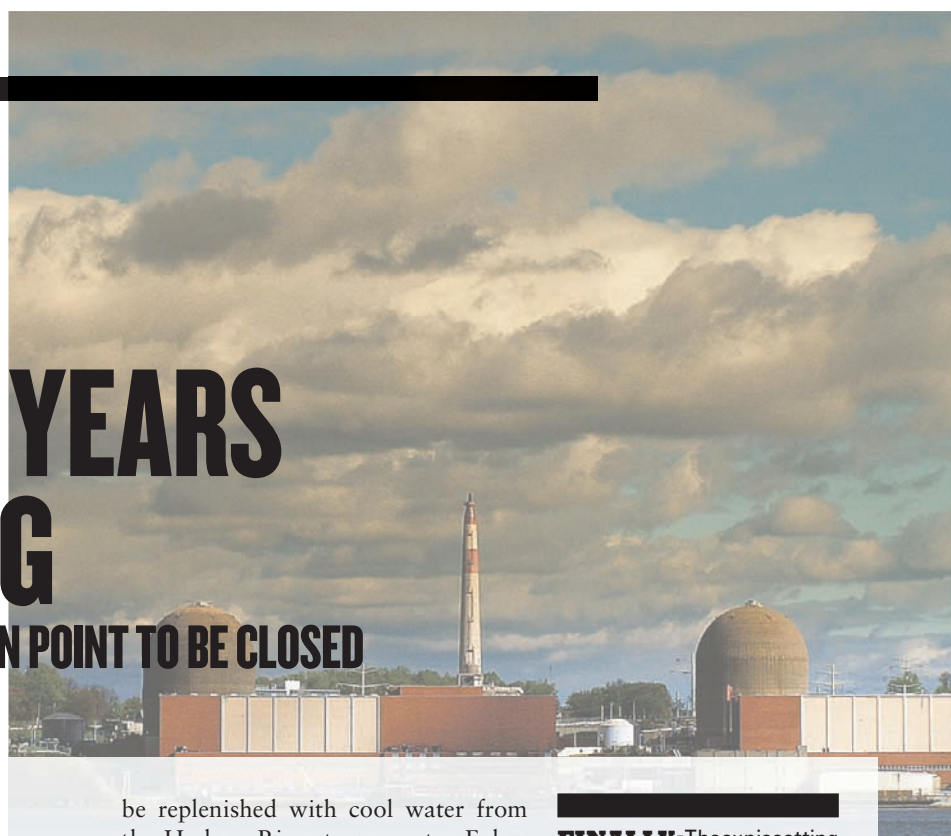
The agreement was enthusiastically welcomed by activists spanning generations. Beginning in 1962 when Indian Point first went online, tens of thousands of people marched, petitioned, sang protest songs, met with their elected officials, organized town halls and benefit concerts and testified in court and at regulatory hearings. They raised alarms over the leaks, incidents of radioactive contamination and exceptionally high rates of cancer, leukemia and birth defects that have plagued Indian Point for decades.

Now, environmental groups are calling on Gov. Cuomo to stop the Spectra gas pipeline, which will to run right past the Indian Point reactors — buried less than a mile away at some points.

And while the governor was instrumental in Indian Point’s closure he has also offered \$7.6 billion in subsidies to keep three Upstate nuclear power plants along Lake Ontario running: Exelon Corporation’s Ginna and Nine Mile Point plants and Entergy’s James A. FitzPatrick plant. Entergy and Exelon Corporation announced plans to close the facilities last year as they were no longer profitable. Cuomo’s cash infusion will keep them online.

Alice Slater serves on the Coordinating Committees of People’s Climate NYC and World Beyond War and as the U.N. NGO Representative of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation.

FINALLY: The sun is setting on the Indian Point nuclear power station north of New York City.



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WALK WITH ME

IMMIGRANT ORGANIZER RAVI RAGBIR WANTS ALLIES TO OFFER SANCTUARY NOT JUST IN CHURCHES BUT AT CHECK-INS WHERE PEOPLE LIKE HIM FACE DEPORTATION

BY RENÉE FELTZ

On March 9, Trinidadian immigrant Ravi Ragbir is scheduled to appear for his annual check-in with a deportation officer at the federal building in lower Manhattan.

"I will go in," he says. "Even though I suspect this may be the day I won't be coming out."

No matter what happens, he will not go alone.

"You can easily disappear," he notes. "So it's best to have people witness."

Ragbir knows the power of accompaniment. As executive director of the New Sanctuary Coalition of NYC, he has worked to connect members of 30 congregations, faith communities and other groups with hundreds of undocumented immigrants seeking refuge and support.

"It's not about the church, or the physical space," he explains. "We are teaching people to literally walk with those in deportation proceedings."

As an outspoken immigrant rights activist, Ragbir knows he can set an example for thousands of others facing similar check-ins.

"I don't want to be a role model, but think I am at the moment," he says, "especially for immigrants who are saying 'We're terrified. But if you look at what Ravi is doing you can understand where you are, and also fight to make change.'"

• • •

RAGBIR LEGALLY IMMIGRATED to the United States from Trinidad and Tobago more than 25 years ago, but a 2001 wire fraud conviction made his green card subject to review. Even though he is married to a U.S. citizen and has a U.S.-born daughter, the government refuses to normalize his status.

Instead, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has exercised prosecutorial discretion to grant him a stay of deportation. His current stay lasts until 2018. But his 15-year-old criminal record makes him an easy target for removal under the Trump administration.

"After Donald Trump's election I basically cried for days," recalls Ragbir's wife, Amy Gottlieb, who is an immigration advocate with the American Friends Service Committee.

"I was totally devastated both because it was going to impact our lives directly, and also because the work I've done for the past 20 years is about struggling for humane immigration policies."

Gottlieb has accompanied Ragbir to almost every one of his check-ins since 2010. This included a period during which he wore an ankle monitor and had to report in person each week -- at first -- to the Brooklyn office of ICE's Intensive Supervision Appearance Program.

It was around this time that the *The Independent* published a photo essay showing Ragbir reporting for an appointment while joined by Gottlieb and a supporter from Judson Memorial Church.

"I want people at ICE to know that he is part of a community that supports him," said Catherine Stetts, as they ate breakfast afterward.

Eventually Ragbir was released from such exhaustive surveillance. Last year, Gottlieb waited with him for hours at his now annual check-in at 26 Federal Plaza. She was relieved when an ICE agent finally confirmed that Ragbir was granted a two-year stay. But then she grew upset when the agent added that Ragbir would still have to check-in again after one year. When she asked why, she was given no clear answer.

"It was their attempt to demonstrate how much

control they have over our lives," she says. "It was really upsetting."

Now the time to check-in again is fast-approaching.

"We are doing everything we can to make sure he does not get detained that day, but this year it will be a different feeling," Gottlieb notes. "This year I am afraid of them."

• • •

ICE CHECK-INS OFFER a combination of intimidation and bureaucracy.

"It almost feels like the Department of Motor Vehicles," says Kyle Barron when asked to describe the 9th floor waiting room in Manhattan where immigrants who face deportation go to meet with the officer assigned to their case.

"You are told to sit down and wait. Many people are very fearful because they don't know what will happen when they get called. They could be told to come back, or they could be detained."

Barron spent three years working with Ragbir at the New Sanctuary Coalition, where she learned quite a bit about the immigration process as head of its Accompaniment Program.

"Many decisions come down to the discretion of individual officers handling the case and whatever the person is feeling that day," explains Barron. "It helps if you can show you have backing from the community."

She says such support is key for immigrants who lack a lawyer, and have undocumented family members or friends who cannot come with them to the ICE office.

Now a student at NYU's School of Law, Barron is also a member of Ragbir's support committee, where she draws on lessons from her grassroots activism and combines them with legal strategy.

"It's interesting to see how all the pieces fit together," she says, "when we are pushing back on the business as usual immigration policies, and trying to see the creative ways to work within and also push the boundaries of the system."

• • •

IT WAS IN PRISON that Ragbir learned how to think creatively about achieving one's freedom in the face of extreme odds.

"They control when you eat, what you eat, when you get up and sleep, when you have access to the phones and TV and law library, your letters, what you wear," Ragbir recalls. "At one time I remember they only gave us one jumper. So when you wash it, what do you wear?"

He came to the realization that, "You can determine how you respond, your thoughts. If you do that instead of becoming anxious and fearful, then you can start to ask: 'this is where I am, but where do I want to be?'"

After serving a two-and-a-half year sentence, he was transferred to immigrant detention, where he successfully fought for his release after another two years.

"You still have control over who you are," Ragbir says, "and that becomes the force that makes the change."

In the basement of Judson Memorial Church, a note posted on the wall above his cluttered desk conveys this approach. After hundreds of conversations with immigrants facing deportation because of drug-related offenses, he now advocates for policy changes like the decriminalization of marijuana even as immigration reform remains stalled in Congress.

"If marijuana is legalized and not a controlled substance, then we can stop the double jeopardy," he notes.

Another wall in his office has a blackboard with a list of names of Central American asylum seekers who had been



QUESTIONS & DEMANDS: (From left to right) Kyle Barron and Amy Gottlieb join Ravi Ragbir at a support committee meeting to prepare for his check-in with a deportation agent. "It's hard to plan because we don't know what will happen," someone observed. "My mother is coming" Gottlieb responded, "so they better be ready to answer questions."

PRESENTE: Demonstrators gathered outside of a federal immigration court in Lower Manhattan on Thursday, Feb. 16 to protest ICE detentions. The protest coincided with a national "Day Without an Immigrant" strike.



PETER RUGH

paired with coalition volunteers the week before. Many were young mothers with no lawyer.

“They come in on Tuesday nights and we pair them up with English-speaking volunteers and an interpreter,” he says. “The place is packed.”

The small groups prepare enough of the necessary evidence in each woman’s case that when she goes in the judge will likely have to set a new hearing date to allow time to review it, instead of moving immediately to deport her.

• • •

“OVER THE YEARS Ravi has steadfastly and humbly expanded the reach of our programs,” says Reverend Donna Schaper, Senior Minister of Judson Memorial Church and co-founder of the New Sanctuary Coalition.

She saw first hand the impact Ragbir had on the lives of others when she accompanied him to his ICE appointments.

“I have seen him, even during his own regular check-ins ... reach out to other immigrants scared and alone, to tell them about our programs and encourage them to have hope,” Rev. Schaper recalls.

Now, Rev. Schaper and other faith leaders may walk with Ragbir when he attends his check-in. Politicians Ragbir has worked with over the years may show up as well.

The weekend this issue went to press Ragbir was recognized with the Immigrant Excellence Award by the New York State Association of Black and Puerto Rican Legislators, given to those who show “deep commitment to the enhancement of their community.”

“City and other elected officials at all levels of government can support the residents of their city or district as they go through this process by showing up at check-ins, and reaching out to ICE,” says Ragbir’s lawyer, Alina Das, who is co-director of the Immigrant Rights Clinic at NYU School of Law and has worked on his case for the past eight years.

In the meantime, Ragbir continues to urge everyone who knows an immigrant going through this process, or who wants to support someone who is, to walk with them.

“Everyone is my family right now,” Ragbir says. “I ask them to come with me because maybe it can make a difference, and you may not see me March 10.”

RESOURCES

THE NEW SANCTUARY COALITION OF NYC

www.newsanctuarynyc.org
(646) 395-2925

The NSC aims to activate congregations and other allies in their “Accompaniment Program,” and offers a weekly legal clinic to help those facing deportation to manage their cases.

MARCH 9 — JERICHO WALK

9–11am, 26 Federal Plaza
Through the Jericho Walk, the NSC brings together faith leaders, immigration activists, and supporters to march in silence and pray in solidarity with those in the immigration system.

ACTION NYC

(800) 354-0365
Multilingual hotline for general information & referrals to free immigration legal services.

FAMILIES FOR FREEDOM

FamiliesForFreedom.org
(646) 290-8720
Deportation Hotline: (646) 290-5551
A New York-based multi-ethnic human rights organization by and for families facing and fighting deportation.

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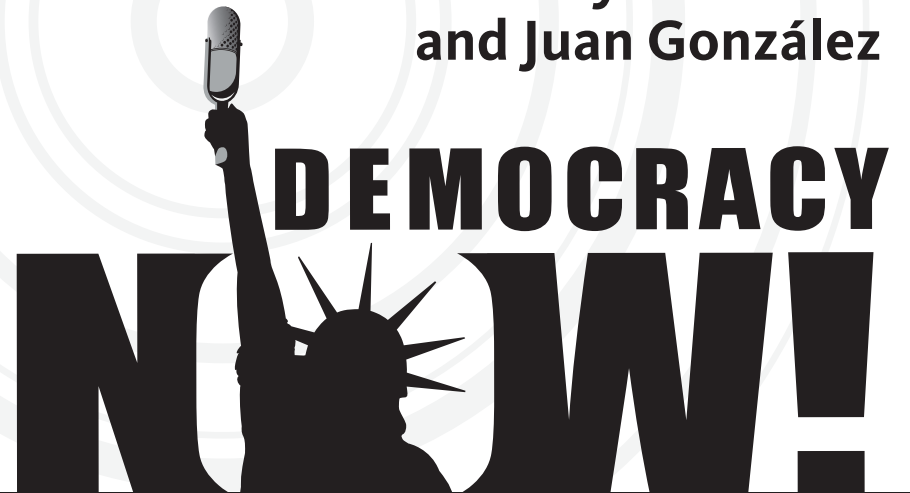
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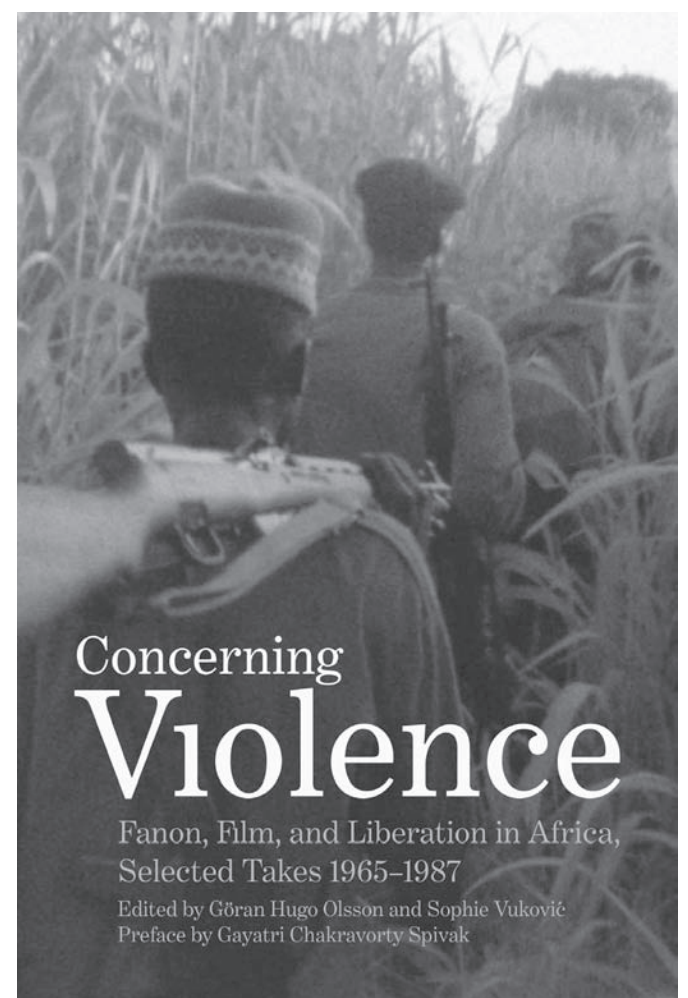
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IN BIG BROTHER'S GAZE

MUSLIM COMMUNITIES WORRY INITIATIVES BACKED BY OBAMA WILL BE INTENSIFIED BY TRUMP

BY ALEX KANE

On the campaign trail, and up until the last days before the election, Donald Trump called for increased scrutiny of Muslim-Americans. He mused about establishing a registry for Muslims, voiced support for surveillance of mosques and demanded a ban on Muslim immigration. He said the United States may have “no choice” but to shut down mosques, and told an interviewer, “I think Islam hates us.”

So far as president, Trump has ordered a ban on refugees and travelers from seven Muslim-majority nations, a move that shocked Muslim-Americans and sparked an outpouring of protest. (Federal courts have temporarily stayed enforcement of the order.) He has also brought anti-Muslim ideologues like Steven Bannon into his inner circle.

Now, as Trump moves to consolidate power and enact his agenda, Muslim-Americans are concerned that Trump will indeed intensify scrutiny of their community — which are already infiltrated by informants in mosques and encouraged to join anti-extremism programs that some worry are a cover for spying on Muslims.

“Things are already bad,” said Fahd Ahmed, executive director of Desis Rising Up and Moving, a New York-based group that organizes the South Asian community. “But we do think this administration has shown a commitment to making things worse.”

It won't be hard for Trump to carry out his campaign promises. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama left Trump with a surveillance infrastructure that could easily be expanded and turned on Muslim-Americans.

The roots of the national security state's targeting of Muslims can be traced back to the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) shifted its strategy from one of prosecution to prevention of crimes. Instead of waiting for a crime to be committed, federal agents would identify people they thought were likely to commit a terror attack and arrest them before the attack actually happened.

To carry out this shift, the FBI put its informant program on steroids. In the COINTELPRO era — when the FBI, in the 1950s and 60s, targeted socialists, communists and the black liberation movement — the agency employed 1,500 informants, people tasked with infiltrating organizations, gathering intelligence and passing that information on to higher-ups. After 9/11, the number of informants ballooned to 15,000.

In practice, FBI informants fan out to Muslim communities, and, critics say, prey on young men, some with financial troubles, others with mental illness. When informants are successful, they bait their targets into agreeing to carry out an attack they might never have contemplated without the urging of the FBI. Forty percent of

terrorism cases tried since 9/11 involved informants, according to a 2011 NYU study.

According to Corey Saylor, who heads the Council on American-Islamic Relations' project to combat Islamophobia, the FBI's informant program “impedes First Amendment-protected conversation. So people are afraid to have an innocent conversation about politics, because they might say something wrong.”

The FBI was not the only agency to infiltrate Muslim communities. The New York Police Department (NYPD), with the help of Central Intelligence Agency officers and funding from the Bush and Obama administrations, instituted its own surveillance program after 9/11. They mapped out New York's myriad ethnic group, sent their own informants into mosques and student groups around the East Coast and recorded conversations in mosques and restaurants. Under Mayor Bill de Blasio, the NYPD shuttered the Demographics Unit, which carried out the wide-reaching spy program, though the police force continues to deploy informants.

De Blasio has pledged not to share data collected through the city's IDNYC program with federal immigration authorities, but questions linger regarding information gathered by the Demographics Unit on law-abiding New Yorkers.

“What are they going to do with that information?” asked Afaf Nasher, who heads the New York chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

“We're pushing for answers with other organizations, not just Muslim organizations, but other groups of people who are concerned with data retention and how the Trump administration may use it, especially with threats of a registry, increased surveillance and whatnot.”

Allies of Trump have urged him to take the NYPD's model nationwide. In December, Representative Peter King, a Republican from Long Island, told the press he urged Trump, during a meeting, to institute “a program similar to what Commissioner [Ray] Kelly did here in New York.”

The bipartisan nature of surveillance targeting Muslims has led some people, like Zein Rimawi, a founder of the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge, to see little difference in Obama and Trump.

“They spy on us everywhere. In the street, in the mosque — everywhere,” Rimawi told *The Independent*. He would know: the NYPD's Demographics Unit placed the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge under heavy surveillance. Still, Rimawi said Trump has spooked people in Bay Ridge, a Brooklyn neighborhood that is a hub for Arab immigrants.



DAVID HOLLENBACH

“They are afraid. They are waiting for the worst,” said Rimawi.

But the Muslim community has not been paralyzed by fear. Since Trump's election, Muslim-Americans have mobilized in large numbers. They have led protests at airports against Trump's executive order barring refugees and people from seven Muslim-majority countries. They have carried out strikes, like the daylong action, on Feb. 2, that closed up the Yemeni-run bodegas that fuel New York City. And they have rejected federal grants that they see as tainted by a Trump White House.

These federal grants, which total \$10 million, were supposed to fund the Countering Violent Extremism Program, a U.S. government effort to get local communities involved in combating radicalism. Under the Obama administration's anti-extremism pilot program, which was eventually expanded nationwide, hundreds of thousands of dollars flowed to community groups working to stanch the appeal of violent ideas. But while the Obama administration insisted it wanted to focus on all types of extremism, civil liberties groups complained it largely focused on Muslims, stigmatizing a vulnerable community. There were also concerns that the information collected

“THEY SPY ON US IN THE STREET, IN THE MOSQUE — EVERYWHERE”

by nonprofit groups could be turned over to federal law enforcement, and used to go after young people thought to be influenced by radical ideas. Those fears were not unfounded; documents obtained by the Brennan Center for Justice revealed that in 2009, a law enforcement-led community-outreach program to Somali Muslims in St. Paul, Minnesota, was also meant to “identify radicalized individuals.” One community leader told *The Intercept* that local law enforcement repeatedly asked him for a list of people who participated in the outreach effort.

Under Obama, the anti-extremism program proved controversial, though some Muslim groups accepted the money anyway. But under Trump, accepting the federal grants is increasingly untenable. In February, four groups that work with Muslim and Arab youth declined to accept the federal cash, a move they made after news outlets reported that the Trump administration is considering changing the name of the program to Countering Radical Islamic Extremism. Reuters reported that the Trump administration was thinking about halting efforts

Continued on page 8

NOT YOUR GRANDPA'S PAY PHONE

CREEPY KIOSKS WORRY PRIVACY ADVOCATES

BY JESSE RUBIN

Last year, New York began rolling out LinkNYC kiosks, replacing defunct analog phone-booths with 9.5-foot-tall, digital monoliths. The goal, according to LinkNYC's website, is to make free, high-speed wi-fi available to all New Yorkers by deploying 7,500 kiosks across the city over the next eight years.

Critics, however, warn that the launch of LinkNYC does more to empower the surveillance state than the average New Yorker, who will be at risk of having their privacy violated every time they walk near one of the stations with a smartphone in hand.

"Basically, Links is corporate-owned, not community-owned," said Adsila Amani of Rethink Link NYC, a pro-privacy group which held the first public protest against the creepy kiosks in January.

LinkNYC and public wi-fi in general track the IP address and cookie IDs of every connected device. While there are legal statutes protecting this so-called anonymized data, companies, governments and hackers alike have developed and utilized various de-anonymization methods to link individuals to their personal data.

LinkNYC is a public-private partnership between the City of New York and CityBridge — a consortium of private companies that includes Sidewalk Labs, a subsidiary of Google run by Dan Doctoroff, a former deputy mayor in the Bloomberg administration. Under the 12-year franchise agreement City Bridge signed with the de Blasio administration, LinkNYC anticipates generating hundreds of millions of dollars in ad revenues that will be split equally with the city.

The agreement also stipulates that CityBridge will not share "personally identifiable information" with governmental authorities except under subpoena, in which case the company will make "reasonable attempts" to inform users when their information is accessed by the authorities.

This is not enough for privacy advocates who insist the deal sells off valuable public space — both physical and digital — to a corporate consortium whose business model is based exclusively on data collection.

Attorneys with the New York Civil Liberties Union penned an open letter

to the de Blasio administration in March. They raised concerns over CityBridge's indeterminate data collection and retention policy, government access to user information and whether users will receive timely notice if their information is shared with authorities.

"We applaud and support the city's goal of making the Internet more accessible to all New Yorkers, but this effort should not result in creating a class of residents who otherwise cannot afford the Internet and must pay for their access with their right to privacy," reads the letter.

LinkNYC's big brother capabilities extend beyond carrying out personal data collection on a massive scale. Each of the 7,500 kiosks will be equipped with three cameras — each pointed in a different direction — for a total of 22,500 cameras. The NYPD currently has access to 6,000 street cameras, two-thirds of which are privately owned, as well as 7,000 more surveillance cameras installed in public housing and another 4,000 inside subway stations.

Alexander Urbelis, an information security consultant and partner at Blackstone Law Group, says it is inconceivable that the data collected by LinkNYC kiosks will remain private.

"They claim they won't share data with third parties, but they will have to respond to legal authorities," Urbelis told *The Independent*. "The government can simply get a warrant and take a look at cameras and digital fingerprinting, even from users passing by."

Closed-circuit cameras are ever-present in New York. But authorities seeking to view their footage need to subpoena each camera owner individually. "The difference with LinkNYC," said Urbelis, "is this ubiquitous monitoring is all under the control of one corporate entity."

As LinkNYC spreads outward from the center of Manhattan, the likelihood that it will be misused in predominantly people of color neighborhoods that have a history of being over-policed also grows.

"Surveillance has never been color-blind," noted Jonah Bossewitch of Rethink Link.

DATA HARVEST: One of the many LinkNYC kiosks cropping up in the city.



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ATTRITION BY DEMOLITION



STEVEN WISHNIA

BY STEVEN WISHNIA

“I recognized Steve Croman from his mug shot,” a Lower East Side woman said after encountering her landlord in the hallway of her building on Jan. 24. He immediately turned to shine his cell-phone flashlight in her face to blur the pictures she was taking.

The owner was in the building, 159 Stanton Street, because city Department of Buildings inspectors had issued two orders that all construction work there had to stop immediately — one, because the superintendent had refused to grant them access to the vacant apartments the day before, and one citing “illegal activity — tenant harassment.”

“It’s a big win,” says Sherief Gaber, an Urban Justice Center lawyer representing the tenants in a lawsuit they filed against Croman in December. “It’s a good sign that the Department of Buildings is taking construction as harassment seriously.”

Croman, who owns more than 150 buildings in Manhattan, is the poster boy for “construction as harassment,” the increasingly common landlord tactic of trying to drive out rent-stabilized tenants by renovating vacant apartments in a way that makes their lives miserable. If they move out, their apartments can also be renovated and rented out for thousands of dollars more. He is facing a civil lawsuit by state Attorney General Eric Schneiderman for harassing tenants, and criminal charges alleging that he scammed banks into giving him loans by claiming he was getting tenants out and raising rents faster than he actually was.

Croman bought 159 Stanton Street in 2013 and began gutting the vacant apartments in the summer of 2015. His workers ripped out windows, walls and floorboards. One woman’s ceiling collapsed, and a cracked pipe leaked sewage all over one man’s kitchen. Meanwhile, Croman minions aggressively and repeatedly offered tenants money to leave. But the work stopped

that fall, leaving eight apartments empty, some with zippered plastic sheets instead of doors.

Construction as harassment has become a major issue in the city over the last decade. The East Village and Lower East Side have been hit hardest, with landlords like Croman, Ben Shaoul, Raphael Toledano and Stone Street Properties using it as a business model. In one deal, Shaoul bought seven East Fourth Street buildings in 2010 and 2011 for \$25 million and, after clearing out most of the rent-stabilized tenants, sold them to Jared Kushner, Donald Trump’s son-in-law, in 2013 for \$49 million. While Kushner has used construction as harassment in some buildings, most notoriously 170 East 2nd Street, he generally prefers to buy properties after other owners “have done the dirty work,” as one Fourth Street tenant put it in January.

Now, it “is a citywide pattern,” says Rolando Guzman of the St. Nicks Alliance in northern Brooklyn. “Over the past five years, it has become a trend.” The group first received complaints about it from tenants in Williamsburg and Greenpoint, but is now seeing it more in Bushwick, and has heard about it in Ridgewood, East New York and Sunset Park.

“As neighborhoods become hotter, there’s more pressure for rent-stabilized tenants to be pushed out,” he says.

In January, more than 100 people attended meetings in Manhattan and Brooklyn about construction as harassment. They were organized by Stand for Tenant Safety, a coalition of more than 20 housing, neighborhood and legal services organizations, and borough presidents Gale Brewer and Eric Adams.

The coalition is backing a package of 12 bills in the City Council intended to reduce construction as harass-

ment. They include measures that would require the Buildings Department to do a full inspection before allowing construction in a building that’s partially occupied; increase fines for violations and enable the city to put liens on property when owners don’t pay them; and concentrate enforcement on buildings, owners and contractors with a history of violations.

The bills were introduced in the fall of 2015, with sponsors including Antonio Reynoso of Brooklyn and Ben Kallos and Margaret Chin of Manhattan. The

HAD ENOUGH:
Residents of 159 Stanton St. protest outside their building.

DUE TO TENANT PRESSURE, THE CITY IS STARTING TO TAKE HARASSMENT BY CONSTRUCTION MORE SERIOUSLY.

Council has held hearings on seven of them, the most recent last April, and taken no action on the others.

“Stand for Tenant Safety is calling on Jumaane Williams and [Council Speaker] Melissa Mark-Viverito to pass the bills,” says Rolando Guzman.

Williams, who chairs the Council’s Housing Committee, “is in continued discussion with the Speaker and sponsors of the bills on the package,” a spokesperson told *The Independent*.

MUSLIM SURVEILLANCE

Continued from page 6

that focus on white supremacists, and solely hone in on Muslim radicals.

“It all came down to principle. Five hundred thousands dollars is a lot of money, especially if you’re a non-profit,” said Mohamed Farah, the executive director of Ka Joog, a group that works in the Somali community in Minnesota that rejected a federal grant. “At the end of the day, we work with immigrants, we work with refugees, we work with Muslims and we believe this administration doesn’t stand for what we stand for.” Farah added that there was also concern among Somali-Americans that the anti-extremism program could be used for surveillance.

Muslim groups, along with civil liberties

advocates, have also launched a campaign to encourage cities across the country to limit their local police department’s cooperation with the FBI on counter-terrorism. Called Stop TrumpIntelPro Now, a play on COINTELPRO, the campaign, which includes the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Asian Americans Advancing Justice Asian Law Caucus and others, wants to build on a recent victory: convincing the San Francisco Police Department to halt cooperation with the local Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), a program that combines local police and federal agents to fight terrorism. The police department said it was stopping cooperation because confidence in the program had been “shaken,” though it may rejoin the program in the future.

The halt in cooperation came after another local victory in San Francisco. In 2012, a coalition of groups in the city successfully

pushed for a local law mandating that police only cooperate with the task force if their activities are in line with state and local laws, which are much more stringent than the FBI’s guidelines on racial and religious profiling. Now, the coalition wants to export that model nationwide.

“If we make clear across the country that our local officers have to follow our local laws, even if they work with the JTTF, the FBI’s partnership, that means that local officers will no longer be allowed to do FBI work that involves, for example, surveilling just because they’re Muslim,” said Christine Sinha, who co-leads the National Security and Civil Rights Program at Asian Americans Advancing Justice Asian Law Caucus.

In the week after it launched, Sinha said, organizers in several cities contacted the coalition, though she would not name them because they had not yet gone public.

“If they can’t commandeer our local resources the way they need to, that does stop the FBI in its tracks a little bit,” Sinha told *The Independent*. “I’m not naive. That’s not going to stop the FBI wholesale. But it at least puts a brake on what the FBI wants to do at a local level.”

HOME SWEET HOME

LOW-INCOME TENANTS WIN RIGHT TO LAWYER AT HOUSING COURT

BY LAUREN KAORI GURLEY

In December 2008, Carmen Vega-Rivera received a white index card in her mailbox notifying her that she had 72 hours to report to Housing Court to answer charges that she had not paid her rent, or face eviction from her rent-stabilized apartment, a few blocks away from Yankee Stadium in the South Bronx.

Vega-Rivera, then 54, had been dutifully paying her rent since 1981, when she first moved into the Art Deco building on the corner of Grand Concourse and 161st Street. But in recent months, she noticed that her landlord, Tiny Fiesta Realty, had stopped depositing her rent checks, and so she began cancelling them. Vega-Rivera, who is the president of the building's tenant association, suspected that her landlord was retaliating for her complaints about the building's broken heating system, rodent infestation, defective elevator, and leaky and moldy walls.

"The boiler has just not been working for almost 25 years," she says. "I was demanding repairs and exercising my rights as a tenant, and they weren't depositing my checks." Refusing to deposit tenants' rent checks and then trying to evict them for nonpayment is a common harassment practice New York City landlords use.

Vega-Rivera, who is disabled and unemployed, could not afford a lawyer, and was left to navigate the labyrinthine proceedings of Housing Court alone. "I was there representing myself," she says. "No one can help you. Everyone's yelling at you. There's no navigation. There's no brochures. There's no [language] interpretation and I'm bilingual." She finally won the case in August 2011.

"If I'd had an attorney, my landlord would have never taken me to court," she says.

Thanks to a landmark agreement, low-income tenants like Vega-Rivera may soon have the right to a lawyer in New York City Housing Court. On February 12, Mayor Bill de Blasio threw his support behind the Right to Counsel bill, under which the city will provide free legal representation to tenants who make less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level, or below \$48,000 for a family of four. It would make New York the first U.S. city to provide legal services to all low-income tenants facing eviction. Housing activists have waged a three-year campaign to pass the legislation, which they argue will curb gentrification and the displacement of low-income residents by preventing illegal evictions.

The mayor has agreed to invest \$155 million a year into the program at a time when the Trump administration is threatening to cut funds for "sanctuary cities" and social services. According to a 2016 report by an independent advisory committee, however, the bill would save the city \$300 million a year,

by keeping families out of shelters and preserving rent-regulated housing.

In 2014, only one percent of tenants in New York City Housing Court had lawyers, while over 90% of landlords did. It is estimated that half of the tenants without attorneys are evicted. "Housing Court is chaotic," says Raun Rasmussen, executive director of New York City Legal Services, the largest provider of free legal services in the country. "The laws are complex, and without representation, it's very hard for a tenant to get a fair settlement resolution of her case, so having a lawyer will make a huge difference just in terms of fairness, fundamental fairness." According to a recent study by the Legal Aid Society and the New York Bar Association, having legal representation would reduce tenants' chances of eviction by over 75%.

The inaccessibility of legal services makes it much easier for landlords to force out longtime tenants and replace them with newcomers willing to pay higher rents. "Landlords are seeking an opportunity to get rid of the people who are there, and charge higher rent," says Ezi Ukegbu, an attorney at Brooklyn Legal Services Corporation A, who has represented hundreds of low-income tenants in gentrifying neighborhoods in Brooklyn.

In 2013, de Blasio established a pilot program that increased funding for housing legal services from \$6 million to \$62 million annually, providing representation for residents of 10 ZIP codes with a high eviction rate. According to the New York City Office of Civil Justice, eviction rates in the city dropped 18 percent within a year, and now are at their lowest levels in a decade.

When Randy Dillard, a disabled single father of five in the Norwood neighborhood in the Bronx, received an eviction order for nonpayment of rent in 2012, he feared that he and his children were headed into the city's homeless-shelter system. But the order was unwarranted: Dillard receives federal Section 8 rent subsidies, and the program had stopped paying the subsidies to his landlord, a city police detective, after inspectors found the building had serious housing-code violations.

"The windows were not insulated. We had to put water on the stove to heat our home. He was a slumlord," says Dillard, a former union bricklayer who has been unemployed since he was diagnosed with a chronic lung condition 15 years ago. Thanks to the advice of a friend, he found a pro bono lawyer at Part Of The Solution, a Bronx nonprofit. The lawyer "informed me that my landlord had no right to take me to court," Dillard says. "Section 8 owed [my landlord] the money." The attorney eventually paved the way for Dillard to move into a new building.

Dillard's apartment, like Carmen Vega-Rivera's,

was rent-stabilized. Landlords increase their profits by evicting tenants in rent-stabilized apartments and raising rents, especially in gentrifying neighborhoods. "If there's a demand in the neighborhood, it's always in the landlord's interest to have a vacancy," said Bill Bryan, an attorney at the Brooklyn Public Defenders Office. Landlords can legally increase rents by 20 percent on a vacant apartment, more if they renovate it, and they usually can get away with illegally charging even more. Under state law, tenants are not allowed to challenge rent increases more than four years old unless there is clear evidence of fraud.

"There are lots of recent graduates who would be happy to pay \$1,400 a month for a one-bedroom... and wouldn't think to go and see the rent history for the apartment and try and find out if the rent they are being charged is legal," says Raun Rasmussen.

Vacant apartments where the rent has reached \$2,700 are deregulated. The city has lost almost 175,000 rent-

WITH THE LAW ON HIS SIDE: Randy Dillard, a Bronx father of five, relaxes in his new apartment which he landed with the help of a pro-bono lawyer who successfully fought for him in housing court.



LAUREN KAORI GURLEY

COULD SERVE AS A MODEL TO OTHER CITIES.

stabilized apartments in the past 13 years.

Landlord groups testifying against the right-to-counsel bill at a Council hearing in September noted its costs to taxpayers and argued that there are few benefits to drawing out eviction proceedings for tenants who cannot pay their rent. "Counsel serves merely to prolong the inevitable through frivolous delaying tactics so that their client can remain with a roof over their head for as long as possible when there is no justification for their continued tenancy," said Mitchell Posilkin, general counsel for the Rent Stabilization Association.

Yet, the bill received fervent support from politicians and activists across the city. It was cosponsored by 42 of the 51 City Councilmembers, and a New York Times editorial endorsed it. If it is enacted, New York City's Right to Counsel will be a triumph for the city's most vulnerable communities, and could serve as a model for other U.S. cities ensnared in cycles of eviction, displacement, and gentrification.

WHICH WAY FORWARD?

SHOULD PROGRESSIVES TRY TO CAPTURE THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY FROM WITHIN AND MOVE IT TO THE LEFT? OR, OPERATE INDEPENDENTLY OF BOTH MAJOR PARTIES?

THE DEMOCRATS' INTERNAL POWER STRUGGLE

By Brett Vetterlein

If the past year in politics has proved anything, it is these two contradicting facts: the Democrats are a feckless, failing party that cannot live up to our needs; and the Democrats are in many ways, for the time being, the only game in town.

Many on the left, myself included, are eager to begin building institutions that represent our politics fully. It is time to take seriously the task of “working outside of the Democratic Party,” of laying the foundation for a true party of the left that can put forward a vision of how America will shed itself of capitalist exploitation, racial injustice, and sexist domination.

Currently, though, a war is being waged for the heart of the Democrats themselves. The two main candidates to be chair of the Democratic National Committee are Minnesota Congressman Keith Ellison, a firm progressive who backed Bernie Sanders during the 2016 presidential primaries, and Thomas Perez, Barack Obama's labor secretary, whose frequently touted leftist bona fides are shaky, given his support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

What's clear is that Perez is a bone thrown by the Democratic establishment to the party's left-wing base. Perez is meant to distract us from the real problem afflicting the party — each election sinks it deeper and deeper into the pockets of Wall Street.

Ellison, an African-American and the first Muslim to serve in the U.S. Congress, has a strong track record of standing up for working people and oppressed communities. In his campaign for the DNC top post, he has promised to pursue a “3,153-county strategy” that would welcome the participation of grassroots activists across the country.

If the Democrats want to start winning more elections, they need to retool towards the Ellison-Sanders-Elizabeth Warren wing of the party and away from the Obama-Clinton “New Democrats” who built their careers ample generous support from powerful corporate interests.

While Obama served as president, the Democrats quietly lost 949 state legislature seats, 13 governorships, 63 House seats, and 11 Senate seats — one of the single greatest transfers of power from one party to another in modern American politics. The chief reason this happened is that the Democrats couldn't connect with voters in any meaningful way.

An Ellison-run Democratic Party could

very well be a boon for the progressive policies leftists have been championing for quite some time — universal health care, card-check union voting, real police reform — which hopefully would result in clawing back some of the political power we've lost to the far right over the past decade.

Of course, most Democrats won't have a say in whether Ellison gets the chance to lead the party. Despite 650,000 people signing a petition endorsing him, the decision will be made by 447 party insiders when they meet in Atlanta on February 25.

If Ellison is successful, though, it opens a window, through which left-of-liberal candidates could take advantage of the resources the Democratic Party has to offer, inject their own politics into races where they have a real shot to win, and take back some ground from the Republicans.

While many on the left will understandably bemoan any effort of trying to work within the Democratic Party, the situation we find ourselves in means that every minute spent arguing over sully the left's good name is lives lost, dreams deferred, hope abandoned. The impending repeal of the Affordable Care Act drives home that politics is a life-or-death contest for millions of people. Politics is being able to see a doctor, afford a home, get birth control, go to school, and put food on the table. It's Medicare for All and the Fight for \$15. We don't have time to waste.

What some can do in the short-term, using the Democrats' platform, is popularize a vision one candidate at a time, win real elections, take back power and fight the right. Meanwhile, in other corners of the left, comrades are already working hard on the long-term project of building on electoral victories by tying elected officials to our movements and establishing mass organizations that one day will overtake the Democrats and win on their own.

This is not a call to work within the Democratic Party, but to make the Democratic Party work for us. I understand if critics can't see the difference; sometimes I don't either. But what if we could use the Democratic Party like a cheap loaner, while our Cadillac — the progressive party currently only of our dreams — is still being designed? If this clunky lemon can get us from point A to point B, what is the harm?

Brett Vetterlein is Brooklyn-based writer, activist and member of the Democratic Socialists of America.

SOLIDARITY, ORGANIZATION & STRUGGLE CAN STOP TRUMP

By Sherry Wolf

The Trump administration is a freight train barreling toward us, threatening to destroy everything in its path and we'd better develop a strategy to get out of harm's way and, ultimately, stop it. Grasping onto the Democratic Party, the very institution that laid the tracks and fueled the Trump train, is not a realistic strategy for survival. The Democrats' decades-long embrace of policies that have eviscerated public institutions and enriched a powerful few at the expense of the majority earned them the abandonment of millions of working class Blacks, Latinos, whites, women and youth in the 2016 election.

To win over many of the Clinton and Jill Stein voters, as well as those who voted with their feet and abstained, the U.S. left must advance a united front strategy on the basis of class solidarity across all ethnic, gender, racial, national, sexuality and ability lines.

Instead of working within a political party that represents the interests of our opponents, we need left-wing independent political organizations that are democratically run, supported by and accountable to their members, willing to link arms in struggle with all progressive forces and pose an alternative to the racist and pro-corporate policies of both parties of capital.

Attempts to repackage the Democratic Party into a vehicle for resistance to Trump's agenda may succeed at corraling activists but will fail to defend targeted communities and advance progressive goals.

Take the issue of immigration. First, we have to ask why did President Obama deport more immigrants than any other president in history? And why do Democrats like Obama, Hillary Clinton and even Bernie Sanders consistently couple calls for immigration reform with enhanced surveillance and funding for more border agents and fencing (one might call it a wall)? As representatives of a political party that is unabashedly pro-capitalist, they accept the logic of borders to control the flow of labor, the very purpose of immigration control.

The goal of the Democratic Party is to run the American capitalist empire. In order to do so, the Democrats must offer, at least rhetorically, some limited reforms and policies that speak to the interests of the popular majority who are working class,

women, LGBTQ, Black, Latino, Muslim. Though it's notable that even the reforms we have won under Democrats — from voting rights for Blacks to expanded LGBTQ rights — have been in response to mammoth social movements.

Each time these reforms are won by struggle and then codified into law by politicians, Democrats in office have chiseled away at, blunted, or gutted the reforms — from abortion to union rights. Working within the Democratic Party doesn't offer a more tranquil approach to defending our interests and winning reforms, but instead poses a threat to even the meager reforms we win. The structural pressures of a system based on profit consistently lead the Democrats to accommodate the needs of business.

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio came to office on the basis of an openly progressive agenda; decrying the “tale of two cities.” Yet his policies have left New York's working class and poor, especially Black and Latino New Yorkers, worse off during a period of record Wall Street profits, on which he has refused to raise taxes. From appointing top cop Bill Bratton, architect of the Giuliani era's “broken windows” policy to expanding private charter schools that undermine public education, de Blasio's administration has failed to deliver relief for those most in need. Many of his policies mirror those of his billionaire predecessor, Michael Bloomberg.

This is not a unique example. Mayor David Dinkins, a former member of the Democratic Socialists of America, was elected to office in 1989 and led a crack-down on the city's homeless population and presided over horrible austerity and a police force that tormented the city's Black and Latino population.

There are no simple formulas or easy answers to the multiple and intersecting crises we all face in the coming Trump era. None of us in the U.S. left have lived through a comparable period in this country. But we must begin now to discuss and engage in comradely debate about what the true lessons of previous failures are in order to create the solidarity, organization and struggle needed to survive and even advance in the years to come.

Sherry Wolf is author of *Sexuality and Socialism: History, Politics and Theory of LGBT Liberation* and is a longtime member of the International Socialist Organization.

INSIDE-OUTSIDE REMAINS THE WAY TO GO

By Charles Lenchner

Every national election, there's another attempt to launch an independent left (or left-leaning) campaign. There's also a huge mobilization of lefties to support the Democratic candidate. Every time this happens, an old debate rekindles over the relative merits of the two positions.

One side is convinced that the party itself is a trap, that once it is supported, the supporters are compromised and hamstrung until they see the light. The “independents only” advocates think those on the other side are either working for party bosses, or are too simple to see that the Democrats push bad policies.

The other side feels silly that they even have to point out that the popular base for change has been attached to the Democrats since 1932, that the two-party system is not threatened by independent campaigns for president, and that the results of Republican wins are obviously worse for working people than those of Democratic wins.

The ‘third party now’ side often argues that even if these factors are true, principles and/or morality demand that working with, in, or through the party be abandoned right away. “Don't vote for what you don't want” is the logical-sounding mantra. And the Democrats themselves, who are ‘the second party of capital’, have made so many concessions to the right that they have squandered their own base of support.

The ‘inside/outside’ position recognizes this, but sees nothing inherent in the party's role or structure that would automatically taint building a left presence in it. Shit happens, but not automatically or inevitably. As for the party's politics, local races are often influenced by local social movements who push local electeds from the center to the left, either by political pressure or electing their own candidates.

‘Inside/outside’ supports independent slates and parties when they have a chance of strengthening the left's hand and pushing through progressive policies. They oppose independent runs that act as spoilers for the right, or avoid reaching out to the Democrats' popular base.

Those who seek out a Euro-style Green or far left niche in the American electoral system maintain that ‘inside/outside’ is a repeatedly failed compromise with centrists, who are often framed as no better than, or even no different from, the GOP right and center-right.

But the only time the left had any appre-

ciable success in a national election outside either major party was in 1912, when Eugene Debs's Socialist Party won 6% in a four-way race, scoring 900,000 votes. In 1948, Henry Wallace, a popular New Deal leader, broke from Harry Truman to run independently. He received 2.4%, matching the percentage of Dixiecrat breakaway Strom Thurmond.

Bernie Sanders broke hearts in the ‘independent only’ camp when he ran in the Democratic primaries last year. Yet running as a democratic socialist, he far exceeded Debs with more than 13 million primary votes.

What is even more significant is that by employing an inside/outside strategy, Sanders gave the American left a new lease on life. He brought it out of the margins for a fleeting moment, and unlike Obama, left the door open. He brought hundreds of thousands of new actors into the electoral process, not just out of self defense against an insurgent right, but in response to demands that directly challenged neoliberalism and xenophobia.

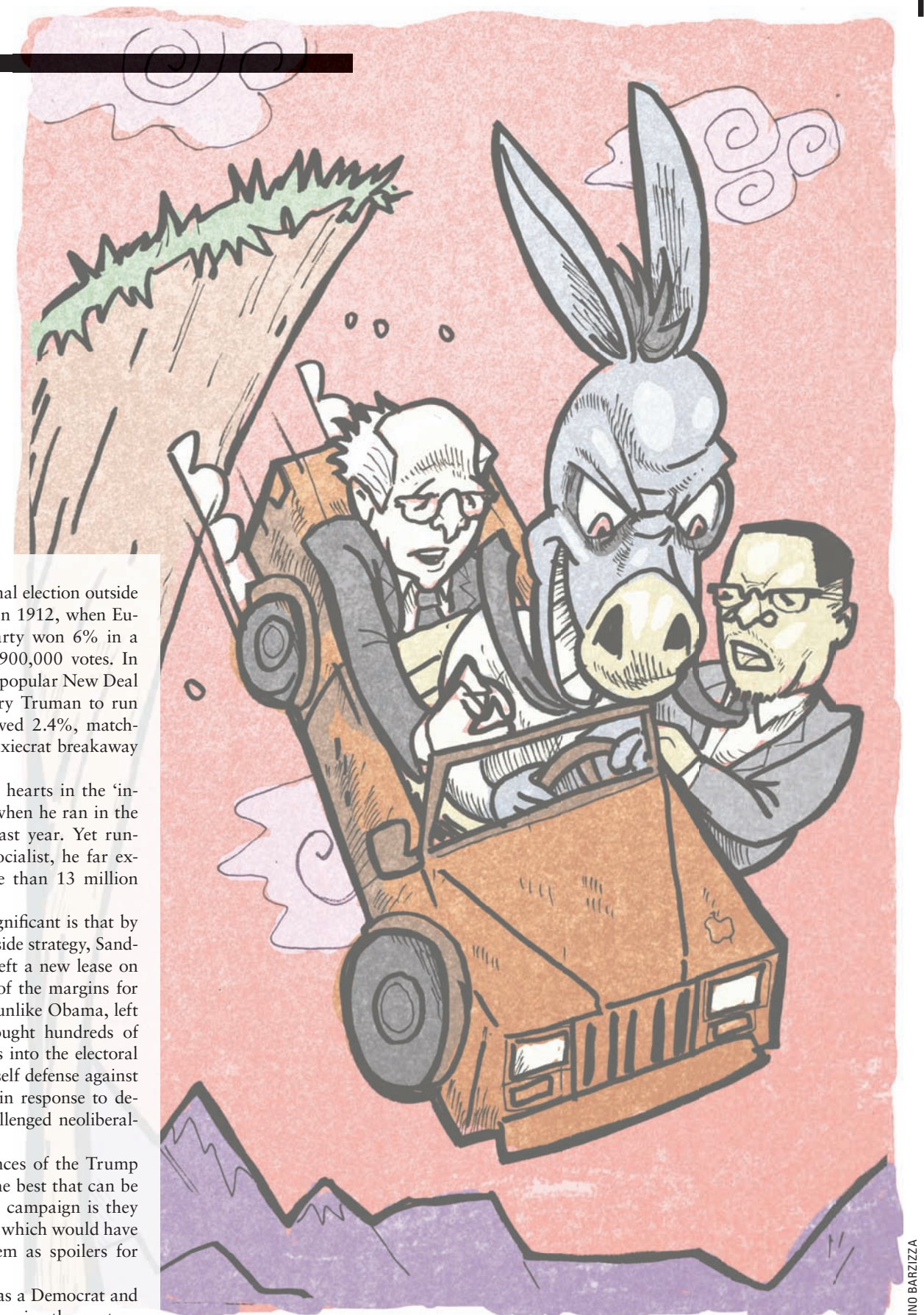
Under the circumstances of the Trump non-popular election, the best that can be said about the Jill Stein campaign is they failed to get more votes, which would have conclusively stained them as spoilers for the right.

Sanders chose to run as a Democrat and won enough influence to give the party a more pronounced left voice. He was also a diligent campaigner for Clinton, but could not get through to the Democratic leadership that Trump was picking up their base among rural and suburban workers who had supported Bill Clinton and Obama. Now the fight has shifted to the direction of the party itself. But for the Stein supporters, whether Green or socialist, this is strictly off-limits by definition.

The US has a share of left electoral activists in every state. They are fringe, fragmented and uncoordinated, like the rest of the left. But if the goal is breaking out of that quagmire, then an inside/outside strategy has proven potential. This is also the direction most left voters choose, even though it means going head-to-head against entrenched power brokers and money handlers.

The alternative is eternal glory in our own implacability, which is its own - and only - reward.

Charles Lenchner is the co-founder of People for Bernie Sanders.



GINO BARZIZZA

March 2017 THE INDEPENDENT

DREAMING OF A GENERAL STRIKE

BY PETER RUGH

American labor is flexing its muscles against the Trump administration. Loosely coordinated work stoppages took place across the United States in February, and more are on the horizon.

On Thursday, Feb. 16, thousands of workers walked off the job for a “Day Without an Immigrant” protest, leaving restaurants closed and construction sites empty from Washington to San Francisco.

“The owner was telling the workers they were going to get fired,” if they didn’t come in to work, Emanuel, a busser at a West Village restaurant, told *The Independent*. He declined to give his last name because of his immigration status, but said that despite the threats, half of his coworkers joined him in refusing to clock in. “You can see in all the restaurants it is 80 percent immigrant. If all the immigrants decide not to go to work, they’re going to shut down those businesses.”

More strikes occurred the next day. Planned through a loose federation of labor groups and individual activists, approximately 100 job actions occurred from coast to coast under the banner #Strike4Democracy. Its stated demands included a halt to “the authoritarian assault on our fundamental, constitutional rights” and an end to attacks on “women, Muslims, immigrants, racial and ethnic groups, the LGBTQ+ community, working families, journalists, and all who offer criticisms of the [Trump] administration’s policies.”

The strikes come on the heels of the Women’s March, nationwide protests at airports against Trump’s travel ban, mass civil disobediences against deportations, and a strike by Yemeni bodega owners in New York City. They are part of a growing push to go beyond demonstrations and use economic power against the Trump administration. More walkouts are planned, including a national women’s strike on March 8, International Women’s Day.

“Everyone is searching for various ways, for the widest range of ways to resist,” novelist Francine Prose told *The Indy*. She wrote an op-ed article on January 30 in the U.K. *Guardian* calling for a national general strike, “a day... on which we truly make our economic and political power felt, a day when we make it clear: how many of us there are, how strong and committed we are, how much we can accomplish.”

Both Strike4Democracy and the organizers behind the Women’s Day protests have labeled their days of action a general strike, a term that has been met with some derision for lacking realism.

“Calling for a general strike now bears no relation to what mass strikes have meant in the past,” Alex Gourevitch, an assistant professor in political science at Brown University, wrote on Feb. 3 for the blog *Current Moment*. “The flight from reality shows up in activists’ blasé attitude to history and their very distant relationship to the working class.”



JOE BRUSKY

A number of citywide general strikes took place during the first half of the 20th century, in Seattle, San Francisco, Oakland, Minneapolis, Rochester, New York, and Stamford, Connecticut among others. Another happened in Oakland in 2011, at the height of the Occupy movement. But there has never been a nationwide general strike or, for that matter, a gender-wide strike, in the United States. With just 11 percent of the U.S. workforce unionized, down from 20 percent a quarter-century ago, calls for a general strike today are more aspirational than practical, but organizers of the upcoming strikes are banking that the national wave of revulsion to Trump will inspire people to act. They note that 200,000 people were expected at the Jan. 21 Women’s March in Washington, and more than twice that number arrived.

“We’re starting to see new forms of struggle emerging and new ways of conceiving of these struggles,” says women’s strike organizer Kate Doyle Griffiths, an adjunct professor at Hunter and Marymount colleges. “I hope that people who are organizing in their workplaces will take this call as a time to do a shop floor action, to walk out of work, to help build their networks in their workplaces.” People who aren’t already engaged in workplace organizing can use the strike as an opportunity to start, Griffiths added.

According to Jeremy Brecher, author of more than a dozen books on labor and social movements, there’s power in simply raising the specter of a national walkout.

“The idea of a general strike shows, ‘Oh yeah, well of course, if everybody stops working, obviously they would have a tremendous power to determine what’s going on in society,’” he says. Putting it out as an idea, “even if it’s not an immediately realizable strategy,” is a crucial step to making a general strike a reality.

Brecher describes the organizing efforts underway now as an attempt at performing “exemplary actions”—“relatively small groups of people deciding that they’re going to do something and doing it in a way that gives other people the idea, ‘Hey, we could do that, too.’”

These general-strike calls are not coming from traditional unions, from already existing organizations, or even from specific movements, other than what might be broadly defined as “the resistance.” Some of the people involved are veterans of past social movements—Occupy, Black Lives Matter, opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline—but others are not. But as news of the “Day Without an Immigrant” and Strike4Democracy spread on social media, it prompted people to talk with their coworkers and to participate in the strikes, with little advance planning.

Not unsurprisingly, traditional labor unions were largely absent. The Labor Management Relations Act

of 1947, commonly known as the Taft-Hartley Act, forbids political or sympathy strikes. It also requires unions to give employers advance notice before walking out.

If American workers want to flex their political power beyond the confines of Taft-Hartley, Brecher says, one direction they will have to explore is a strategy long championed by anarchist groups, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). It entails creating informal unions that act as unions structurally but refuse to sign contracts, to avoid the ensuing legal restrictions.

“You can already see it in unions in ‘right-to-work’ states where union rights are severely restricted; in a lot of experiments with unions that are not certified under the National Labor Relations Board procedures,” he says. “And you definitely are seeing it with the Fight for \$15 in a way that’s quite reminiscent of the IWW. I know in some of the Fight for \$15 organizing efforts, in Chicago in particular, they actually have informal unions, working within fast-food enterprises and other low-wage employers.”

That informal-union strategy might become more pertinent in the years ahead. Since 2011, six states, all

WORKER

POWER: Protesters in Milwaukee took part in a recent “Day Without Immigrants” strike on Feb. 16.

IT WOULD BE THE FIRST IN U.S. HISTORY

in the industrial Midwest, have outlawed the union shop. A bill to do that nationwide has been introduced in Congress, and Trump has endorsed the concept.

More job actions are in the works for May Day. “Once you have people in motion it is hard to contain them,” says Griffiths. “And once you have ideas floating around like the general strike, like women organizing together—they’re not easy to hold in place. They tend to build their own momentum. A year ago, I wouldn’t have thought this was a very practical thing to do, but things are different now.”

Only during rare instances have Internet-based calls to action been enough to drive people out of their workplaces and into the streets—the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street—and they have never proven enough to sustain social movements over the long haul. Whether activists can maintain the momentum they have attracted, let alone launch a successful general strike, will likely depend on their ability to build organizations that can sustain themselves in the years ahead.

ACTIVISM

JOIN THE RESISTANCE

10 THINGS YOU CAN DO

BY INDEPENDENT STAFF

CALL YOUR ELECTED OFFICIALS

Elected officials want to keep on getting elected. So when they hear from large numbers of their constituents on an issue, it has an impact. With the help of websites like 5calls.org, you can locate your local representatives and receive phone numbers and scripts so calling is easy. For busy people who don't have lots of free time, this is an easy way to stay engaged and make a difference.

TURN OUT FOR PROTESTS

Feeling overwhelmed by all the scary, bad news? Getting out from behind your computer and into the streets with other people who share your hopes and concerns is cathartic and often makes a real impact. Better yet, bring along friends or family members.

VOLUNTEER WITH POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Whether knocking on doors or making phone calls to prospective voters, this is a great way to listen and learn from other people while working to elect officials who represent your values. In NYC, the Mayor and all 51 City Councilmembers are up for re-election this year. Across the Hudson River in New Jersey, voters will be choosing a successor to Gov. Chris Christie who was an early Trump supporter. In 2018, Congress will be up for grabs along with governorships and state legislatures across the land.

EXPAND YOUR MIND

Read widely and develop a deeper sense of history, politics, literature, economics, etc. This will make you a more effective advocate for the causes you believe in.

JOIN A READING GROUP

Consider joining a reading group or starting one of your own. Reading and studying with others is a great way to meet new friends and learn not only from the reading material but other people's insights and life experiences.

JOIN (OR START) AN ORGANIZATION

Whether it's joining a local grassroots group, the local chapter of a larger national organization or becoming an ac-

tive member of a political party, working in concert with others allows us to build the power we need to affect change.

BE GENEROUS WITH YOUR MONEY

Sick of Trump's over-the-top lying and "alternative facts?" Notice how the White House has declared the media to be "the enemy of the people." Give generously to support independent media. The media outlets we will need the most are the ones that will have to be funded by all of us.

COMMIT CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Deliberately breaking the law and getting hauled off to jail is not for everyone. No one should be pressured into participating in such an action. But when done at the right time and place with a clear message and demands, civil disobedience can be a dramatic and effective form of protest.

SUPPORT THE GENERAL STRIKE

Okay, we don't know when or if we'll ever see this happen here in the United States. But if it comes, you know what to do. Shut it down!

BE THERE FOR EACH OTHER

The coming years are going to be a marathon not a sprint so let's be there for each other and carve out time to enjoy the beautiful things in life.

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On the Air — Max Elbaum

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FROM MARGIN TO CENTER

SAT FEB 25 • 7-9:30PM
PRESENTATION: In the era of Trumpism, learn how social media is creating an atmosphere of algorithm consciousness, how data radicalizes you, what the alt-right is and where the left should go next.

SUN MAR 5 • 7-9:30PM
READING: Author Rita Banerjee will read from her new novella, *A Night with Kali*; the story of two people stuck in a cab during a monsoon in Kolkata and the tale the driver tells them of a ghost he encountered when he was young.

TUE MAR 21 • 7-9:30PM
DISCUSSION: After 25 years, Kate Bornstein's seminal book *Gender Outlaws* has been updated and revised. Join Kate as she discusses the new edition.

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March 2017 THE INDEPENDENT

TRUMP THROUGH MEXICAN EYES

BY LAURA CARLSEN

MEXICO CITY — Those who thought that Donald Trump's Mexico-bashing was just a campaign strategy have been roundly proven wrong. With the stroke of a pen and the sending of a tweet, Trump has brought the two nations to the brink of diplomatic rupture and pushed a teetering Mexico closer toward political and economic crisis, during just his first month in office.

Trump has rained down executive orders to punish Mexico, supposed to be one of the United States's strongest allies. His threats to construct a wall along the entire border, orders to intensify deportation, constant insinuations that migrants are heinous criminals, promises to implement pseudo law-and-order measures against transnational crime and illicit drug dealing as if they were a foreign invasion, and threats of tariffs to block Mexican imports have shocked both economists and diplomats, even within his own administration. But nowhere are people more shocked than in Mexico itself.

Day after day, newspapers headline his latest attack: "Trump Insists Mexico Pay for the Wall" and "Trump Says All Deported Migrants are Criminals." The man who called Mexicans rapists and thieves has achieved what few thought possible — he has brought about consensus among a famously contentious population.

Now that Trump has launched raids to round up Mexican immigrants and ordered the construction of a 2,000-mile border wall, insult has quickly turned to injury. That's not to say that his rhetoric didn't have an impact. Predicted growth for Mexico in 2017 has been revised downward to a meager 1.7 percent, according to the International Monetary Fund. Since Election Day, the peso has lost about 13 percent of its value. Currency markets understand the real risks behind the bluster. Any one of Trump's threats could send Mexico into a downward spiral.

TRUMP'S THREATS

First, there's that wall. A wall already exists, built with bipartisan support, along 700 miles of the most trafficked parts of the border. Even if Trump succeeds in barricading the other two-thirds, Mexicans who want to go the United States badly enough will find a way. More than the prospect of a physical barrier, it's the message of the wall that enrages Mexicans — the idea that they are a social contagion, undesirable elements.

The current border wall has been one of the biggest taxpayer boondoggles in U.S. history. Multimillion-dollar contracts to security and construction companies have brought cost overruns and paid for failed technologies. It has battered cross-border communities, inhibited legal commerce and increased smugglers' income, while failing to stop the flows of prohibited workers and of heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine. The money involved is high enough to buy off U.S. customs officials and law enforcement agents. The extended \$20- to \$40-billion Trump version would further inhibit international commerce and inflame racism.

Trump's plan to deport 2 to 3 million migrants would

devastate Mexico. Mexico has no plan to employ and sustain that many people. It already fails to create jobs for the approximately 1 million people who enter the workforce a year. Nearly 60 percent end up in the informal sector — another undesired consequence of integration with the vastly more powerful U.S. economy under the terms of the 1994 North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The prospect of returning migrants needing jobs also causes anxiety among workers in Mexico, especially in the tourism industry. In the Pacific Coast resort city of Puerto Vallarta, waiters, vendors, shop clerks and hotel workers say they're afraid of losing their jobs to returning migrants with a better command of English and knowledge of U.S. culture.

For workers in U.S. factories producing in Mexico, the Ford and Carrier cases have left them with wondering if their last day of work could be tomorrow. President-elect Trump convinced Carrier to cancel part of its investment plans in Mexico by offering a subsidy out of public funds. Shortly thereafter Ford announced its sudden decision to nix a \$1.6 billion plant already begun in San Luis Potosi, citing other reasons but sending a clear message that Mexico was looking less attractive for transnational production. Trump's threats to apply a 35 percent tariff or 20 percent border tax on Mexican exports have a chilling effect on foreign investment. Faced with tariffs that increase their costs and ability to compete in the United States, companies will search for greener global pastures in which case more Mexican workers will be out on the street.

Trump's proposals to cut off or tax remittances to force Mexico to "pay for the wall" could be the most painful of all. Remittances, the money sent from migrants to their families back in Mexico, account for the largest cash flow into the country — about \$25 billion a year. This money goes to some of the poorest families, in a nation where more than half the population lives below the poverty line.

FRAGILE DEPENDENCY

The irony is that Mexico's vulnerability to Trump has everything to do with its submission to U.S. and international finance institutions' neoliberal prescriptions over the past three decades. Under NAFTA, the economy was forcibly oriented toward exports. That weakened both its internal market and local production, opening up to a flood of imports and concentrating 80 percent of exports in the United States. Mexican food production actually decreased. As it became harder for Mexican workers and farmers to make a living, many fled to the United States — but although NAFTA made it much easier for capital to cross the border to seek lower costs, it left it illegal for labor to cross the border to seek higher wages.

The trade agreement also showed how U.S. policies can come back to bite. It displaced some 2 million small farmers, increasing immigration to the United States. In recent years, more Mexican immigrants have been returning back home than coming to the United States,

but if Mexico's simmering employment crisis explodes, that would change. And organized crime finds recruiting much easier when large numbers of young people have no prospects for gainful employment.

With a peso that buys less, jobs that are more precarious than ever, and the possibility that their lifeline to the United States will be cut or reduced, Mexicans' anxiety is also sometimes expressed as personal anger against North Americans. Longtime residents of beach resorts and San Miguel de Allende, which is home to an expat community of close to 10,000 people, report a spike in anti-American sentiment. Some have taken to wearing anti-Trump pins in public.

NO TRUMP, NO PEÑA

Mexicans have been demonstrating in the streets against Trump every week since the election. Tens of thousands routinely turn out, but their fury is not just directed against Donald Trump. The demonstrations have brought to a head discontent with Mexico's dominant political and economic systems. From last August, when President Enrique Peña Nieto invited Trump to Mexico and gave him red-carpet treatment, to the revelation that Foreign Minister Luis Videgaray co-wrote Trump's Jan. 25 executive order on the wall and border security, Mexicans are infuriated at the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) government.

A Feb. 12 march for "national unity" organized by pro-government business sectors and media conglomerates fizzled when only a few thousand people turned out. In contrast, nationwide marches on Jan. 31 that combined the protest against Trump with calls for Peña's resignation and an end to gas-price increases brought some 60,000 into the streets of Mexico City alone.

Mexico is being forced to rethink its dependent economy, and grassroots organizations see that as an opportunity. With renegotiating NAFTA possibly on the table, small farmers' organizations are demanding that Mexican food production be withdrawn from the agreement. Trump's threat to pull the United States out would cause much suffering, but many organizations are looking at how to move out of a bad deal and into greater sovereignty and equality.

A new "Mexico Moment" could be in the making. Far from the one that put Peña Nieto on the cover of *Time*, this one won't be registered in the U.S. mainstream media and it won't be led by Mexico's political elite. It's building from below, and it includes strengthening cross-border ties.

Laura Carlsen is the director of the Americas Program of the Center for International Policy based in Mexico City.



DONALD THUMP:

Bashing piñatas made in the likeness of the new U.S. president is a popular activity in Mexico these days.

THOMAS HAWK



MARIO MURILLO

CUBA'S DELICATE DANCE WITH A NEW ECONOMY

BY MARIO A. MURILLO

HAVANA — Luis is a chemical engineer by training who worked for 20 years at a state-run medical facility. These days, he drives a run-down 1978 Fiat that he converted into a taxi.

"I take home in one day what I used to make in about three weeks," he told me enthusiastically after giving me a lift to Old Havana. "I can't imagine ever going back to what I was doing before."

Ruben is another Havana taxi driver I met during my recent visit to the island. He dropped out of medical school a couple of years ago to drive his great-grandfather's 1929 Ford convertible up and down the Malecón, Havana's famed seaside walkway, a popular tourist destination.

"Thanks to the Commander-in-Chief, Raul Castro, I now have this," Ruben said, pointing to the sticker pasted on his windshield that shows official recognition allowing him to use the antique car as a taxi. "After all the fees and taxes are paid for, I come home every night with between \$8 and \$10." That's a small fortune in Cuba.

In 2015, Presidents Barack Obama and Raul Castro resumed normal diplomatic relations between the two countries, after 54 years. Many Cuba-watchers are speculating how a possible reversal of that policy by President Donald Trump might affect the island nation. Yet, the biggest challenges Cuba faces at this moment may be of its own making. A growing private-sector economy centered around the tourism industry is creating pockets of individual prosperity, while driving inequalities not seen in the country since the 1959 Revolution brought Cuba's socialist government to power.

"This is the most difficult period of the last 56 years of the revolution, even more difficult than the days of the so-called 'special period,' because the social inequality that is developing is breaking down the ideological fortitude of the people," said Dr. Ana Sanchez Collazo, professor of pedagogy and philosophy at the University of Havana and a proud veteran of the literacy brigades that fanned out into the countryside in 1961 in the Revolution's successful effort to wipe out illiteracy in Cuba.

For a society steeped in egalitarian values, the drive over the past five years by Cuban leader Raul Castro to introduce elements of capitalism into the economy have been jarring and have many people on edge, across generations.

"The challenge we face is how to build a prosperous and sustainable socialism at a moment of increasing income heterogeneity," said Dr. Daybel Panellas, a professor of social psychology at the University of Havana who has been conducting research about the Cuban worker's psychosocial outlook.

24 YEARS LATER

I last visited Cuba in 1993, when its economy was enduring an unprecedented collapse caused by the sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union, the nation's primary benefactor. Known as the "special period," it was a time of energy rationing, extreme food shortages and scarcity of basic goods, as the real wages of the typical Cuban plummeted. Overall, the Cuban economy contracted by one-third between 1990 and 1993.

"The special period made the Great Depression in the United States, look like an economic boom," said Dr. Ricardo Torres, an economist at the Center for the Study of the Cuban Economy. "Cuba was left all alone to fend for itself, with no support from the international community, and more importantly, with a tightening noose from Washington as it tried to finally put an end to the Cuban Revolution by making the economic blockade even more restrictive."

Yet with some pragmatic changes such as loosening restrictions on foreign investment, propping up the long-dormant tourism sector and legalizing the use of U.S. dollars on the island in the quest for hard currency, somehow, Cuba survived.

The changes to the physical environment have been modest, but are eye-catching when seen after a long absence. There are much larger swarms of foreign tourists, including an unprecedented number of *norteamericanos*, who for decades had been practically non-existent because of the stringent travel restrictions placed on U.S. citizens, many of which were lifted by the Obama administration. The Malecón, the esplanade that buttresses a good part of the city from the Caribbean Sea, still has its dramatic structures with decaying facades, but its five miles are now peppered with dozens of new restaurants, cafes and swanky bars that could not have been imagined in the early 1990s.

SUBTLE CHANGES

But for the most part, the changes underway in Cuba are much more below the surface. Today, as many as 29 percent of Cuban workers are active outside of the state sector, abandoning jobs that pay as little as one-tenth what they can earn in the private sector. It's a brain drain that sees well-educated professionals like Luis and Ruben abandoning their careers to drive taxis, run self-owned eateries or turn their homes into small hotels known as *casas particulares* for visiting tourists.

This trend is expected to grow as the government continues to seek out hard currency and typical Cubans look for new economic opportunities. But while the government has endorsed this process and many Cubans welcome it for the most part, the questions are how quickly it will continue to develop, and what its long-term social and economic effects will be.

The phrase quoted by economists and sociologists

on the island is Raul Castro's own slogan, "sin prisa, pero sin parar," or "without a rush, but without stopping." Yet, is it sustainable in the long run?

"During the special period, there was a feeling of collective sacrifice and struggle, that everyone was in this hole together," said Dr. Panellas. "Today, that sense of social solidarity is threatened by the growing inequality. But there's also a recognition that there's no turning the clock back. The economic reforms that were pushed by the government will not be turned around any time soon."

Indeed, the debate about how to move forward is being widely discussed by everyone, from young punk-rockers hanging out in the streets to high-ranking members of the Communist Party. The artistic community is embracing the new possibilities that these changes are bringing in. In the heart of Old Havana, for example, a number of galleries are popping up, run by established artists who are promoting the new spaces as venues for tourists and Cubans alike, to celebrate the vibrancy of Cuban culture and artistic expression.

One of them is Daniel Atiés Sans, a painter and sculptor whose work has been exhibited from Havana to Berlin, New York City to Santiago de Cuba. His new gallery space is conveniently situated right in front of the birth home of the revered Cuban patriot Jose Martí, the 19th-century revolutionary who is the national symbol of Cuban independence and resistance. Atiés is renovating a formerly abandoned building to "make it a space for the community and the world to celebrate our art and culture." It was only possible, he told me, because of the reforms approved by the government to allow for more independent endeavors to take hold without the direct oversight of the state.

"Many tourists who come in here from Canada and Europe tell me they're visiting the island before Cuba changes totally and becomes something else," he said. "I tell these people not to worry, that they must know that the Cuban people will always be Cuban, and the rich culture of national pride and resistance will always be with us regardless of what happens."

While Cubans are concerned that U.S. policy toward their country could once again take a bellicose turn under Trump, their experience over the past quarter-century has left them confident in their ability to face adversity.

"We've already suffered through, resisted and survived the worst that could be thrown at us," said the owner of the *casa particular* where I stayed during my visit. "Nothing that can happen in the coming months or years can be more difficult than what we have already lived through. After all, we are Cuban."

NEW OPPORTUNITIES:

A carriage driver navigates his way through tourist-friendly Old Havana.

THE END OF WHITE RESPECTABILITY

BY NICHOLAS POWERS

“Flava Flav should run for president,” I told my friends. “Donald Trump? Really? We’ve got better celebrities.” They laughed bitterly. Whether at a party or riding the train, we all felt thrust into a strange limbo. The rules we’d been taught our whole lives were suddenly being rendered meaningless.

After the election, we seesawed between anger, fear and sheer wonder. It was the wonder that tells us the most about our times. How could a man who is so ignorant and vulgar, win the presidency? We had witnessed, without knowing it, the end of white respectability politics.

White America had been split by class but fused together by the reality and mythology of upward mobility. Each generation moved up, and each lower class policed itself to fit the norms set by the one above it.

It worked for decades like an escalator, until capitalism broke down and America became too diverse for them. Now those left behind acted out a desperate revenge. They elected a cretin to the highest office in the land. Whether they know it or not, they bankrupted whiteness for whites. Its elites are shamed and visionless. Its poor are panicked. The future is elsewhere.

RESPECTABILITY POLITICS 101

“For Black people to reach the Promised Land, Flava Flav has to be shot.” Chris Rock paced the stage. “We have a Black man running for president. We don’t need a nigger running around with a Viking hat on his head.”

We howled in laughter at this bit from Rock’s 2004 comedy special *Never Scared*. It spoke to a truth we had lived our whole lives: We had to keep ourselves clean-cut, arrive on time, talk proper and be twice as good. In short, we had to be respectable.

For most of American history, ethnic minorities practiced respectability politics. We policed ourselves to embody white middle-class beauty aesthetics, mannerisms, styles and culture. Professor Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in her 1993 book, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church*, wrote how Black women, “felt certain that respectable behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America, and hence they strove to win the black lower class’s psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners and Victorian sexual mores.”

For most American minorities, respectability politics is bound to “double consciousness”: We know of the warping lens of caricature by which the majority sees us. So we blend in or turn the mirror back around at it. Malcolm X practiced it. Marian Anderson practiced it. Dr. Martin Luther King practiced it. Barack Obama practiced it.

A countercurrent pulsed in the street. In smoky juke joints and jazz clubs. In the jails. In the alleyways where men rolled dice. In the blues. It was just a countercurrent until the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, when Black became beautiful and handsome by rebelling against white middle-class norms. The Black Power aesthetic was commercialized, and remade our culture. We have been living in a Black anti-respectability culture for nearly four decades. White America is just catching up.

WELCOME TO THE MACHINE

“Meet George Jetson!” The cartoon showed Mr. Jetson, zipping in a space car, dropping his family off in a gleaming, futuristic suburbia. I was transfixed. Growing up, I was engulfed by whiteness. “Leave it to Beaver.” “Gilligan’s Island.” “Laverne and Shirley.” “Happy Days.” You name it, I saw it or read it or heard it.

But I knew the stark contrast between media whiteness and the real, living breathing people who were supposed to be white. They did not have laugh tracks turning their pain into humor; their poverty did not end after 30 minutes with credits. They were friends, and they welcomed me into run-down homes, fed me and yes, sometimes hurt me.

We don’t think of white America as having respectability politics. Whiteness seemed to be a background setting. Yet the split between media whiteness and real people creates a class-based double consciousness, a way that poor and working-class whites see themselves through an ideal whiteness.

It began with colonial whiteness, the fusing of ragged European immigrants into an imaginary race. After the interracial 1676 Bacon’s Rebellion in Virginia, a terrified colonial elite made whiteness into a set of magnetic privileges, to divide the restive European working class from African slaves and indigenous peoples.

Whiteness was a generational escalator. It moved new ethnic groups up, up, up into a bright new future. Irish, Jewish, Italian, Greek, Eastern European — people became “respectable” to the degree that they dissolved their cultures in the blandness of the postwar GI Bill-subsidized suburbs. The ’50s were a white golden age. Wives with pearls vacuuming. Men with gleaming new cars. The American president was the final authority in this world, and his decorum, behavior, speech and mannerisms were the embodiment of the ideal.

American whiteness worked as long as the escalator kept moving people across the class divide. But the inner dynamics of capitalism act like a suction tube drawing wealth from the many to the few at the top. Politics strained to bridge the gap.

Presidents overcompensated with populist gestures; Bill Clinton brandished his sax and flaunted a baby-boomer sexuality, George W. Bush had a folksy twang and bar-room swagger. But neither their theatrics nor their policies could stop the class divide from getting wider until the aura of white respectability snapped. The elites of both parties had been coasting on a social contract that had been defaulted on. Then along came a man called Trump.

THE VILLAGE IDIOT

The president doesn’t read. The president hangs up the phone on other world leaders. The president speaks like a middle-school kid bully. The president sends angry 3 a.m. tweets at his TV critics. He held the hand of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for

a long time, petting it like the head of dog.

Every day, we get more evidence that President Trump is embarrassing himself and the country. And yet it is exactly his vulgar, crude and ignorant ways that endeared him to some white voters who found themselves living at the end of whiteness. Their racial privilege is more visible at the same time that their class privileges have stalled or been revoked. And their psychological allegiance to the white ruling class has broken enough for them not to care about respectability. They are no longer looking down at themselves from the position of the elites, but are looking at the elites as frauds. In a fury, they have thrown off white respectability politics.

But in a telling gesture, they, in voting for Trump, threw away their dignity. Respectability politics, whatever race, is implicitly a transactional act. I pay for entry into the club with good taste and good behavior. It is performative, meant for the appraisal of others, one that Jean-Paul Sartre would call “bad faith” or psychologist D. W. Winnicott would call life as a “false self.” It is a mask.

In voting for Trump, a man who laughed at the disabled, gleefully dumped slurs on whole peoples and is too entitled to bother to think, white voters did not free themselves from their elites. Respectability politics can only be

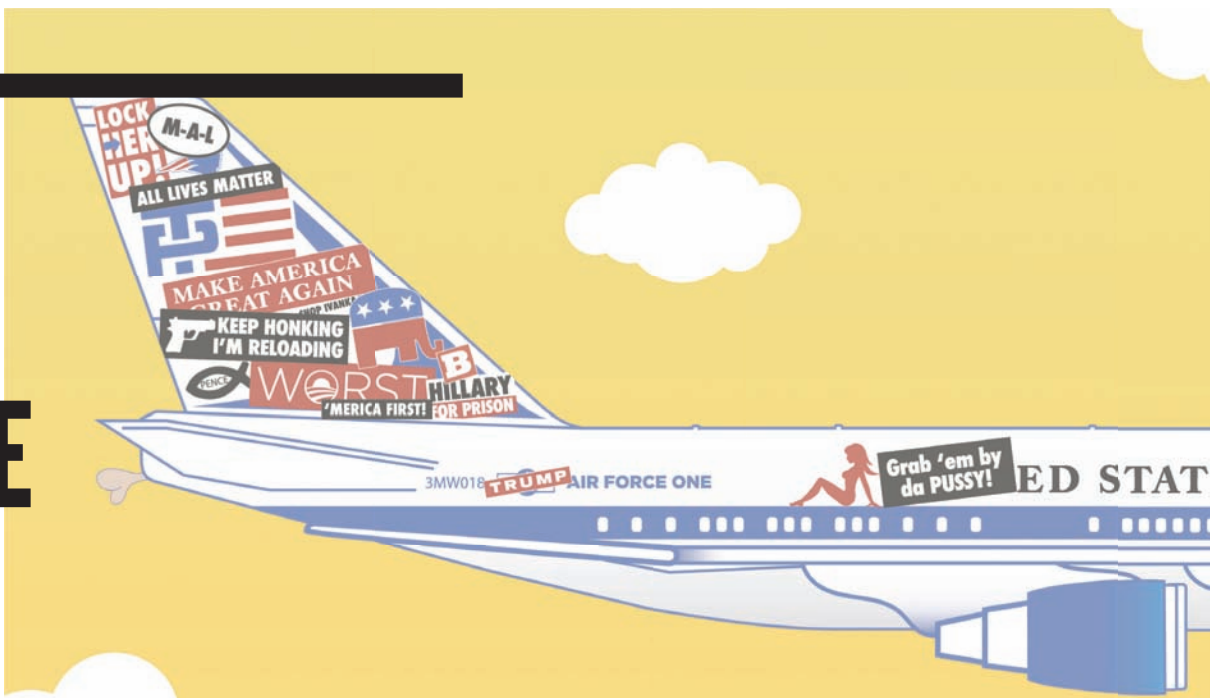
WHITENESS WAS A GENERATIONAL ESCALATOR THAT WORKED AS LONG AS IT KEPT MOVING PEOPLE ACROSS THE CLASS DIVIDE.

seen as a trap if it was first seen as a source of freedom, but it never was.

Dignity is. Dignity comes from a deeper place. Dignity is the source of true revolutions. It’s the realization that you, no matter how poor or tattered, are the embodiment of an immeasurable worth that cannot be defined by status or property.

When you feel that power within, you feel it with everyone, because it is our universal truth. When Trump tried to enact his Muslim ban, tens of thousands of immigrants and native-born allies showed up at airports to protest. It was a deeply loving act of dignity, to reach out in the name of shared humanity to those being scapegoated. It was the birth pangs of a New America, where everyone is welcome, including Flava Flav. Yeah Boyeeeee!

Nicholas Powers is a Professor of African-American Literature at SUNY Old Westbury and author of *The Ground Below Zero* (UpSet Press, 2013).



BRIAN PONTTO

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MAKE PIZZA GREAT AGAIN!

RIGHT-WINGERS ARE ATTACKING A CULINARY DELIGHT THAT REPRESENTS WHAT IS BEST ABOUT AMERICA

BY PETER RUGH

When a far-right conspiracy theory involving the Clintons, pizza, and a supposed child sex-trafficking ring led to a shooting incident in December, I knew it was time to talk to *The Independent's* readers about pizza.

When Edgar M. Welch, a 28-year-old father of two and certifiable moron, decided to investigate the “Piz-zagate” conspiracy, he showed up at Comet Ping Pong in Washington. A trendy pizzeria and ping-pong parlor on the city’s leafy northwestern edge, it was the alleged hub of the Clintons’ child-trafficking operations. Like all great detectives seeking to expose criminal activity, he fired off his AR-15 the minute he walked in the joint. Luckily, no one was injured.

“I just wanted to do some good and went about it the wrong way,” Welch apologized after he was arraigned for assault with a deadly weapon. “The intel wasn’t a hundred percent.”

That is perhaps the understatement of the century. Comet Ping Pong is not alone. The conspiracy theorists claim that the words “cheese pizza” in leaked emails from John Podesta, Hillary Clinton’s former campaign chairman, were code for “child pornography.” Roberta’s, an upscale pizzeria in Bushwick, has been the target of related threats.

“The more I dig those emails and new findings,” one online commentator remarked about Roberta’s, “the clearer it gets.... Most of those so-called elites made a cult out of pizza. Disturbing indeed.”

Anyone who has seen the photos of Donald Trump and Sarah Palin eating Famiglia’s pizza with knives and forks knows the elites wouldn’t even know where to begin making a cult out of pizza. They don’t even know how to eat it.

But it seems the forces of ignorance and bigotry that Trump has brought to the fore are not content with just going after Muslims and immigrants, women and gays. Like ISIS lopping the heads off the idols of ancient dynasties, they have launched an attack on pizza, a divine delight that represents what is truly great about our sad and confused nation.

First brought to New York at the turn of the 20th century by Italian immigrants who were considered dirty and politically suspicious by the American jingoists of the day, pizza is now a quintessential part of the American diet.

“[A] very simple dish, invented as a filling fast meal for the poor of the teeming city,” Elisabeth Luard remarked on pizza’s Neapolitan roots in her classic, *The Old World Kitchen; the Rich Tradition of European Peasant Cooking*. Quick to prepare and easy to eat on the fly, pizza thrived in our own teem-

ing city of immigrants. It spread like marinara across the country.

Like the American dream itself, the surface of a pizza is a wide-open canvas. Let’s make pizza again. Make it yourself, share it with friends, and give New York’s great pizza houses your patronage, before Famiglia becomes our only option.

For help, I’ve reached out to Scott Wiener, who runs tours of New York’s oldest and finest pizza establishments, and is listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as having its largest pizza-box collection. (Visit scottspizzatours.com to book one, or check out his book *Viva La Pizza! The Art of the Pizza Box* to delve into the nerdier subculture surrounding pizza.) He’s provided a list of some of New York’s best pizza-by-the-slice establishments, along with a simple dough recipe you can whip up at home. I’ve also included a basic marinara recipe and a few additional tips that will help put you on the road to becoming a master pizza chef.

WHERE TO FIND THE PERFECT SLICE

JOE’S — 7 Carmine St. (West Village)

LUIGI’S — 686 5th Ave. (Park Slope, Brooklyn)

NY PIZZA SUPREMA — 413 Eighth Ave. (Midtown)

PATSY’S — 2287 First Ave. (East Harlem)

SCARR’S — 22 Orchard St. (Little Italy)

PIZZA RECIPES

SCOTT’S PIZZA DOUGH

Meticulous bakers measure the weight of their ingredients. If you’re going to go all out, you might want to invest around \$20 in a kitchen scale. It’s perhaps more important to be mindful of the dough’s consistency. With some breads, such as focaccia (a precursor to pizza) or no-knead bread, you’ll want a wet, sticky batter. Pizza calls for a smooth ball of dough that expands back into form when you poke it with your pointer finger. If your dough is too wet, add more flour; too dry, add water a spoonful at a time.

455g or just shy of 2 cups of water (room temperature is fine)

700g/6 1/3 cups of flour (all-purpose is fine, bread flour is even better)

3–3.5g/1 tsp active dry yeast

14g/2½ tsp salt (kosher or sea salt)

10g/¾-tbsp olive oil

Mix flour, yeast, salt and water. Let rest 30 minutes. Add olive oil. Knead until springy, then split into four pieces, each weighing 290 grams (or as close as you can get). Store in

lightly oiled containers overnight in the fridge. DONE!

MARINARA SAUCE

6 cloves of garlic, minced

2 tsp red chili flakes

1/8 cup of olive oil

1 28oz can of whole peeled tomatoes (preferably San Marzano)

2 tbsp of oregano, or more to taste

Salt and pepper to taste

Add oil to a skillet over medium heat. Add garlic and red chili flakes. When the garlic becomes fragrant, in about one minute, add tomatoes and all the juice with them from the can. The tomatoes will cool the skillet, so turn the heat up. Allow the mixture to come to a boil. As it does, stir in oregano, a couple dashes of salt and a sprinkling of pepper. Reduce heat and allow to simmer for about 10 minutes, stirring and tasting occasionally. Season with more chili flakes, oregano, and salt and pepper to your liking, as you go. The tomatoes will gradually break down and dissolve. This makes a thick marinara. For a thinner sauce, add a ½ to 1 cup of water in with the tomatoes.

A WORD ABOUT TOPPINGS

Choosing quality ingredients goes a long way with pizza. For cheese, I recommend sticking to the classic: fresh mozzarella, the kind that comes in a ball you can effortlessly peel apart. (There are vegan substitutes that, I’m told, come close.) Colby and cheddar will yield a similarly gooey-chewy consistency.

It is tempting to load your pie with marinara, cheese and other toppings, but it’s better to err on the side of restraint, or else you might have a soggy, undercooked pie on your hands.

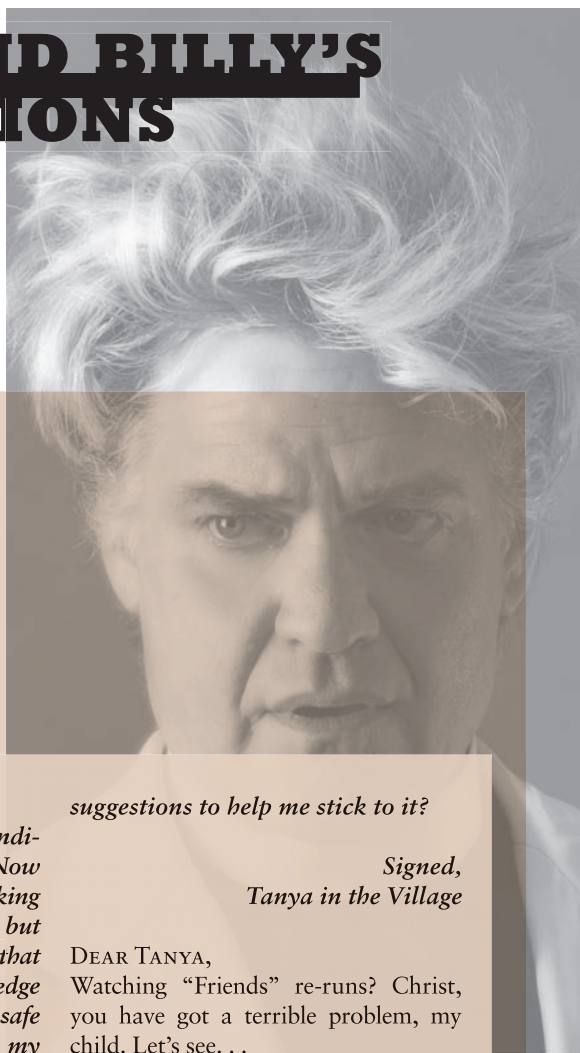
BAKING

The key to the solid, crisp crust and sizzling cheesy top that makes a perfect pizza is heat, a hard thing to duplicate in domestic ovens. You can get around this by using a cast-iron or otherwise oven-safe skillet. The blister on my left hand as I type this reminds me to warn: Be careful not to burn yourself!

Preheat oven to 500 degrees. Lightly brush skillet with olive oil. Roll pizza dough into a disk 12 to 15 inches wide, depending on the size of your skillet. Once your dough is snugly on the pan, add toppings and turn up the burner to high heat. You might have to shift your pan here and there over the burner to ensure even cooking. After about 2

to 4 minutes, the dough will begin to bubble ever so slightly, and the cheese may begin to gently melt. Faint plumes of smoke will begin to rise from the pan. Don’t be alarmed. Give the pizza another 30 seconds on the burner, and transfer to the oven on the skillet. When the dough has risen and turned golden brown, and the cheese has melted — about 10 minutes — remove the pie from the oven. (This is the perfect moment to toss arugula or fresh basil on top.) Let rest about 5 minutes. Slice. Dig in.

REVEREND BILLY'S REVELATIONS



JOHN QUILTY

Dear Rev,
Back when Trump was just a candidate I used to laugh at his antics. Now I'm horrified. I feel bad for not taking him as seriously as I should have but I can't help but feel these days that laughing at him would take the edge off all the terror he represents. Is it safe to laugh again? How do I regain my sense of humor when it comes to our mad hatter-in-chief?

— Cody, East Williamsburg

DEAR CODY,
Give yourself a break. You can't constantly be arranging your emotional response to the outside world like you're driving a car, steering between the lines. I agree with you that we were laughing when we should have been volunteering against Trump's fascism. We should have flown to Toledo, gone door-to-door — a modern version of going off to fight in the Spanish Civil War.

When George Orwell was fighting in Catalonia, he was quipping wittily about proceedings as the bullets flew by. One bullet struck him and he even kept laughing as he fell. That's why he survived to tell the story.

You don't have to find a safe place to laugh. A sense of humor is not earned.

We're in a dangerous place right now, Cody. We can blame ourselves for all those years of laughing with Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert and letting the monster sneak up on us. But the problem was never that we were laughing, it was that we became depoliticized. Have your big laugh at Trump. He is funny. But by all means necessary send him to the Hell where he belongs. Send him to some beauty contest in a phosphorescent subterranean world, where everything is orange. That's good for a laugh.

Laugh-a-lujah!

• • •

Dear Reverend Billy,
Every New Year's I make resolutions. Pretty much the same goals every time. I want to read more and watch less TV, to lose weight and to get more involved in activism. I make some progress here and there but by March I'm sitting on my couch watching "Friends" reruns and eating ice-cream and babka at the end of each work day. This year my resolution is to keep my resolutions! Any

suggestions to help me stick to it?

Signed,
Tanya in the Village

DEAR TANYA,
Watching "Friends" re-runs? Christ, you have got a terrible problem, my child. Let's see. . .

Try this: You will die.

We all will die. Probably someone is dying while they are reading this sentence. You and I will pass away.

Be honest with yourself about this death thing. Imagine your last moments of life. You are falling from a high place. You are bleeding profusely. You are watching light stream into the room. It's over.

People who come back from near-death experiences talk about a contented feeling, about a beautiful dream.

Give yourself the gift of imagining that you are in the super-contented, full-of-light act of dying at this very moment. Then the next moment. And the next... It is happening right now. But for some reason you are not paralyzed in a bed. You have arranged it so that you can keep moving through life while imagining that every second in your healthy body is one of your last.

Death is doing what it always does, moving inexorably toward you. You might last 30 more seconds, a day or 50 years. You can go at any second and each second you have is a gift. Life is letting you breathe another breath in its beautiful dream.

The screen and sweets will really start looking ridiculous. You don't want to live your last moments watching television. If temptation tries to catch your eye, break off, walk away, stand outdoors and start dying for life all over again.

Life-a-lujah!

— REVEREND BILLY TALEN

Reverend Billy is an activist and political shouter, a post-religious preacher of the streets and bank lobbies. He's been in New York forever with the activist performance group the Church of Stop Shopping.

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