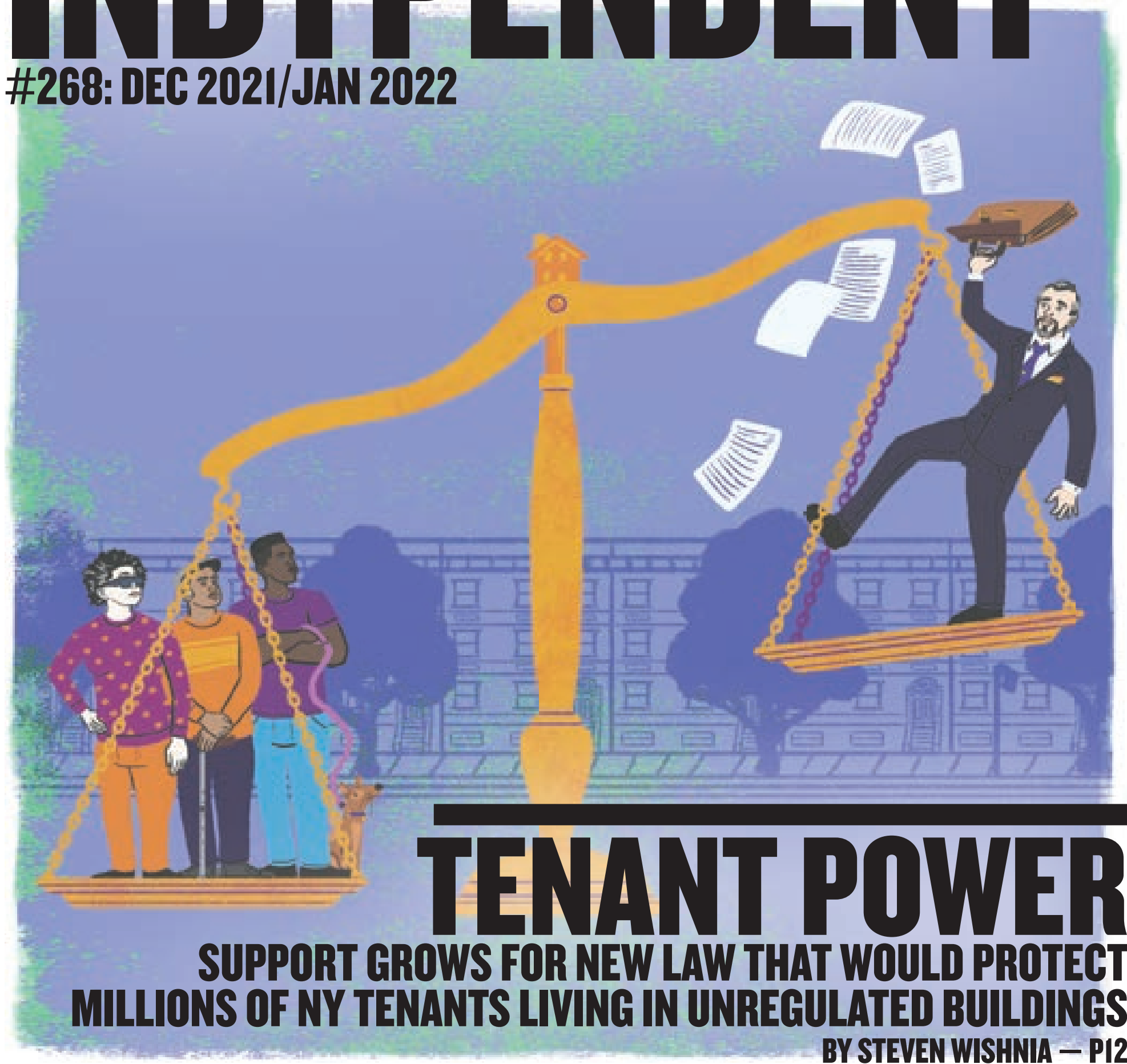


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THE INDYPENDENT

#268: DEC 2021/JAN 2022



TENANT POWER

SUPPORT GROWS FOR NEW LAW THAT WOULD PROTECT MILLIONS OF NY TENANTS LIVING IN UNREGULATED BUILDINGS

BY STEVEN WISHNIA — P12

DANIEL FISHEL



STILL STANDING

Help us keep it that way in 2022. See Pages 2, 22 & 23.



THE INDEPENDENT



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EDITOR'S NOTE



WHAT I LEARNED FROM JERRY MEYER

By JOHN TARLETON

Almost a decade ago, I received an assignment to write a short piece about a retired City University of New York professor who liked to give away his money.

His name was Gerald “Jerry” Meyer. He had just given \$25,000 to Hostos Community College, the school he had taught at for 30 years. As a show of gratitude, the school was going to rename a conference room in honor of his political hero.

I planned to do a quick phone interview, bang out the story and move on. Nine years later, he and I were still talking when a nasty fall on the steps outside his Brooklyn brownstone brought his remarkable life to a close. He was 81.

• • •

JERRY GREW UP in an impoverished working-class Irish family in Hoboken, New Jersey. He was the only one of three brothers to complete high school. Money was tight and emotions were often frayed in the Meyer household. Decades later, after his net wealth had climbed into the millions, he would describe his experience of childhood poverty as “scarring” and “unforgettable.”

In this milieu, he became a rebel at a young age. Attending a Catholic school during the Red Scare, he was confronted by a nun who caught him with a copy of a book critical of Senator Joseph McCarthy and warned the rest of her homeroom class not to speak with him. He threw his books on the floor and walked out of the room, never to return again.

After college, he spent six months on an Israeli kibbutz (his paternal grandmother was Jewish). He loved the hard work that came with living on an agricultural commune but left convinced that any socialist project — including Labor Zionism — that practiced racial exclusion should be rejected.

Jerry was a slightly older contemporary of the New Left activists of the 1960s and was deeply engaged in the struggles of that era. But his heart was always with the Old Left of the 1930s and '40s that helped birth the great industrial unions, fought for racial equality at a time of rampant white supremacy and rallied to the side of FDR's New Deal. He saw the Old Left's commitment to building institutions rooted in the working class

as key to its success and despaired of his middle-class peers' infatuation with the counterculture.

Scraping by as an adjunct professor during his twenties, Jerry shoplifted his food when money got tight. But even then — he reminded me years later — he would set aside his extra nickels and dimes to send off small donations to causes and publications he believed in.

Hostos Community College — named after the Puerto Rican educator and independence leader Eugenio Maria de Hostos — opened in 1970. It was a part of the City University of New York, the largest urban university system in the United States, and it was the first bilingual college in the country.

Squeezed into a refurbished tire factory in the South Bronx, Hostos was suffused in leftwing activism and was very much a product of the social movement ferment of that era. For Jerry, it embodied the kind of institution that needed to be nurtured and built up. It was love at first sight.

“I really had the sense I was home,” he told me. “I felt very welcome there from the administration on down.”

Jerry taught history and became the first chapter leader at Hostos for the Professional Staff Congress, the faculty union at CUNY. His organizing skills would be put to the test in 1975 and 1976. The city sought to close Hostos amid a spiraling financial crisis and a turn toward neoliberal austerity. Jerry helped mobilize students and faculty who marched and protested, took over campus buildings and successfully lobbied state legislators to allocate the funds needed to save the school.

Jerry met the love of his life, Luis Romero, at Hostos. And, it's where he completed his groundbreaking biography on Vito Marcantonio, the East Harlem congressman who championed the causes of the left on Capitol Hill during the 1930s and '40s while studiously attending to the needs of his working-class constituents.

A tall, wiry figure with a bemused smile, Jerry had the wry, self-deprecating laugh of a man who has suffered and still can't quite believe his own good fortune. He prospered later in life when fixer-upper buildings he acquired in the 1970s and '80s for little more than back taxes subsequently soared in value.

In 2006, Jerry helped start the Hostos Circle of 100 Scholarship & Emergency Fund. The fund assisted students in their final semester who needed a hand to stay in school and graduate. He continued to give back to the school, including a \$25,000 donation that got the conference room named for Marcantonio.

Jerry's friends packed a funeral home chapel days after his passing and the full spectrum of people and institutions he aided came into a view — former Hostos students and administrators, members of his union, fellow Marxist scholars, a boxing gym in the Bronx that doubles as a community center, members of the Vito Marcantonio Forum that he co-founded, a musician whose first album he helped bankroll, a recovering alcoholic

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COURTESY

whose AA membership he sponsored, an Italian-American woman who thanked him for restoring her pride in her heritage. “He cared about people,” his son Adam Meyer said afterwards. “He helped a lot of people.”

• • •

JERRY AND I WOULD TALK at least once a month and email more frequently. He delighted in each new issue of *The Independent* that landed in his mailbox and the opportunity to learn about what other (much younger) New Yorkers were doing to change the status quo. His tone was consistently encouraging and he was always ready to share what he had learned. Some of the wisdom he imparted may seem obvious, but we all would still do well to keep it in mind.

- Enjoy life. It goes by quickly.
- Be there for family and friends.

WANTED TO DO A QUICK PHONE INTERVIEW, BANG OUT THE STORY AND LIVE ON. NINE YEARS LATER, AND I WERE STILL TALKING.

- In one’s political activism, don’t get too far ahead of the masses of people by adopting positions they don’t understand and may find alienating.
- The left can only win if it’s building its forces and becoming stronger. Be wary of divisive individuals who drive others away.
- Don’t be a pompous blowhard who is well-versed in radical

theory but treats other people badly.

- Protests only get you so far. You have to build institutions if you want to wield power over the long haul.
- Don’t be stingy. Only leftists can fund the institutions they need to win the world they want.
- Giving money can be a source of joy. It’s an opportunity to live your values while helping create the change you want to see.

Regarding those last two points, you will see and hear numerous appeals this holiday season from progressive organizations — including *The Indy* — soliciting your support. Please respond as generously as you can to the groups that inspire you. Every little bit helps. If all of us who identify

with the struggle to create a fairer, more humane society support this work with the same generosity that Jerry demonstrated through good times and bad, we will be much closer to winning that world, one that is filled with justice.

FOR MORE ON WHY JERRY MEYER SUPPORTED THE INDEPENDENT, SEE PAGE 22.

HE KNEW HOW TO MAKE A POINT: Jerry Meyer speaks at a 1990 rally at Hostos Community College.

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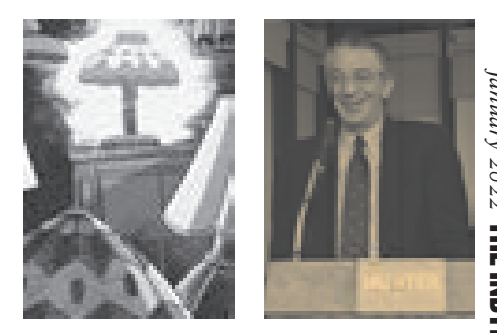
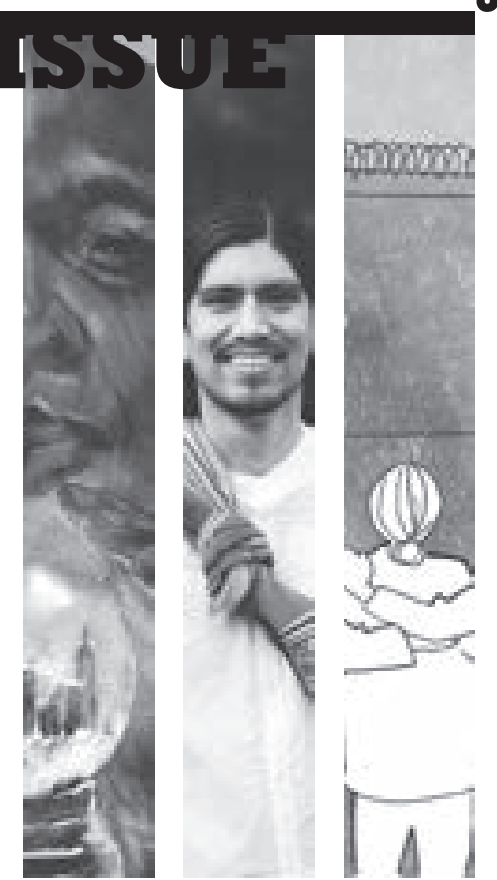
Solidarity journalism sees the world through the eyes of those marginalized by systems of power.

BUILDING LEFT INSTITUTIONS, P22

The left has to fund its own institutions, or they won’t exist, Jerry Meyer wrote in this 2019 article about why he donated to *The Indy*.

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We’re ready to do more great work in 2022, but we need your support.





ESTEBAN JIMENEZ

ANTICIPATING THE ADAMS ADMINISTRATION

CLUES, CONTRADICTIONS & THE HEGEMONY OF CAPITAL

BY TOM ANGOTTI

As Eric Adams prepares to become the next mayor of New York City, many on the left are being pulled in opposite directions. After eight years of disappointments with Bill de Blasio, an avowed progressive, should we not expect worse from someone who harshly criticizes progressives and openly embraces big business and real estate?

The local press wants us to feel upbeat because the incoming mayor talks about reducing violence and improving health and livability in communities of color. They think he's cool because he rides a bike and is vegan. Even his Republican rival, Curtis Sliwa, praised him for his lifestyle choices.

However, if we listen carefully to his campaign rhetoric, there are obvious signals that we may very well be in for more business as usual. Adams says repeatedly he wants to “get things done” and that he knows how to do so. This is standard code for keeping the machinery running without being clear where it's going or whether it's fair and equitable.

Of the city's previous mayors, he identifies most with billionaire Michael Bloomberg, who touted the virtues of his “luxury city” and succeeded in vastly expanding inequalities and creating giant luxury enclaves like Hudson Yards in Manhattan. Will Adams continue feeding the financially bloated real estate market, which promotes new luxury development, saps government subsidies, undermines tenant protections and is the main generator of displacement and evictions in communities of color? Will he continue promoting “affordable housing” subsidies to mask the rise in housing prices and property taxes for working people caused by new real estate deals that are backed by city policy?

THE SECOND AFRICAN-AMERICAN MAYOR

Especially for those of us who supported the city's first African-American Mayor, David Dinkins, it is tempting to conflate our thinking about Adams with Dinkins. The two men both rose from within powerful political clubs — Adams from the Brooklyn Democratic machine and Dinkins from a Harlem-based political dynasty. Dinkins supported the civil rights movement as it evolved and brought community activists and progressives into his administration. Adams confronted racism within the NYPD as a police officer and had two terms as Brooklyn Borough President, where he built ties with African-American and immigrant communities, many of them facing gentrification and displacement.

Being the parent of a Black son and candidate who ran on a crime-fighting message is reassuring to his core sup-

porters, as is his promise to use his first-hand knowledge of the NYPD to weed out its worst practices. However, Adams avoided criticism of Rudolph Giuliani's “law and order” and “quality of life” campaigns that targeted communities of color.

While Adams is most likely to follow the path opened by Michael Bloomberg, he may adapt some elements from the two terms of Bill de Blasio, who was also backed by big real estate.

ANOTHER WAVE OF UNCHECKED GENTRIFICATION?

It is clear that Adams has been loyal to the wealthy and powerful who largely financed his campaign. He unequivocally promotes development without seriously confronting the pandemic of displacement of communities of color driven by real estate speculators and abetted by city policy. He seems to endorse de Blasio's “affordable housing” policies that have stoked neighborhood rezonings and favor market-rate housing while increasing land values, rents and property taxes that displace more affordable housing than they create. Unsurprisingly, Adams praises the Bloomberg and Koch administrations, which were openly pro-business and spurred waves of abandonment and displacement from the Bronx to Brownsville.

Both Adams and de Blasio have solid roots in the most powerful political engine in the city, the Brooklyn Democratic Party, which has been a faithful adjunct to the massive downtown and waterfront development that swamped the borough in the last decade, displacing working-class communities of color and small, locally-owned businesses.

The Adams program reads like the usual wish list of well-intentioned ideas to increase government efficiency while also addressing inequalities. It could have been written by political consultants pushing a third de Blasio term or a team from the banking and financial sector acknowledging the big changes that occurred in the economy and city over the last decade, in particular the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter. In the end, it carefully protects the hegemonic role of capital.

BIKE LANES, VIOLENCE PREVENTION, PUBLIC HEALTH

On the hopeful side, Adams talks about more community-based violence prevention in high-crime neighborhoods and has promised to hire a woman police commissioner, though he still resists cutting the bloated police budget.

The local press has trumpeted the possibility that Ad-

ams the cycling enthusiast can revolutionize the planning and management of the city's chaotic street network. A succession of mayors has tried and failed to improve street safety and reduce auto dependency. Ed Koch put a bike lane on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan and was forced to close it. The city's 1994 bicycle master plan has yet to be fully implemented. Bloomberg hired a biker and transportation expert as trans-

portation commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan. She started the process, but left an incomplete and often dangerous network of bicycle lanes. Neither Bloomberg nor de Blasio were known for walking the streets, riding the subway or riding a bike. However, to be successful the new mayor (and city council) will have to do more. They will need to tame the most powerful lobbies representing big retailers and the car, taxi and trucking industries and refashion the transportation network in a way that builds communities and commerce instead of interrupting them. These lobbies will continue to resist in the name of saving business and commerce. While Adams advocates the implementation of congestion pricing and more express bus lanes, so did de Blasio — only to be thwarted in Albany by outer-borough and suburban state legislators who don't want their car-loving constituents to be inconvenienced.

It also remains to be seen whether Adams can follow through with his criticisms of the wide disparities in public health by combating the commercially-fueled epidemics of obesity and heart disease that disproportionately affect communities of color. And will Adams widen inequalities in the public school system by propping up the racially skewed gifted and talented programs while continuing to support privately run charter schools?

Finally, all of us on the left end of the political spectrum need to be mindful of the disastrous effect of Giuliani's revanchist attacks on Dinkins, most memorably the 1992 police riot outside City Hall that Giuliani egged on. Dinkins ended up a one-term progressive mayor followed by five terms of conservative administrations, two under Giuliani and three under Bloomberg. Adams could continue to move to the right to counter such an event, or he could surprise many of his detractors and move to the left. In either case the left and progressive movements will need to stay engaged to prevent the worst and to force a better outcome.

Tom Angotti is author of New York For Sale: Community Planning Confronts Global Real Estate and co-editor of Zoned Out: Race, Displacement and City Planning in New York.



COURTESY

SOCIALISM RETURNS TO THE LOWER EAST SIDE

DSA CANDIDATE VOWS TO “TAKE RISKS,” FIGHT FOR WORKING CLASS RESIDENTS

BY JOHN TARLETON

New York voters have sent six socialists to the state legislature since 2018. And more could be on the way to Albany in 2022 including one from Lower Manhattan.

The Lower East Side and Chinatown are two of the last working class neighborhoods in Manhattan. Besieged by gentrification and weary of the traditional Democratic Party machine, voters have been moving left in recent years. In 2016, progressive firebrand Yuh-Line Niou took over Sheldon Silver’s Assembly District 65 seat (which also encompasses the Financial District) after the former Assembly Speaker was felled by federal corruption charges. In 2021, left-leaning Christopher Marte won a City Council seat formerly held by real estate ally Margaret Chin.

On December 10 *City & State* reported that sources close to Niou said she was planning to primary moderate incumbent State Senator Brian Kavanagh. In turn, the Democratic Socialists of America’s Illapa Sairitupac has shifted his sights from running against Kavanagh to running for Niou’s soon-to-be vacated Assembly seat (NYC-DSA will also be primarying incumbent Democratic legislators in three other races).

If Silver’s legacy is one of tax breaks for luxury real estate developers and grift for himself and his cronies, Sairitupac told *The Independent* he wants to use that assembly seat to tap into an older political tradition in Lower Manhattan. This interview had been edited for length and clarity.

INDYPENDENT: *Your thoughts on jumping into the race for Sheldon Silver’s old Assembly seat, and that you and Yuh-Line Niou will both be running as progressive anti-machine candidates in Lower Manhattan this election cycle.*

ILLAPA SAIRITUPAC: We are very excited for the race. Socialism has deep roots in Lower Manhattan going back to our Jewish Marxist comrades who settled on the Lower East Side more than a century ago and the Puerto Rican diaspora who came here as well.

I think the fall of Sheldon Silver was a long time coming. Yuh-Line taking over his seat restored the respectability of this district. I hope people are excited to see Yuh-Line and I running as a progressive one-two punch. I think having a socialist represent this district which includes Wall Street would be a huge symbolic shift. We haven’t had a socialist representative down here since the 1910s. It’s long overdue.

You’re a first-time candidate. What do you bring to the table that voters should know about?

I’m a gay, indigenous, Latino son of immigrants. I’m a social worker who used to work at a preschool, as a dog walker and as a chaplain at Bellevue Hospital. I think as a person who’s been working class, who lives in the community and comes from organizing on the ground. I’m not someone who’s ever been a staffer. I’ve never been anointed or appointed. I’m not someone who comes from that political milieu. I’m someone who just came from the movement, and I’m proud of that. I’m running as an outsider. I believe that an incrementalist approach to the changes that need to be made isn’t enough. And it hasn’t been good enough for a while.

Talk about your job as a social worker and how that informs your candidacy.

I work at a mental health clinic and serve a working class population, 80% of whom are from the Lower East Side. My youngest client is 14, my oldest are in their 80s. I’m literally working with my community every day. These are people who would not ordinarily have access to mental health care. Some of these people are formerly incarcerated. It’s a lot emotionally sometimes, but it fuels my commitment to what we’re fighting for down here. These are folks that have been forgotten by our society and I want to fight for them once I’m in office.

In terms of specific issues, what’s on your mind?

I’m running a campaign that supports a Green New Deal, universal healthcare, a good cause eviction law for tenants,

the SWEAT Act to end wage theft by employers. I think it’s a really exciting opportunity to bring in people who maybe ordinarily might not use “socialist” to define themselves to see my platform, and go “yeah, these are common sense, issues and bills that speak to me, and that would protect me and that would protect and fight for my community.”

As a socialist, I’m inspired by people like Bernie Sanders. That’s the lane we’re fighting for right now. It’s the lane of liberation. At the local level, we’ll be fighting against displacement, against billionaires buying and building empty high rises while homeless people sleep on the streets. I’m very against the Two Bridges plan which would build four more skyscrapers along the East River which is the last thing we need. I also oppose the destruction of East River Park. The way it’s being done is a failure of leadership.

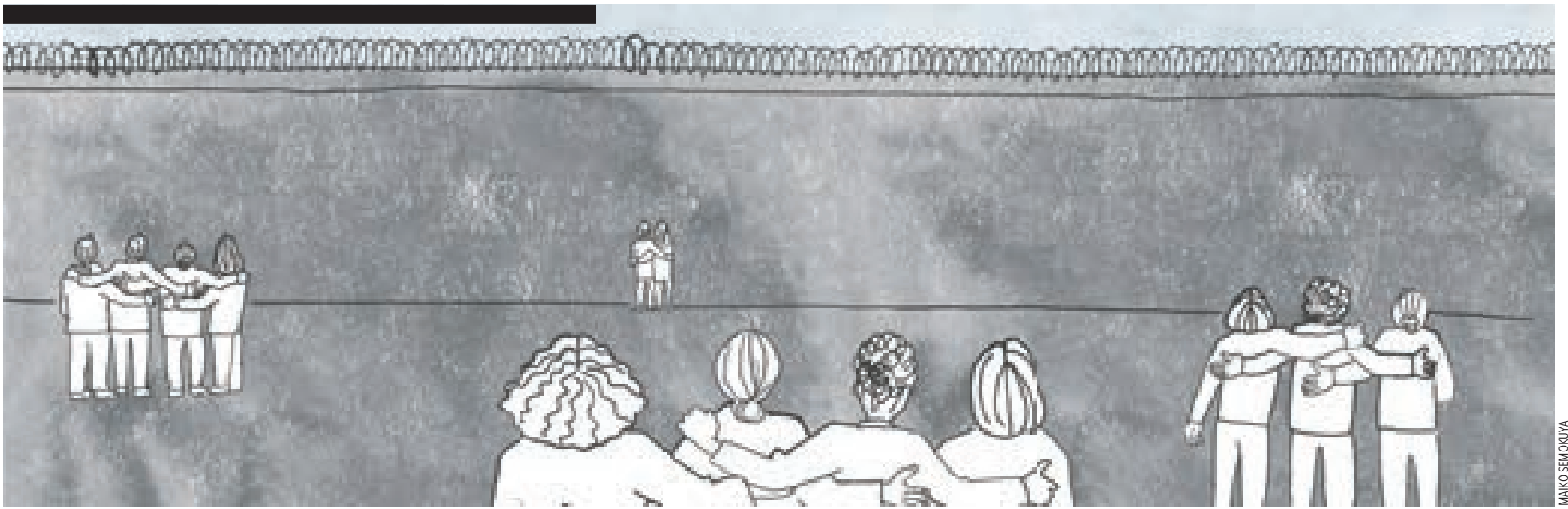
The failure of whose leadership?

Of the city. Of a politician who thinks that they’re above the law. I support the Big U plan, as originally devised, to protect Lower Manhattan from future flooding. However, the East Side Coastal Resiliency project offers no interim protection during the years that it will take to complete construction. While they say it will take five years to construct the new East River Park, it will probably take more than a decade. And, they will be dumping millions of tons of fill to build the new park on top of the old one which will create an air quality crisis that will impact NYCHA folks who live nearby. We need better solutions.

What’s your vision for simultaneously being a legislator on the inside and an organizer on the outside? In the past year, DSA legislators like Marcela Mitaynes and Zohran Mamdani have gone as far as joining hunger strikes for causes such as an excluded workers fund and forcing the city to bail out indebted taxi drivers.

I think what Marcela and Zohran are doing is an inspiration for what we should do as legislators, putting our body on the line and being unafraid to call out injustices which harm the working class in our communities. In June, I partook in a direct action calling out state politicians who refused to pass legislation to build publicly controlled renewable energy. I go on trial next month. If elected, I want to be someone who’s not at his desk all day. I want to be in the community taking risks, speaking truth to power and calling out this corrupt system which needs to shift and change.

HEADED TO ALBANY?: *Illapa Sairitupac is looking to join the bloc of six democratic socialists who currently serve in the New York State Legislature.*



MAIKO SEMOKOVA

FROM BAD TO WORSE

RIKERS ISLAND TRANSFERS NOW HELD IN MAXIMUM SECURITY PRISON WHERE DRINKING WATER TASTES LIKE 'SEWAGE AND STUFF'

By JULIA THOMAS

Al-Shariyfa Robinson, who has been incarcerated for a 15-to-life sentence at Bedford Hills since 2017, snuck a sample of water out of the Correctional Facility to her visiting mother in September. At that point, the water had tasted non-potable for weeks, and access to water had been spotty for months.

At the facility in Westchester County, the largest New York state prison for women, incarcerated people were faced with contaminated drinking water over the summer. It smelled “like cars, sewage and stuff that I’ve never smelled in water before,” says Joy Powell, a 60-year-old who’s been held in the prison since 2007. “I was throwing up and had diarrhea for like two weeks just from trying to drink the water.”

She also recalls taking ice cold showers from June through mid-October, on top of being housed in facilities where incarcerated people have long reported rampant roaches, rats and mold. Incarcerated people at Bedford Hills also says that proper treatment COVID-19 and other health issues is not provided, with basic public health precautions being largely ignored by prison staff and guards.

Now, the maximum-security prison is experiencing an influx of women and transgender and non-binary people — all held pre-trial — who are being transferred from Rikers Island. The transfers, which began in October, come after renewed calls to close Rikers and address the increasingly inhumane conditions on the penal colony. Over the past few months, Rikers Island has experienced heightened levels of violence, deteriorating physical conditions and life-threatening lack of services, all resulting in suicides and suicides attempts.

The move was announced in conjunction with Gov. Kathy Hochul’s long-awaited signature of the Less Is More Act, aimed at preventing the number of people incarcerated at Rikers for minor parole violations.

However, incarcerated people, organizers and attorneys are raising many concerns about the impacts of moving women and trans and gender non-conforming people who have not yet been sentenced to the state prison system. Advocates say the shift from Rikers to a maximum security facility 44 miles away from the city not only isolates people from their loved ones and creates complications around access to legal support, but also puts individuals into a carceral environment where they are treated as if they have been sentenced.

So far, approximately 100 people, including women and a few trans individuals, have been transferred to Bedford Hills. A total of 232 people are slated to be moved from Rikers to both Bedford Hills and Taconic Correctional Facility, but the process has been plagued by a lack of transparency from city and state officials about exactly how and when people will be moved. Detainees are typically given 48 hours to pack up their personal property and contact their loved ones and legal support before a transfer occurs.

The transfers mark an unprecedented move that “completely flies in the face of ... constitutional protection in terms of having access to counsel and innocence until proven guilty,” said Mik Kinkead, a trans staff attorney for the Rikers Civil ReEntry Project at the Legal Aid Society. While visiting hours extend from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day of the week

at Rikers, visiting hours at Bedford Hills end at 3:30 p.m. on weekends, and were temporarily extended to end at 7 p.m. Some attorneys have been successful in video chatting their clients, Kinkead says, but it’s unclear if that access has been granted to loved ones.

People who are transferred are “going to feel like they never actually got a fair chance in court,” Kinkead told *The Indy*. “They’ve been deprived from their community, from their providers, from their family.”

Trans people and non-citizens have the option to oppose being transferred, and attorneys have been advocating for cis people with medical, legal and other needs to stay in the city. Attorneys who are advocating to oppose a client’s transfer can call or email with a reason not to transfer. But mistakes have been made in terms of people ending up on transfer lists who are not supposed to be there.

“I think we would all rest more easily if we could clearly see our clients’ names on a ‘do not transfer’ list and know they are on there,” Kinkead wrote in an email to *The Indy*. “So far we just have this reporting and then we monitor to make sure no client accidentally gets on the transfer list.”

Some trans individuals, for reasons related to their safety and status of their trial, have elected to remain at Rikers, while others have chosen to go up to Bedford Hills. Kinkead says people at Rikers have had “wildly different experiences based upon their race and based upon how long they’ve been inside.” Black and/or Latinx trans men have reported being sent to solitary more than white trans men.

Hochul’s decision still exposes a contradiction in the state’s approach to carceral reform: Why transfer marginalized people in Rikers’ women’s quarters to an out-of-city prison with dangerous conditions rather than address the humanitarian crisis in men’s jails, where public defenders say conditions are more severe?

Advocates say impacted people and the New York City Council-appointed task force on trans, gender non-conforming and non-binary individuals in New York City jails were not consulted prior to the decision. “None of us were present, which is part of why this is such a disaster,” says Kinkead. The transfers place an “enormous burden on the most vulnerable people because they’re not willing to admit that Rikers has been in crisis for such a long period of time.”

Conditions at Bedford Hills are comparable to Rikers, described Powell in a phone call with *The Indy*. When we last spoke on Dec. 1, Powell described a scene of “chaos” due to the prison’s lack of COVID protocol and quarantine periods for people coming from Rikers.

“I feel like I’m suffocating in a COVID cesspool and it’s

just not right,” Powell, who is diabetic, said. “A lot of the women here are very concerned and calling their families, some are even calling lawyers. Not just my unit, but the majority of the entire prison is locked down on a modified schedule because of this.”

After a visit to Bedford Hills, New York State Senator Julia Salazar tweeted Dec. 8 that her time at the prison “confirmed all our worst fears about the impact of the forced transfers of women from Rikers Island jails to Bedford.” That day, according to Salazar, 19 people out of 595 incarcerated people at Bedford Hills, had tested positive for COVID-19.

A trans person who recently arrived from Rikers had just been moved to Powell’s unit and had not yet received test results, after allegedly being exposed to COVID-positive people on the bus from the jail, according to Powell. She noted that Bedford Hills has been inconsistent in their promise to keep people from Rikers in one unit and instead has dispersed detainees throughout the prison’s general population.

Donna Robinson says she’s been in touch with numerous incarcerated people who don’t have family or support systems — “bonus sisters” and “bonus daughters,” she calls them — over her years of advocacy with Release Aging People in Prison (RAPP). Medical care at the facility has consistently been “slim to none,” she told *The Indy*, adding that she’s consistently heard about nurses and doctors at the facility brushing off incarcerated people’s concerns about their health.

The first person to die of COVID-19 in a New York State prison was Darlene “Lulu” Benson-Seay, a 61-year-old Black woman who was incarcerated at Bedford Hills for seven years. She had a heart attack and open-heart surgery three months before her death on April 28, 2020, and had been eligible for medical parole even prior to the pandemic. Her story underscores the endemic issue of medical neglect at Bedford Hills, where mental health issues are also routinely pushed to the side, Robinson says.

“I’m afraid for those women who are going to be transferred to those two facilities, what that is going to do to them mentally,” Robinson told *The Indy*. “They’ve already been traumatized being at Rikers. Now you’re going to send them to another facility, to take that baggage.”

Melania Brown, the sister of Layleen Polanco — a trans woman who died from an epileptic seizure in solitary confinement at Rikers Island in June of 2019 after multiple instances of neglect by Rikers’ jail staff — is calling for people to be released, not transferred. “All they’re doing is moving these humans from one facility where there’s suffering to an even worse one, because now they’re in maximum security where there are people that have committed crimes that are being sentenced,” she told *The Indy*. “The problem is that they’re not attacking the problem from the root.”

Advocates are demanding city and state officials release people and provide community-based alternatives for those who are being transferred. “We need leadership who begins to really scrutinize,” said Elisa Crespo, executive director of the NEW Pride Agenda, “and think deeply about whether incarceration actually rehabilitates people or actually puts them in a better standing when they’re released.”



COURTESY

23 YEARS LATER ANTHONY SIMS' MURDER CONVICTION LOOKS SHAKY AFTER STAR WITNESS STUMBLES

BY THEODORE HAMM

Although Brooklyn District Attorney Eric Gonzalez regularly touts his office as a “national model” for redressing the office’s own wrongful convictions, the ongoing inquiry into the 1999 murder conviction of Anthony Sims highlights the problems that arise when any bureaucracy investigates itself.

Sims was convicted of killing Li Run Chen at a Bushwick Chinese food joint in May 1998. A jury reached that verdict almost entirely based on the testimony of Sims’ then-best friend, Julius Graves. The trial was handled by veteran Brooklyn homicide prosecutor Mark Hale.

In May 2021, the DA’s office agreed to Sims’ legal team’s request for a judicial hearing regarding the conviction in response to witness statements that could exculpate Sims. At the end of June, Mark Hale retired from the office. Since 2014, Hale had been head of Brooklyn’s Conviction Review Unit, which Gonzalez inherited from the late Ken Thompson.

As *The Independent* has reported, during the hearing in October and November, Graves gave wildly contradictory testimony about his role in the murder but did not dispute that after the deadly shooting, he wiped the gun clean of fingerprints and gave it to a 14-year-old neighbor to dispose of. Although he was granted immunity for the murder in return for his testimony against Sims, Graves could be charged with perjury for his statements in the current hearing.

That is not likely to happen, for the same reason that the DA’s office is fighting to preserve Sims’ conviction—i.e. Gonzalez’s team would be admitting that Hale prosecuted the wrong person for the murder.

During the three decades he spent in the DA’s office prior to 2014, Hale won scores of homicide convictions. Under his

DAD TIME: Anthony Sims poses with his two sons during a 2003 family visit.

watch, the CRU exonerated 30 people. None were cases in which Hale was the lead prosecutor.

Hale’s handling of the Emmanuel Cooper case is currently the focus of a federal lawsuit in the Eastern District of New York. According to the complaint, Hale withheld a raft of exculpatory information from Cooper’s defense and threatened a witness who tried to recant.

Jabbar Collins, a leading Brooklyn exoneree who advocates for others wrongfully convicted, says Cooper sent a letter to the CRU asking for an inquiry into his case but never received a reply. Anthony Sims similarly contacted Hale’s unit but the response informed Sims that there would be no investigation.

In January of 2020, the Brooklyn DA’s office agreed to vacate Cooper’s 1993 conviction but then spent 10 months deciding whether to retry him. Although Gonzalez’s team opted not to do so, the CRU chose not to exonerate Cooper.

The Sims hearing is scheduled to resume in the first week of January, and Hale will testify before it concludes. Among the things he may be asked about is Julius Graves’ testimony in November that he met with Hale only for “three minutes” prior to the 1999 trial.

If true, such a lack of discussion may seem mystifying, given that Hale’s case against Sims depended almost entirely on Graves’ account. But then again, if Hale had some questions about Graves’ veracity, he was better off not meeting with Graves so that Hale could claim not to have any reason to doubt him.

Meanwhile, as of mid-December, DA Gonzalez had not yet named Hale’s successor as head of the CRU. Tough shoes to fill, indeed.

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

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AMAZON ORGANIZING DR STALLS IN STAT ISLAND

HOW TO UNIONIZE THE E-COMMERCE GIANT REMAINS UNCLEAR

BY LACHLAN HYATT & AMBA GUERGUERIAN

Derrick Palmer was at Amazon's JFK8 warehouse on Staten Island when he heard that the petition to form a union he had spent the last six months acquiring signatures for had failed. As a warehouse associate in the packing department, Palmer was working a shift packaging and loading orders onto conveyor belts when the president of the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), Chris Smalls, broke the news.

"I was devastated and I felt like it wasn't fair," said Palmer, the union's vice president. "But at the same time, you've got to expect the unexpected in Amazon."

On November 12, ALU organizers withdrew their petition to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), as they were alerted that they did not have enough valid signatures for the board to initiate a vote on union representation. They needed to have union-authorization cards signed by at least 30% of workers at the site. The ALU had filed the petition on October 25, believing they had union cards from a third of the warehouse's 5,500 workers. However, Amazon contacted the NLRB and said there were actually more than 9,600 workers employed in the warehouse. The ALU plans to refile the petition in the coming months.

The union says its count was not a ballpark estimate, but a concrete number from trusted sources. Whatever accounts for the 4,100-name discrepancy in headcount, Amazon is writing its own rules.

Chris Smalls also blamed the location's high turnover rate, more than 150% a year, for invalidating hundreds of the petition's signatures, as those workers are no longer employed by Amazon. The ALU says many of the workers who signed union cards were fired.

In organizing a union, the general rule is to sign up at least 70% of a unit before asking for a vote on union representation, because of the inevitable attrition once management cranks up an anti-union campaign. But the ALU plans to go ahead once it reaches the 30% minimum because the turnover rate means it might be impossible to reach 70%, says Smalls.

"With a higher percentage, of course you have better chances. But when you deal with a company like this, it's impossible to get. I'll be here for two years," the ALU president told *The Independent*. He says the union's plan is to get the minimum number of cards signed and approach an election campaign in sucker-punch style, quickly bringing the union message to the thousands of workers who would need to be persuaded before a vote.

"The union has trouble figuring out who is actually in the unit because there's night shifts, and there's people who are in the unit but might be working off site or something like that," said Nelson Lichtenstein, a labor historian at the University of California Santa Barbara. "So, A, they keep it sort of secret, they don't let you know how many are actually in the unit. Then 'B, they flood the unit. That's what they did at Bessemer... and I wouldn't be surprised if that's what they're doing right now in Staten Island."

Another union-busting tactic is "captive-audience meetings," where workers are forced to listen to anti-union propaganda. Amazon held them daily in Bessemer, where it also posted anti-union messages on the inside of toilet doors. Vice recently released leaked audio from a captive-audience meeting held in the Staten Island warehouse.

"We continue to be a target for third parties who do not understand our pro-employee philosophy and seek to disrupt the direct relationship between Amazon and our associates," said the operations manager at the meeting. An ALU member quickly pointed out that the organizers are not a third-party group, but workers themselves.

The Bessemer workers voted against joining the RWDSU by a 1,798-738 margin. But on Nov. 29, the NLRB ordered a new election, on the grounds that Amazon had tainted the vote by setting

up a mailbox to send in ballots inside a tent emblazoned with the company's anti-union slogan.

• • •

AMAZON'S PUNISHING WORKLOAD and the harsh conditions in its warehouses are well known. Shifts are never shorter than 10 hours, and during the holidays, overtime is mandatory. There is a high rate of injuries and lax COVID-19 safety measures. Chris Smalls was fired in March 2020 after working for

the company for five years because he went public with criticisms about people not getting personal protective equipment at the Staten Island facility.

The pace is fast, with workers' every move tracked by a computer. Numerous Amazon workers have said that they urinate in bottles to avoid being penalized for five minutes "time off task." Shifts are spent scanning, packing, moving carts or loading packages onto docks. JFK8, the biggest of the four warehouses in the Staten Island complex, is the size of two football fields.

"Breaks in this building are a nightmare because by the time it takes to get to the place where you need to be, your break's already half over, and then by the time the break's over, you're already late," says Josiah Morgan, an ALU organizer who has been working at the warehouse since March. To make things worse, management recently shortened break time from 20 to 15 minutes.

"There's definitely a racial issue going on," says Derrick Palmer, who is also the founder of the Congress of Essential Workers, an organization that supports the rights of the working class throughout New York.

According to a June New York Times report, 60% of warehouse workers at JFK8 in 2019 were Black or Latino, and Black workers were almost 50% more likely to be fired than their white peers. Management was 70% white or Asian people.

"Race is probably one reason why we don't get the support that we deserve. But it is what it is, you know, I mean, of course people are not gonna support us because of that," Smalls told *The Indy*.

• • •

THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE BETWEEN the Staten Island and Bessemer drives

is that while the Bessemer workers were attempting to join the RWDSU, a large national union, the Staten Island workers have formed their own.

After the RWDSU's defeat in Bessemer, workers at the Staten Island's four Amazon warehouses saw having their own union as a way to build a more resilient, grass-roots campaign. They founded the ALU last spring.

It now has around 2,500 workers signed up and an organizing committee with over 150 members. A group of organizers is on the ground at the Staten Island warehouses every day. They say they have had a largely positive response, projecting that the real issue will be beating the turnover rate.

Setting up a tent outside the JFK8 warehouse, ALU organizers have become a staple there, by bringing pizza to workers at shift change, holding nighttime bonfires and barbecues, offering free weed and hosting gatherings, while passing out union pamphlets and garnering signatures for NLRB petitions.

On Thanksgiving, the ALU held a potluck dinner outside the facility for workers "trapped in a warehouse." In late November, when a warehouse worker was hit and killed by a car while leaving the facility, it held a vigil in her honor.

A warm plate of food helps after a 10-12-hour shift on your feet, before a three-hour ride back to the Bronx or

New Jersey. "Most people take public transportation to get here," said Josiah Morgan. "I know one girl who travels from White Plains."

Every half hour, city buses full of people pull up in front of the warehouses. A line of workers files out, then disperses as they head towards one of the four warehouses. Smalls is often there to greet them, while other workers organize on the inside, or outside during breaks.

The bottom-up approach, while lacking the financial support of a large union like the RWDSU, has the potential to lead to a stronger core of organized workers, says Ellen Dichner, a labor lawyer and distinguished lecturer at the City University of New York School of Labor and Urban Studies.

"As a whole, running union campaigns like this requires a lot of money and a lot of expertise, which usually workers who've not had experience organizing lack," she said. "On the other hand, they're the folks that are in constant contact with their coworkers, and having that inside organizing campaign of the workers is instrumental, absolutely instrumental." By having a union created by workers themselves, Dichner adds, the ALU will have an easier time refuting Amazon's casting unions as an outside third party only eager to take workers' money for dues, something she thinks the Bessemer effort failed at.

Other attempts to organize Amazon include Amazonians United, founded by six workers in Chicago in 2019 during a shop floor battle to force management to provide clean drinking water at a local warehouse. It has since become a decentralized network active in several cities, including New York. Its organizers emphasize patiently building relationships among workers that yield strong organizing committees. Those focus on leading winnable shop-floor struggles for better working conditions. The long-term goal is to build a network of organizing committees throughout Amazon that will lead the fight for bigger victories.

In June, the International Brotherhood of the Teamsters announced that they were making organizing Amazon a top national priority. The Teamsters have more than 1.3 million members — 10 times as many as RWDSU — and an annual budget of more than \$200 million.

For the Teamsters, Amazon's rapid growth presents both

you ain't never worked for this company, you are not going to be able to really understand."

"We operate like a union already," he adds, explaining the ALU's well-developed organizational structure. "We have everything that a union has already... besides the protections and the resources. For any union to support us, they will have to sit down and meet with us. And, you know, we'll figure out a way where we can work together."

Palmer insists that the road to a union victory at the Staten Island warehouses is still open. "We're going to continue our efforts and we're going to file again," he said.

Many see the effort to unionize mega-employers like Amazon, Starbucks or Walmart as potentially revolutionary. "It would be the same sort of thing as organizing General Motors or U.S. Steel in 1937, or the Montgomery bus boycott in terms of civil rights," said Lichtenstein, author of several books on the history of labor unions in 20th century America, about the societal impact if Amazon workers were to unionize.

These efforts come at a time when polls show the highest level of public support for unions since the 1960s, although less than 11% of U.S. workers now belong to one — and less than 7% at private-sector employers. Despite that public support, the battle against Amazon and its centi-billionaire founder, to overcome the company's sheer will to destroy any union drive, will be a long, tough one, requiring intense organizing and effective tactics.

In April, just after the results of the Bessemer vote were announced, labor author and organizer Jane McAlevey wrote an article for *The Nation*, "Blowout in Bessemer: A Postmor-

HAVE TO START SOMEWHERE:

(l-r): Brett Daniels, Chris Smalls and Josiah Morgan of the Amazon Labor Union. They are trying to organize their peers inside the warehouses to become the first unionized Amazon warehouse in the US.

Credit: Amba Guerguerian

LONG COMMUTE:

Amazon workers take the S40 bus to the parking lot of the warehouse complex. For many workers, it's the last leg in a journey that begins in New Jersey, the Bronx or Westchester County.

BOTH TRADITIONAL TOP-DOWN UNIONS AND EMPLOYEE-LED ORGANIZATIONS ARE EXPERIMENTING WITH HOW TO CRACK AMAZON.

an opportunity and a direct threat to their base of workers in the trucking and warehousing industries. They represent 340,000 UPS workers. The union has initiated a nationwide outreach campaign, featuring Teamster members speaking directly with Amazon workers about the benefits of a union job, which often pays at least twice as much as the \$15-17 per hour that is the norm at Amazon.

In November, a left-leaning reform slate won the Teamsters presidency by a 2-1 margin, ousting the union's old-guard leadership. Incoming President Sean O'Brien has vowed to pull out all the stops to win a strong new contract with UPS when the old one expires in 2023 and hold up that success to show Amazon workers what a strong union can do. Teamsters leaders have also suggested that the union might seek to organize wildcat strikes at Amazon facilities to win union recognition, rather than solely relying on elections, in which the playing field is slanted in favor of management.

Smalls says he wouldn't be opposed to collaborating with the Teamsters, but indicated he didn't have much faith in the large top-down union. He was a member of one of their locals before moving to Amazon in 2015 because he was unhappy with the contract it negotiated.

"I know a lot of people are like, 'No, what about the experience?'" he says when asked about organizing a small, completely new union. "But there's no experience, because

tem on the Amazon Campaign." She had two main criticisms of the RWDSU effort there. Organizers only organized at the workplace gate, under Amazon's gaze, instead of visiting workers at home (while taking precautions against COVID), and they didn't go public with workers who promised a yes vote, encouraging others to do the same.

The exception to the labor-organizing rule that home visits are essential, she wrote, would be "if large numbers of actual Bessemer Amazon workers were the people standing at shift change at the plant gate." That is indeed the case at Amazon's Staten Island warehouses, where most workers arrive by bus. And many of the Staten Island workers have clearly gone public with their plans to vote yes for the union.

Can the ALU's do-it-yourself organizing model or an alliance with a union such as the RWDSU or the Teamsters reverse the defeat at Bessemer and provide a solution to the challenges posed by Amazon's union-busting tactics? We'll learn more in the coming months and years.



BRIAN PONTO

WHAT'S REALLY CAUSING INFLATION AND HOW WE SHOULD DEAL WITH IT

BY PADDY QUICK

From November 2020 to November 2021, consumer prices rose by 6.8%, the highest rate of inflation since 1982, but average hourly earnings rose by only 4.8%. This meant that, on average, working families were worse off than a year ago — what are termed “real wages” actually fell by 2%. During this same period, however, the S&P 500, a broad measure of corporate stock prices that predict future corporate earnings, increased by some 25-30% well over the rate of inflation. While times have been getting harder for workers, it is clear that capitalists (or “big business”) have been doing very well. It would seem as though everyone is against inflation. But the real problem is not that prices have been increasing but that wages have not kept up with this.

It is important to look not only at why inflation has increased but at the very different question of why wages have not kept up with it.

The answer to the first question is fairly easy to understand. The pandemic sent shock waves throughout the world and production fell dramatically. But it did so very unevenly, and this resulted in major disruption of global production chains. The process of manufacturing involves the use of products from many different countries that are then shipped across the globe. A major fall in the production of a single one of these leads to a crisis in the entire process. As an example of this, automobile production fell dramatically because of a shortage of computer chips, so that production lines in the United States and other countries had to be shut down, while automobile prices skyrocketed. The average price of a new car increased by 12% over the past year for those willing and able to pay for them, and the price of used cars increased by 25%. This is the major reason for the increase in prices, and it will take a long time, maybe another year or more, before production returns to normal. In addition, for very different reasons, the international price of oil also increased for all countries, including the United States. But with this exception, inflation cannot be understood by looking at individual prices — some go up, while some (such as elec-

tronic goods) go down — but inflation means an increase across the board, in all prices.

But while corporate profits increased, this has never led to an automatic increase in wages. While Social Security payments are increased annually to cover, in full, changes in consumer prices, there is no such adjustment in wages. Workers must fight for every additional penny, and since the mid-1970s real wages have been almost stagnant while the gains from increased productivity have gone disproportionately to the top 10%. So this “gap” between the rate of inflation and the rate of change in

hourly wages is nothing new.

It could have been worse, and without a major mobilization by progressive forces it will be. One effect of the pandemic was to reduce the number of workers available for work, as they faced the problem of child care and the dangers of catching COVID-19. It also seems as though many people with sufficient household resources to get by were no longer willing to put up with low wages and bad working conditions. In addition, the government sent considerable pandemic-related assistance to both businesses and workers. As a result, the official unemployment rate fell to the very low rate of 4.2%. Businesses therefore had to compete with each other for workers, and did so, in many cases, by offering higher wages (although not sufficient to compensate for higher prices). This in turn led them to raise the prices of their products, and so inflation “took hold” throughout the economy.

The big-business supporters of both Republicans and Democrats differ on many things, including Biden’s taxation and spending policies, but they are united in their opposition to high rates of inflation. With very few exceptions politicians today agree with them, as if it is inflation, rather than inadequate wages, that are the problem.

The reason for business opposition to inflation is not obvious. Most people are simply not involved in the decision-making of big business. Businesses are continually driven to expand by increasing investment in new plants and equipment and new technology. But in doing so they have to project not only the effect of such investment on the quantity of its output, but also the future prices of both inputs and the prices of its own products, as well as future interest rates. What matters is not so much whether the average rate of inflation averages 2% or even 6%, but whether it could vary this average by plus or minus 5% in individual future years. There is no way to predict this with any certainty. Investment spending is thus riskier when inflation is unpredictable, and so investment falls, and with it the growth in profits that is a business’s main objective.

THANKS BERNIE!

On January 1, the U.S.’s 70 million Social Security recipients will see their monthly check go up by 5.9%, the largest increase in decades. For the typical recipient, the average monthly benefit will increase from \$1,565 to \$1,657.

This increase would be significantly smaller if President Barack Obama had got his way. After winning re-election in 2012 while promising to protect Social Security, Obama quickly moved to enact “chained CPI,” a more conservative method of calculating the consumer price index. Using it would have reduced the size of the annual cost of living adjustment. For Obama, it was a bargaining chip for reaching a budget deficit reduction deal with congressional Republicans.

The outcry was immediate. By April 2013, 2.3 million Americans had signed petitions calling on the president to back off of chained CPI. The signatures were presented at a rally outside the White House headlined by Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders who vowed to “do everything in my power to block President Obama’s proposal to cut benefits for Social Security recipients through a chained consumer price index.”

The senator mobilized a wide coalition of organizations, including veterans, women’s rights groups, and labor unions to oppose chained CPI. The Intercept reported. Rattled by the show of opposition, Obama’s own congressional allies refused to back chained CPI and he quietly withdrew it from his budget proposal the following year.

During his 2016 presidential campaign, Sanders popularized the idea of increasing Social Security benefits which has since become a mainstream position in the Democratic Party. Eric Laursen, author of *People’s Pension: The Struggle to Save Social Security Since Reagan*, says that’s the way to go as pensions disappear. Likewise, the soaring costs of caring for their parents and the cost of paying for their children’s college education leaves many people’s savings depleted when they reach retirement age, Laursen said. Social Security is not supplemental income, as envisioned when the program began in 1935. It’s the only source of income millions of Americans have, Laursen noted, and it shouldn’t be chained to a stingy CPI calculation or to the Inside the Beltway politics of bipartisan deficit reduction.

— JOHN TARLETON

Continued on page 15

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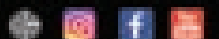
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GOOD-CAUSE EVICTION TOPS TENANTS' 2022 AGENDA

PROPOSED LAW THAT WOULD GIVE PROTECTIONS TO MORE THAN 1.6 MILLION NY HOUSEHOLDS GAINS MOMENTUM IN ALBANY

BY STEVEN WISHNIA

If we don't get this bill, it will allow landlords to do what they like in terms of moving people out," Leroy Johnson, chair of the Flatbush chapter of New York Communities for Change, tells a rally in Brooklyn on the sunny, chilly morning of December 9.

The bill he's talking about would outlaw evicting tenants without a specific "good cause." It's at the top of tenant groups' agenda in Albany for the 2022 session, made more urgent by the impending expiration of the state's moratorium on evictions on Jan. 15. And state Sen. Kevin Parker, whose district office one block east of

Nostrand Avenue is the site of the rally, has withdrawn his cosponsorship.

"For some reason, which might be greed," Johnson says in a rich Caribbean accent.

The office looks empty, but the roughly 25 protesters sing loudly. Expanding tenant protections, Johnson says, would affect thousands of people in Flatbush. The buildings on the block are mostly two and three stories high, too small to meet the six-apartment minimum for rent stabilization. And the neighborhood isn't rich: Around the corner on Nostrand Avenue, the line for the 50-pound bags of potatoes and cabbage being given away by the storefront Church of God of Salvation (Eglise de Dieu du Salut) is bigger than the demonstration.



RENT CONTROL COMES TO MINNESOTA

Cue the ghost of Prince singing "Purple Rain" as "lower rent, lower rent": Rent controls are coming to the Twin Cities. Voters in St. Paul on Nov. 2 approved a measure that would limit rent increases to 3 percent a year, while across the Mississippi in Minneapolis, they amended the city charter to authorize enacting rent regulations. Both initiatives won about 53 percent of the vote.

The St. Paul law, which will go into effect May 1, is both the first rent-control law in any Midwestern city and the farthest-reaching one in the nation. It will apply to all buildings with more than three units, with no exceptions for vacant apartments or newly constructed buildings. It also directs the city to create a process for landlords to apply for higher increases if they are not making a reasonable return on their investment.

Housing Equity Now St. Paul, the coalition that campaigned for the initiative, says it was designed to address "the loopholes that have limited the effectiveness of rent-stabilization policies around the country." They argued that it would

create stability for both tenants and the market. If a landlord or developer can't make a healthy return without rapidly increasing rents every year, they said, "it's a risky investment that we don't want in our city."

The coalition is now trying to ensure that the city implements the law without weakening it. On Nov. 22, it sent a letter to the city's Department of Planning and Economic Development, urging it to be skeptical of claims that a project is no longer financially feasible that are actually "a thinly veiled capital strike to intimidate city staff and elected officials to compromise the strength of a policy developers dislike."

The law won't limit rent increases for tenants whose leases expire before May 1. It also doesn't give renters a right to renew their leases, but its strict limits on vacancy increases eliminate a common incentive to push tenants out.

The Minneapolis initiative clears the way for the City Council to enact rent controls, but doesn't require it to do so.

In Boston, mayor-elect Michelle Wu advocates restoring the city's rent-control law, but she faces one currently insurmountable obstacle: In 1994, Massachusetts voters approved a landlord-

backed ballot initiative that forbids local governments from regulating rents.

Meanwhile, a New Jersey appeals court ruled Nov. 30 that Montclair's rent-control ordinance, enacted in April 2020, cannot go into effect until voters in the city of 39,000 approve it.

The court overturned the Montclair township clerk's January decision that the local landlord organization opposing the ordinance had not received enough petition signatures to qualify an initiative for the ballot. The township had allowed it to collect signatures online, and the appeals court held that the clerk had "unreasonably" rejected online signatures that did not match voting records, and should have contacted those people herself to get them corrected.

The ordinance would have limited rent increases to 4.25 percent a year, or 2.5 percent if one tenant is 65 or older. It would have applied to buildings with more than three apartments, except for government-subsidized low-income housing.

— STEVEN WISHNIA

The good-cause bill, sponsored by state Senator Julia Salazar (D-Brooklyn) and Assemblymember Pamela Hunter (D-Syracuse), would give tenants in more than 1 million unregulated apartments protection against being evicted without a specific cause, such as not paying rent or creating a substantial nuisance. It would cover all private apartment rentals except for owner-occupied buildings with less than four units, sublets and apartments already covered by rent control, rent stabilization or federal rent regulations.

It would also, according to Salazar's office, create a presumption that tenants have the right to renew their lease and that raising rent by more than 3 percent a year (or more than 1½ times the inflation rate, as measured by the federal Consumer Price Index) is unreasonable. Tenants could contest a rent increase or lease refusal in court and the landlord would have to prove it was justified, explains Oksana Mironova of the Community Service Society.

The bill would cover almost 1.6 million households in New York State, the CSS estimated in September. That would include more than half of renters upstate and more than 70 percent in Suffolk County, areas with no rent regulations. But it would also include about 785,000 apartments in New York City, in buildings that are too small or too new to be covered by rent regulations and in apartments deregulated under the 1990s rent-stabilization loopholes.

"We have a big membership that lives in unregulated housing," says Jennifer Hernandez of Make the Road New York. But when those tenants complain about massive rent increases — "\$300, \$400, sometimes \$1,000," she adds — "we have to say there are really no protections... but here is this bill that will change that."

It would also protect tenants who are demanding repairs or complaining about lack of heat and hot water. For tenants in this situation, the fact that they have no legal right to renew their lease means "there really is no due process," says Rima Begum, associate director of housing stability at Chhaya, a Jackson Height-based organization serving South Asian immigrants.

"The only advice I can give them is that the risk of fighting your landlord is eviction," she says. "By the time they get to court, their lease is going to be up."

In Ossining, says Michael McKee of Tenants PAC, almost all the tenants who testified in favor of rent stabilization in 2016 had been forced out by the time the Westchester County town enacted it in 2018.

PROGRESS UPSTATE

Several cities upstate enacted good-cause eviction laws this year. Albany was the first, in June, although its law

allows landlords to evict tenants if they're selling the building to a buyer who wants it delivered vacant — a dangerous loophole, says McKee. The fast-gentrifying town of Hudson passed a similar law, but the mayor vetoed it so it could be amended to exclude that loophole, he adds. The revised version is expected to pass, says Rebecca Garrard of Citizen Action.

Poughkeepsie and Newburgh enacted good-cause laws this fall. Kingston's Common Council on Dec. 7 decided to postpone its first vote on one until January, after tenants objected to a provision exempting buildings with less than five apartments — about two-thirds of the rental apartments in the city, they said.

Similar measures have been introduced in Beacon, New Paltz and Ithaca. In Syracuse, the city's corporate counsel is reviewing the bill's language, says Garrard, while in Rochester, advocates are waiting for the incoming mayor and City Council, who are "much more politically inclined to pass it." Preliminary efforts are underway in Utica and Buffalo.

That all laid the groundwork to push the good-cause bill in the state Legislature. "We've created a mandate," Garrard says. "Electeds are realizing they can't come out against a policy that their constituents and local legislators strongly support."

Albany Assemblymember John McDonald was a vocal opponent of the city's good-cause bill, but switched sides when it passed, she notes. He and Assemblymember Kevin Cahill (D-Ulster/Dutchess) are facing primaries from more pro-tenant challengers. State Sen. Michelle Hinchey, elected in 2020 from the upper Hudson Valley, has also not endorsed the bill. She should remember that the previous Democrat who held the seat was unseated after one term, Garrard says: "In a purple district, you need to turn out your blue base."

"I feel really optimistic, which is not to say this is a done deal," she says.

McKee has more doubts. The Senate "has been ready to pass the bill for two years," he says, but there is more opposition in the Assembly, and that has to be overcome: Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins "is not

Continued on page 22

DECOMMODIFY HOUSING

"Decommodify housing" is a concept gaining currency among pro-tenant housing-policy types. The unwieldy-sounding phrase, explains Community Service Society housing policy analyst Oksana Mironova, means "to make housing less of a commodity, less of an asset that investors can park their money in," and thus prevent speculation from driving up housing costs by inflating land value.

Since the Great Recession, private-equity firms such as Blackstone and BlackRock have bought up thousands of

residential properties, from foreclosed houses in Southern California to mobile-home communities in upstate New York. In a red-hot housing market like the fast-growing city of Austin, Texas, they can outbid regular homebuyers because they can afford to sit on a property for five years until its value multiplies.

Smaller investors, even those owning as few as five buildings, can also act like speculators, Mironova points out.

To break that pattern, advocates are calling for more "social housing": housing for people to live in, not ruled by the market. That would encompass more public housing, community land

trusts, stronger tenant rights, and public or nonprofit housing for working and middle-class people, such as the New York's old Mitchell-Lama program and limited equity co-ops like Penn South in Chelsea and Electchester in Queens.

"All of the above," says Mironova. Whatever is done, she adds, it must be done on a large scale to have any impact.

— STEVEN WISHNIA



'WE ARE MADE OF HOPE'

FORMER HUNGER STRIKERS REFLECT ON THEIR EXPERIENCES

BY AMBA GUERGUERIAN

“**T**he huelga de hambre has been used for thousands of years. It has won many struggles,” said Ana Ramirez, 42, who fasted for 24 days this spring to demand that undocumented people and other excluded workers in New York receive stimulus and unemployment money. “Esther the *reina* won a battle with the hunger strike.”

Ramirez is referring to Queen Esther of the Old Testament’s Book of Esther. The queen and her supporters fasted for three days in advance of going to ask her husband, Persian King Ahasuerus, for permission to have her enemies — who were trying to wipe out all Jews in the empire — killed. She prevailed. Mahatma Gandhi used the hunger strike. So too Cesar Chavez. South African political prisoners hastened the end of the apartheid era with their hunger strike. “The battle of empty stomachs” has been ubiquitous with Palestinian protest for decades. In Gaza, thousands of prisoners have been known to stage fasts at once.

The hunger strike is a political tool that protesters resort to when they have no other recourse. Sometimes this means they have tried all other means and failed. But more often, it means that those starving themselves are prisoners.

Since March of 2020, the political use of fasting in the New York City area has escalated in the face of the intense hardship some communities have experienced during the pandemic.

A healthy body can go without food for up to eight weeks but it will likely incur some serious and/or long-term damage along the way. In October, five young activists (ages 18 to 25) with the Sunrise Movement, which advocates for sweeping climate action, went on hunger strike at the height of congressional negotiations over dueling infrastructure plans. But Sunrise Movement activists stopped their strike after 14 days because doctors monitoring the action said that if a person is 25 or under, irreversible brain damage can occur after two weeks of starvation.

Julia Paramo, 24, was one of the five hunger strikers who responded to a nationwide call to go on hunger strike at the White House in October to push for the “fullest possible federal legislative effort to combat the climate emergency” in the infrastructure bill. Although they stopped the strike before a deal was reached, she says the strike brought climate change provisions back into the negotiations that had previously been sidelined.

“I remember my friend Paul’s heart rate kept going really low. It was constantly going low. I touched his hands and they were just so cold. That’s when he went to the ER, that was towards the end,” she says. Another friend

and fellow striker, Kidus, was also hospitalized. “Kidus went to the ER on day four. Everyone would tell us we looked like we were dying,” she said.

Since her fast, one of Paramo’s friends mentioned wanting to do the same. “I was just like, ‘You can’t do that.’ I care about her,” said Paramo. “It’s a tactic that you have to be very strategic with. You have to consider the consequences. I would talk to people who are considering it. I see its value in bringing

moral clarity to human rights, but I want to live and want others to live.”

While the young climate activists were not willing to risk their lives or long-term health, some hunger strikers have been desperate enough to do so.

“Do you wanna die fighting or live life on your knees? I made the decision. Get released alive or dead,” said Marcial Morales, a father of three school-age children, who has led hunger strikes protesting Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s detention of immigrants in unsafe, cruel conditions from behind bars and on the outside.

Morales went on his first hunger strike in March of 2020 with 200 others at Essex County Jail in New Jersey, a facility which had a financial agreement with ICE to house immigrant detainees in addition to people incarcerated by the county. The jail staff, infamous for abuse, successfully broke that strike within the first few days.

“The whole group of guards came in and beat everybody up and then said it was a fight between the [other inmates] and the detainees,” Morales recalls. “One guy was on the ground unconscious for three hours after. When he stopped breathing, they came to see him and called a nurse and they took him away and we never saw him again.” In another brutal incident, he says “they came to our unit and accused the tier rep of provoking disorder and they kept him 60 days in the hole [solitary] ... He almost died. He had it pretty bad.”

All of the handful of hunger striking detainees *The Independent* has interviewed, were put into solitary confinement or suicide watch — where one is stripped naked — as retribution within the first few days of a strike.

After the initial failure, Morales took it upon himself to learn more about hunger strikes and the rights that a detained immigrant has while fasting. “If you stand up for yourself, [jail staff] back[s] off. Because they know that you didn’t know they were violating your rights. So once I knew my rights — I read the whole jail book — I was like ‘hell, yeah!’”

Morales was released from ICE detention on hunger strike in November 2020 after nine days of rapid health deterioration exacerbated by his diabetes. He has since inspired and mentored many hunger strikes among people in ICE detention.

Depriving oneself of food has mental effects, especially in the already stressful jail environment. Towards the end of his strike, “something was in the wall and I saw it and drew it. Jesus was there in the wall with bread in his hands,” said Morales.

Julia Paramo, too, found strength within. “During the hunger strike, I wrote messages on my forehead. Something [else] that got me through was thinking about home in Dallas and Guanajuato, Mexico.”

Ana Ramirez said that the strength to go on strike was born from her identity as an immigrant. “This comes from a lot of discrimination, from seeing the work of the undocumented person undervalued. We’ve worked harder, cleaned dirtier things. We are made of corn. We are made of hope. I came crossing the frontera at Piedras Negras,” she told *The Indy*.

Ramirez, who was determined to win or to die, spent two months preparing her body to fast. She was not prepared, though, for the identity-changing, spiritual experience she would have during the 24 days of hunger strike. “By the time I finished, the Ana Ramirez who started the *huelga* left. She came back with a different way of thinking, of being. I discovered things, attributes I didn’t know I have. It completely changed my life, *la huelga de hambre de 24 días*,” she said. “I remembered a lot of memories from my childhood. I really wanted to cry and run away from this place. Lots of emotional pain.”

In October, a group of taxi drivers — mostly men over the age of 55 — with the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA) went on hunger strike to demand relief from crushing debts that began to incur when the city inflated the value of taxi medallions a decade ago and then caused the value of those medallions to plummet by

GRINDING HUNGER, SPIRITUAL EPIPHANIES AND, OFTEN

allowing ride share companies such as Uber and Lyft to flood the streets with their cars. After camping out unsuccessfully for 46 days on the sidewalk outside City Hall with no results, the drivers stopped eating.

Saddled with an average debt of \$550,000 after a lifetime of work, many of the drivers told *The Indy* they saw the hunger strike as a fight for their lives. Since 2017, nine indebted drivers have died by suicide. One of those nine, Kenny Chow, is survived by his brother, Richard Chow, a 63-year-old cabbie who has been driving for 16 years. “I love my brother Kenny. My heart is broken,” said Chow.

“That’s why we started [the strike]. We lost everything. After I lost my brother — and there are 6,000 medallions like me and all my friends facing the same crisis — I don’t want to lose my friends,” Chow said.

Chow, despite having diabetes, low blood pressure and a heart condition, joined the fast and refused food for all 15 days of the strike.

The union rented a hotel room for him near their 24/7 protest encampment at City Hall because he lives in Staten Island and was ordered not to drive while fasting. Balkar Singh, a 62-year-old with high blood pressure, spent a few nights in the room with Chow as they both struggled through low points with their health.

“Mr. Balkar has high blood pressure. We are the opposite. We took care of each other,” said Chow, who had to drink chicken broth to keep his blood pressure up while Singh drank Insure to keep his down. Both men were



AMBAGUERIAN

overjoyed when, on the 15th day of fasting, New York City came up with a debt relief plan.

Those hunger strikers who are willing to risk their lives and are confronting an image-conscious adversary are often able to prevail.

“If we had not resisted through mass hunger strikes, we would have remained like the slaves from the Middle Ages,” my father, Ismail, told me during a Skype call after I forced him to revisit his memories from the 33-day legendary Nafha prison hunger strike that he joined 37 years ago,” wrote Palestinian reporter Shahd Abusalama for Al Jazeera in 2017.

Marvin Reyes, who started a fast in Bergen County (NJ) Jail, was transferred to another facility in Miami in retaliation. He was released earlier this month after a four-month hunger strike that he was able to prolong with a few intermittent snacks.

RITUAL , VICTORY.

“Over 16 guys that I’ve been in contact with have been released on hunger strike. It’s totally unprecedented,” says Marcial Morales of the recent hunger strikes by ICE detainees. When asked about when to execute a strike, he said, “Do the right thing first. Put your hunger strike as plan C. If whatever legal proceeding doesn’t work, okay, let’s do it the hard way. People don’t deserve this punishment for their freedom, but it takes what it takes.”

Interviews with Ana Ramirez and Bonilla were translated from Spanish by the author.

INFLATION

Continued from Page 11

Central banks, including the U.S. Federal Reserve today have adopted a consensus view that the optimal rate of inflation is around 2%. This is high enough to allow for workers to feel “grateful” to their employers if they receive a wage increase of 1%, while putting the blame for higher prices on “the government” or businesses. At the same time the variation in this rate is so little that it does not interfere with investment plans.

What is now becoming clear, however, is that inflation caused by collapse of global production chains will continue even once this problem has been resolved. Policy makers, such as Janet Yellen, the current Treasury Secretary, are now saying that inflation is no longer “transitory” and must therefore be addressed now or in the near future. And there is really only one way to reduce inflation (and in particular wages) and that is through policies that reduce total production and increase unemployment. Big business is therefore willing to accept a temporary decrease in total production to achieve a reduction in the rate of inflation to a “normal” 2% and a return to “normal” profitability. But there is absolutely no doubt at all that this would result in increased hardship for workers in both the short term and the long term.

A planned reduction in production, or at least the rate of growth of production, will, unless challenged, take place mainly through the use of monetary policy, in which the Federal Reserve raises interest rates, but also through cut-backs in the portions of government spending that benefit workers. The attack on Biden’s Build Back Better program now includes the unjustified assertion that it will increase inflation. Future increases in interest rates and cutbacks in spending will similarly be “explained” to workers by the need to “fight inflation.” We should not fall for this! Instead what is needed is renewed mobilization to increase wages, in particular by strengthening workers’ ability to organize.

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SUE BRISK

WHEN NYC WAS GRITTY

ALEX HARSLEY'S PHOTOGRAPHY IS A PORTAL TO AN EARLIER NEW YORK

BY AMBA GUERGUERIAN

On the north side of East 4th Street, between Bowery and Second Avenue, in a small window-front shop is the 4th Street Photo Gallery. At any given hour, you might see Alex Harsley, 83 and wiry with a crooked cap, sitting in a chair, either at the back of the gallery watching the news or editing a video project or outside on the street, where the photographer observes the block he's known since 1974.

The gallery's walls are lined ceiling to floor with 13" x 19" photographs. Basquiat gazes sheepishly; notes pour out of Coltrane's sax, Muhammad Ali, a lot of Ali, looking down at you, up at you. New York embraces you. A woman sunbathing at Coney Island. Children playing behind fences. Sunday bike races in Harlem. Bohemians and beatniks in Washington Square. Syrians selling clothes on the once-cobblestone streets of Lower Manhattan. Dancers twisting on a stage. The photographer's daughters, his ex-wife. The Palisades. The World Trade Center. Heightened, digital edits of images that were taken on film. Athletes, naked women, crowds. Images sit among stacks of old cameras, floating mobiles, stacks and stacks of old photos.

He exchanges old photos for new ones every few days, paying special attention to those in the front window. "The window belongs to the neighborhood," Harsley says. He puts up different combinations, then takes note while that display is up of who responds and how they respond.

Harsley waves, chuckles, checks in, says "alright," as people walk by the gallery. A woman and her daughter. "She's the one," he whispers after they walk by, alluding to a community board drama he'd just told me of. "I got off that a long time ago," Harsley says of the board.

He and an old superintendent with a jingling ring of keys smile at each other. "He's been here about as long as I have," says Harsley.

Another man walks by, stopping in awe in front of the window as a fluffy Pomeranian circles his feet. "Oh man, this is

great!" he says. He has that look in his eyes that says he's traveling, memories flooding back. "This is what this neighborhood used to be like."

Those who were once Harsley's contemporaries have mostly been obliterated from the East Village, replaced by mediocre, expensive restaurants, empty galleries and CVS stores. He always has a story about one of the instances someone tried to kick him out of the building.

"The conspiracy was to get rid of all the poor people, including me." While Harsley isn't poor, he doesn't quite fit in with the rest of the people on the street. The gallery — which sticks out like a true vestige — has stirred things up on the block over the years.

"They tried to beat my door in! Late one evening while editing, I took a nap. I woke up after the dream that I was having started exploding. I could see that a foot had just kicked the window. Then again, BOOM, and I could see it hit the window and bounce back ... I opened the door and he took off and ran down the street." Harsley said that the men then ran from one apartment building on the street to another, demanding pay. "Now I knew what was going on." This was in the early 2000s, a critical time for the East Village as it solidified its identity as a desirable neighborhood in a rapidly gentrifying city.

• • •

THE PHOTOGRAPHER WAS BORN in 1938 around Rock Hill, South Carolina to Methodist landowners. By the time he was four, all the men in his family had been taken by the war. He raised his younger siblings; his mother had moved up to New York. "Ever since I learned to walk, I've been working."

"We were a proud people. We had land. Them white folks wanted to live on our land. And I was taught to be proud." The confidence Harsley learned as a young child on a cotton farm helped propel him through life and inspire confidence in others.

When Harsley was 10 years old, he and his little brother and sister followed their mother north to Intervale Avenue in the Bronx.

"My main interest was acclimating into this reality here from working on a farm. Everything was completely different. All of a sudden, there's kids!" Harsley got to play for the first time. "We were latchkey kids."

Coming to post-war New York in the aftermath of the Harlem Renaissance solidified Harsley's belief that he should do something, be someone. "Seventh Ave was lit up from 116 to 125. It was wonderful. A lot of the people I came up around came to be somebody."

"In '53, '54 there was this ad in the back of the comic books about learning to draw. I sent the ad in. The guy came to the

door. My mother said, "You can't afford to do this! Get out of here!" And she shooed the man away.

In 1955, when Harsley was 17 — the same year his step-father passed away in his arms in East Harlem — "my mother said to go down to 42nd Street to the unemployment agency and get a job!" As a foot messenger, he developed a desire to photograph what he saw on the streets. "This is Midtown Manhattan, mind you [three snaps of a finger]. It's happening that way."

Soon after, he got a job working at Peelers camera store. Working in the darkroom, he began to understand the complexities involved in making a photograph. By the time he was 21, Harsley was tapped to run the photo department at the office of Manhattan DA Frank Hogan. He finally had access to photo supplies, from top-shelf cameras to endless rolls of film.

Working for the DA provided Harsley the financial freedom to finally experiment with photography styles and equipment. He shot two to three rolls of film a day. Before the digital click, that was a lot. "Being brought up on a farm I had no idea what each day would bring. ... It was the same with photography, a matter of feeling once I got the camera and would go out looking for the right image, the image of the day."

He was drawn to certain images. "Fences, for instance. I always had trouble with fences since I was a kid. And when I came to New York they were even more ridiculous. ... Then there was people. Faces of people — it's speaking. I don't have to say anything. All I have to do is take it, put it on paper and everyone else will see what I see."

He went to the Apollo Theatre, shot Miles Davis in 1959. Later he would photograph Charles Mingus, Sun Ra, Al Sharpton.

Once deep into the art of street photography via the photojournalism and documentary photography he was doing, Harsley was drafted in 1961, "and that was the end of that."

• • •

AFTER A TOUR WITH THE ARMY, Harsley reenlisted, lured by the promise of further study in photography. Instead, they sent him (unknowingly and unwillingly) back to the South, where he worked in a chemical storage depot in Anniston, Alabama. He was exposed to leftover toxins from chemical testing during previous wars, for the A-bombs. He felt violated; he wasn't where he belonged. He hadn't signed up for this. Twice now, war had taken him away from what he loved.

Eventually, he protested enough that the army yielded and sent him to Ft. Devens, Massachusetts, where he was able to experiment photography for the better part of four

years. Upon returning to New York City, he would emerge as a freelance photojournalist, a street photographer and a master color technician.

• • •

“WHEN I MOVED DOWNTOWN in 1964 ... you had the likes of all the jazz musicians in town on Avenue B. I saw jazz musicians serious on heroin. It was sad. That was the beginning of the end of the black clique that was down here, that was slowly but surely dismantled so it doesn’t exist anymore.”

“When I was in the army, there were all these different movements going on,” he said. “I was left out of all that so when I came back, I was like, on my own!”

In 1971, he founded Minority Photographers, a non-profit that provided professional mentorship to marginalized artists. This also helped him create an artist community in the neighborhood, where he would hang his mentees work on the fences that originally inspired him to photograph.

Through the organization, Harsley would mentor the likes of Dawoud Bey and David Hammons. Once he told me he feels some sort of responsibility for the premature death of Jean-Michel Basquiat — who he would see lingering on the other side of 4th Street, staring at the gallery like he wanted to come in — as if he could have turned the young artist’s trajectory around if only he’d invited him to cross the street. It showed that he really felt a sense of regret.

“Photographers that come in get stuck in that stupid stereotype of Black photography,” says Harsley, who detests the thought of artists being pigeonholed. “What I’m doing in here is counter to what they’re doing out there. So my photography is not really about the [political] issues, it’s about art. But I take the issues and put them as the context.”

• • •

OVER THE SUMMER, Harsley’s photographs were hung at Pioneer Works cultural center in Red Hook in an exhibition curated by his daughter, Kendra Krueger. I noticed a motif: explosions. A burst of trash on the sidewalk, fire hydrants burst open, a plume of smoke in BedStuy. There was a video, too: Images and sounds of New York overlay each other. A woman dancing on a pier, people coming off the Ellis Island ferry, a parade, George Bush talking on Sept. 11, 2001, the towers falling. (More explosions.) I felt as though I was hallucinating, watching the “Freedom Tower” blend into the sky behind it.

In an ongoing response to 9/11, the artist has made hundreds if not thousands of videos similar to the one described above. He has left analog photography behind and stitches together clips shot on old camcorders and newer ones from an iPhone, his new favorite camera. (The transition from analog was not seamless; he hated the first digital machines: “The first programs out there were very difficult to use and you had to be seriously stupid to know how to use them.”)

Harsley’s videos contain self-composed music and industrial sounds that have a doomsday effect. In addition to footage



COURTESY OF ALEX HARSLEY



ALEX HARSLEY



ALEX HARSLEY

from the day of the attacks, they always feature dance performances, planes in the sky, a digital chamber with Y2K-esque icons floating around it. The artist was ahead of his time. The videos, which he started editing over a decade ago, look like they were made by cutting-edge GenZers in the current style of maximalism and deep-web-inspired art.

Talking to Harsley — who in high school, spent hours in the library doing self-assigned research — you get a feeling that he will always know more than you could even wonder about.

the southwest corner of the park, near the chess tables, where they always have. A few blocks away, Harsley sits behind a window that, reinforced with plastic, won’t break from a blow.

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*Easter Sunday in
Central Park, 1970*
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*Sun Ra at the
Vanguard*
=====

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*Hot summer,
1969, Houston St.*
=====

Why, then, has he edited the same video innumerable times?

“What’s up with the 9/11 obsession?” I asked Harsley, who lost a close friend that day and refers to the attacks as “9-1-1.”

“Everybody responded to it. People are still responding without having an understanding of what they’re responding to. It fucked everybody. ... The whole community was turning against each other. All these homeless people with issues looked at the Chinese people and saw they were getting more of the American dream than they were getting. ... And that’s left over from the Korean War! All these different cultures have been demonized over time,” he shakes his head. “I go to the Pakistani store, across to the Indian store. They’re all here! Am I supposed to hate them? Some people do. How ‘bout that?”

“The confluence with dance?” I ask.

“It even happened in the arts. All of the sudden it was all about aggression. If you look at the choreography, it’s about disassociation. [The dancer is] dealing with the trauma. ... Different parts of the family taken to war or sent to jail. All from that 9-1-1.” That day it finally hit me that for Harsley, 9-1-1 isn’t just 9/11. It’s the intensification of corporate globalization, neo-colonialism, what he sees as a new world order. And the heaviness of it all.

• • •

ON 4TH STREET, there is a man made of wire named Alex Harsley. I hope he never leaves. He is a New York I want to know, that I only get glimpses of.

“It can never go backwards,” he said once, when I asked him how he envisioned the neighborhood’s future. “This is an upscale, intellectual community, all professionals.”

“Do you even have a hope for the future?”

“The future exists. I am hopeful by continuing a running document of people living in the neighborhood. I created content. I create a lot of content. It’s ongoing. Everyday you have to be famous. There’s no time off. You gotta do something in order to continue that legacy of content.”

We talk shit together about the well-to-do yuppies in our midst and their lack of interest in the vanishing communities around them. “Your generation is easily coerced,” he says.

He laughed when I mentioned the Tompkins Sq. Park riots one time. “The people refused to leave. That hasn’t changed.” Still, homeless people gather a few blocks over in

ACT UP AND WIN

Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT-UP New York, 1987–1993

BY SARAH SCHULMAN
MACMILLAN PUBLISHERS, 2021

By Jessica Max Stein

Supposedly the highest praise one can bestow upon a work of nonfiction is to say, it reads like a novel. Yet this cliché insults both the genre of nonfiction and the experience of real life — as if life can't yield sufficiently interesting events to hook a reader.

Still, Sarah Schulman brings to bear her experience as a novelist in *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT-UP New York, 1987–1993*. The book is a riveting account of the founding chapter of the political direct action group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) in some of the most desperate years of the epidemic. Schulman has a keen eye for exactly which details bring a character to life and which beats to hit to turn even tangential anecdotes into engaging subplots.

Schulman also exercises her journalistic skills here, as she has been writing about AIDS since the early 1980s as a reporter for the *New York Native*. The book incorporates 188 interviews with surviving members of ACT-UP, analyzed and contextualized in a sweeping narrative. Oddly, the publisher is marketing the book as an autobiography; while Schulman's participation and eyewitness are crucial, this label does the book a great disservice. If anything, *Let the Record Show* is a biography of the group, which was always far greater than merely the sum of its parts.

Yet Schulman's experience as an activist — beyond her writing proficiency — is the ingredient that elevates this book from good story to essential movement primer. Schulman gives the reader an opportunity to learn from what ACT-UP New York did right and what they did wrong. While the group arguably shortened the AIDS epidemic — not to mention expanding the definition of AIDS itself — internal strife over access and tactics ultimately caused a painful rift. ACT-UP presaged and influenced modern movements from Occupy Wall Street to Black Lives Matter to the current struggle for LGBTQIA+ rights; in that light, Schulman provides not just a good read but a very useful one, particularly now.

At its height, 800 people were regularly involved with ACT-UP New York. Over 7,000 people turned out for its biggest and most controversial action, disrupting the anti-gay and anti-AIDS-education Cardinal O'Connor during services at St. Patrick's Cathedral. At ACT-UP New York's founding in 1987, six years into the crisis, an estimated half-million Americans were living with HIV, yet President Ronald Reagan still hadn't uttered the word AIDS. The New York chapter quickly inspired 148 autonomous chapters across the country and around the world.

ACT-UP New York had an anarchic framework, with big group meetings on Monday nights (usually at the LGBT Center, sometimes at Cooper Union) as well as many affin-

ity groups and subcommittees who worked independently. While the group had some prominent figures, structurally it was leaderless. The book reflects that structure in its refreshing refusal to submit to the usual myth-making around AIDS activism, which often deifies a few white, gay male heroes and omits the rest. While lauded orator Larry Kramer did kick off the group with an incendiary speech, for example, he was involved only with certain specific projects, unaware of much of the other work happening in the multi-racial and multi-gendered organization. By contrast, Schulman stresses in the preface, "This is a book in which all people with acquired

to the point that the dozen members of the Treatment Action Guerrillas split off in 1992 to become a 501(c)3 nonprofit — but they were merely a small fraction of the hundreds of active members who remained.

Current activists have many lessons to learn from ACT-UP New York. Ironically, the group's desperation led to great productivity, as lives were literally at stake and no one had time to waste. Instead of sitting around hashing out theory, their politics grew out of their actions, rather than the other way around. What's more, the structure of independent committees enabled ACT-UP New York to tackle a wide variety of projects — everything from needle exchange to housing people with AIDS to queer youth organizing — without needing group consensus. Affinity groups strengthened bonds of solidarity and increased safety, enabling people to take risks like committing civil disobedience.

What's more, ACT-UP New York made excellent use of the media, following the adage, "Don't speak to the media; speak through the media." They pioneered the tactic of video activism, using brand-new technology such as portable video cameras to document demonstrations, as well as police behavior — pre-saging people filming police misconduct on their phones. They created and preserved their own counterculture, everything from the newsmagazine *Outweek* to eye-catching art, most notably originating the now-ubiquitous "Silence = Death" branding.

ACT-UP New York's media savvy was driven by their delicious humor. For example, when Macy's fired a man from playing Santa because he admitted to taking the AIDS drug AZT, 25 men of all colors and sizes dressed up in Santa costumes and chained themselves together in the cosmetics department. And the drag acapella choir Church Ladies for Choice enlivened many demonstrations, retooling "God Save the Queen" as "God Is a Lesbian" ("God is a lesbian/She is a lesbian/God is a dyke").

But the group didn't just help members hold on to their humor and sanity; it helped them make sense of the traumatic experience, especially as the straight world gaslit them, acting like the epidemic wasn't happening. In that sense this book is not just a record but a validation, a crucial affirmation of a shared narrative.

Schulman concludes the book with an anecdote about her own health crisis, which her ACT-UP experience helped her manage. "AIDS prepared us for every-

thing," says her friend Jack Waters. Indeed it is impossible to read this book and not see glaring connections to the COVID-19 pandemic — the prominence of Dr. Anthony Fauci, the rush to put "drugs into bodies" and perhaps most importantly, the experience of thinking about health collectively rather than individually and realizing that protecting the most vulnerable raises the bar for everyone. AIDS and ACT-UP New York prepared us for this too.



LIVINE FOSTER

immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) or with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) are equally important."

But indeed this argument over how to historicize AIDS activism reflects one of the major tensions in ACT-UP New York: whether to focus on the many or the few. Many in ACT-UP were white, gay men (often closeted) who enjoyed privilege until they seroconverted and were shocked to find out that the mainstream deemed their lives worthless; others were women and/or queers and/or people of color who had never had such illusions. For a while, this tension worked for the group, a sort of "good cop/bad cop" strategy. While some members met with Anthony Fauci and other such high-placed officials, focusing solely on rushing drugs into production ("drugs into bodies"), others took a wider view, fighting to protect the most vulnerable and to access healthcare for all. Ultimately, this conflict escalated

MEET THE NEW BLUESTOCKINGS

By Olivia Riggio

On a mid-November evening, the strip of Suffolk Street between Rivington and Delancey is mainly dark, but through one glass storefront, people step off the street to browse a collection of radical, activism-centered books and zines. The colorful materials are arranged along the walls and stacked on tables by topic, including prison abolition, migration, feminism, anti-racism, gender identity, sexuality, spirituality and sex workers' rights. "Embrace diversity or be destroyed," reads an Octavia Butler quote painted above the bookshelves.

Bluestockings Cooperative is New York City's only trans, queer and sex worker-run bookstore, cafe and gathering space. Founded in 1999 as a radical feminist book store, it was located on Allen Street on the Lower East Side for more than two decades. In the summer of 2020, an unsuccessful attempt to renegotiate the building lease led to members choosing to move Bluestockings to a new location and shift its business model from volunteer-run to a full worker co-op — all during a pandemic.

The store's collective members signed the lease on the new building in August 2020. They decided to leave their Allen Street building after it seemed unlikely the landlord would address structural issues including leaking pipes and caving tiles if they resigned. Bluestockings Suffolk Street opened its doors in April 2021 after raising more than \$100,000 on GoFundMe to support building out the new space and adding technological and accessibility improvements. While business slowed and moved entirely online during pandemic lockdowns, Bluestockings members took the opportunity not only to revamp the physical space, but also how it was run.

"In the course of that time, in the move, was when we decided if we're going to come back as this new space in this new location, we have an opportunity to basically re-think the business and how we do things, and that's sort of where the transition to the local co-op came to be," Joan Dark, one of Bluestockings' worker-owners, tells *The Independent*.

BLUESTOCKINGS IN FLUX

Prior to being a full worker co-op, Bluestockings was mainly volunteer-run, with between 60 and 70 volunteers and

five collective members. Now, its seven paid worker-owners set their own living wages and make consensus-based decisions about the business.

Having seen the fallout of 9/11, the Great Recession and, most recently, Covid-19, Bluestockings' business model has been in flux before. Founder Katherine Welsh established the store in 1999, citing a lack of radical feminist book stores in New York City. However, in 2003, she sold the space to a group of activists. The store operated as a worker co-op with some volunteers, but fol-

low with the occasional help of a few contract workers.

Dark says the goal is to hire more workers, but balancing expenses like rent with the need to pay workers a livable wage in New York City is a challenge. For some worker-owners, their job at Bluestockings is their primary source of income, but others have other jobs. The collective works to establish a livable wage for everyone and operates with financial transparency.

Bluestockings earns revenue from its in-store sales, a tiered membership program and an annual fundraiser that takes place in December.

Bluestockings' new location is about two times the size of its previous one, allowing for more space to sit—and hopefully, eventually gather. Though the main room housing the books and cafe is cavernous, it features a cozy back room with windows, a skylight and sliding wooden doors that close it off from the rest of the store and optimize it for confined event-hosting (although all events are virtual for the time being). The store is wheelchair accessible, with wide aisles, a bathroom outfitted with handrails and a wheelchair lift for the back room.

"I feel like this one is a lot better in terms of availability of books, availability of space, and if you kind of want to just do your own thing in the back, you can do that too," says Ana Valens, a Bluestockings regular since she moved to the city in 2016. Valens is a writer and reporter, and much of her work focuses on sex workers' issues.

"Bluestockings was just this incredible opportunity to really have a space where it felt like I could meet other people like me, I could find community, and also I could connect with other writers, other creators, artists, et cetera," she says.

When Bluestockings first opened in 1999, only women were allowed to be part of the collective. It was named for the Bluestockings, an informal society of English women intellectuals in the mid-18th century, which later became a derogatory term for any woman who was deemed too learned. When the group of activists bought it out in 2003, they expanded the store's mission to center trans, queer and nonbinary people as well.

As the store expanded its focus beyond the experiences of cisgender women, it encompassed more activist topics. As more collective members and volunteers came and went, they contributed their perspectives and broadened the topics the stores' inventory covered.

"You can really trace back, as the store evolves, more and more sections start to get added as more people start to come and go from the store and leave their mark, saying that we need an environmental studies section, or a section on spirituality, or a section specifically dedicated to Black



ASH MARINACCO



ASH MARINACCO

lowing the Great Recession, collective members decided to stop paying themselves around 2010 — until this past year.

Dark says it's common for activist work to be taken for granted as a labor of love, regardless of how difficult it is to sustain without financial compensation.

"I feel like what we're doing now with the worker co-op model ... if anything, feels like a return to form of just sticking to our values and making sure people aren't having their labor taken for granted," Dark says.

This model comes with financial challenges. Whereas dozens of volunteers previously helped run the store, now seven full-and part-time worker-owners handle the bulk of the la-

BUSINESS WITH A MISSION: *Bluestockings worker-owner Joan Dark inspects some of the store's inventory.*

ELBOW ROOM: *The new Bluestockings at 116 Suffolk Street has twice as much space as its previous storefront.*

Continued on next page



REVEREND BILLY'S REVELATIONS

Dear Billy, I find the holiday season depressing. I live alone. I'm estranged from my family, and I don't return home to see them for Christmas. The colder, darker days don't help either. I think I'd be fine if I could tune it all out. But since that doesn't seem possible, do you have any tips for how to get into the cheerful holiday mood?

ROGER
Hell's Kitchen

Roger let's try something radical. In your letter, you are a stationary being with relationships, and the dark weather rolls over the room you're sitting in there in Hell's Kitchen. You assume that you won't move, and so you're depressed and blame the holidays. Well, we all do that. But here's the radical act — you move. You climb Bear Mountain or you swim out at Coney. You walk until the rocking of walking is rolling around in the cradle of your pelvis like a greasy cannonball.

You walk out under the sky until the screaming hawks

clearly see you are not a rabbit or a vole.... I'm saying doing this physically, not virtually — because the screen will persuade you that it is reality - it isn't. The Earth still wants you and you will feel wanted if you get out into that wind and rain and sun. Are you with me? Did you get this far? And when you get home, read a good book. I just read *America* by Frank Kafka. Fantastic.

• • •

Reverend Billy, I like to buy Christmas presents for family and close friends, but holiday shopping is a lot harder this year with limited supplies and people snapping up whatever they can get their hands on when it becomes available. I imagine you are delighted about this situation. I find it incredibly frustrating.

CANDACE
Crown Heights

Candace, thank you for your mocking acknowledgement of my strange career. But I have to say, the old idea of purchasing presents at Xmas — where does that fit in the current age of raging fascism and the Earth's extinction?

Celebrating the Santa-centric Xmas in 2021 reminds me of the goofy Americans who had a big holiday bash after 9/11 and the Afghanistan war in 2001. Disconnect! May-day! We're going down! Candace this year your gifts need to surprise not just the gift-getter but you the giver. Have an eccentric Xmas not a Santa-centric trash-making ritual under the dying tree.

Give experiences, home-made and hand-made “maker gifts” — nothing from retail and nothing from this traditional extractive/colonizing culture. The old Xmas is so carbon heavy. No, Don't give this economy a pass just because its Xmas. Don't give this capitalistic illusion more reason to believe it is the only reality. Blow up reality with your gift! Experiences not tchotchkes! Make promises you cannot keep! Give your love the gift of handcuffing yourself to a bulldozer before it wrecks your nearby forest. Millions of us have to make fools of ourselves at the same time, like very shocking synchronized swimmers. This Xmas — break the culture!

— REV BILLY

REVEREND BILLY TALEN IS THE PASTOR OF THE CHURCH OF STOP SHOPPING. HAVE A QUESTION FOR THE REVEREND? EMAIL REVBILLY@REVBILLY.COM AND UNBURDEN YOUR SOUL.

BLUESTOCKINGS

Continued from previous page

studies or Middle Eastern studies ... I think that's definitely one of the really beautiful things about that collective history,” Dark says.

Valens says the sheer breadth of Bluestockings' book selection demonstrates its dedication to truly uplifting marginalized identities.

“I don't think I've seen a single bookstore in New York City that has a sex workers' rights section,” Valens says.

Dark says worker-owners represent a wide array of intersecting identities, but describe the store as “queer, trans and sex worker-owned” because of its specific focus to center those marginalized communities.

Dark says radical queer, trans and sex worker-led movements influence Bluestockings' work. Bluestockings' website also cites the Black communist and leftist organizing in Harlem and the radical Borinquen (Puerto Rican) organizations of Loisaida (the Lower East Side) as influences in its worker-owner cooperative model.

In recent years, the feminist movement has experienced a rift between those who are inclusive of sex workers, trans and nonbinary people, and those who are not. Though Dark says they can't remember a specific instance of a confrontation with a trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) or sex worker-exclu-

sionary radical feminist (SWERF), they know it has happened. They say the loose, drop-in-drop-out nature of Bluestockings' prior volunteer-run model had the downside of not knowing whether individuals had perspectives that were trans- or whore-phobic.

“I think by virtue of the fact that the space was originally called Bluestockings Women's Bookstore sort of points to ... this greater understanding of what feminism can be and what it should be,” Dark said.

IN-PERSON GATHERINGS OR ZOOM?

Bluestockings has been known not just as a bookstore and cafe, but also a gathering space for local activists. In the past, its frequent events have brought the likes of Russian feminist punk band Pussy Riot, writer and transgender rights activist Janet Mock to the space. Local organizers would also use Bluestockings as a meeting place.

“Bluestockings being a space where you don't really have to spend any money to be there and just exist, I think, by virtue of that, is a place where a lot of activists tend to gather,” Dark says.

Now, its events include book clubs, talks, fundraising events and book launches, but like many events in the past two years, they're entirely virtual.

Dark says the collective made the decision to keep the events virtual to protect immuno-

compromised attendees and staff.

“It doesn't really seem like there's a way to do events physically in the space and still keep everyone reliably safe right now,” Dark says.

Valens, who has worked on organizing her own mutual aid projects and events over Zoom, says in some ways, remote gatherings are more convenient. It's easier to get people into a group chat than to organize a time to meet in-person. Plus, disabled and immuno-compromised people don't have to worry about their safety. Valens says ideally, events will be hybrid virtual and in-person in the future, but remembers that before the pandemic, Bluestockings operated as more of a hub that fostered a more physical sense of community.

“It's that sort of organic community that happens. Whereas online it's so much harder because let's say your feed doesn't show you the people that you know IRL [in real life] ... When you're in Bluestockings it sort of forces you into a more community mindset than it does online,” she says.

Dark says the collective hopes to bring in-person events back to Bluestockings, but in the meantime, they believe there are still some regular customers who use the cafe and reading areas as a hub. Customers who are still wary of visiting in person can order books online.

As it turned the world upside-down, Covid has further pulled the curtain back on late-stage capitalism. While billionaires like Ama-

zon's Jeff Bezos profited from the chaos, nearly 60% of people making less than \$35,000 a year reported losing income during the pandemic, according to Human Rights Watch.

All the while, right-wing pundits and papers blame ex-employees—not their employers—for worker shortages. The fact that some wages are so low that unemployment benefits offer more money is treated as a reflection of Americans' laziness, not companies' exploitative labor practices. Research shows that wage theft, which was a problem costing American workers billions annually even before Covid hit, is even worse during periods of high unemployment.

Bluestockings treats the worker co-ownership model as the best available stop-gap in the midst of our current system.

“In an ideal world I would love to just be able to hand people the books that we get and say, ‘This is a resource that I wish you could read,’ but we also need to be able to pay rent at the same time. So, I think it's tough but I think with the conditions that we have right now, worker-ownership is one of the solutions that we have to take as much ownership of our work as we can.”



CHRISTINE JARSON

WHAT SOLIDARITY JOURNALISM REVEALS TO US

BY ANITA VARMA

Imagine that a reporter is writing a story about your house, which has become practically unlivable. The reporter wants to understand the issues in the house, how it affects people who are still managing to survive in it, and what might be done to make the house livable again. But instead of talking to you, they talk to the mayor's office, a real estate developer, and a housing researcher at an elite university across the country. Lacking any insight from people inside the house, the story ends up only partially accurate, at best. Including you would have led to a more truthful story, since you know the issues best from being inside the house.

I often use this analogy when introducing journalists and journalism educators to the benefits and logic of solidarity reporting over dominant reporting practices that exclude people from coverage of their own lives. If journalists are striving for accuracy, then solidarity reporting is better aligned with that goal than reporting that focuses exclusively on officials, elites and academics.

Let's start with a few definitions: solidarity is a commitment to social justice that translates into action. Social justice means that everyone's dignity is respected in a society — regardless of their credentials, qualifications or achievements. Solidarity reporting is a commitment to social justice that translates into the action of reporting on marginalized communities. This is not just any reporting that vaguely gestures at a social justice issue — instead, solidarity reporting focuses on issues that disrespect or deny communities that are disrespected or denied their humanity and represents the perspectives of people directly affected. It intentionally moves beyond parroting officials' or outside experts' claims about a marginalized community to centralize the truth of people whose knowledge is based on lived experience.

Solidarity reporting isn't new or niche — though it often isn't given its due in conversations about why journalism matters. In many countries, the origins of an independent press are rooted in viewing journalism as an act of resistance against state power that may otherwise deny that inhumane conditions endure within its domain.

In the United States, we can trace the logic of solidarity

reporting all the way back to mobilizing for independence, abolition newspapers that reported the truth and consequences of slavery for people living it (instead of focusing on those benefiting from it) and coverage of issues like child labor, factory conditions, suffrage, voting rights and immigration. This list goes on and continues today with a growing set of examples, like climate crisis reporting that focuses on communities affected and displaced rather than amplifying the preferred frames and excuses from companies responsible for it.

We need more solidarity reporting because elite and official-focused reporting hasn't brought about accurate portrayals of marginalization. Vaccine inequity, labor struggles, housing precarity and policing are making frequent headlines — yet all too often, the stories that accompany these headlines do not represent the people directly affected by these issues.

“Objective,” “neutral” and “impartial” reporting encourages amplifying people who have official titles and relegates people experiencing marginalization to only having a chance to speak if they provide emotional “color.” This means that self-interested officials often receive tremendous media attention, even if they are uninterested in acknowledging truth that does not serve their aims. Some officials and experts are surely pragmatic public servants, but many are advancing agendas that are far afield from the needs of people who are suffering the most. That's not a conspiracy theory — it's an assessment based on the routine distance between official narratives and community-grounded narratives.

Reassurances that economic plans will work in economies that have already failed as a result of similar plans, insistence that housing is stable amid rising homelessness and claims that there are medical resources for anyone who needs them in countries where people die due to insufficient care in a global pandemic are just a few examples of how officials have advanced misinformation and leveraged dominant reporting practices to do so — and why solidarity reporting is so crucial right now.

Given that corporate media owners and elite officials often share the same interests, the prospects for widespread solidarity reporting may seem bleak. It stands to (unfortunate) reason that corporate media, with their abundant reporting resources and reach, tend to amplify sources that affirm their preferred profit-aligned frames. The good news is that even in corporate-owned media, we see examples of solidarity reporting occasionally break through. This is usually a result of journalists being determined to report a previously misconstrued story accurately, often out of respect for sources who have thoroughly convinced them that dominant frames are incorrect. These moments of breakthrough are infrequent, but indicate that solidarity has a fighting chance even outside of mission-driven news outlets — especially when journalists take a stand.

Solidarity reporting calls on journalists to push beyond reporting the easy soundbite from an official press release in order to do the work of representing people experiencing injustice who know all too well what the issue is and how it could be immediately addressed.

Solidarity reporting starts by seeking out people directly affected by an issue. With solidarity reporting, journalists ask questions like, What do you think about this issue? What causes this situation? How long has this

been going on? Why hasn't it changed? What would help? These questions elicit perspectives, and are different from just asking, And how does this make you feel?, which is a question for eliciting emotions. People who struggle may not have elite or academic credentials, but they have unmatched insight into what changes would address the biggest issues constraining and harming their lives — which makes their perspectives newsworthy.

I began my work in 2008, during the rise of digital media and the decimation of print journalism. At the time, the greatest promise and hope was that internet freedom would achieve what the press never had: Instead of relying on gatekeepers, operating within the constraints of narrow professional norms and preserving steep barriers to access the means of widespread communication, the internet would ensure that everyone received an equal platform. The truth of marginalized people's lived experiences, long denied by media conglomerates' preferred narratives, would rise to the top like cream rising from milk and would finally be heard without advertiser-friendly editing.

This promise has never been fully achieved. Influencers and marketing interests have risen to the top on many platforms, and calls for social justice are often re-marginalized and de-amplified, particularly when they come from groups that are small relative to the largest trending interests online.

Solidarity reporting, which is not often amplified through digital platforms, offers a way for journalists to develop more accurate representations of enduring social injustice and possibilities for change that are grounded in reality. Since 2008, we have seen time and again that the largest internet platforms will not structure their systems of amplification to align with social justice. Journalism, then, still has a crucial role to play in fostering solidarity so that social justice is one day fully realized for us all.

Anita Varma leads the Solidarity Journalism Initiative, and she is an assistant professor of journalism and media at the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of “Evoking Empathy or Enacting Solidarity with Marginalized Communities?” which was published in Journalism Studies in 2020. Her book on the role of solidarity in U.S. journalism is currently in preparation.

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COURTESY

WHY I GIVE TO THE INDY

BY JERRY MEYER

Editor's Note: Jerry Meyer was a lifelong leftist who unexpectedly became wealthy late in life. He relished using his good fortune to support left institutions. In 2019, he wrote this short explaining why he supported The Indy and encouraged others to do so as well.

I donate to The Independent from a sense of gratitude for all that it does to support my values and hopes for a better society. I marvel at how The Indy is reaching into New York City's communities with an invaluable message: We must defend the gains we make and regain losses we experience.

I cheer every time I see how the newspaper's articles and features reach out beyond the confines of the already convinced. It demonstrates that change is not an all-or-nothing, now-or-never thing.

I learn what younger (much younger) New Yorkers, living in communities not reported about in the New York Times, are doing to change the status quo.

I value The Indy's Events Calendar, which informs its readers of expanding networks of progressive cultural and educational

THANK YOU: Jerry Meyer was a generous supporter of The Indy and many other worthy causes.

activities and provides the basis for genuine progressive communities.

I appreciate the high artistic level of The Indy's illustrative layout and background. Each issue of the paper is saying, "art matters."

I hope that The Indy's increased circulation will continue so that its hopeful and thoughtful message will reach ever more progressive people in need of a beacon.

I worry that The Indy might stagger and even fall due to a lack of support from its appreciative readers.

The left must be self-funding. We must all take responsibility for nurturing and growing its institutions, which are essential to our struggle for a fairer, more humane world. And it can be a source of great joy to do so.

I believe that others will join me in giving, in whatever amounts possible, to secure and strengthen The Independent: A free paper for free people.

Jerry Meyer was a founding member of the Hostos Community College faculty, co-chair of the Vito Marcantonio Forum and author of Vito Marcantonio: Radical Politicians (1902-1954) and other writings. He was a lifelong activist.

GOOD CAUSE EVICTION

Continued from Page 13

ready to pass a one-house bill that puts [Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie] on the spot."

The bill is "a very important protection," he adds, but "it's certainly not as strong as rent controls." It doesn't guarantee tenants the right to renew their lease, he explains, it just gives them a defense to challenge a denial in court.

Both he and Mironova say it will protect tenants against extreme rent increases, however.

DISPLACEMENT & COVID

As of Dec. 12, the good-cause bill had been sponsored by 22 of the 63 state senators and 51 of the 150 Assemblymembers, all Democrats.

The Democratic Socialists of America are planning to do door-to-door canvassing and phone-banking for the good-cause bill in the districts of four Brooklyn state legislators: Parker, Assemblymember Stefani Zinerman in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Assemblymember Erik

Dilan in Bushwick, who have not signed onto it and Sen. Brian Kavanaugh in Williamsburg, who is a cosponsor. The canvassers will also be feeling out possible supporters for DSA's challengers to three of them in next June's Democratic primary: David Alexis against Parker, Samy Nemir-Olivares against Dilan and Illapa Sairitupac against Kavanaugh.

The organization's Queens and Uptown/Bronx branches are expected to begin a similar canvassing-and-primary campaign in January.

Advocates say the bill is also essential to protect tenants and neighborhoods against displacement, as it is easy to push out renters who have no protection against predatory rent increases.

"It directly fights against gentrification," says Begum. "Unless we can do something to protect unregulated tenants, we will be stuck in the market cycle where eventually no one will be able to afford to live in New York City."

She and Hernandez both say they are seeing unregulated housing being bought up by speculators in the immigrant neighborhoods of Queens, most noticeably in Jackson Heights. Even illegal basement apartments are getting more expensive, says Begum.

Speculation is also intensifying upstate,

says Garrard, particularly in the Hudson Valley, with housing costs up 30 to 40 percent in some areas.

Senator Salazar's office said they hope to pass the good-cause bill early in the session, worrying that the end of the eviction moratorium on January 15 and peoples' reduced incomes from the persisting pandemic might open the floodgates for evictions.

Its restrictions on eviction were included in the original version of the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act, the landmark 2019 bill that closed loopholes in the state's rent-stabilization law, but were deleted before it was passed. Mironova says seeing the number of people the pandemic put in danger of eviction might spur some legislators to support it. She believes it has a "pretty good chance this session."

Hernandez says she fears that as the pandemic wanes, people returning to the city will give landlords an incentive to push rents up. With the state's Emergency Rental Assistance Program for tenants facing eviction running out of money after five months, she adds, enacting the bill "would be a good way to extend those protections."

STILL STANDING

THE INDYPENDENT IS AN ABSOLUTELY UNIQUE VOICE IN NEW YORK CITY — PROVIDING BOLD, ORIGINAL REPORTING AND ANALYSIS OF STRUGGLES FOR JUSTICE HERE IN THE CITY AND AROUND THE WORLD.

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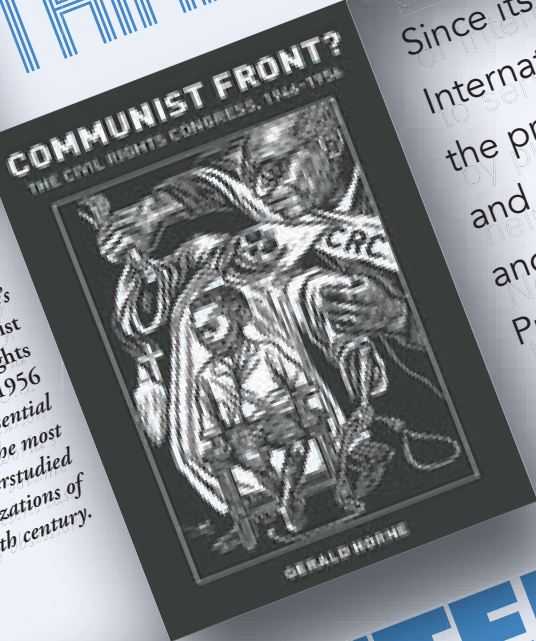
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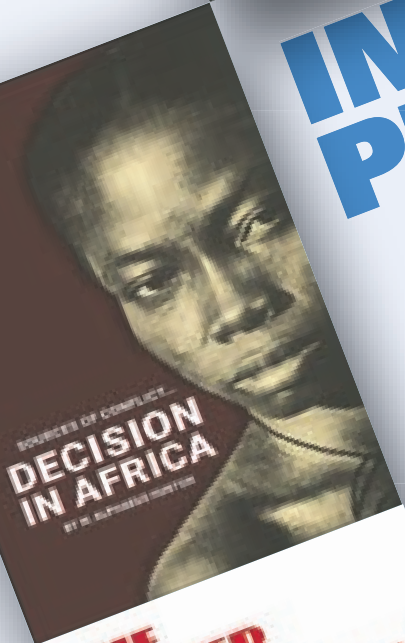
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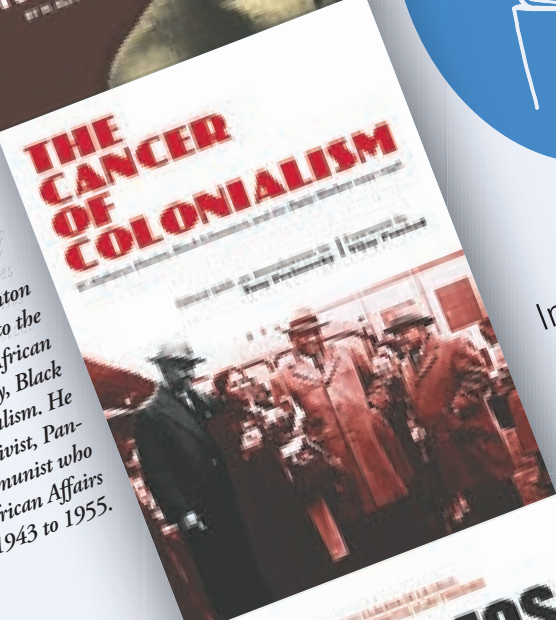
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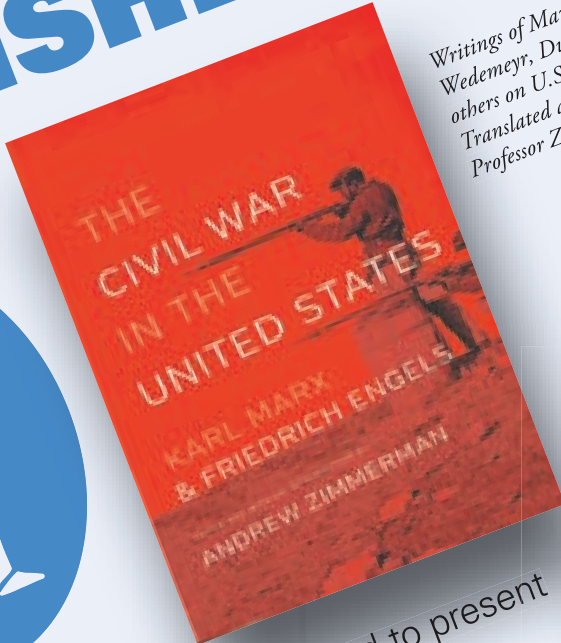
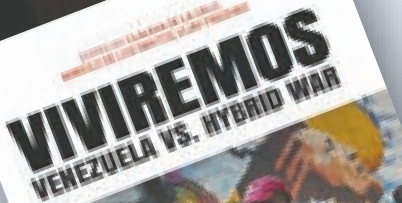
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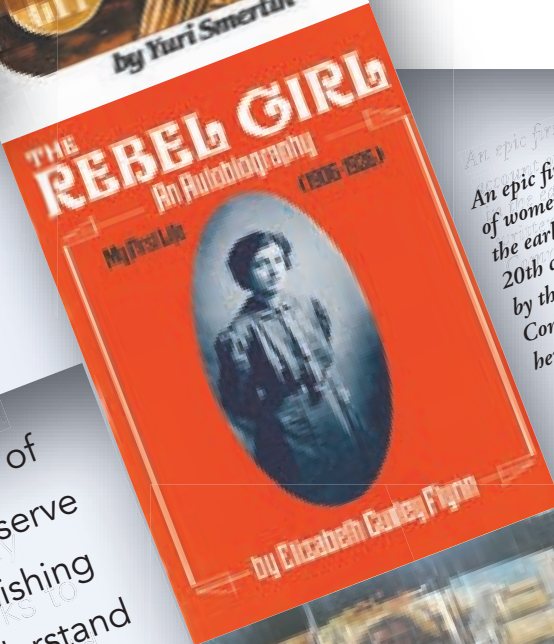


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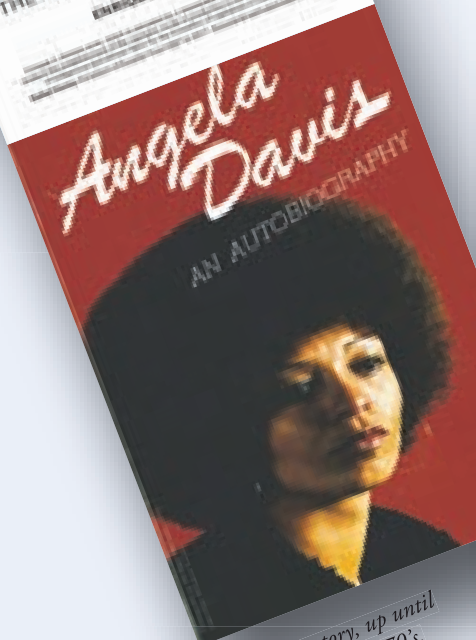
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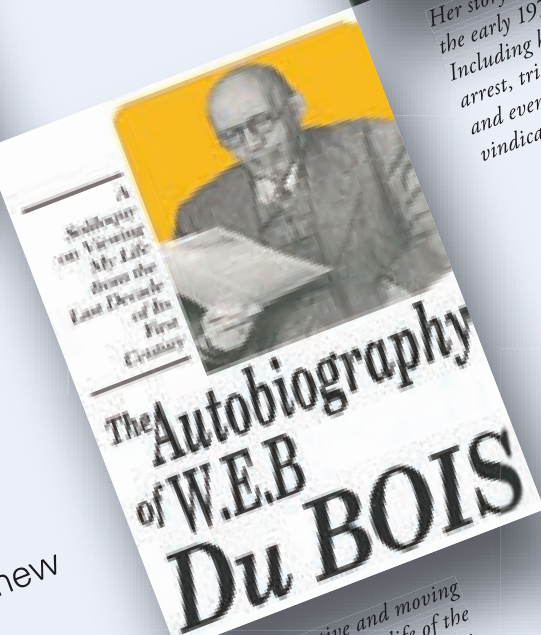
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