

#236: JUNE 2018 • INDYPENDENT.ORG

THE INDYPENDENT

A TEACHER'S LIFE

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ROJAVA UNDER SIEGE

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**JESUS, BLACK &
TRANS**

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BEAT THE MACHINE

CAN THIS FORMER BERNIE ORGANIZER TOPPLE THE KING OF QUEENS?

BY JOHN TARLETON & LYDIA MCMULLEN-LAIRD, P14

Congressional candidate Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez speaking outside a subway station in Elmhurst, Queens.

ELIA GRAN

MIC CHECK!

LET OUR AUTHORS READ THEIR ARTICLES TO YOU ON ITUNES, STITCHER OR SOUNDLOUD.



THE INDYPENDENT



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Liam Reilly, and Carol Smith.

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

JUNE 1–JUNE 24

8PM • FREE

THEATER: OTHELLO

Set amid war and palace intrigue in the 17th-century Mediterranean, this classic drama about a noble black Venetian general whose marriage is sabotaged by theater's most infamous villain, Iago, remains Shakespeare's most urgent and relevant tragedy. A lush, romantic vision gives way to the violent tangle of love and jealousy, race and revenge. Tony-winner Ruben Santiago-Hudson directs. Visit publictheater.org for ticketing information.

DELACORTE THEATER
Central Park, Mnhtn

TUE JUNE 5

6:30PM–9:30PM • FREE

MUSIC: COMMON

Socially-conscious hip hop performer and actor Common kicks off this summer's Celebrate Brooklyn concert series.

PROSPECT PARK BANDSHELL
9th St. and Prospect Park West,
Bklyn

TUE JUNE 5

7:30PM–10PM • \$70 & up

FOOD: IFTAR FOR GAZA WITH UNRWA USA

In the spirit of Ramadan, UNRWA USA hosts an experiential and interactive charitable Iftar (fast breaking) for Gaza. The dinner will feature authentic Middle Eastern cuisine, hosted at Casa La Femme in Manhattan's West Village. This event will evoke a day in the life of a Palestine refugee in Gaza. Proceeds contribute to UNRWA food assistance for Palestine refugees

living in the blockaded Gaza Strip.

CASA LA FEMME
140 Charles St., Mnhtn

WED JUNE 6

7PM–10PM • FREE

GATHERING/BOOK LAUNCH: THE BATTLE FOR PARADISE (LA BATALLA POR EL PARAÍSO)

An urgent conversation about how the forces of shock politics and disaster capitalism are seeking to undermine a radical, resilient vision for a just recovery in Puerto Rico. With videos from JunteGente and The Intercept, an art build, community tables and a book signing by author Naomi Klein.

GREAT HALL AT COOPER UNION
7 E. 7th St., Mnhtn

JUNE 9–JUNE 10

SAT & SUN 11AM–6PM • FREE

FOOD: THE BIG APPLE BBQ BLOCK PARTY

Enjoy mouthwatering 'cue from the world's best chefs and pitmasters.

Madison Square Park, Mnhtn

SAT JUNE 9

3PM–5PM • FREE

BOOK LAUNCH: GRAPES AND THE WIND (LAS UVAS Y EL VIENTO) Celebrate the release of *Grapes and the Wind* by Pablo Neruda, newly translated into English by Michael Straus. A conversation between Straus and Phong Bui, co-founder and artistic director of the Brooklyn Rail, will be followed by a poetry reading in Spanish and English with Ralph Lemon, María José Giménez, Alfred MacAdam and others.

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
200 Eastern Pkwy, Bklyn

SAT JUNE 16

1PM–4PM • FREE

PARADE: THE MERMAID PARADE

A celebration of ancient mythology, the honky-tonk rituals of the seaside and community pride.

CONEY ISLAND
1208 Surf Ave., Bklyn

SAT JUNE 16

2PM–8PM • FREE

FAIR: THE SECOND ANNUAL NYC RADICAL BOOK FAIR

Come hang out with leftists from across the five boroughs, expand your personal library and build solidarity! Thousands of used political and non-political books for sale.

VERSO BOOKS
20 Jay St., Suite 1010, Bklyn

SAT JUNE 16

10PM–4AM • FREE (before midnight)

MUSIC: WORKING WOMEN AND YU SU

Working Women, a New York DJ collective comprised of four selectors — DJ Ashlyn, DJ Voices, DJ Nina and DJ Nicely — each with a unique vision behind the decks, are joined by Vancouver-based producer and DJ Yu Su.

NOWADAYS
56-06 Cooper Ave., Queens

SUN JUNE 17

12PM–6PM • FREE

FEST: MAFRIKA MUSIC FESTIVAL

An international music festival aimed at bringing together members of NYC's diverse communities through sound, dance, visual art, food and literature.

Marcus Garvey Park, Mnhtn

WED JUNE 20

6PM–10PM • \$20

PARTY: BIG GAY ROLLER SKATE: PRIDE EDITION

Guest DJ, skate rental, cocktails, rinkside dining, drag show. Show your rainbow colors.

LEFRAK CENTER AT LAKESIDE PROSPECT PARK
171 Eastern Pkwy, Bklyn

WED JUNE 20

7:30PM–9:30PM • \$6–\$15 (suggested donation)

BOOK LAUNCH: FIGHTING FOR SPACE WITH AUTHOR TRAVIS LUPICK

The story of a group of drug users in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside who waged a political street fight for two decades to transform how the city treats its most marginalized citizens.

THE BROOKLYN COMMONS
388 Atlantic Ave., Bklyn

THU JUNE 21

5:30PM–7:30PM • FREE

FAMILY: PRIDE NIGHT AT CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF MANHATTAN

A special after-hours event in celebration of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer families, as well as LGBTQ adults with children in their lives. Enjoy an evening of family programming and explore all five floors of the museum.

CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF MANHATTAN
212 W. 83rd St., Mnhtn

THU JUNE 21

7PM–9PM • \$25

FILM: LITTLE CINEMA PRESENTS LABYRINTH

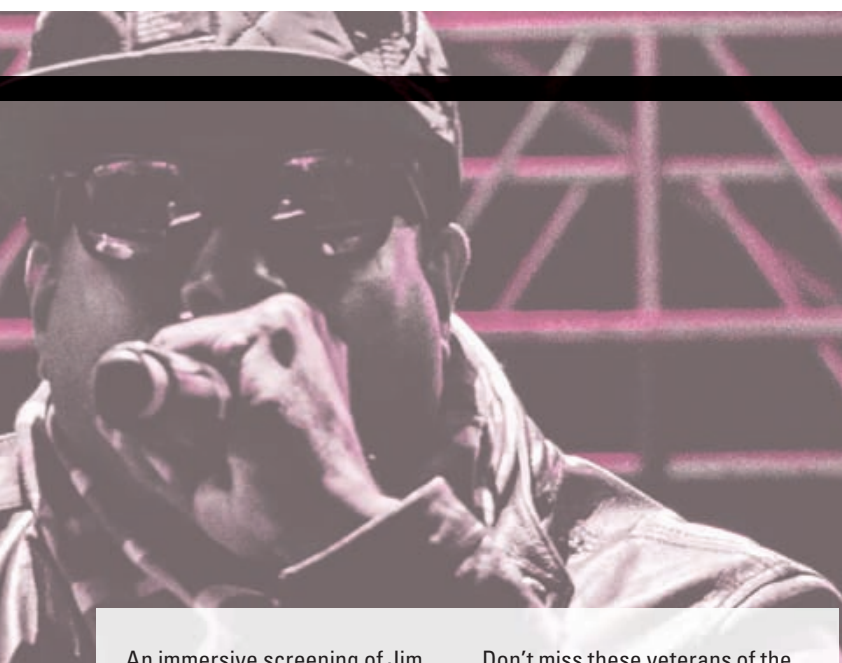
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THE INDYPENDENT

JUNE



ESTEBAN IGNACIO PAREDES DRAKE

An immersive screening of Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* starring David Bowie as Jareth, the Goblin King, and Jennifer Connolly as Sarah. Little Cinema reimagines the dark fantasy epic, exploring the historic collaboration between Bowie, Henson and George Lucas with a cast of over 20 House Of Yes performers and a new interpretation of the classic soundtrack featuring the best of Bowie's music.
BROOKLYN MUSEUM
200 Eastern Pkwy, Bklyn

SAT JUNE 23
1PM-3PM • FREE
PARTY: 6TH ANNUAL ALL AGES PRIDE PARTY
Listen to super queer music and spoken word and have a good time in a space dedicated to LG-BTQ young people, their families, allies and friends.
HOUSING WORKS BOOKSTORE CAFE
126 Crosby St., Mnhtn

SAT JUNE 23
7PM-10PM • \$8
ART: LAFONT: LATIN AMERICAN ART, BEATS & SOCIAL IMPACT SHOWCASE
Colombian artist Mario Lafont's posthumous return to NYC. While exploring a curated exhibition of his works centered on the pressing issues of our time, enjoy live performances and cocktails. Live painting by Kim Hernandez.
STARR BAR
214 Starr St., Bklyn

SAT JUNE 23
7PM-11PM • \$15
MUSIC: THE ADOLESCENTS

Don't miss these veterans of the '80s California hardcore scene.
BROOKLYN BAZAAR
150 Greenpoint Ave., Bklyn

FRI JUNE 29
7PM-10PM • FREE
PERFORMANCE: BRONX SPEAKS: DREAMERS PAL-ABRAS BACANAS Y EMPANADAS CHÉVERES
A night of spoken word, storytelling and savory treats focused on the importance of immigration and the struggle for equity and rights with Bronx spoken word artist Danyeli Rodriguez Del Orbe and La Masa founders Josh Montalvo and Laura Valdez.
LA MASA RESTAURANT
1000 Morris Park Ave., Bronx

SAT JUNE 30
4PM-9PM • FREE
FOOD: BRONX NIGHT MARKET
Highlighting food from around the world found in New York City, featuring 35 food vendors, live entertainment and Bronx-based merchants.
FORDHAM PLAZA
1 Fordham Plaza, Bronx

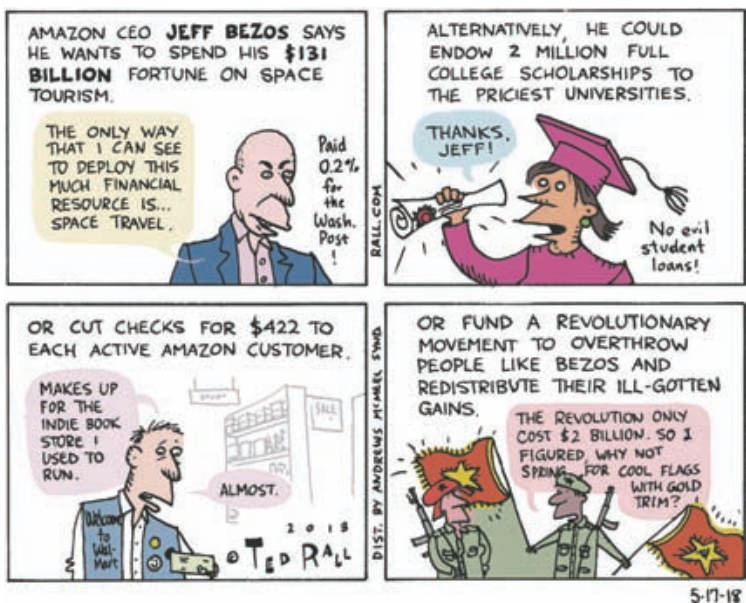
SAT JUNE 30
6PM-9PM • FREE
MUSIC: TALIB KWELI & OSHUN
The acclaimed Brooklyn emcee, one of the sharpest lyricists of his generation, is joined by the rising neo-soul duo OSHUN.
BETSY HEAD PARK
865 Thomas S. Boyland St., Bklyn



STEVEN PISANO

JUST TO GET BY:
Come check out Brooklyn's own Talib Kweli at Betsy Head Park on June 30.

BOARDWALK EMPRESSES: Frolic with the mermaids and other funky misfits of the sea at Coney Island on June 16.



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The price of leases for NYC's 950,000 rent-stabilized apartments are about to rise... again.

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His old comrade Hermon Bell was granted parole, what will be Jalil Muntaqim's fate?

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The view from the front of the chalkboard in Brooklyn's troubled schools.

THE SCHOOL DEFORM MOVEMENT, P10
How Gov. Cuomo and his wealthy donors are warping the minds of New York's children.

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An upstart candidate is making party boss Joe Crowley sweat in advance of their June 26 congressional primary.

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The Democrat's Russia obsession could come back to bite them in the November midterms.

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A firsthand account of the migrant caravan though Mexico.

UTOPIA ON THE EDGE, P20
A Turkish-led invasion could upend an effort at feminist socialism from below in Northern Syria.

SPLIT SCREENS, IMPERMEABLE BORDERS, P21
Dozens of Gazans were killed, while Ivanka Trump celebrated the new U.S. embassy. What now?

JESUS THROUGH THE LENS OF ACTIVISM, P22
An exploration of the late Rev. James Cone's radical theology.

MARX IS BACK, P23
Now how do we make him fully relevant to the 21st Century?

MERELY MORTAL?, P24
A new Jimi Hendrix anthology begins with the guitar genius singing "I'm a man." We're unconvinced.

TRUMP HELP HOTLINE, P25
Rev. Billy offers a tale of two ceremonies: one in Jerusalem, the other at Windsor Castle.

READERS LIKE YOU, P26
The Indy's circulation continues growing thanks to volunteers like these.



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HOUSING

JACKED!

BY GEORGIA KROMREI

On April 26, the New York City Rent Guidelines Board (RGB) voted 5-4 against freezing rents for the approximately 950,000 rent-stabilized apartments it oversees in New York City. The board recommended allowing increases of 0.75 to 2.75 percent for one-year lease renewals and 1.75 to 3.75 percent for two-year renewals. The increases it will set at its final vote June 26 will likely be the biggest it's allowed since Bill de Blasio became mayor in 2014.

The RGB, appointed by the mayor, has nine members. Two represent the interests of tenants, another two represent landlords and the other five are "public members." It froze rents on one-year leases in 2015 and 2016 — for the first time ever — but last year, it approved increases of 1.25 percent for one-year leases and 2 percent for two-year leases.

At the April 26 preliminary vote, the board rejected the tenant representatives' proposal for a one-year rent freeze by a 7-2 margin. Angry tenants surged into the auditorium's aisles in protest, chanting so loudly the landlord representatives didn't bother to make a proposal.

At the next RGB meeting, on May 24, chair Kathleen Roberts, a former judge, proposed prohibiting people from bringing banners and signs to future meetings. (Attendees already have to go through a metal detector, and noisemakers were banned after protesters brought drums and whistles to a 2006 meeting.) "Democracy is a messy business," responded tenant representative Leah Goodridge. "People are upset about the affordability crisis. We should be careful about impinging on peoples' free speech."

"All we have for

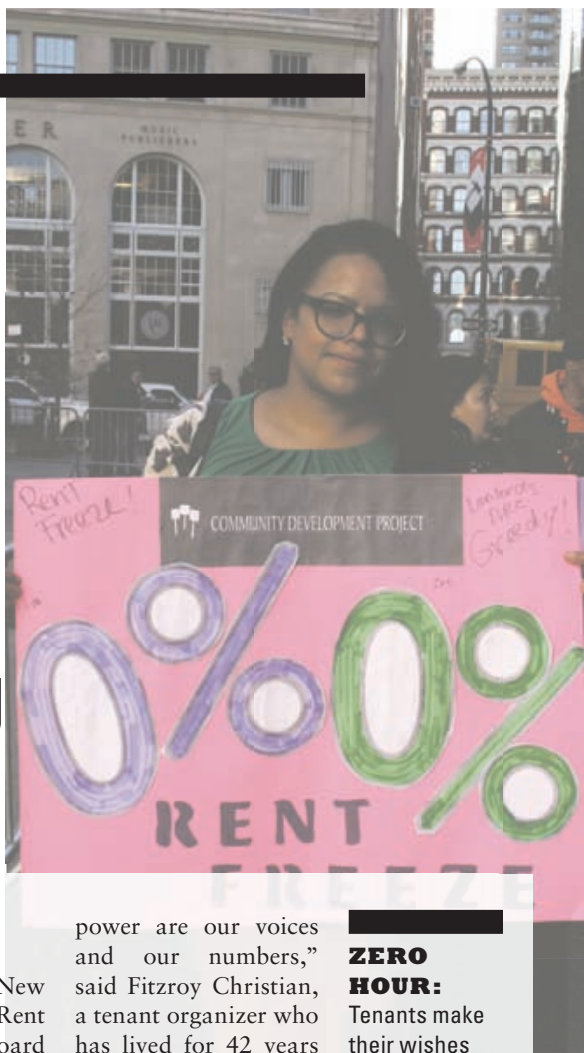
power are our voices and our numbers," said Fitzroy Christian, a tenant organizer who has lived for 42 years in the Bronx. "Protests and signs are a part of people's testimony."

New York's rent-stabilization laws cover buildings of six units or more that were built before 1974, and some more recent units that were built with tax subsidies. These laws will be up for renewal next year. Tenant groups have been urging the legislature to repeal the loopholes it has enacted over the past 21 years, such as deregulating vacant apartments with rents of more than about \$2,735 a month. The state Assembly has passed several bills to strengthen rent regulations over the past few years, but a coalition of Republicans and renegade Democrats has blocked them in the state Senate.

The Rent Stabilization Association, the main trade group for residential landlords, spent over \$1 million on lobbying in 2017, according to the Joint Commission on Public Ethics.

ZERO HOUR: Tenants make their wishes known at the April 26 RGB meeting.

STEVEN WISHNIA



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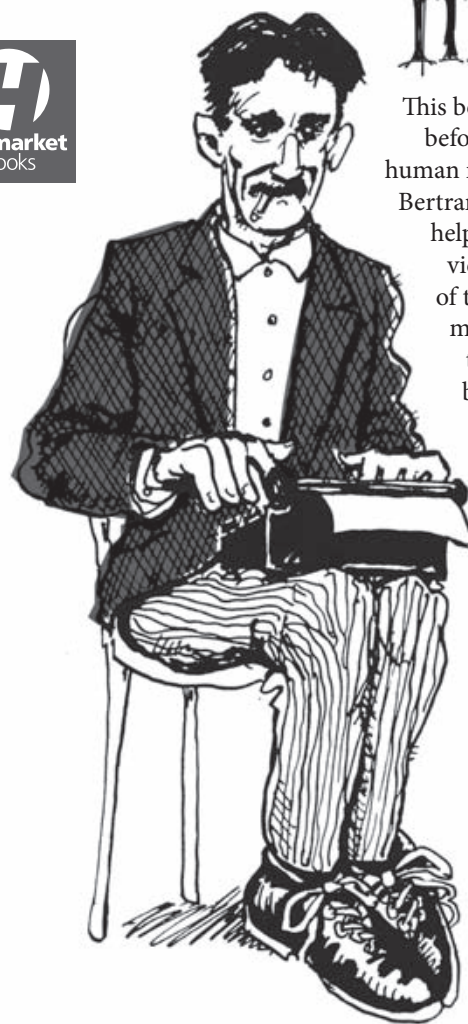
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George
Orwell
Illustrated



This book brings Orwell to life as never before. New discoveries—including a human rights manifesto coauthored with Bertrand Russell and Arthur Koestler—help us better understand the world-view behind the words. In part two of this book, *Planet Orwell*, Orwell's manifesto appears here for the first time, along with a wealth of fresh biographical and literary insights.

David Smith
Illustrated by
Mike Mosher

George Orwell's
story told in full,
with a light touch and
copious illustrations

**UPCOMING RENT
GUIDELINES BOARD
HEARINGS:**

**THURSDAY, JUNE 7
5:30PM–8:30PM***

Jamaica Performing Arts
Center Auditorium
153-10 Jamaica Ave., Queens

**MONDAY, JUNE 11
5PM–8PM***

Hostos Community College/
CUNY, Main Theatre
450 Grand Concourse, Bronx

**WEDNESDAY, JUNE 13
5PM–8PM***

Saint Francis College,
Founders Hall
180 Remsen St., Brooklyn

**TUESDAY, JUNE 19
4PM–8PM****

The Great Hall at Cooper Union
7 E. 7th St., Manhattan

**THURSDAY, JUNE 21
5PM–8PM***

Oberia D. Dempsey Multi
Service Center, Auditorium
127 W. 127th St., Manhattan

**FINAL VOTE:
TUESDAY, JUNE 26
7PM**

The Great Hall at Cooper Union
7 E. 7th St., Manhattan

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BRIEFING ROOM



THE TAXI DRIVER SUICIDES

The body of missing taxi driver Kenny Chow was identified on May 26, after washing ashore near the Brooklyn Bridge. According to family and friends, Chow had become increasingly worried about covering the cost of his wife's cancer treatment and was struggling to make payments on a \$700,000 medallion loan while working 14-hour shifts behind the wheel of his cab. Chow is the fifth worker in NYC's ride-for-hire industry to take his own life in recent months. Bhairavi Desai, director of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, blamed the proliferation of rideshare cars in the city, which have rendered fares scarcer and driven down medallion values, for the despair pervading the industry. "City Hall allowed Uber and Lyft to expand unchecked, devastating the lives and livelihoods of New York City's professional drivers," said Desai. "There are real human consequences to a business model predicated on destroying labor standards and treating workers as expendable."

LOST DAYS OF SUMMER:

Young revellers near Rockaway Beach, where a half-mile stretch of waterfront is closed because it has drifted off to sea.

BITCH CAKES

SHOW TRIALS

The second trial in a series of federal prosecutions stemming from the "Disrupt J20" Inauguration Day protests in Washington, D.C. is set to begin on June 4. Over 200 people were swept up in mass arrests on Jan. 20, 2017 after a small group of demonstrators broke storefront windows and burned a limousine. 194 people were initially expected to stand trial in the case, many facing decades in prison for conspiracy and other charges. Prosecutors, however, dropped their case against all but 59 defendants after jurors acquitted the first six defendants in December. The government has already spent millions prosecuting the alleged rioters for what, by its own admission, amounts to \$100,000 in property damage. It has sought to bolster its conspiracy claim by alleging that J20 attendees who wore dark clothing were members of black bloc, a frequent contingent at protests known for destroying property and clashing with police. Among those still awaiting trial is journalist Aaron Cantú, a former *Indy* contributor who was working as a journalist that day.

IMMIGRANT RIGHTS SETBACK

A federal judge has lifted Ravi Ragbir's stay of deportation and rejected part of a free speech lawsuit that claimed ICE targeted him as head of the New Sanctuary Coalition of NYC. Another stay related to a New Jersey lawsuit challenging Ragbir's original conviction remains in place, and his next scheduled check-in with ICE is July 27. He remains active. "We have to speak up and be willing to sacrifice," Ragbir said.

ON THE RIGHT TRACK?

The NYC Transit Authority's new leader, Andy Byford, laid out a \$19 billion plan this May to overhaul the city's subways. Byford wants to update the subway's Depression-era signal system, a source of frequent delays, within 10 years. Previous plans have given a 50-year timeline for the upgrade. Although there is widespread agreement that the plan would eventually swiften commutes, there has been no indication from Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who appointed Byford, regarding if or how he would pay for the repairs. NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio and Queens State Senator Michael Gianaris have each called for a millionaire's tax to help fund subway improvements.

ROCKAWAY IS WASHING AWAY

Rockaway Beach needs sand. Park Department officials were forced to close a popular half-mile long section of the waterfront ahead of the summer season this May because the shore has become too narrow for beach-goers to inhabit. The city has so far balked at depositing the 250,000 cubic yards of sand required to widen the beachfront, fearing that the \$10 million investment will simply drift away until the Army Corps of Engineers, charged with fortifying the coastline, installs rock jetties to prevent erosion. Accused of prioritizing shore restorations in wealthier Long Island communities, the Corps is not expected begin its work in the Rockaways until after the 2019 beach season.

wild smart fun

SAVITRI D

REVEREND BILLY

photo: john guilty

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AFTER 47 YEARS BEHIND BARS, WILL HE GO FREE?



SHERRI PINTO

BY MESSIAH RHODES

It all started the night of May 21, 1971. Two police officers, Waverly Jones and Joseph Piagentini, were fired upon while walking to their patrol car at a housing project near the Macombs Dam Bridge in Harlem. Jones died instantly from a gunshot to his head. Piagentini, who was shot 13 times, died en route to the hospital. Today nothing marks the location of the shooting, but in the 1970s, it was among a string of cop killings that garnered the attention of J. Edgar Hoover and even President Richard Nixon, who told his FBI director “not to pull any punches” in going after the black militants believed responsible.

Working with the NYPD, the FBI launched operation NEWKILL, casting a nationwide dragnet to track down members of the Black Panther Party’s paramilitary offshoot, the Black Libera-

tion Army (BLA), which had issued statements claiming responsibility for the deaths of Jones, Piagentini and other officers in their war against the United States government.

After a shootout with police in San Francisco, two young men — Anthony Bottom and Albert “Nuh” Washington — were arrested on August 28, 1971 for the killings of Jones and Piagentini. Nearly two years later a third accomplice, Herman Bell, was arrested in New Orleans. They became known as the “New York Three” and in 1975 were convicted of first degree murder, weapons possession and conspiracy.

In 2000, Washington died in prison from cancer. On April 27 of this year, Herman Bell was granted parole. Anthony Bottom, who later changed his name to Jalil Muntaqim, is the only member of the New York Three remaining behind bars. Just 19 years old when he was apprehended, Muntaqim was a member of the BLA,

but he’d already been politically active years before that. An activist with the NAACP’s San Francisco chapter, he joined the Panthers after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968.

“I had a job at California human resources as a social worker and I worked with them getting people employment,” Muntaqim said, recalling the era in which he was radicalized during a recent interview conducted at the Sullivan Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison in upstate New York. “At the same time, I was engaged with the Black Panther Party and their operations.”

Since his arrest, Muntaqim has spent the past 47 years behind bars. The 66-year-old has done time at Attica and Sing Sing in New York and at

HISTORY LESSON:

Former Black Panther Jalil Muntaqim has taught black history courses to his fellow inmates in the New York State prison system.

Continued on page 18

JUNE 1-3, JOHN JAY COLLEGE, NEW YORK CITY
RLS-NYC @ LEFT FORUM 2018

The Far Right in Government: Hungary, Poland, and Turkey

Across the world, we are witnessing a terrifying rise of right-wing governments. For this panel, we have brought experts from Turkey, Poland, and Hungary—each struggling under the rule of an increasingly far-right regime—to discuss how and why this happened, the current state of affairs as well as state of resistance, and what lessons the rest of us can draw.

Pinar Çakiroğlu-Bournous (University of Crete, Greece)
Bartosz M. Rydliński (Wyzynski University, Warsaw, Poland)
Kristóf Szombati (Columbia University, New York)
Ethan Earle (RLS-NYC), Chair

Democracy: Liberal, Radical, Socialist

Amidst the crisis of 'actually existing neoliberal democracy' today, this panel addresses the theoretical foundations of liberal and radical conceptions of democracy in relation to those of socialist democracy. What are the new premises and visions that will be required in rethinking socialist democracy in the 21st century?

Alex Demirović (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Berlin)
Nancy Holmstrom (Rutgers University)
Leo Panitch (York University)
Greg Albo (York University), Chair

Co-sponsored With Socialist Register

The Black and the Bern: The Rise of Insurgent Black Progressive Politics

Since Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential run, a wave of insurgent Black progressives have been running for elected office around the country. But how are the Black and the Bern(ie) linked? Join us for this wide-ranging discussion, which will touch on reparations, electoral strategy in the age of Trump, and that secret sauce needed to cook up a lasting coalition.

Councilman khalid (City Councilman, South Fulton, GA)
Maria Hadden (Candidate for 49th Ward Alderwoman, Chicago City Council)
Yasmina Price (DSA National Afro-Socialist Caucus)
Kazembe Balagun (RLS-NYC), Chair

Marx 200 Everything Old Is Young Again

This May 5 we celebrated Karl Marx's 200th birthday. At this gathering, a diversity of voices will tell short stories about Marx to keep this birthday celebration going. When did you first read Marx? How do you relate his work to contemporary issues, from politics to art to science fiction? Join us for this belated birthday party.

Sarah Leonard (The Nation magazine)
Silvia Federici (Hofstra University)
Christoph Spehr (Die Linke, Germany)
Yasmina Price (DSA National Afro-Socialist Caucus)
Biju Mathew (New York Taxi Workers Alliance)
Kazembe Balagun (RLS-NYC)
And many others
Albert Scharenberg (RLS-NYC), Chair

Marx 200 Sunday Matinee: The Young Karl Marx

In this acclaimed film about Karl Marx, Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck (*I Am Not Your Negro*) traces the early years of Marx's life as a young philosopher and revolutionary. Centered on the burgeoning friendship between Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the film details Marx's experiences with political repression during his years in Paris, Brussels, and London. Join us for a free screening of *The Young Karl Marx* (2017, 118 minutes) and reflect on the dilemmas as well as promises of an international socialist movement, then and now.

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ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG
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A TEACHER'S EDUCATION

A VIEW FROM INSIDE THE CITY'S TROUBLED SCHOOLS

BY FARID NASSIF

Ms. Wang's 10th-grade physics classroom is a furnace. There is no air conditioning. A certain sickening heat rises from the lower floors of the building and lingers in the air here on the top floor. When I arrive, an English Learning teacher, Ms. Vladi, is helping Ms. Wang deal with residual dramatics from yesterday when a fight broke out in the hallway. Ms. Wang has retreated to a can of ginger ale, holding it close to her lips as though it will prevent her from taking the neural wear of too much stimuli on the chin.

The classroom degenerates into a ballistics training camp gone awry. Balled paper and other detritus rocket overhead. Ms. Wang flinches and nearly ducks behind her desk. Ms. Vladi is left stranded, playing the futile role of aerial traffic cop as trash flies about. "Is math the language of the universe?" Ms. Wang delicately mumbles in an effort to regain order, but the room has become a starship vessel, penetrating the stratosphere in a nosedive toward utter anarchy. It takes an inordinate amount of control to keep myself dissociated from the melee. I'm not aware when class ends because it never seemed to begin.

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BROOKLYNITES LEARN and teach atop the noxious strata of industrial waste in Gerritsen Beach, above massive expressways in Sunset Park, amid the ongoing inland circuitry of a roaring city.

Rife with de facto segregation and barely-veiled discrimination, Brooklyn's schools, and New York City's for that matter, are underfunded and poorly equipped, yet are held to the cookie-cutter standards of the state. Black children are incarcerated for loitering outside of schools, often brutally subdued for petty infractions. From outdated textbooks to poor access to special needs instruction, the uneven distribution of and access to knowledge is disgraceful.

I started teaching at CUNY community colleges five years ago but soon became convinced that I had to visit the former schools my students named, from which they arrived, often unable to read beyond a grade school level. I became a part of a city program that gave me the opportunity to observe and teach several classes throughout Brooklyn.

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IN A SCHOOL NEAR GERRITSEN BEACH, one that will be shut down this summer due to the discovery of hazardous waste in the surrounding soil, Mr. Mike pitches several scenarios in his 11th grade math class to help his students understand the real-world utility of his lesson. He decorates the whiteboard with geometric figures. He compares the measure of a tangent to the shapes that form when we skip rocks in water. He explains that secants are useful if a patient in an emergency room has been pierced by a bullet. Then he asks the entire class, "How can you find the circumference of Earth?" A few students pull up to the board, consorting, cross-referencing informal equations to dispel diameters from radii. They're determined to know the size of the planet they live on and perhaps how much room is left for them.

Meanwhile, this sinking school is soon to be drained of its students. Real-world lessons are not limited to math. Toxic water fountains in the halls are covered with garbage bags and students carry old plastic bottles full of water from home. Paper is in short supply, so teachers bring their own reams. Students learn first-hand about asbestos abatement and termite infestation, and the teachers do as well. Hungry students learn to steal lunch from the fridge in the teachers' lounge. They come from cold housing projects where they care for siblings while their parents work the night shift. There is so much to learn.

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TEACHERS ARE SO SURFEITED with such realities that they retreat to familiar things. A shifting tide of male and female teachers enters and exits the catacombic teachers' lounge every day.

Conversation morphs to baseball lineups when the influx of men charge the dungeon, and then there's chatter about child-rearing and dieting when the women take over. Everyone seems very comfortable with the stereotypes that surface: locker room man-speak and vanity-

counter gossip make the day a little less mean. And holy mackerel are there sweets — chocolates, taffy, crackerjacks, candy corn, horribly stale Peeps, cans of Mountain Dew. This is a time to let things rip, to make the most of the morning respite ahead of the school day. Expletives are passed around the table like condiments. I tend to shift my weight awkwardly in the lame kids' corner, my own high school hauntings resounding within me. A Global History teacher is sitting uncomfortably close, tearing at a nectarine as she explains that she's moving to New Jersey but "wouldn't ever change schools because kids out there are doing hard stuff."

It had crossed my mind that suburbia might be home to more rigorous instruction while city schools do nothing but exact pain and corral students into fetid cells, but I never expected to come across such laziness, especially at a school like this, relatively well respected even if it is in the city. It was my comfort to believe that some good schools were immune to this thinking. I fear my sudden paralysis and a prolonged silence may have revealed where I stand on the matter. I consider grabbing a Peep from the table as some sort of defensive strategy. I want to argue on behalf of those who have a genuine passion for teaching. I want to change her, but given the unanimous laughter at the table, I wouldn't touch that responsibility with tongs.

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IN A MILL BASIN SCHOOL, Ms. Kelly asks her 11th grade students to write a paragraph about a piece of furniture or object that holds memories for them. The class is reading Toni Morrison's, *The Bluest Eye*. In the "Autumn" section of the novel, Cholly Breedlove's self-loathing manifests itself in several ways: his alcoholism, the abuse of his family and the rape of his daughter, Pecola. The family sofa provokes this feeling further — a physical representation of his inadequacy. Its fabric is split down the center on the date of purchase and Cholly is unable to convince the store to replace it — yet another reminder of his inferiority.

In a brainstorming session before writing their paragraphs, many of the students name old toys, necklaces, video game controllers (ugh) and even restaurants — an assortment of things that they hold dear. One student hands in a story I find disturbing. Marina says she dislikes all the objects in her home because they remind her of her father, who she also considers an object, one that brings nothing but "evil and hate."

"He means nothing to me, but he has such an impact on my life," she writes.

Marina has not spoken a single word in the classroom in months. Always polite and composed but never a contributor to discussions, she sits in the far corner of the room despite Ms. Kelly's pleas to move closer. She is stocky and sports an androgynous quiff. There is a steely expression of tolerance frozen on her face. I imagine the weight of that tolerance is a heavy load to hoist aloft through eight periods each day, especially in this particularly boy-heavy class where whispers of "fag-got" and "homo" are routine. Many of these kids are often in on some confidential joke that seems to be pointed in her direction.

"What are you trying to start here?" Ms. Kelly asks Marina after class is over.

"I'm going to therapy about it already," Marina says and marches away.

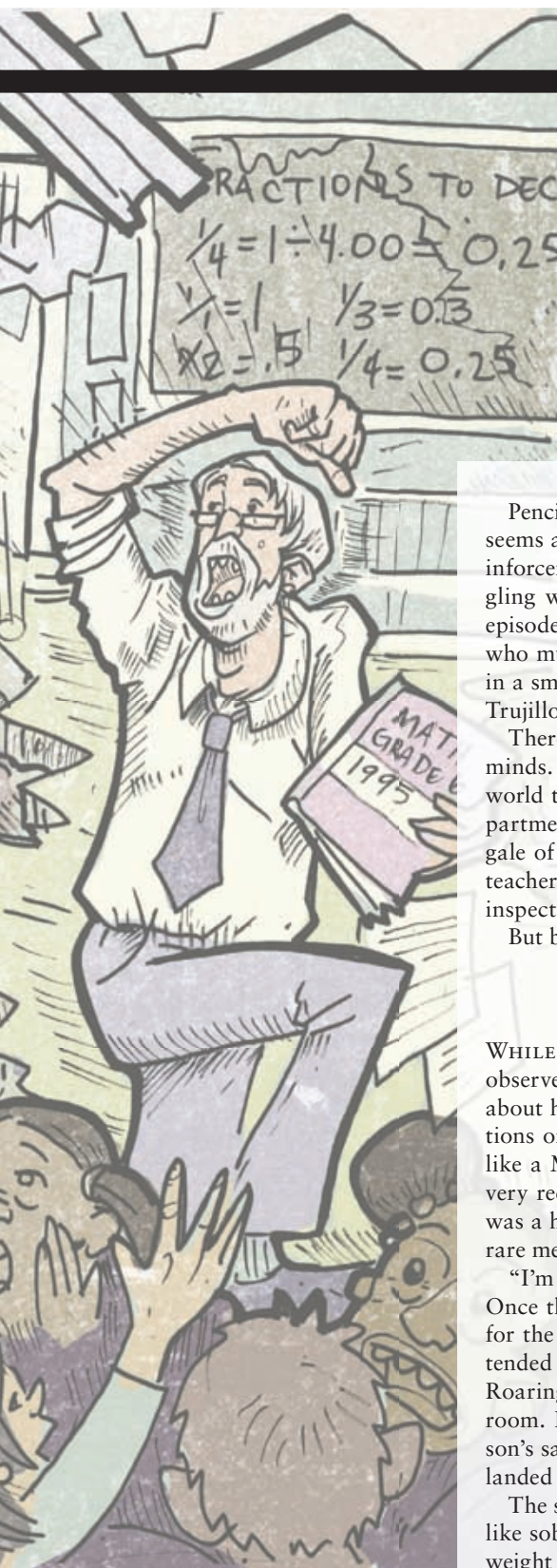
What is my responsibility here? This is not my classroom. Where is the book titled, *How to Become the All-purpose Teacher*? Very little instruction was necessary to give Marina a sense of the humiliation and degradation that haunts Cholly Breedlove.

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IN SHEEPSHEAD BAY, Mr. Josh begins by asking the students in his 9th grade English classroom to try to avoid thinking of a green hippopotamus for a minute. A tame laughter envelops the room. Very few admit to resisting the thought. Josh transitions into a discussion of mind control and Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of Butterflies*, a novel about the psychological and physical torment Dominicans faced living under Rafael Trujillo's autocratic reign. He asks the students to reflect on the notion of attempting to abandon all thought of a terrorizing dictator who is forever looming like a foul odor, or a green hippopotamus, that relentlessly invades their consciousness.

"What might be the psychological effect on a nation living under such control?" Josh asks.





GINO BARZIZZA

Pencils start moving and hands are raised, but a quarter of the room seems adrift. Josh's lesson plan has already anticipated the need for reinforcements in just such a circumstance. For those who are still struggling with the concept, Josh plays a brief clip of *The Twilight Zone* episode "It's a Good Life." The story tells of provincial townspeople who must put on airs of contentedness or be exiled into the cornfields in a small town ruled by a megalomaniacal young boy. The concept of Trujillo's reign takes a concrete form for all of the students.

There is in fact a green hippopotamus always stalking teachers' minds. The Brooklyn classroom is a tiny ecosystem while in the macro world the Regents and the Common Core exams, and the general Department of Education bureaucracy, loom ferociously. The approaching gale of reckoning that comes during testing season gives students and teachers alike a sense that a greater inhuman force will be making a full inspection of them.

But bureaucrats aren't the only ones with expectations of success.

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WHILE PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES are often uneventful, I did observe one mother's malfunction after a fellow teacher relayed a tale about her son. Throughout the evening I'd mostly seen different variations of jump suits and gray sweat wear, but this mother was dressed like a Mardi Gras float. Her neck was a purple-feathered lei. She had very recently shampooed and teased a variegated panic of hair. There was a harlequin patchwork on her shirt. Her lips were painted red like rare meat. She looked beyond cheerful, almost tipsy.

"I'm heeeoorre!" she proclaimed, in an accent I couldn't decipher. Once they were seated in two tiny tablet arm desks normally reserved for the students, both she and Ms. Carlin seemed apprehensive. I pretended to thumb an errant piece of tape dangling from a poster of "The Roaring 20s" while I listened intently from the other side of the classroom. In short order, Ms. Carlin recounted the story of the woman's son's savage path to a week's suspension. The story ended when Carlin landed on, "that's when he called me a bitch."

The sudden rush of tears on the woman's face as she emitted a snore-like sob told me what heartbreak looks like. As a new father, I felt the weight of this more than I'd expected. What crushing news. Her life's work had just been dragged through the mud. Carlin did her best to convince the mother that the suspension was no big deal. But the woman abandoned her seat and marched out of the classroom, shaky but resolute. What that young man had in store was all too real.

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MY OWN EXPERIENCE TEACHING in Brooklyn public high school classrooms was very real itself. I was loud, idiotic and impressively knuckle-headed in front of thirty-seven lotus eaters in the 11th grade. They all looked like they'd pulled an all-nighter; some of them in fact are put to work in family bodegas until ungodly hours. And here we were at 7:15 a.m., discussing F. Scott Fitzgerald.

We had slogged through seven chapters of *The Great Gatsby* thus far this semester, and I sure as hell wouldn't let them stall at this stage. It seems that they had relied so heavily on the 2013 DiCaprio film that the thinky parts in the seventh chapter were entirely incomprehensible. As the week neared an end, I decided to try a close reading with them, pausing after tiny passages and asking them how they might interpret each. I'd like to blame the encroaching spring vacation, the visions of days burning time or doing anything but reading the eighth chapter, but it was a futile exercise and my visible disappointment seemed to just roll off the porch.

I ask something about Nick Buchanan's inability to reserve judgment.

"I don't care!" Tavis barks at me. For a moment it was almost relieving to see him participate. Tavis is a walking wen, blemishes poke out of his cheeks like raviolis split open. He has the posture of an ailing city squirrel. As he lurks the hallways in the morning, awaiting the first bell, his breaths are labored and audible. A recent doctor's note says he is asthmatic. On a daily basis, I try to rouse him with a spunky "Good morning, Tavis!" He replies with a dark moan.

After class I spoke to him in the hallway, expressing concern for his unusual outburst.

"I don't like this book," he says, eyes to the ground, adding with a resolute shrug: "It's boring."

To me it was a spit in the face. All this time I thought I'd been making *Gatsby* exciting.

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AT THE BEGINNING of an afternoon ELA class I scrawl on the board something taken from the writer Grace Paley: "If you say what's on your mind in the language that comes to you from your parents and your street and friends you'll probably say something beautiful."

My question for the students is fairly direct: "What do you think this means? Do you agree?"

I hope for a verbal firing squad, but get nothing but a few blue yawns and a distant "fuck you" from somewhere in the back of the room. Breakfast was four hours ago, and someone took my banana bread from the shared refrigerator — something that has happened several times this semester, the act, I suspect, of a desperately hungry student. The ghost of the purloined banana bread throws sand in my Wednesday eyes, and because it is so hot in this room, I'm nearly ready to faint.

After some prodding, one student says that she doesn't really talk to people in person because she doesn't need to. Social media has essentially wrung their use of language dry. Ridicule is their default mode of engagement. I hear it in the hallways and in the cafeteria; the base poetry of mockery. As long as social media scares children away from genuine human encounters, I'm afraid these kids won't know how to measure the distance between love and fear. Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison consider the continued use of the language of their childhoods to be a gesture of survival, a way of guarding their memories and of carving out a sense of place in the face of adversity. I do hope this was just a dreary morning and not a sign of things to come, of a general forgetting.

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OUTSIDE OF MY OWN STINT in front of the chalkboard, I have seen some teachers succeed. In Sunset Park, at the start of Mr. Banes's 8th grade ELA class, a raucous game of musical chairs settles to a pre-performance hush. This is clearly a tamed classroom. Banes tells me later that this was no accident. He spends the first weeks at the beginning of each school year working patiently to generate an atmosphere of respect in his classroom. When his students are not around he is applying for grants to fill his classroom shelves with volumes of literature or fielding long, often broken phone conversations with parents. He has a reserve of trivia that keeps the students on their toes. He explains that "scuba" is an acronym. He can tell spitting llama stories, how long a flying fish can glide in the air, how many postmen were bitten by dogs in Britain in 1968, where iced tea was invented. His compendium of unusual facts has knighted him in the eyes of his captors.

The walls are decked with quotes harvested from *Of Mice and Men*, drawings of Steinbeck and photographs of Salinas, California, Steinbeck's hometown. The students begin a discussion of the themes in Steinbeck's novel: the American Dream, loneliness, power. Art supplies and magazines are distributed and they begin creating a collage based on their own definitions of these themes.

A moon-faced boy in the back of the room holds up his copy of the novel and asks, "Why is this page 'ix'?" Banes thoughtfully transitions into a lesson about Roman numerals. He has a swift, conscious command of the impromptu lesson afoot. He proceeds to compare Arab and Roman numerals, asking them to map out the year 1971 in Roman digits. It is refreshing to see these tiny grace notes of inventive serendipity in a classroom.

After school, Banes works with his students in an adjoining garden that he has created himself. Banes has sculpted a landscape for his students that out-shoots the overwhelming cascades of bitter incivility and snarkiness at large in New York City. The peace that comes with gardening and a concurrent understanding of agriculture is a rare thing in this city. The students till topsoil and prepare seedlings. I'm reminded of something Steinbeck once wrote, that he hopes "we may not be overwhelmed one day by peoples not too proud or too lazy or too soft to bend to the earth and pick up the things we eat."

HEY, CUOMO, LEAVE THOSE KIDS ALONE!

BY PETER RUGH

Imagine you are in grade school, taking a test, one that could determine whether your teacher keeps her job, the amount of funding your school receives or even if it will remain open. You've been preparing for this test for months and now there is a multiple-choice question on a computer screen in front of you, but every option — A,B,C — reads “system error.”

This actually happened on April 11 to students sitting for the New York State English exam. Other students in the 263 districts taking part in the digital-testing pilot program weren't able to log in or their work was lost when the software crashed. The glitch was ultimately ironed out, but the “system error” message spoke volumes to critics of the state's increased emphasis on standardized tests.

In the past two school years, approximately 20 percent of New York parents have refused to force their children to take the statewide exams in what's become known as the opt-out movement. They say the tests are developmentally inappropriate, while teachers complain of being forced to devote excessive amounts of time preparing students for them.

“As teachers, we're trained to look at the entire child, but as soon as we enter the institution of the Department of Education, we're suddenly compliance managers,” says Jia Lee. An opt-out parent and a teachers union activist, Lee has worked as a special education instructor at various New York City public schools for 17 years. She is running for lieutenant governor as a Green Party candidate. “The pressure is on the teacher and the administrators to make sure test scores are high,” she says.

Parents and educators alike have also raised concerns about students' privacy. The test scores are part of the data used to track student performance over the course of their education. Personal information such as Social Security numbers are often batched in with academic information provided to third-party vendors contracted by the state Department of Education (DOE).

In January, Questar, which received a five-year, \$44 million contract in 2015 to administer state exams for third through eighth graders, announced that a data breach had compromised the confidential information of 52 students at five schools in Great Neck, Menands, Oceanside, Queens and Buffalo. That's only a minute fraction of the more than 2.6 million students enrolled in New York's school system, but nonetheless the breach — which included student names, teachers, grades and identification numbers — highlighted the risks of collecting massive troves of student data and placing it in the hands of third parties.

Yet the tests and the data-driven assessments of both teachers and students that have accompanied them are just one facet of the education overhaul the state is undergoing at the direction of Gov. Andrew Cuomo — part of a national trend of education “reforms” pushed forward by Wall Street, technology companies and billionaires like the Walton

family, heirs to the Walmart fortune.

Gov. Cuomo, the most powerful politician in New York for the past seven and a half years, is seeking a third term but is facing a primary challenge from the left by Cynthia Nixon, a longtime education activist who has name recognition thanks to her role on the popular television program *Sex and the City*.

The governor, who hopes that winning a third term will vault him into consideration as a viable presidential candidate in 2020, touts himself as a “progressive” Democrat while raising vast sums of money from the 1 percent. Cuomo has increased the minimum wage and pushed same-sex marriage through the legislature, but he has a much spottier record on several other major issues. New York City's subway system has fallen apart on his watch. He has done almost nothing to shore up state laws that protect the roughly 2 million city residents who live in rent-stabilized apartments, has chronically underfunded city and state university systems, and has pushed forward a series of corporate-friendly school policies whose impact on millions of New York school children, families and teachers has been far-reaching — if more opaque and obscure than a daily commute from hell on a broken subway system.

Often derided as the “school deform movement” by its detractors, the corporate push for education reform has led to the closure of hundreds of public schools, the proliferation of privately-operated, publicly-funded charter schools and attacks on teachers' unions, one of the last bastions of organized labor. Norm Scott, a longtime public school teacher who now runs the Ed Notes Online blog, describes the surfeit of corporate think tanks, political action committees, charter school chains and data analysis firms that have sprung up under the “reform” umbrella in recent years as the “Education Industrial Complex.”

“It's not going away any time soon,” says Scott. “There's too much money in it.”

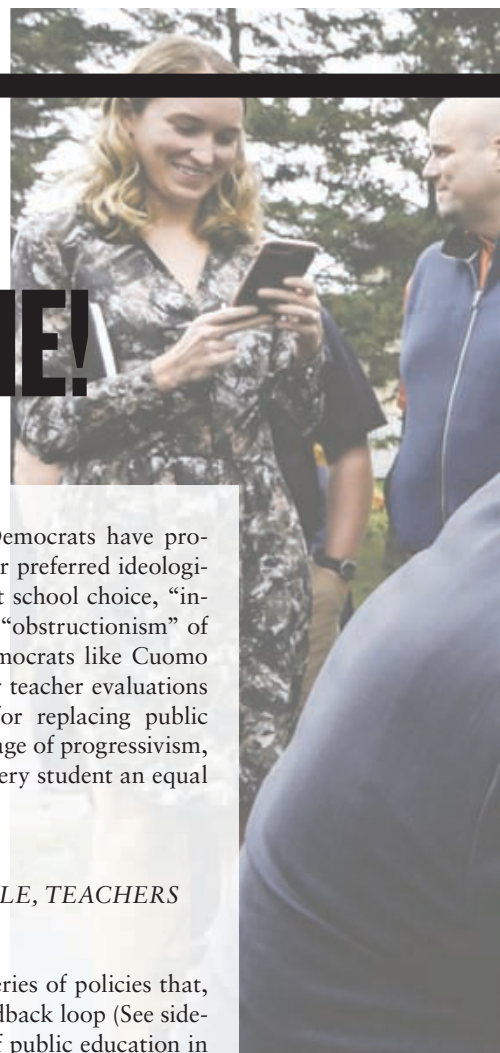
Both Republicans and many Democrats have promoted these policies, through their preferred ideological lenses. For the GOP, it's about school choice, “innovation” and often breaking the “obstructionism” of teachers' unions. Meanwhile, Democrats like Cuomo have couched their calls for stiffer teacher evaluations tied to standardized tests and for replacing public schools with charters in the language of progressivism, arguing their agenda will grant every student an equal opportunity to succeed.

WHEN STUDENTS ARE CATTLE, TEACHERS ARE RANCHERS

Gov. Cuomo has championed a series of policies that, taken together, form a kind of feedback loop (See sidebar) threatening the foundation of public education in the state. Test scores are used to fire teachers and to label schools failures and close them down. In turn, those schools are replaced by nonunion charters, thereby weakening the membership base of the New York State United Teachers, the statewide teachers union, and its New York City local, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT).

“I'll never forgive Gov. Cuomo,” says Carol Burris, a former principal of the year at South Side High School in Rockville Centre on Long Island, now executive director of the Network for Public Education Foundation. She describes the climate in which the “reform” movement first began to pick up steam. The Obama administration's 2009 “Race to the Top” initiative gave states an incentive to focus on test scores as a way of securing federal grants at a time when the housing crisis had left schools strapped for revenue.

“Cuomo, he just took advantage of it politically,” Burris explains. “All of a sudden, teachers and principals were seen as villains. We were not doing our job. We had



10 REASONS FOR THE STANDARDIZED TESTING INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

HUGE PROFITS: *for the companies who make and grade the tests and create test prep materials.*

BUILDS A MARKET: *Allows for standardized curriculum that in turn helps create a national market for other educational products and services.*

DESKILLS TEACHERS: *Standardized testing and a heavy emphasis on test prep reduces the importance of the teacher and makes it easier to hire poorly paid novices who don't know any other way of teaching.*

DISCIPLINES STUDENTS: *A test-centered pedagogy teaches the idea that meaning isn't something you generate in part from your own life experience, but is something that exists outside of you and can only be rotely memorized and regurgitated upon demand. For those who preside over an increasingly plutocratic society, teaching young people how not to think for themselves could be seen as an insurance policy against future social upheaval. But will it work?*

DISCIPLINES VETERAN TEACHERS *who face the choice of continuing to teach to the whole child as they were trained to do or teach to the test. If they choose the former, they risk seeing their students' register sub-par test scores and in turn be removed from the classroom or even fired, which saves money and removes the people best positioned to critique and mobilize opposition to a pedagogy based on standardized testing.*

WEAKEN TEACHERS UNIONS: *Replacing experienced teachers who saw their job as a career with younger, less-skilled teachers who will burn out within a few years and be replaced by others like them has the added benefit of weakening teachers unions and reducing future pension costs.*

SCHOOL CLOSINGS: *It provides a rationale for closing “underperforming” public schools and handing their school buildings and their per pupil public funding over to privately run charter school chains.*

A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN: *Charter school students also have to take standardized tests. However, charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately managed, can expel low-performing and/or behaviorally challenged students and send them back to public schools which have to accept them.*

MASS SURVEILLANCE: *As standardized tests are increasingly taken on computers, data on how a student answers every question from kindergarten forward can be compiled and potentially sold to educational products vendors. Welcome to the matrix.*

BLAME SHIFTING: *Allows elected officials who don't want to offend their wealthy donors by investing in great public schools to shift the responsibility for the policies they have enacted onto vulnerable schools and the communities they serve.*

— INDYPENDENT STAFF



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to perform. And if only we were better, poverty would disappear because all of the kids at school, no matter how difficult their circumstances, they would go off to college and poverty would disappear.”

To gauge teacher performance, New York State uses a metric known as student-growth percentile (SGP). In theory, it is supposed to factor in economic data and other elements that contribute to test results, and then determine a teacher’s impact on learning by how much the percentile rankings of students under their charge have changed each year. The state DOE takes test data and compares that to statistical models for how much growth each student in a class should experience and assigns teachers ratings of “highly effective,” “effective,” “developing” or “ineffective.” Those who receive two consecutive “ineffective” ratings could face dismissal. As critics point out, if a teacher manages to inflate her students’ scores one year and preserve her job, then the next year’s teacher will be expected to surpass that.

“Really, the test scores are indicating where there are high pockets of poverty and inequity,” says Lee, rather than how well students are being instructed. She notes that there are no state standards for how charter schools evaluate their instructors. They are not compelled to use SGP.

And yet students at charter schools tend to outperform their public school peers. The reason for this, Lee argues, is because tests are often charter schools’ primary focus of instruction and because charters, which typically enroll students through a lottery system, use disciplinary measures to weed out problematic pupils. Forty-two percent of all student suspensions in New York City occurred at charter schools, although they contain only 7 percent of the city’s overall student population, according to an analysis conducted by the *Atlantic* based on 2014 data. One mother, whose son attended a Success Academy charter in Brooklyn’s Fort Greene neighborhood, told the magazine that he was suspended 30 times in one year in an effort to force her to withdraw him. Success Academy, the state’s largest charter-school network, runs 46 schools in the five boroughs and its operators are among Gov. Cuomo’s largest donors.

A 2017 study by the Network for Public Education found that charter schools in New York City have a lower population of students with special needs or who come from economically disadvantaged homes. At Success Academy Charter – Harlem 1, 76 percent of students come from low-income homes and 16 percent have learning disabilities. That might seem high, but not when compared to the surrounding public schools. At nearby PS 149 Sojourner Truth, 93 percent of students are low-income, 36 percent have special learning needs.

Public schools, Lee says, “are not in the business of pushing students out. We work really hard to educate all of our students, no matter what.”

Oddly enough, the SGP assessment tool the DOE uses to measure teacher performance derives from an equation deployed in a number of states called value-added modeling that was developed by statistician William Sanders of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, who first used it to calculate the impact of nuclear weapons tests on

radiation levels in livestock.

In 2015, Cuomo dropped his own bombshell on teachers when he signed a law that tied 50 percent of their evaluations to test scores. The fallout was intense. One out of five New York school families opted out of having their kids take the tests and the DOE announced a moratorium on implementing the teacher evaluation system until the 2019-2020 school year — well after this year’s election.

WATCH OUT KID: Gov. Andrew Cuomo greets one of his younger constituents.

CHARTER SCHOOL AIRBNB

But test scores are still being used to shut schools down.

In 2014, new Mayor Bill de Blasio attempted to fulfill a campaign promise. His predecessor, billionaire Michael Bloomberg, had shuttered 164 public schools from 2002 to 2013. Roughly four times as many smaller charter schools replaced them, many opening in spaces that had previously been inhabited by public schools, a process known as “co-locating.” De Blasio called for a moratorium on co-locations, but Cuomo stepped up to defend the school closures, arguing that schools where students didn’t meet the state’s stringent math and English testing standards deserve the “death penalty.”

“We will save charter schools,” the governor pledged. Later that year, he signed a bill requiring the city to provide charter schools space in its public schools or cover the rent

GOV. CUOMO HAS PUSHED CORPORATE FRIENDLY SCHOOL POLICIES WHOSE IMPACT HAS BEEN FAR-REACHING.

they incur elsewhere.

The growth of charter schools has slowed under de Blasio, with 12 a year moving into public school buildings, compared with 30 a year during the last five years of Bloomberg’s tenure. Nevertheless, the city paid \$52 million this year alone in charter-school rent, a figure that is expected to rise by \$10 million next year.

There are two ways for charter schools to obtain licenses in New York State. One is through the Board of Regents, whose members are chosen by the state Assembly. The other is through the State University of New York (SUNY) Charter School Institute, whose board is controlled by Cuomo appointees. In October, the institute voted to waive teacher certification requirements and allow uncertified teachers to work as instructors at the schools it licenses. The board’s chair, Joseph Belluck, an asbestos injury attorney and six-figure Cuomo donor who proposed the measure, justified the lowered standards by touting the exceptional test scores of students at those schools. The hiring of uncertified teachers would act as a stop-gap measure, he argued, to fill hiring vacancies at schools under SUNY’s domain. Success Academy has received all of its

Continued on next page



DAVID HOLLENBACH

HEY CUOMO

Continued from previous page

licenses from SUNY.

But charter schools aren't the only ones grappling with a teacher shortage. Is it any wonder that fewer people would want to enter a profession in which your livelihood is tenuously tied to the results of draconian exams taken by impoverished students?

BUSINESS SCHOOL

For proponents of education reform in both major political parties, the financial rewards have been handsome. Corporate reformers have big money to throw around, which they have used to insert themselves in policy debates, often drowning out the voices of parents and teachers. In a recent special election in Westchester County to fill a vacant state Senate seat, a political action committee linked to the charter advocacy group StudentsFirstNY poured \$800,000 into ads opposing Democratic candidate Shelley Mayer. The bulk of StudentsFirstNY's funding comes from members of the Walton family. On April 13, 11 days before the special election, Arkansas-natives Alice and Jim Walton wired a half a million dollars each to StudentsFirstNY's PAC, a review of campaign finance filings shows. Mayer ultimately won despite that torrent of cash.

The misleadingly named Great Public Schools PAC run by Success Academy CEO Eva Moskowitz, has donated \$303,500 to politicians of all stripes in New York, including \$105,000 to Gov. Cuomo since 2011. Moskowitz, a former City Councilmember from the Upper East Side, makes \$600,000 a year as CEO. Billionaire asset manager Daniel Loeb, who served as Success Academy's chair until he announced on May 1 that he was stepping down, contributed \$400,000 to Cuomo and PACs that support him — that's excluding the \$300,000 he's poured into Moskowitz's Great Public Schools.

Success Academy gave no reason for Loeb's resignation, though it appears unrelated to remarks he made on Facebook last August. In them, he praised state Senator Jeff Klein, the leader of the breakaway Independent Democratic Conference that allied with the Republicans to give them control of the Senate, for standing up for "poor knock [sic] kids." After his glowing endorsement of Klein, who is white, Loeb went on to compare charter school opponents to the Ku Klux Klan, specifically citing the Senate's African-American Democratic leader: "hypocrites like [Andrea] Stewart-Cousins who pay fealty to powerful union thugs and bosses do more damage to people of color than anyone who has ever donned a hood." He will be succeeded by another Wall Street kingpin, Ste-

ven Galbraith of Kindred Capital.

Why have elites thrown their chips into the education game?

"They really believe in competition, that it is okay if something closes down if something better takes its place," Burris suggests. "Of course, they never think about the lives of the children that are disrupted when a school closes." Another motivation, says Burris, is to maintain the status quo: "They would rather believe that poor children have such difficult life circumstances and limited future prospects because a public school did not prepare them, than to look in the mirror and see that their own system of beliefs in unrestrained capitalism and wealth are contributing to the dire poverty in this nation."

It also helps that their agenda strikes at the heart of unions. If you are going to go after the labor movement, the public sector, with its unionization rate of 35 percent, is a great place to start. The National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers are two of the most sizable unions in the country.

In fact, the reason Loeb and other rich dipshits have any sway in education debates, or within the Democratic Party for that matter, is precisely because of the decline of unions as a political force. Politicians like Cuomo have to fill their campaign coffers, and less and less of that money is coming from labor. In New York, appeasing charter school advocates provides a geyser of cash that rivals what the real-estate industry is willing to fork up.

Despite his attacks on their members, UFT leadership continues to stick by Cuomo, backing him over Cynthia Nixon in the upcoming Democratic primary this September. Part of the reason why: they are depending on the governor to help shield them from the likely ruling in the *Janus v. AFSCME* case, in which U.S. Supreme Court justices are expected to strike down requirements that workers pay fees to unions even if they don't join them.

THE REPORT CARD

Nearly a decade into the educational reform push, one might begin to wonder what the results have been. Burris suggests we take a look at the biannual National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly described as 'the nation's report card.' "In 2015, NAEP scores fell," she points out. "In 2017, NAEP scores stayed the same. They never recovered. They didn't budge. I think we can logically say that none of these policies made NAEP scores better."

What does work? Burris points to a number of steps that could improve the quality of education in New York State and nationally. One is racial integration. Schools in New York City are some of the most segregated in the country.

"Children of color do substantially better when they are in integrated schools and the academic performance of kids who are not of color is not adversely affected," she says. Other real reforms: increased support services and smaller class sizes. "It's ironic that in wealthy white communities in Westchester and Long Island, you see far smaller class sizes than we have in the city, where there are far more serious needs — kids that are poor, kids that have learning disabilities." Those wealthy suburbs also have elected school boards. New York City does not. Giving communities more power over their school districts could also lead to more culturally relevant curriculum whereas the standardized testing model of education has left many students feeling alienated.

And one thing every educator who spoke with *The Independent* for this article called for: money.

"You can't say you believe in public schools when you aren't funding them equitably," Lee said.

New York maintains a nearly \$10,000 education spending gap per pupil between rich and poor — second only to Pennsylvania.

"[Lawmakers] like to say there is an achievement gap," said Maria Bautista, campaigns director for the Alliance for Quality Education New York. "But really there's a resource gap."

In New York, as in much of the country, property taxes fund the state's public schools. This has historically meant that whiter, more affluent areas can raise more money than poorer regions. In 2007, responding to a lawsuit filed by advocates with the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, then-governor Eliot Spitzer agreed to establish a "foundation aid" formula to ensure the fair allocation of money to schools and meet the state constitution's mandate to provide "sound basic education" to all students.

Under the terms of the settlement, Spitzer pledged to allocate \$5.5 billion over four years utilizing that formula, which distributes money to schools based on factors like student poverty, the number of English learners and students with disabilities. However, the Board of Regents calculates that public schools are still owed \$4.2 billion statewide — money that has been conspicuously left out of the budgets Gov. Cuomo has signed into law year after year.

Meanwhile, under heavy fire from parents and facing a primary challenge from the left, Cuomo has edged away from (but not abandoned) many of his signature education policies in recent years. But were he to be re-elected, what could we expect to see in a third term? Would he be chastened or empowered to continue the demolition of public education?

John Tarleton and Jesse Rubin contributed reporting to this article.

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ALEXANDRIA VS. GOLIATH

SHE'S SURPASSED EXPECTATIONS, BUT CAN THIS DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST DEFEAT BOSS JOE CROWLEY IN THEIR JUNE 26 CONGRESSIONAL PRIMARY?

BY JOHN TARLETON & LYDIA McMULLEN-LAIRD

It was a cool Sunday afternoon in mid-May when Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez turned the corner onto Northern Boulevard and saw a storefront office with glass doors covered in dark blue-and-white posters. A year had passed since the former Bernie Sanders organizer had launched her own longshot election campaign. Amid a light rain, she was doing on this afternoon what she had done on so many other days: pound the pavement canvassing the Queens and Bronx neighborhoods she hopes to represent in Congress beginning next January. Her opponent, one of New York's most powerful Democrats, had studiously ignored her campaign and her demands for a debate in advance of their June 26 primary contest. But now she unexpectedly found herself standing in front of his well-furnished campaign office.

While supporters she was canvassing with joked about being so near "the belly of the beast," Ocasio took a deep breath, calmed her fears and strolled through the glass doors and into the nerve center of Rep. Joe Crowley's re-election campaign.

"One of the guys looked like he was going to fall out of his chair," she later recalled with a laugh.

Crowley's campaign manager, Vijay Chaudhuri, bolted out from the back of the office and glared at her as they stood toe-to-toe in the middle of the office. When Ocasio-Cortez told him who she was, he snapped, "I know who you are!"

Chaudhuri's outburst was a revelation. Crowley's campaign had not publicly acknowledged Ocasio-Cortez's existence even when she had recently stunned some observers by submitting more than 5,400 petition signatures to win a place on the ballot — more than four times the required amount. But after months of wondering if she was too insignificant in her opponent's eyes to even be noticed, she had her answer.

Ocasio-Cortez repeated her request for a debate and Chaudhuri promised to pass it along. Ocasio thanked him for his time and left feeling emboldened. "It was the first time I looked the opposition in the eye," she told *The Independent*. "It made me feel this was more possible than I already thought it was. I saw not the certainty that I thought I was going to see."

• • •

Ocasio-Cortez grew up in the Bronx but spent most of her summers in Puerto Rico. The lack of opportunities in the Bronx's underfunded public schools and the grinding poverty she witnessed in Puerto Rico shaped her working-class identity. She returned to the Bronx after college to work as a director for early childhood education programs through the National Hispanic Institute. She became involved in electoral politics during the 2016 Democratic primary as a volunteer for the Bernie Sanders' presidential campaign. "Before working on that campaign I really thought it was impossible to run a for office without corporate money, which is why I never thought of doing it," said Ocasio-Cortez.

After the 2016 election, she traveled to Standing Rock, North Dakota where she encountered thousands of non-violent protesters. They were there in solidarity with members of the Lakota Sioux who faced off in the frigid cold against police water cannons and attack dogs to try and stop an oil pipeline that threatened the tribe's water supply.

"Seeing people from across the country and the depth to which they were putting everything on the line was just really inspiring to me," Ocasio-Cortez said.

Upon leaving Standing Rock, Ocasio received a call from Brand New Congress (BNC), a group that was looking to challenge incumbents from both parties in the 2018 midterms with unabashedly progressive candidates who would eschew corporate backing in favor of small donor support. Ocasio-Cortez was taken aback when BNC urged her to run in New York's 14th Congressional District against an incumbent who had not faced a primary challenge in 14 years. She decided to take the leap.

"If you were going to do this, it had to come from an organizer," she said. "It had to come from someone outside the system who would give it a jolt. If you want any kind of political career in New York City, you can't challenge Joe Crowley."

• • •

QUEENS IS A ONE-PARTY STATE where the Democratic Party machine wields near-total control over the political life of the borough. Crowley, 56, sits at the apex — the most powerful New York politician you've never heard of.

While headline-chasing politicians such as Cuomo, Schumer and Gillibrand get more press, Crowley gradually amasses power. He has raised more than \$20 million for his campaigns since 1997. He has funneled some of that largesse into campaign contributions to conservative and moderate Democrats across the country and is widely believed to have his sights set on someday supplanting Nancy Pelosi as the top Democrat in the House of Representatives.

He is also Chair of the Queens County Democratic Party. From that perch, he controls the Queens delegation to the City Council and, in January, used an alliance with Bronx Democratic Party boss Marcos Crespo to install real-estate industry favorite Corey Johnson as Speaker of the New York City Council. Crowley also decides who gets the Democratic nomination to judgeships in Queens. Likewise, he controls who sits on the Queens County Surrogate's Court. There, two of his closest allies — Gerald Sweeney and Michael Reich — have pocketed \$30 million and \$500,000 respectively in processing fees since 2006 as court-appointed administrators for the estates of Queens residents who die without a will. As for the widows and orphans who might need those resources, they're out of luck.

In addition to his well-stocked campaign war chest, Crowley can draw on the backing of local Democratic Party clubs, two dozen labor unions who have endorsed him and a legion of elected officials who will sing his praises on command.

Yet, in a twist of irony, Crowley might be a victim of his past success in deterring primary challenges in NY-14.

"Most people have no idea who their congressman is even though he's been in office for almost 20 years," said Amanda Vender, a public high school teacher from Jackson Heights who has canvassed and phone banked for Ocasio-Cortez. "There's so much enthusiasm when I talk to people and explain that there's someone who doesn't take corporate money and is a new, fresh face on the scene."

Crowley's ties to the real estate industry — he's received \$235,000 in contributions from it this cycle — may also come back to bite him, at least in Jackson Heights and Elmhurst, where the city's proposed rezoning on 82nd

Street has sparked outrage. If enacted, it would allow a 13-story luxury apartment building to be built with a Target store on the ground level. Locals fear this would spur more gentrification and displacement of long-time residents and family businesses.

"My parents are elderly and live in this area and they are getting priced out," said Naureen Akhter who is backing Ocasio-Cortez.

Ethan Felder volunteered for Obama in 2008 and Clinton in 2016 and gathered 200 petition signatures for Ocasio-Cortez in Corona and LeFrak City. "They're not tied to the incumbent," he said of the mostly middle-aged and older residents he met. "They're very open to someone who is more reflective of their community."

Indeed, demographics are trending against Crowley who was installed in his seat in 1999 by his predecessor Thomas Manton without a contested primary. He now represents a district that is 70 percent people of color and 50 percent immigrant.

"The Queens of 20 years ago is not the same as the Queens of today," Ocasio-Cortez noted.

• • •

Ocasio-Cortez, who identifies as a democratic socialist,

FIRST SEATED IN 1999, JOE CROWLEY NOW REPRESENTS A DISTRICT THAT IS 70 PERCENT PEOPLE OF COLOR AND 50 PERCENT IMMIGRANT.

is running on a platform of Medicare for All, free public university tuition, a "Green New Deal," a federal jobs guarantee, criminal justice reform and the abolition of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

"In an 85 percent Democratic district, you won't get voted out of office for fighting for the working class," said Virginia Ramos Rios, Ocasio-Cortez's campaign manager.

Ocasio-Cortez's campaign comes at a time when the aftershocks of the 2016 election — Sanders' surprisingly successful insurgency and Clinton's general election defeat — continue to reverberate through the Democratic Party. Entrenched Democratic incumbents

who have been coasting for years are being primaried like no time in recent memory. In New York City, Carolyn Maloney (13 terms) and Yvette Clarke (6 terms) are both facing strong primary challenges from younger, well-funded opponents.

Across the country, a parallel infrastructure of groups such as BNC, Justice Democrats, Our Revolution and the

Continued on next page



CROWLEY FOR CONGRESS



LEUBAYER

JITTERY JOE: After months of ignoring his challenger, Rep. Joe Crowley agreed to a debate against Ocasio-Cortez.

ONE VOTE AT A TIME: Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez goes from door-to-door in a Jackson Heights apartment building seeking support.

JOE CROWLEY INC.

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\$14,200 Con Edison

\$12,400 Manadnock Construction

\$12,250 Nasdaq

Source: Opensecrets.org



ALEXANDRIA VS. GOLIATH

Continued from previous page

Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) have emerged to support left-leaning candidates who are challenging pro-corporate centrists preferred by the Democratic Party establishment.

These outsider candidates lose more often than they win, even as they move the party leftward, at least rhetorically. Relying on small donor support, they are financially outgunned in most races and generally lack the name recognition and institutional networks of their entrenched opponents. Still, there have been breakthrough moments. In May alone:

Kara Eastman, a Medicare-for-All proponent won a hotly contested congressional primary in Omaha, Nebraska over her centrist opponent.

Stacey Abrams ran on an unabashedly progressive platform and became the first black woman to be nominated for governor in Georgia. Paulette Jordan did the same in Idaho and became the state's first female Native American nominee for governor.

In Pennsylvania, four democratic socialists, all women, backed by the DSA defeated four older male opponents to win state house seats.

A bastion of both patronage-based political machines that prefer the status quo and finance and real estate elites that profit from it, New York City will be a tougher nut to crack. Joe Crowley stands at the intersection of those forces.

• • •

NOT THAT OCASIO-CORTEZ, or “Doña Quixote” as she sometimes refers to herself, is letting that slow her down. In addition to support from Brand New Congress, she has also garnered the support of the Justice Democrats, People for Bernie, Black Lives Caucus and the New York City chapter of the DSA among others. She’s held fundraisers in the living rooms of supporters across the district and has raised more than \$200,000 from almost 9,000 individual donors, according to her campaign.

On May 26, the Ocasio-Cortez campaign officially opened an office. Located on the second floor of a strip mall by the 90th Street subway stop in Elmhurst, the room was filled with a bustling, diverse crew of 40 mostly-millennial volunteers. Along the walls were maps of all the neighborhoods in the 14th District, from Astoria to Flushing, Throgs Neck to Morris Park. The day before the office opened, Crowley’s campaign announced that he would debate Ocasio-Cortez on June 15 at the New York 1 television studio.

“His clubs are holding emergency meetings,” Felder said. “They can feel her presence.”

The primary’s outcome will ultimately hinge on voter turnout. Sixty-four thousand people in NY-14 voted in the 2016 Democratic presidential primary, 31,000 in last year’s mayoral primary, noted John Mellonkopf, director of CUNY’s Center for Urban Research. In a district with a low rate of voter participation that rarely sees a congressional primary, turnout on June 26 could dip to 20,000 or less, meaning the winning candidate may need to garner roughly 10,000 votes to win — or one-third the number of people who regularly show up a couple miles

away at Citi Field to watch the Mets play.

In this contest between top-down and bottom-up politics, could one of the biggest upsets in recent New York history be in the making?

Mellonkopf told the *Indy* he doesn’t think Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign has the resources or the level of media visibility to mount an operation that can overcome Crowley’s advantages.

Ramos Rios disagrees pointing to the \$100,000 the campaign raised in the final weeks of May and coverage in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* among other media outlets. “We are reaching thousands of people per day in the district through field organizing and digital efforts.”

According to Ocasio-Cortez, her campaign’s goal is to reach 30,000 confirmed supporters in the district in advance of election day. And while she wouldn’t divulge a number, she insisted her campaign was “well on its way” to meeting that target.

“The only thing we’ve done this whole time is educate and expand the electorate,” she said.

GRASSROOTS

ORGANIZATION: Volunteers compare canvassing notes at the Ocasio-Cortez campaign headquarters in Elmhurst, Queens.

WHY RUN PRIMARIES FROM THE LEFT

Powerful Democratic politicians hate being primaried from the left so much that even a very-long-shot challenge like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez against Joe Crowley or Cynthia Nixon against Andrew Cuomo can really fuck with their heads. Why? The issue isn’t only or even mainly that they might lose to the challenger. The issue is that the strategy of Democrats in 2018 is to deny that there exists a plausible politics anywhere to their left.

This is in contrast to 1996 when they could say “oh there is this bleeding-heart liberal politics but it doesn’t work, instead of doing this tree-hugging liberal politics I’m going to do centrist politics and voters will like that”— now it’s very clear that what the Democratic activist base wants really is way to the left of what its politicians are prepared to deliver. And the only way to deal with that is to say, “that doesn’t exist, that’s impossible, that’ll never happen, there’s nothing to see over there.”

But when someone’s out there saying “no actually that does exist, you can have that,” suddenly you’ve fallen from being the guy who got the \$1 minimum wage increase to the guy who ran against the \$4 increase, from the guy who promised three wind farms by 2020 to the

guy who ran against carbon neutrality by 2030. And it’s a bad look, it alienates a whole key chunk of the primary base from you in a way that risks being irreparable -- whether you win or lose, you’re in that position.

For someone like Crowley or Cuomo who has ambitions beyond this cycle, who aspires to higher office, that’s a really dangerous place to be; even if you win you’re still remembered by a big chunk of your support base as being way more right-wing than they are. This is why Teachout got Cuomo to do the minimum wage increase, this is why Cuomo is going crazy over Nixon--not because he expected to lose to them but because the closer they get, the more apparent it is that Cuomo isn’t the left wing of the possible, and the farther the Democratic Party base moves away from him and people like him.

— MICHAEL KINNUCAN

Michael Kinnucan is a writer and activist in Brooklyn. He is on the organizing committee of DSA’s Brooklyn Electoral Working Group.

CAN WE TALK ABOUT SOMETHING ELSE?

THE DEMS ARE OBSESSED WITH RUSSIAGATE AT THE EXPENSE OF ISSUES IMPACTING PEOPLE'S LIVES.

BY DANNY KATCH

Two seemingly contradictory trends are competing for space amidst the usual multitude of horrors in our news feeds.

The revelation of a shell company network connecting Donald Trump's lawyer Michael Cohen to corporations with business before the White House — as well as Columbus Nova, an investment firm connected to a prominent Russian “oligarch” — has turned the daily drip of information about the investigations into “Russiagate” and Trump's other scandals into a deluge.

At the same time, polls show that the Democrats leads are shrinking in Congressional ballot races and that the party might squander the anticipated “blue wave” in this November's mid-term elections. That Republicans are rising in the polls while evidence mounts against Trump doesn't prove that voters don't care about corruption, but it does show that it doesn't crack the top of their list of concerns at a time when more than a third of the country is struggling to afford food, shelter or medicine.

Since November 2016, Democrats and their media supporters have hammered away at the idea that Russian interference played a key role in Trump's election, but all they've proven is that it's their own utter lack of a way forward for the working-class majority that was, and continues to be, the central reason for Trump's success.

The Democrats' singular focus on Trump's scandals is telling when compared to their lack of attention on countless other important issues. That was clear in April when the Democratic National Committee (DNC) announced a lawsuit against Trump campaign and the Russian government over the 2016 hack of DNC servers. They also sued Wikileaks for publishing the hacked information, which, as The Intercept's Glenn Greenwald pointed out, is a major threat to all whistleblowers and journalists who publish classified information.

It goes without saying that there have been no high profile lawsuits or headline-grabbing Congressional hearings about the crimes of voter suppression — primarily against poor people of color — that we already know played a major role in giving Trump the presidency. Perhaps Democrats would gain more traction from Russiagate if more people trusted them to be serious defenders of election integrity.

Many liberal strategists understand that they can't limit their message to scandal-mongering, but a party based on the contradiction of getting money from wealthy donors and votes from working-class people, people screwed by those wealthy donors, can't seem to tear itself away from the path of least resistance.

Russiagate supplies endless grist for the partisan rage mills at MSNBC and Daily Kos, while keeping the base's white hot anger safely absorbed by what is essentially a self-contained conspiracy theory (keeping in mind that some conspiracy theories turn out to be true). By contrast, Trump's injustices against immigrants and his favors for corporations receive only passing mention, which is convenient for the many Democrats who any sustained attention would reveal to be deeply implicated in pushing mostly the same policies.

None of this is to say that Robert Mueller's special investigation doesn't matter. The answers to the many questions about Donald Trump's Russian connections — whether they are illegal or merely improper, with Russian business interests or the Kremlin itself — range from possible to highly probable, and journalists

should keep digging until the full story is known. Even the most skeptical critics of Russiagate should want to know why the Russian-linked equity firm spent the summer of 2016 registering “alt-right” internet domains.

GEE MAN: Former FBI Director Robert Mueller's investigation into President Trump enters its second year.

It's also important to understand that for the 1 percent, Russiagate is more than just a scandal but is part of a strategic debate that is pitting those who want to continue exerting U.S. hegemony through international bodies like the World Bank and NATO against those who favor Trump's “America First” unilateralism (even if they'd prefer a more competent and less corrupt spokesperson). Through this lens, Trump's Russia connections reflect not only his shady business ties but more importantly his tolerance for fellow “rogue” leaders like Vladimir Putin who violate international agreements and norms — and his firm belief that it's China rather than Russia the United States should be worried about.

This is a historically important debate, but unfortunately for Democrats it's one that has little appeal for the majority of Americans who are seeing their wages continue to stagnate even as unemployment falls near record lows. The problem isn't, as well-heeled liberals too often suspect, that ordinary folk are too simple or selfish to care what happens overseas. Rather, it's that from the Iraq War and Hurricane Katrina under George W. Bush to the bank bailouts under Obama — they've been getting screwed by their government's lies and incompetence long before Trump entered the scene.

Trump's unlikely political success is based not on secret Kremlin backing but because his rants about ordinary Americans being sold out by a cabal of globalist elites resonate. He's put forward an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory, but one that connects with the growing anger of people who have been sold a bill of goods for decades by people who told us to salute the flag while they raided our pension funds and stashed their wealth in overseas tax havens.

Hard right nationalism is emerging as one of the main political challenges in the coming years, here and around the world. In that context, the Democrats' fixation on Russiagate is not just a pathetic attempt to go back to sleep and reset the alarm for November 7, 2016. It's a troubling sign that both parties see their road to power through accusing opponents of disloyalty to the homeland.

And if Democrats are prepared to throw the treason card at Republicans, you better believe they'll use it against their opponents on the left. It already feels inevitable that Green Party candidates and other progressives arguing for left wing independence from the Democrats will be smeared as Russian-backed trolls in the months leading up to November.

On the bright side, the wave of teachers' strikes in red states from West Virginia to Arizona and parts in between is showing that there's a different way to fight. It involves thousands of people organizing to use their power to shut down their workplaces and quickly bring formerly arrogant Republicans to their knees.

But be forewarned. If these ideas about workers' power get popular, it won't be long until we see a revival of the original Russian scare.



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F, G TO BERGEN / 2, 3, B, D, N, Q TO ATLANTIC AVE

JALIL MUNTAQIM

Continued from page 7

San Quentin in California, among other prisons. His case represents a turbulent era in the United States, when the government actively suppressed nonviolent movements as well as their militant counterparts, including the Weather Underground, Puerto Rico Liberation Front, the American Indian Movement and the BLA.

“We got close to a real revolution in this country,” Muntaqim said. “I am an example of what was going on during the 1960s and ’70s leading out of the Civil Rights movement.”

Since entering prison Muntaqim has been a tireless advocate for radicals such as himself who are serving decades long prison sentences, helping to run an organization he formed called the Jericho Movement, which raises awareness of their plight. In terms of his own case, he has repeatedly been denied parole since he became eligible in 2002, although his last parole assessment classified him as a low-risk inmate.

Until recently, the New York State Board of Parole could deny parole solely based on the severity of a prisoner’s past offense, even if he or she was deemed to have been rehabilitated and a low risk to society if released. Under new regulations, the parole board is now required to give much greater weight to an applicant’s record while incarcerated and the likelihood they can be reintegrated into society.

In Bell’s case, the parole board cited his exemplary prison record and his apology for his role in the killings of the two police officers. “There was nothing political about the act,” Bell told the parole board in March. “As much as I thought [so] at the time, it was murder and horribly wrong.”

Muntaqim has also garnered praise for his conduct behind bars and will go before the parole board the week of June 11. Stung by Bell’s release, the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association and its political allies are clamoring for Muntaqim to remain behind bars and point to his continued identification as a political prisoner as a sign of his lack of penance for his crime.

An organizer, writer, poet and educator, Muntaqim has twice received commendations for quelling tensions and preventing prison riots. He has written three books while incarcerated and, in 1994, graduated from SUNY New Paltz with a B.S. in Psychology and a B.A. in Sociology.

These days, he focuses on educating the inmates around him, teaching classes in poetry, sociology and history.

He has also dedicated himself to his Muslim faith. “Prison is not easy,” Muntaqim said, explaining how Islam helped him mature over the years and find peace. However, he has refused to entirely renounce his revolutionary views, which, he believes, is the reason he continues to be locked up. His political convictions have also gotten him into hot water in prison. He spent four months in solitary confinement at Attica beginning in December 2016 because authorities were not happy about the content of one of his classes.

“They came to my cell and took me to the SHU [Secure Housing Unit],” Muntaqim said. “I was teaching a black history class for about two months straight. I started from 1861 and I was bringing it up to 1960s. So during the 1960s naturally I have to talk about the Black Panther Party. That was one of the biggest things going on in this country at the time. I was bringing a comparison to the Black Panther Party and street organizations, particularly the Bloods. The [prison] administration was not happy about the fact I was making that kind of comparison. So they took my narrative and turned it into something completely different. They put me in the box, saying I was trying to organize the gangs or something.”

Meanwhile, as aging radicals such as Oscar López Rivera, Herman Wallace, Herman Bell and others are finally released from state and federal prisons, Muntaqim hopes the New York State parole board will set him on the path to freedom so he can continue the work he began in prison on the outside.

He already has plans for what he will do when he’s free. Going to federal prison at the age of 19, Muntaqim was separated from his soon-to-be newborn daughter. At the age of 66, he has yet to spend time with her, his granddaughter or his great-granddaughter outside of prison.

He wants to be involved in community gardens and to take part in forming a community center where

young people can learn computer skills, especially coding. He also has a few history lessons he would like to impart on the next generation.

“Some of us on the inside need to come out,” Muntaqim said. “We have a voice that needs to be shared.”

BOOKS BEHIND BARS

After public outcry, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced on Twitter in January he was rescinding a pilot program that required people in four state prisons to purchase books from five vendors that offered a total of 77 books at inflated prices, including 24 coloring books and 14 religious texts. NYC Books Through Bars was also blocked from sending free reading material to people who often have to borrow a stamp to mail their request.

The NY Department of Corrections originally planned to expand the program to the entire prison system by the end of 2018, and has hinted it could be revived again in the future.

Few realize that up to 13,000 people in at least nine New York prisons called “TV facilities” already lack access to free books, after they voted to purchase a TV set for their cells. In exchange, these prisoners can get just two food-only care packages per year, and must buy other items from approved vendors.

Meanwhile, in May federal prison officials abruptly reversed a controversial policy requiring thousands of inmates to order books only through an approved vendor.

— RENÉE FELTZ

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MARIANA MARTÍNEZ ESTÉNS

AFTER THE CARAVAN

DEMONIZED BY THE FAR RIGHT, FEW OF THE MIGRANTS ARE LIKELY TO RECEIVE ASYLUM.

BY MARIANA MARTÍNEZ ESTÉNS

TIJUANA, MEXICO — Ashley, a beautiful baby girl, had no cake or party for her first birthday a few weeks ago, but for her mother, Katherine, having her safely in her arms is enough to celebrate.

Katherine, a 23-year-old from Honduras with wide, melancholy eyes and an easy laugh, declined to give her last name. In 2017, “mareros” (Mara Salvatrucha gang members) hit her in the head with the butt of a gun, cracking her scalp open. They told her they planned to return to rape her and the baby. She believes the attack was meant to pressure Ashley’s father, a drug addict who owed the gang members money.

She left her two sons under their grandmother’s care and fled to Mexico with Ashley, where they joined a caravan of more than 200 people fleeing from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, hoping to get asylum in the United States. As gang violence has spiked, those three countries now have among the highest murder rates in the world. From 2013 to 2015, the number of people applying for U.S. asylum from them exceeded the total for the previous 15 years.

The caravan, organized with the help of the international volunteer organization Pueblo Sin Fronteras, was dubbed the Via Crucis (Stations of the Cross) to link it with Christian values. It started March 25 in Tapachula, near the Guatemalan border, and quickly became an obsession of President Donald Trump and far-right media outlets, who depicted the immigrants as a mob threatening to invade the “homeland.”

Katherine and Ashley spent more than a month sleeping on the ground and on top of freight trains, being fed by generous people along the way. By the time they arrived in Tijuana, Ashley was badly malnourished, with a fever and a severe cough.

They were among the 228 caravan members who camped out in the plaza in front of the Pedwest pedestrian border crossing, which leads into San Diego, for a week. Among the group were at least 15 transgender women, who regularly face assault in their home countries.

When they were finally allowed to turn themselves in at the port of entry, they hugged each other, many in tears. They understood they would be detained and not allowed to have a pen or paper, and passed a black marker to write phone numbers on their clothes, arms, legs or torsos.

Unlike other asylum-seekers, however, the caravan’s participants had the support of American activists, which enabled them to have media visibility and a group cohesion that would have been nearly impossible on their own.

They also had access to pro bono legal counsel. Dozens of lawyers, including a trio of women from the nonprofit Al Otro Lado (On the Other Side), spent days and nights in consultations and legal

clinics. They provided not just legal advice, but oversight of the immigration process, documenting and challenging neglect and abuses of power by U.S. authorities.

The caravan participants’ support network also comes into play once they have surrendered at the border, into the custody of the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). It comes in the form of sponsors, who can be key for their cases to move forward in the system.

Asylum-seekers have grim odds of approval: Only four people of 78 from a similar caravan last year were allowed to stay in the United States. A recent *Reuters* investigation found that only about 16 percent of Hondurans’ asylum requests are granted. That number could decrease now that Attorney General Jeff Sessions has appointed 28 new immigration judges, 16 of them former ICE prosecutors.

According to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, a nonprofit that monitors and analyzes data related to court processes, immigration judges have wildly different rates of approving asylum petitions. In the Mojave Desert city of Adelanto, California, Judge Timothy Everett orders deportation in 90 percent of the asylum cases he oversees, while Judge Denise Slavin in Baltimore orders it in just 6.5 percent.

Of the 1,700 people who started the caravan’s journey in March, only about 700 made it as far as the northwestern city of Hermosillo, about 200 miles south of the Arizona border. About half of them decided to stay there and accept the Mexican government’s offer to let them stay legally, either with temporary work permits or under asylum. On May 7, 15 Central American immigrants in Hermosillo went on a hunger strike, camping out outside the Mexican government’s immigration offices to pressure authorities to keep that promise.

The 350 who made it to Tijuana attended legal clinics hosted by volunteer American lawyers, who explained the process of entering detention, that parents and children would likely be separated and that they would be kept in holding cells dubbed “the freezers.” Those cells, according to a Human Rights Watch report released in February, have uncomfortably low temperatures, and detainees sleep on the floor or on concrete benches with only a foil blanket to protect them. They are sometimes forced to remove sweaters and outer layers of clothing.

Sandra Elizabeth Pérez, 43, from El Progreso, Honduras, opted to stay in Mexico after speaking with a lawyer and hearing about “the freezers.” “I don’t have a job and lived in a violent city, but I have not been targeted specifically, so I most likely would be deported,” she explained. “When the caravan stopped over in Mexico City, I worked cleaning

houses, so now my plan is to get my work permit and start looking for work in Tijuana. All I know is I can’t go back to my country, and I don’t want to be in jail.”

The arrival of Central Americans marks a drastic change from previous patterns of migration across the U.S.-Mexico border. In the 1980s, the border saw “circular” migration, mostly Mexican men who would work for a while and then go back home. In the 1990s, family members followed to join them in the United States. In the early 2010s, a surge of unaccompanied minors fleeing violence in Central America came. Now, full extended families, both Mexican and Central American, are coming north.

By mid-May, only about three dozen people from the caravan were still in Tijuana shelters, uncertain of what to do next.

“I decided to wait until I found a sponsor to make our case stronger,” said Carlos Antonio Aguilera Cerna, a 37-year-old Honduran who traveled with the caravan with his 32-year-old wife, Evangelista Aguirre, and their four children, ages 9 to 15. He said Pueblos Sin Fronteras had matched

DIFFICULT CHOICES: Sandra Elizabeth Pérez (right) and Carlos Antonio Aguilera Verna, both came with the Caravan to Tijuana from Honduras, but decided on different paths.

ASYLUM SEEKERS ARE PLACED IN CELLS DUBBED “THE FREEZERS.”

them with a San Francisco woman who had agreed to be their sponsor.

On May 7, Attorney General Sessions said he had established a “zero tolerance” policy on illegal border crossings, including prosecuting parents who bring their children for smuggling “illegal aliens.”

“If you are smuggling a child then we will prosecute you, and that child will be separated from you as required by law,” he stated. “If you don’t like that, then don’t smuggle children over our border.”

When Aguilera heard this, he shivered.

“Neither my kids or I have committed any crime. We don’t deserve to be in jail,” he said. “It’s heartbreaking that after so many years of working hard to support my kids, they can be taken away from me. That is the worst possible threat one could make to a parent.”

ROJAVA UNDER SIEGE

TURKEY GOES ON THE OFFENSIVE AGAINST A FEMINIST-SOCIALIST SOCIETY THAT SPRANG UP AMID SYRIA'S CIVIL WAR

BY MEREDITH TAX

On Jan. 20, 2018, Turkey invaded Afrin, one of the three cantons of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, better known under its Kurdish name, Rojava. The invasion — conducted by a NATO army with the participation of Islamist militias — highlights the urgent need for solidarity with this beleaguered socialist experiment, whose survival could help to determine our own possibilities for a more democratic future.

In the middle of a war zone, despite constant attack and a Turkish and Iraqi-Kurdish economic blockade that has cut off access to sufficient food, medical supplies and electricity, the 4 million people of Rojava are trying to build a new kind of feminist democratic politics. Rojava offers new ways of thinking and self-organization to a world where for decades the only two choices have seemed to be neoliberalism and violently hateful forms of nationalist fundamentalism.

Rojava is not run by a state nor does it aspire to become one. In the writings of its jailed ideological leader Abdullah Ocalan, the state is seen as inimical to true democracy. So Rojava, which is the size of Massachusetts, is run by a bottom-up “self-administration,” built on a foundation of elected neighborhood committees called communes. Women’s liberation is central to both their ideology and practice; every organization and administrative bureau from the smallest commune to the committee that administers the whole region must have at least 40 percent women members and be led by co-chairs, one male and one female, while education on the importance of gender equality is mandatory in every institution. And all these organizations have parallel all-female counterparts. The economy being planned will be ecologically sustainable and based on cooperatives, though it is still very small because of the blockade and the constant state of war.

The rule of gender parity, parallel women’s organizations and joint leadership also applies to the army, the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and Women’s Protection Units (YPJ). In fact, the commander of the campaign to liberate Raqqa was led by a Kurdish woman seconded to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the joint Kurdish-Arab army that is part of the U.S. coalition against ISIS. The Kurds had no particular need to fight in Raqqa, which is Arab territory nowhere near Rojava, but they hoped their sacrifices would make the United States come to their aid if they were attacked by Turkey. Then Turkey attacked, and the United States did nothing.

During the last six years, Afrin had become a safe haven for hundreds of thousands of war refugees from other parts of Syria. Without U.S. help,

the YPG-YPJ had no air cover and could not hold out indefinitely against the technically advanced Turkish army and allied militias. Afrin fell on March 14. Fearing a bloodbath, the YPG-YPJ told all civilians to leave Afrin City and head for Kobane. But the territory in between is controlled by the Assad government, which would not let many pass. Thousands are still trapped outside on the road, in heavy rains, without food or medical attention. Those who tried to return to Afrin are being turned away by the Turkish army.

Meanwhile, Turkish President, Tayyip Erdogan, and his Syrian counterpart, Bashar Assad, seem to have done a deal to benefit both, in which Assad sends anti-government rebels from Ghouta and other areas near Damascus to far-away Afrin, where Turkey-sponsored militias give them homes and businesses stolen from the Kurds. Thus Assad gets rid of rebels close to his capital, Erdogan gets rid of some of the Kurds close to his border and the human rights of civilians on both sides are trampled.

Civilians who did not leave Afrin have been subjected to even worse fates: kidnappings, confiscation of homes and property, the unexplained disappearance of up to 15 teenage girls and the imposition of sharia law enforced by ISIS-style enforcers. Erdogan clearly announced his plan to ethnically cleanse an area that has been Kurdish for centuries and replace the inhabitants of Afrin with more ethnically desirable refugees from other parts of Syria. Some of his paid militias are linked to al-Qaeda and Kurdish sources say that known members of ISIS have been incorporated into Turkey’s proxy army. Certainly, one of the first things the invaders did was knock down Yazidi shrines, a signature gesture when one remembers ISIS’s 2014 genocide of the Yazidis.

In response to the inattention being paid to Afrin inside the United States, a group of concerned academics, activists and writers including Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky, David Graeber, Bill Fletcher, Gloria Steinem, Michael Walzer and yours truly published an open letter in the *New York Review of Books*, forming an Emergency Committee for Rojava and saying:

Turkey must be isolated economically, diplomatically, and militarily until it withdraws its troops and its proxy militias from Kurdish Syria. In the long run, there can be no peace in the region until Turkey is willing to reopen negotiations with its own Kurds and grant all its citizens democratic rights, including freedom of expression and the right to form political parties and win elections without reprisals.

We are calling on the U.S. government to:

- impose economic and political sanctions on Turkey’s leadership;
- embargo sales and delivery of weapons from NATO countries to Turkey;
- insist upon Rojava’s representation in Syrian peace negotiations;
- continue military support for the SDF.

To some U.S. progressives, it will seem counterintuitive to call on the U.S. government to support a socialist-feminist enclave. To others, the fact that the United States has given the Rojava Kurds military support (if only to use them for its own ends) shows they are sell-outs. Progressives today must put behind those narrow and static versions of anti-imperialism, dating from the Cold War period, and see that we live in a globalized world of constantly shifting alliances, where the same two countries can both contend and collaborate, and no single hegemonic power calls the tune for the world, no matter how much the United States would like to.

Global politics today are shaped by an epic conflict between fundamentalist, tribalist forces like ISIS, Turkey and others all over the world who want to go back into a theocratic Never-neverland inhabited by the ethnically or racially pure, versus the forces of what Ocalan calls “capitalist modernity,” or neoliberalism if you prefer, where the only values that count are listed on the U.S. Stock Exchange.

Since the end of the Cold War, progressives have been searching for some alternative to both these worldviews, something new. Something we are still defining. The Kurds are working on their version of this in praxis; they call it democratic confederalism and see women as central to its development. Their experiment and the lessons we can learn from it are desperately important to all of us for the future. But we cannot learn from this experiment unless we help it survive. Defending Rojava is part of defending our own ability to imagine something new.

Meredith Tax, a feminist writer and organizer, is the author of A Road Unforeseen: Women Fight the Islamic State (Bellevue Literary Press, 2016) and a cofounder of the Emergency Committee for Rojava, defendrojava.org.



COMRADES IN ARMS: Members of the Kurdish Women’s Protection Units rest on a hillside in Rojava.

JOEY L.

THE PROTESTS IN GAZA ARE NOT ABOUT TO END



AHMED ABU HAMEEDA

BY ALEX KANE

The grotesque spectacle that took place on May 14, 2018 will be impossible to forget. As Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner smiled and celebrated the new U.S. embassy in occupied Jerusalem alongside Israeli and American dignitaries, Israeli snipers gunned down Palestinians in Gaza with high-powered U.S.-made rifles.

Those two images were beamed around the world, highlighting a tone-deaf U.S. administration paying little mind to the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in Gaza, only 40 miles away. Those side-by-side pictures will live on as a symbol of what will be Donald Trump's shameful legacy: giving Israel whatever it wants, and thus emboldening the state to take the gloves off and unleash the full weight of its repression on Palestinians.

The far-right in Israel and the United States have long sought to move the U.S. embassy from the beachfront of Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. For Israeli Jews, the move is a recognition that the holy city is fully theirs, despite the Palestinians that live in the eastern part of the occupied metropolis. For Christian evangelicals in the United States, it fulfills what they see as a Biblical duty to give full-throated support for the Jewish state. For some of those evangeli-

cals, it is one more step in an apocalyptic vision that will end with a final war, the conversion of Jews to Christianity and the return of Jesus to earth.

Trump has delivered for right-wing American and Israeli Jews and Christian Zionists, and in the process signaled to Israel that it could entrench its occupation — and all the human rights abuses that go alongside that occupation — without the United States uttering a word of condemnation. And on May 14, the world bore witness to the human consequences of Trump's policy.

Thousands of Palestinians rallied near the militarized fence that separates Gaza from Israel to demand their right to return to lands Israel expelled them from in 1948, and for an end to Israel's devastating air, land and sea blockade of the coastal enclave. Israeli snipers unleashed tear gas and live ammunition, killing dozens of people. Since March 30, the beginning of Palestinian protests in Gaza, Israel has killed more than 100 people and wounded over 12,000.

The purpose of the protests is to pressure Israel to let the people of Gaza live a normal life — with electricity, clean water and working hospitals, which Israel denies to them — and ultimately, for the refugees of Gaza to return to the homes they were forced from in 1948. But the Trump administration's policy of giving Israel whatever

it wants with no concessions in return portends a dark future for Palestinians, as long as Trump remains in the White House.

Trump administration officials did not utter a word of criticism of Israel for its indiscriminate use of live-fire on Palestinians, many of whom were children. Instead, they blamed Hamas, the Palestinian militant group that rules Gaza.

But these protests are not about to end. As long as Israel's blockade continues to immiserate Gaza — and make it “unlivable,” as the UN has said — Palestinians will continue to demonstrate. But Israel feels emboldened to keep spraying Palestinian civilians with bullets.

Israel's occupation and blockade will be allowed to grind on as long as the United States gives it carte blanche to kill Palestinians with impunity. It's a reality that will only be changed when American citizens, whose taxes pay for Israel's weapons, and the rest of the world wake up, sanction Israel and force the U.S. to abandon its role as protector of a state that can't quit occupying and besieging the Palestinian people.



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BLACK JESUS WILL SAVE YOUR SOUL

BY NICHOLAS POWERS

In the '90s, I was on a bus, carrying weed, and saw a man with a painting of Black Christ. He was handsome, brown and radiant. I stared at it like a mirror that reflected a better me. The man got off at a church. I got high with friends. At night, I stumbled past that church and sat on its steps. I told Jesus I was too lost to find home.

Today I am atheist, but growing up, it was Black Jesus who got me through hard times. I read Rev. Dr. James H. Cone's work on Black Liberation Theology. His Christ was a revolutionary for the oppressed. Cone recently died and his legacy is in question. Black Lives Matters is tech-savvy and secular, queer and millennial. What will be done with a faith that linked us to our ancestors?

THE COVENANT

Last Sunday, I picked up Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* and re-read, "The task of Black Theology is to analyze Jesus in the light of oppressed Blacks." He was born in segregated Arkansas in 1936. Later as a young seminary student, he saw the 1967 Detroit riots, and rage, he said, "erupted out of him like a volcano." Pouring his anger into the Bible, he found again what Black Christians had before, a theology that said God heard him.

Across the street, I saw elderly neighbors and families file into church. They believed in God. They sang and beat tambourines as the pastor's loud call and response rocked the pews. I heard his sermons as I passed. He spoke of the God's covenant with us, a promise of deliverance in exchange for faith.

When enslaved Africans converted to Christianity, they converted Christianity itself. One idea they borrowed and wove into a large moral vision was the covenant. Prof. Christopher Hobson's elegant 2012 book, *The Mount of Vision: African American Prophetic Tradition*, mapped it out: "In covenantal thought, God's favor and protection over time depends on the community's maintaining or, after rupture, renewing the covenant."

Faith that God would deliver freedom was seared into our ancestors in the Civil War. Cities were ablaze. The land was littered with rotting corpses. W. E. B. Du Bois in his 1935, *Black Reconstruction*, wrote of this blood-stained covenant: "To most of the four million black folk emancipated by the Civil War, God was real. They knew him. ... His plan for them was clear; they were to suffer and be degraded; and then afterwards by Divine Edict, raised to manhood and power."

Today, more than a hundred and fifty years later, that covenant has ruptured. A new generation has risen that is less religious. A new gospel has risen that

is less about justice than success. At service hour, I see young men hustling on the corner. Inside, pews are half full. Many pastors don't talk about "Jesus in the light of the oppressed." They talk about money, money, money.

PROSPERITY GOSPEL

For years in Bed-Stuy, I walked past a mural of two pastors, smirking at the line, "It's Your Diamond Decade." They were prosperity gospel preachers, praising wealth as a sign of holiness. I heard their sermons spill out of church into everyday talk at the bar or gym or at work. It was like listening to people with gold rush fever.

Black America is split by class into nearly separate worlds. The poor are trapped in rural poverty or Section 8 housing in the city. The middle class has integrated into the white mainstream or live in small enclaves. The church that once forged the people into a movement has itself been split by this economic divide.

It has turned from the spiritual to the material. Instead of challenging the American Dream, many Black churches reflect its *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* excesses. The list of prosperity gospel preachers is long. The oily Creflo Dollar is worth \$27 million. He tried to fundraise \$65 million for a private jet. Now-disgraced pastor Eddie Long was worth \$5 million. T. D. Jakes is worth \$18 million in Dallas where one out of three children live in poverty.

They are top-tier, the largest faces of the prosperity gospel and under them are lesser known pastors of smaller flocks, who pass the tithe bucket until checks and cash spill out. I remember talking with a friend who quit the church.

"Why did you stop?" I asked him.

"When, every time I went, I had to stop at the ATM first," he said, "Man, it burned me to be hustled for money by a pastor wearing a gold watch."

THE CHURCH THAT KILLS ITS CHILDREN

"The old men leered at my breasts," she laughed bitterly. "Ew. It was disgusting being in church. I sat in a dress but I was a million miles away."

She never felt at home with her family's God. The pastor ranted against "perverts." She was bi-sexual. And curious. She ran away and changed her name. We met at a protest in New York and I asked her to write her story. She did in an essay titled, "Walking Away from the Black Church."

Through her eyes, I saw how the church's homophobia drove LGBTQ youth from their homes and into the streets. They were abused and had sex to barter for food and shelter. A lot of her friends were run-



LYNNE FOSTER

aways of one sort or another.

How many Black children fled their families because their parents believed God hates gays? What happened to them? Did they survive?

Last year, I was told, she committed suicide. I wasn't surprised. She had tried before. But I wept anyway. She deserved better. She deserved a God that loved her too.

THE NEW COVENANT

"It is wrong to claim our present circumstance as the redemption," Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote in *Between the World and Me*, "people never asked for the posthumous glory of dying for their children."

No God. No redemption. No covenant. As the voice of a generation, Coates is a touchstone with which to measure the distance from Cone's militant Christianity to Black Lives Matters' today. In Cone's halcyon days, the Black church was one of the spaces to strategize protests. The pastor was the leader. The Bible was the well of deep, moral imagery that Black resisters from Malcolm X to Martin Luther King Jr. to Ella Baker used.

Coates' young Black readers go to church less and read scripture less. They strategize Black Lives Matter protests from online or at college or community centers. They draw on memes not Bible verses. They are queer-friendly. They are decentralized.

As the youth march into the future, what role is left for the Black church? A few carry the torch, like participants in Rev. William J. Barber's Moral Mondays protests. But many don't.

Maybe it's time to reread Cone: "Being black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are." And add to that Ludwig Feuerbach's famous line from his *The Essence of Christianity*: "God is nothing else than man, he is the outward projection of man's inner nature."

If so, then true religion is inherently on the side of justice because prayer and prophecy are how millions of people reconnect to ourselves. Let's reclaim it. Let's remake God again and say, Jesus is gay. Jesus is transgender. Jesus is Black. Jesus is in jail. Jesus is a sex worker. Jesus is poor. Jesus is a refugee. Jesus is all the dead parts of us that are resurrected with love.

Let us now pray.

A WORLD WORTH FIGHTING FOR: MARX RECONSIDERED

Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory

BY MIKE DAVIS
VERSO, JUNE 26

By Steven Sherman

Scholar and activist Mike Davis is best known for *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, a noirish blend of sociology, geography, history and architectural criticism. But his first book, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, synthesized a generation's worth of social history with Marxian political economy, producing an original understanding of the history of the American working class and the rise of neoliberalism. Thirty years after it was first published, it still brims with relevant insights.

The preview description of Davis's new book said it would survey the politics emerging among slum dwellers in cities around the world. It would consider whether they might be the class to help point the world to a more sustainable and just system, while the Global War on Terror would be conceptualized by Davis as an effort to repress this class. A reinvigoration of Marxism would provide the conceptual armature for his work.

I was excited to hear that Davis was returning to Marxist analysis, but that is not what the book is actually about. Instead, *Old Gods, New Enigmas* consists of one major new essay — 150 pages on workers' struggles and socialist parties between roughly 1848 and 1920 — and three previously published works, with a preface that attempts to tie them together and connect them to the original book project. It is hard not to suspect that Davis is having some trouble completing his original project, which would be both a sequel to his outstanding *Planet of Slums* from 2006 and an ambitious effort to offer a coherent, Marxist perspective on global political developments. If that book is ever completed, it would be a major event in the left-wing public sphere. Like everything Davis writes, *Old Gods, New Enigmas* is worth reading, but it doesn't come close to answering the questions it poses in its preface.

In that preface, Davis describes his long interest in Karl Marx and his desire for a politically engaged Marxism, rather than the academic, almost scholastic version dominant in the United States. In particular, he applauds Marx's focus on agency, and poses the question of whether people in slums, "the informal proletariat" of unorganized odd-job workers and small-time vendors, constitute "that most potent of Marxist historical talismans: 'historical agency.'"

To answer this, he takes the circuitous route of exploring working-class history in the 70 years or so after Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, the period when the working class was acquiring the political and social capacities that

led to the labor and socialist movements in Europe and the Americas. The resultant essay, "Old Gods, New Enigmas: Notes on Revolutionary Agency" is a fine read, racing through the transition from artisans to factory workers (and the kinds of struggle common to each); the emergence of socialist culture in city governments, neighborhoods and sports associations; the significance of mass strikes and workers councils; the subterranean forms that organizing takes, and more. It's certainly recommended reading for the new generation curious about the history of socialism, although it overlaps a good deal with the work of Eric Hobsbawm.

But it can't be said that it answers any questions about the revolutionary agency of workers. For starters, it ends too early to get a full sense of this class's actual revolutionary history. Workers were the key agents in the Russian Revolution, but that success was not replicated elsewhere in Western Europe. And Soviet communism soon mutated into an authoritarian developmentalist state, a model very influential worldwide, but remote from the goal of workers controlling their own lives. After World War II, European socialist movements became doggedly reformist, not revolutionary, and eventually, communist parties did as well. These movements and those that emerged in newly industrialized nations like Brazil and South Korea helped secure important reforms and strengthen democracy, but their relationship to revolution became increasingly abstract.

In any case, what does this have to do with the planet of slums, where nothing like an international socialist culture has yet emerged, and the historical agents, the slum dwellers, are not concentrated in workplaces comparable to factories?

Davis also mostly ignores the questions of gender, racism and colonialism that are likely to haunt a reconstruction of the socialist project. In the preface, he claims that the re-emergence of religion at the end of the 19th century was an unanticipated development, specifically the European Catholic parties that won the votes of "proletarian mothers" in the 1910s and '20s and again between the '50s and '70s, while socialists were largely ignoring the woman question, including in the practice of Karl Marx. This is perhaps the most original, provocative passage in the entire book, worthy of an essay of its own, but he doesn't return to that line of thought.

The three previously published essays included don't hold together particularly well. "Marx's Lost Theory: The Politics of Nationalism in 1848" focuses on Marx's writings about France in the 1840s and



1850s to make the point that historical understandings of nationalism should be integrated with political economic analysis, often of a sort that looks at fractions of classes rather than a polarization between proletariat and capital. The point is well taken, but apart from being about Marx, what does it have to do with the focus of the book? Much the same can be said of his examination of the climate change theories of the Russian anarchist Prince Piotr Kropotkin, "The Coming Desert: Kropotkin, Mars, and the Pulse of Asia."

But the last of these essays, "Who Will Build the Ark?" is essential reading. It is structured as a debate between Davis's pessimistic self, fearful that it is too late to stop climate change, and his optimistic self, who believes that remaking the world economy to be environmentally sustainable is the main political project of our time. While he believes suburban development is unsustainable on a global scale, cities can be remade "giving a priority to public affluence over private wealth" and creating an ecologically sound lifestyle. This sounds like a socialism worth fighting for, and one that points back to the agency of people who live in slums, who are most likely to bear the brunt of climate change and whose well-being has never been secured. It is a line of thought worthy of much more elaboration.

Old Gods, New Enigmas feels like one of the albums of B-sides, alternate takes, and rarities that musicians produce when they are between major projects, rather than a coherently conceived work. Davis is an important enough thinker that it is worth reading. But I hope he completes the book originally described soon. We need it.



JIMI'S PENNIES FROM HEAVEN

Both Sides of the Sky

BY JIMI HENDRIX

LEGACY RECORDINGS, 2018

By Brady O'Callahan

Hearing Jimi Hendrix sing, "I'm a man," feels somehow inauthentic. Sure, we know he was a man like any one of us, but was he really? His legacy has propped him up to legend, even god-like, status. He can sing it all he wants, but folks aren't likely to believe him at this point. How can someone so monumentally talented, so otherworldly and storied, be made from the same stuff as the rest of us? Despite all this, that's just how *Both Sides of the Sky*, the last in a trilogy of archival and unreleased Jimi Hendrix material, begins with Jimi's take on Muddy Waters' blues standard "Mannish Boy."

There are a lot of hangups associated with posthumous collections of unreleased materials. One has to wonder why the material remained unreleased in the first place, especially when it's been so long. Of course, there's the desire to

run the risk of coming across as money-grabs. It's clear, however, that a great deal of thought went into the production and release of *Both Sides of the Sky*, as well as the two prior installments in the trilogy, 2010's *Valleys of Neptune* and 2013's *People, Hell and Angels*.

Hendrix was raised on blues — Robert Johnson, Waters, B.B. King — and he never strayed too far from it in his own music. Rather, he elevated and pushed its conventions further than they have ever gone before his untimely death in 1970 at 27.

He would often find what he was looking for during in-studio improvisations, recording all the while. The Experience, Hendrix's backup band, would sometimes just ask Jimi for a key and a tempo and play according to his lead. Many of the songs on *Both Sides of the Sky* present that improvisational spirit, and, if Jimi had been alive to see them

suss out any bit of material from especially talented artists, especially in instances when they've died tragically, young or both, but compilations like this

through, most if not all of these songs would have been retooled over and over again to make a more polished finished product. Given what they are, the record is an interesting capsule of his creative process at the very least.

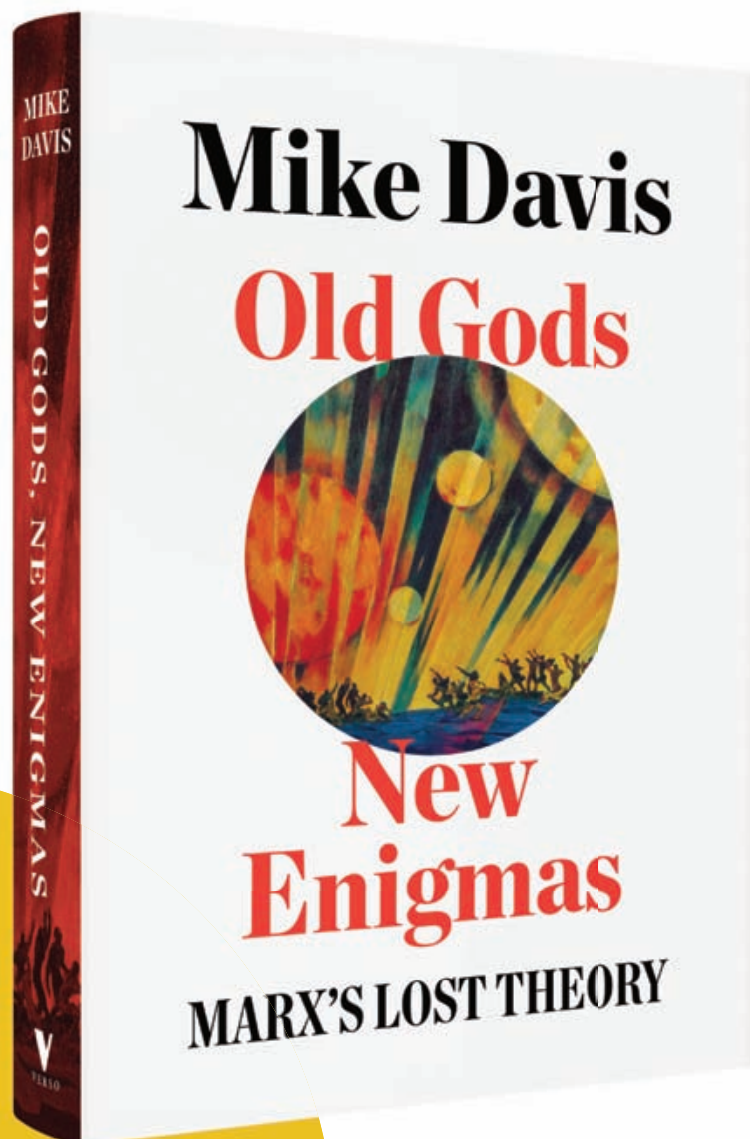
Standout track "Mannish Boy" finds Hendrix at one point scattling in perfect harmony with his guitar, as if merging with the instrument itself. "Hear My Train A Comin'" will satisfy any blues guitar solo fanatic's wildest expectations. "Send My Love to Linda" showcases Jimi's talent even in restraint before letting all hell loose in classic Hendrix fashion.

"Cherokee Mist", the seven-minute guitar and sitar jam that closes the collection, suffers a bit from the unfinished, unfocused nature of the source material. "Lover Man" features Jimi slipping into the Batman theme song in a moment of studio levity that showcases a playful side to the guitar god. Lonnie Youngblood's vocals and saxophone add a smooth, soulful dimension to the static-tinged edges of Hendrix's riffs on "Georgia Blues." Other collaborations are less endearing. The songs "\$20 Fine" and "Woodstock" featuring Stephen Stills on

vocals don't quite showcase Jimi's talent and the tracks haven't really stood the test of time.

Hendrix, of course, was at Woodstock, where he unleashed his discordant rendition of the "Star-Spangled Banner," one that would surely cause John Stafford Smith to rip his wig off. His interpretation of the anthem is now synonymous with the turbulence of the era it was born out of — the Vietnam war, Richard Nixon, Black Power, the student protest movement. The same could be said for Jimi's sound as a whole. To hear him play is to listen to the raw, violent and uncertain energy of the times transposed onto six electrified nylon strings.

The songs on *Both Sides of the Sky* are scraps we were never intended to hear, but they are scraps from a genius tuned into the zeitgeist of his day. This compilation provides a fascinating look at the creative process of one of the most remarkable musicians we've ever seen.



Old Gods, New Enigmas Marx's Lost Theory

By Mike Davis

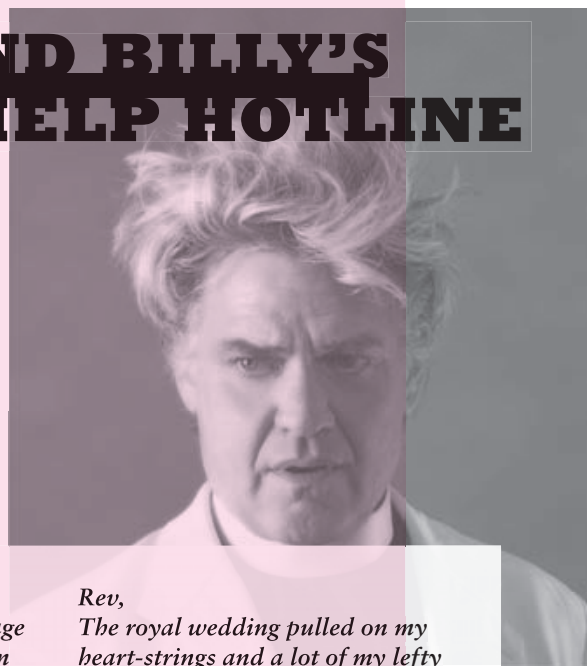
The highly anticipated book by the best-selling author of *Planet of Slums* marks the 200th anniversary of Marx's birth, exploring Davis's thinking on history, labor, capitalism, and revolution.

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REVEREND BILLY'S TRUMP HELP HOTLINE



JON QUILITY

Dear Reverend Billy,
Watching the split-screen coverage of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem opening while, forty miles away, Palestinians were being slaughtered, I found myself wondering what you make of this Rev. Robert Jeffress who spoke at the unveiling. He only supports the embassy move since he believes it will hasten the Christian apocalypse. In a way, it is hastening an apocalypse in the Middle East, isn't it? A self-fulfilling prophecy?

— MANNY, Morningside Heights

Manny,
We Americans better stop kidding ourselves about evangelical Christians. They are not a voting bloc or a large cult of crazies. They have a mass murder plan for the world that they believe is the news of the day and they control President Trump. The Book of Revelation is not prophetic to them. This is their script. We are inside the apocalypse now. It was biblically fated that the Gazan people were being shot in split screen with Ivanka Trump. The move by the U.S. consulate to Jerusalem was hailed by Jeffress as another step toward the return of the rock star Jesus descending from the clouds to kill the non-believers.

The Gazan people are our teachers. They are at the border with such a heightened state of belief, of dreaming, of realizing that they were imagined by the hapless border gunmen to be a danger. They possess the revolutionary surrealism that can reclaim a home, a normal, safe home. And they are teaching us that this is what it takes. We all must run across the space between the violence and the ritual that ordains it. Each of us has a kidnapped holy place that we must retake. Trump and evangelicals, go to Hell!

— BILLY

• • •

Rev,
The royal wedding pulled on my heart-strings and a lot of my lefty friends were excited too. I feel a bit guilty for getting a rush out of watching Meghan and Harry walk down the aisle. I mean, aren't we supposed to be against monarchies?

— REGINALD, Manhattan

Reggie,
Rev. Michael Curry's sermon at the ceremony was a big Love-a-lujah! Contrast that with the hate of Rev. Robert Jeffress. As Rev. Curry said, "A couple young people fell in love and we all showed up..."

The United Kingdom's treatment of workers from Jamaica in the Windrush scandal mirrors Trump's racism in the States. We'd like to see the Duke and Duchess of Sussex directly face down the Tories, banish the House of Lords and get on with the real takedown of empire. Let's face it, they torched the world. The House of Windsor only matters when it is violated, and Meghan and Harry have done their part.

Emma Goldman said, "Love is the defier of laws." In the case of colonization, we don't need the inevitable charity of celebrity royals. We need love that defies laws.

— BILLY

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IRAN OUR NEXT WAR?

Shortly after 9-11, Retired General Wesley Clark "leaked" information from a classified Department of Defense memo. It stated that the U.S. planned to "take down seven countries in five years." The countries referred to? **Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and IRAN.**



Map shows U.S. bases surrounding Iran

- What is really behind the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran deal?
- Why has the U.S. surrounded Iran with scores of military bases?
- What is the role of other countries in the region, in particular Saudi Arabia and Israel, and how do they relate to Iran?
- What can we do to prevent another catastrophic Mid East war?

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BOOK LAUNCH: *As Black As Resistance* makes the case for a transformative politics rooted in an anarchistic framework that the authors liken to the Black experience itself.

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WORKSHOP: The fundamentals of software engineering for beginners to more advanced programmers.

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HISTORY STATES

WORD IS OUT

BY INDY STAFF

The Independent has placed scores of outdoor news boxes across the city since the fall of 2016. Our circulation has jumped to 45,000 papers a month. None of this would be possible without the help of volunteers who maintain our boxes and find new venues where the paper can be shared. Here are some of the first-person stories of the volunteers helping us build a grassroots media revolution.

ERIK ANDERS-NILSSON JERSEY CITY

I'm an actor and a short film director. I became an activist during the run-up to the first Gulf War in 1990-91. I was working as a hotel supervisor and would put out flyers for anti-war protests in the employee break room. One day I was called into my boss's office and she told me I was being fired because of the flyers. No warning, nothing. Maybe I was naïve but I couldn't believe it. But in the end it made me stronger.

I helped found the Jersey City Peace Movement in 2003. We're opposed to all wars, racism and injustice, and we provide aid and friendship to the homeless as well. Getting a factual, alternative view of current events into people's hands is also a part of our work. I come into the city a couple of times a month with three buddies of mine to carry copies of *The Indy* to a street box in Jersey City in an extra-large suitcase with rollers that can hold 400-500 papers. We wheel it down the stairs to the PATH train one step at a time.

We have a box outside the Five Corners Library near Journal Square. We also take the paper to other libraries and mom-and-pop stores where it is welcome. Jersey City is going through rapid gentrification as people are pushed out of places like Brooklyn and come here. The issues *The Indy* covers are just as relevant in our community. If there are any Indy supporters who drive regularly between New York and Jersey City who would like to help us, we could move a lot more papers than we already are.

KIM FRAZCEK BUSHWICK

I am the Director of the Sane Energy Project, a grassroots environmental justice organization that has helped lead the fight against fracking and destructive fossil fuel projects in New York in recent years. In social justice organizing we talk about not siloing our work. But sometimes it's inevitable when you are working hard on campaigns. Being able to read all the articles in *The Indy* is an easy way to have a birds-eye view of the movement and understand how our issues overlap and how we can elevate each other's work.

I take care of *The Indy* box at the Morgan Avenue stop on the L train. The neighborhood has changed dramatically since I arrived in 2004. The warehouse spaces that used to house old knitting factories have transitioned into artists' lofts. Gentrification has sped up and brought many young people who seem oblivious to the world around them. Having the box right in front of the subway station allows commuters to grab a paper before they board the train in the morning.

Unlike the other free morning newspapers, what they are getting is not sensationalism or headlines with hollowed-out news updates but real stories thoughtfully written about what's happening in our city — with national and global implications. With our newer neighbors I'm glad they have a chance to be exposed to *The Indy*'s coverage of gentrification and police brutality.

ASHLEY MARINACCIO HELL'S KITCHEN

I love box watching! Whenever friends come over, I show them my shiny red Indy box on 9th Avenue across the street from the apartment complex I live in. They get a kick out of it.

I first came across *The Indy* in college in the mid-2000s at Iraq War protests and later I did some photography and theater coverage for the paper. I am the co-founder and director of Co-Op Theatre East, an ensemble of actors, playwrights and directors that use theater to grapple with socio-political issues. I'm also working on a PhD in performance at the CUNY Graduate Center.

There's an intersection between what I do and what *The Indy* does. It's all storytelling. Independent media allows us to see what is going on in our communities and in the world through the eyes of people who don't dominate the media narrative but who are affected by policies that are implemented in their name.

The people who pick up papers at my box are a mix of Theater District workers and tourists. It offers them a glimpse of those whose stories should be told. Looking after the box and keeping it neat and orderly with a display copy in the window isn't a huge commitment. I take pride in doing my small part to bring independent media to my community.

NICHOLAS POWERS BED-STUY

When I take papers out of the box I watch over and bring them to cafes or laundromats it's like Christmas time.

The Indy is a magnet for thoughtful people who want to keep up on progressive thought without being guilted or yelled at. When I sit in my favorite cafe, writing an article, I feel a warm, glow right in my belly button as my neighbors sip coffee and turn *The Indy*'s pages.

All those stories, read and remembered become a shared language. The paper unites the men watching basketball in the barber shop with the hipsters at the Korean cafe with the locals at the bodega and the laundromats with the sisters getting their hair straightened at the Dominican beauty salon. All the patrons of the places where *The Indy* is at.

The Indy says over and over, "You deserve more" and "you create the world." That affirmation descends like a star into the depths where hope is buried.

Behind the eyes, inside silences; hope becomes explosive. In some unexpected way, on some unpredictable day, the people will come out of their barber shops and cafes and beauty salons and laundromats and say, we are going to write our own story today.

To find out more about how you can get involved, email us at contact@indydependent.org or call 212-904-1282.



AKI SHAWKY



ERIK MCGREGOR

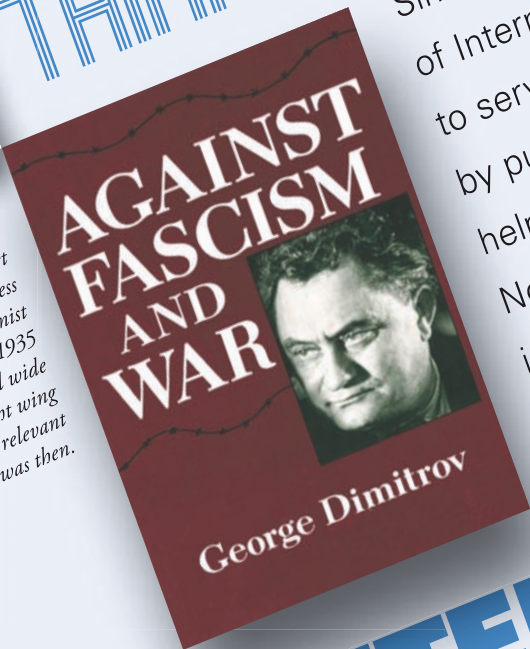
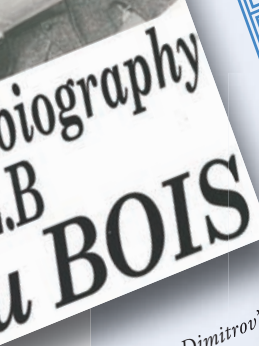
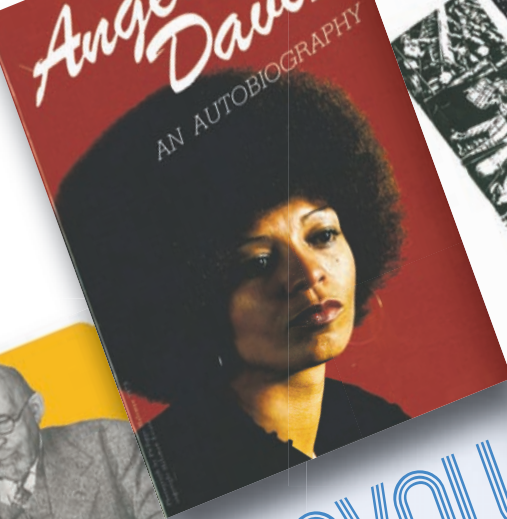


TIMOTHY KRAUSE

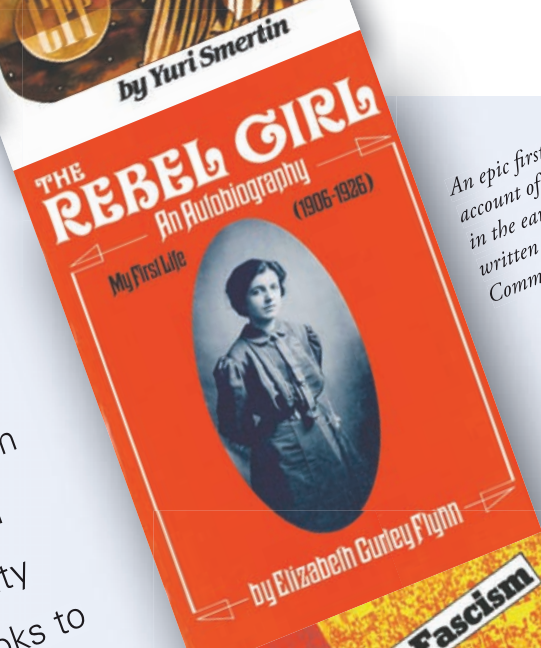
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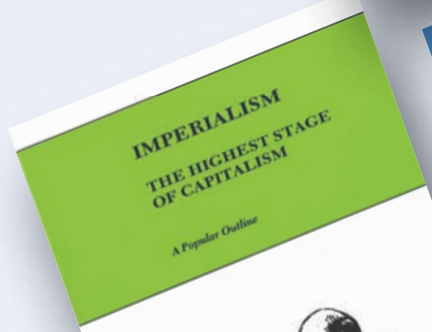
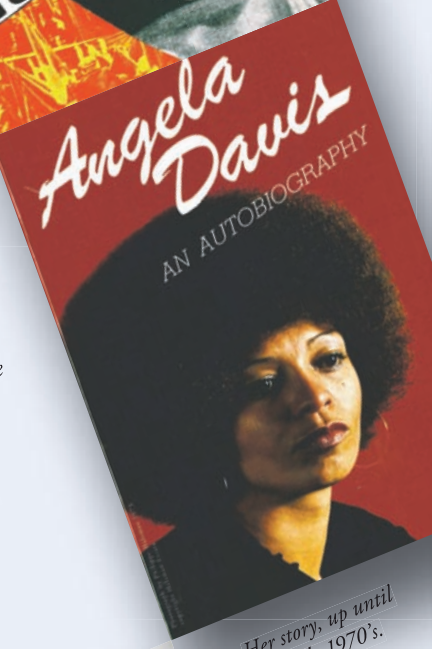
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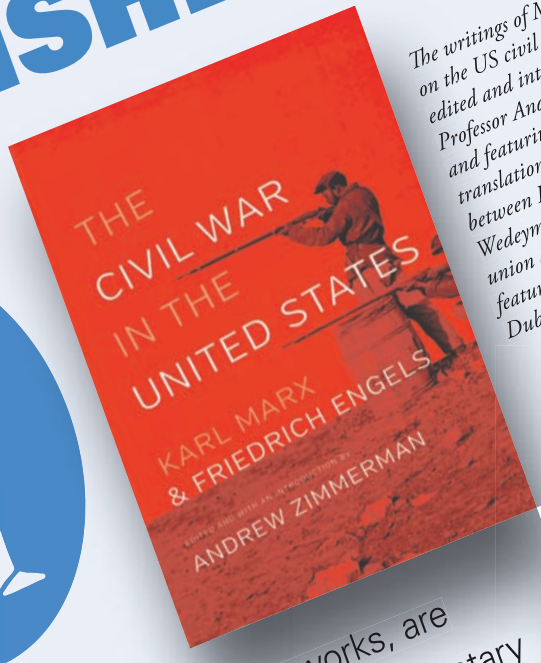
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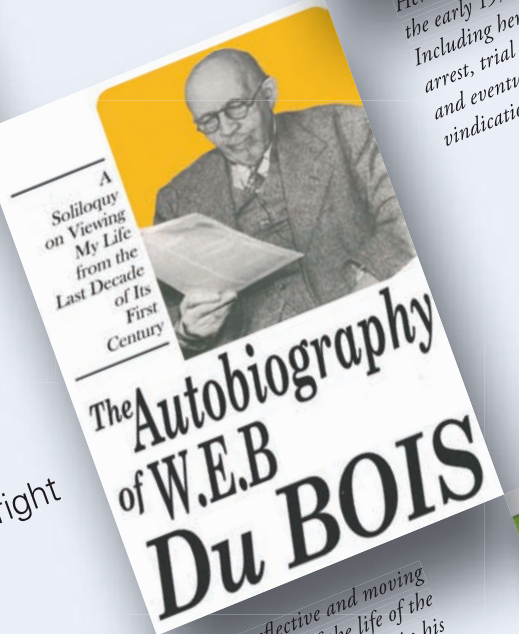
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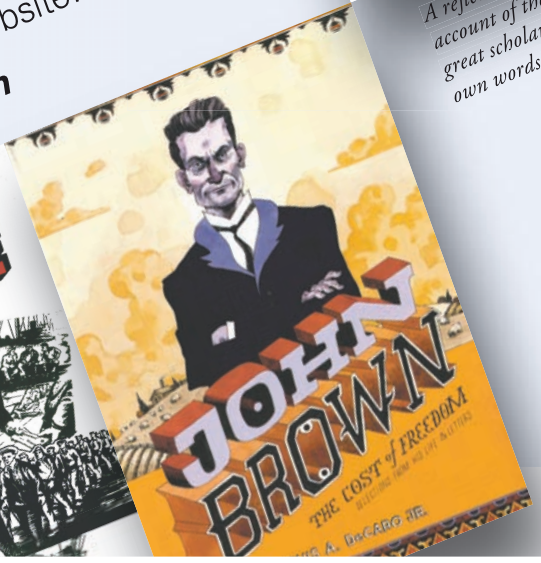


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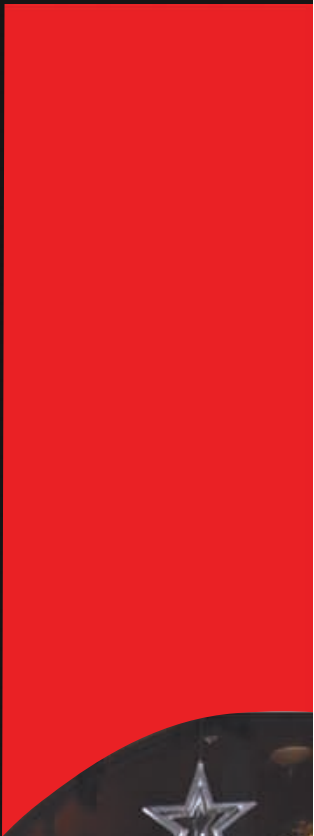
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