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AMAZON UNION P8 • UKRAINE COVERAGE P14-17

THE INDYPENDENT

#270: APRIL 2022



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THERE'S AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE POWER MONOPOLY'S SOARING RATES AND LACK OF CLIMATE ACTION. P10

ESTEBAN JIMENEZ

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Photographing the

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30 Lafayette Ave, BKLYN

THU APRIL 21

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ELECTRIC AFROFUNK AT NUBLU CLASSIC

Turiya Electric is a musical project led by the New York City based Australian/Spanish musician CisXo and inspired by the Great Alice Coltrane. The project aims to inspire love, unity, and spiritual awakening through music. Turiya Electric is formed by an eclectic mix of talented New York based international touring artists. The experimental music draws from Afrofunk, Afrobeat, Jazz, Flamenco, and Blues and merges these sounds over a canvas of driving Afro-latin rhythms.
151 Loaisida Ave, MHTN
Tickets via https://bit.ly/3Dg6V0b

SAT APRIL 23

2PM-4PM • \$3-\$11

MARXIST EDUCATION PROJECT

Platform Socialism: How to Reclaim Our Digital Future from Big Tech: James Muldoon shows how grassroots communities and transnational social movements can take back control from Big Tech. He reframes the technology debate and proposes a host of new ideas from the local to the international for how we can reclaim the emancipa-

tory possibilities of digital platforms. Drawing on sources from forgotten histories to contemporary prototypes, he proposes an alternative system and charts a roadmap for how we can get there.
Virtual. Register via https://bit.ly/3wAJmxL

SAT APRIL 23

1PM-8PM • FREE

THE PEOPLE'S FORUM

The People's Forum is celebrating the one-year anniversary of the launch of its socialist and revolutionary bookstore, 1804 Books, with a day of fun, with delicious food provided by The People's Cafe and vendors selling goods as well as books.
320 W 37th St, MHTN

SUN MAY 1

12PM-6PM • FREE

MAYDAY CELEBRATION

The Mayday Festival of Resistance is a free outdoor community celebration of International Workers Day. The annual concert+party will take place in Maria Hernandez Park in the heart of Bushwick, Brooklyn. The event will feature performances by local musical acts, DJs, resource tables from an array of community organizations, and art-making activities for kids. Cultural workers and grassroots groups will be on hand to inform residents about their rights as tenants, immigrants, and workers.
Maria Hernandez Park, BKLYN

SUN MAY 1

1PM

INTERNATIONAL WORKERS DAY RALLY

May 1, also known as International Workers Day or May Day, is an official holiday in much of the world outside the United States. The holiday's origins date back to the May 1886 Haymarket Massacre in Chicago that saw police violently suppress the movement for an eight-hour work day. Every year, hundreds of people, representing dif-

SPRING IS COMING: *And so too the cherry blossoms at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.*

ferent unions, organizations and labor campaigns, gather at Union Square to celebrate May Day. This year, they will meet up for the rally/celebration at 1 p.m. and later march on Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos's Midtown mansion.
Union Square at 14th St, MHTN

THRU JULY 10 • WED-SAT

11AM-6PM • SUGGESTED DONATION \$10-\$16

BROOKLYN MUSEUM

Baseera Khan: I Am an Archive is presented as part of the UOVO Prize for an emerging Brooklyn artist. Baseera Khan uses their own body as an archive, often employing a variety of multimedia collage techniques to visualize the lived experiences of people at the intersections of Muslim and American identities, both today and throughout history. The exhibition debuts eleven new artworks, in conversation with key works made since 2017, that explore Khan's body as a site of accumulations of experiences, histories and traumas.
200 Eastern Parkway, BKLYN

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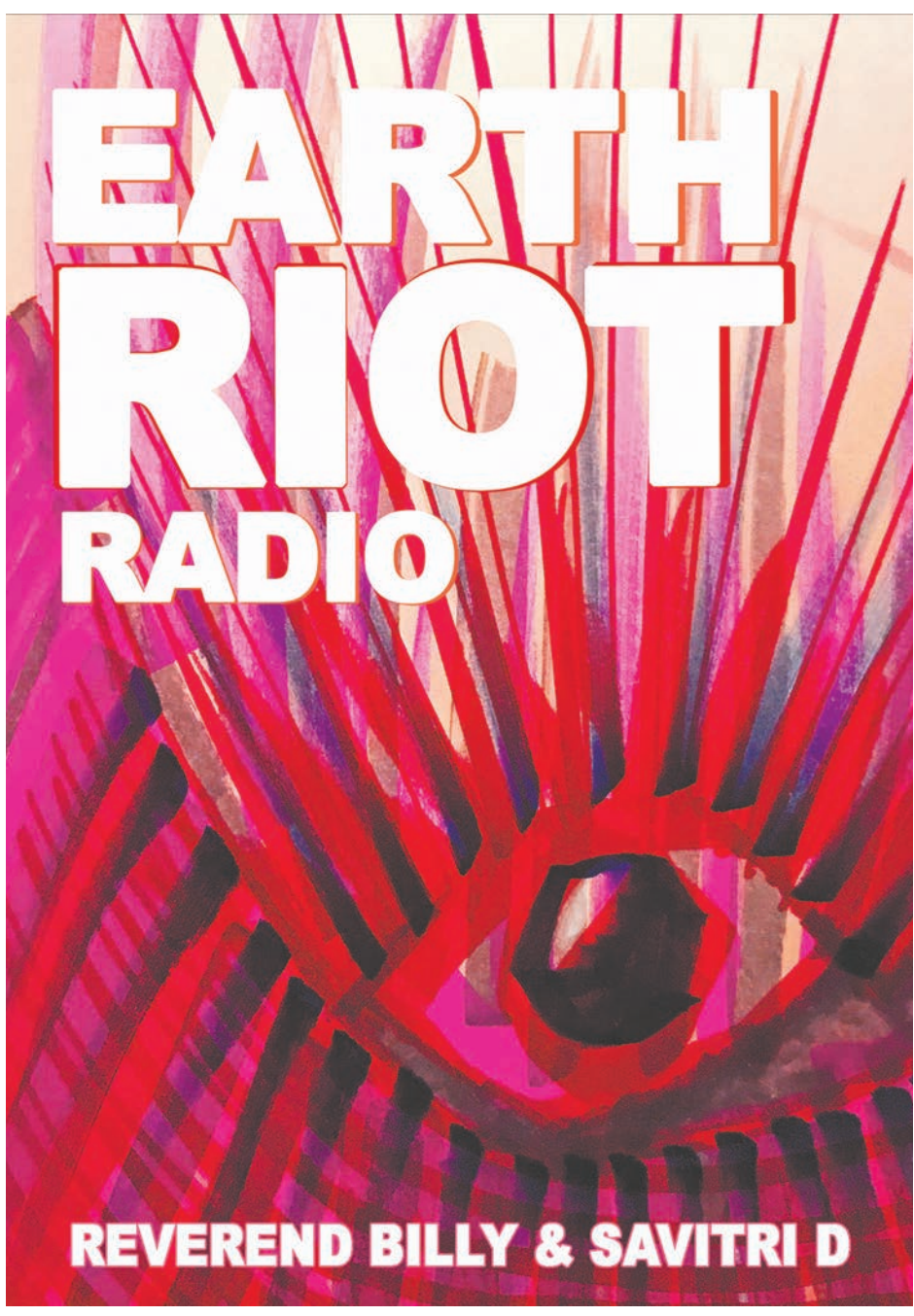
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April 2022 THE INDEPENDENT



SUE BRISK

SUBWAY SIGNALS

HOMELESS LAMENT MAYOR' 'INHUMANE' PLAN TO REMOVE THEM FROM SUBWAY SYSTEM

BY JENNA GAUDINO
PHOTOS BY SUE BRISK

On Feb. 18, Mayor Eric Adams announced his plan to remove from the subway system unhoused people who regularly sleep there. The strategy came to fruition three days later. Adams claims his approach will reduce violence, unruly behavior, littering and loitering in subway stations.

"No more just doing whatever you want," Adams said. "Those days are over. Swipe your Metrocard, ride the system, get off at your destination. That's what this administration is saying."

At the same time, Adams admitted that, "the vast majority of the unhoused and the mentally ill are not dangerous," though his plan does not outline a solution for the houseless, only additional policing of homelessness. It's estimated that more than 1,000 people sleep inside subway cars and stations. We spoke with some of them about their experiences and how they think the city government should address homelessness.

JIMMY PAGAN

"I am homeless and I sleep on the train. With this new plan, it's like, what can I do? It's the law. I have no idea what to do now. I have no plan. I have a voucher for an apartment but I can't find an apartment, because no one is helping me! I've had the voucher for two years.

I've been homeless for four years. People don't care. It's been terrible for me out here. But everyone is different. Not everyone is bad. I ask for money so that I can stay clean, so I can wash my clothes, so I can eat, so I can shave. This is how I live. I am 52 years old, and I don't have much of a job. I have no employment. I have no income. I have no family.

Give us a place to sleep. A better place. Give us hotel rooms or apartments. It's so hard to find those. Make us buildings and give us the buildings. I know a lot of homeless people don't like to work, and they're on drugs. But I don't do that. I stay clean. At the end of the day, I'm hopeful that things will get better for me."

TYRONE JACKSON

"I've got a lot to say! I have an apartment, but it's section eight. So it still counts as being homeless.

I'm going to tell you about the other day when I was on the train. I happened to doze off. And sometimes I'm in raggedy clothes. There was this lady that said I was leaning on her child and she said I tried to grab her child. They locked me up for child endangerment. I know people are afraid of homeless people. I was sitting in front of the judge, and the judge was reading, and he goes, 'Where's the child endangerment? He dozed off.' I watched the news last night and the same thing happened. They said the child was kicking and had an attitude. They put that guy in jail, too.

People don't know what's going on. When you see officers with guns coming up to you, it kind of escalates the situation.

With the mayor's plan, it's going to be difficult to identify who is homeless and who is not. Who has been sitting around for hours, and who hasn't. That's the problem. About 10 years ago, I was with a girl who was heavy on drugs — I mean, I drink my alcohol, but who doesn't nowadays? — I told her not to do drugs in the subway. I don't like that because that's why people judge.

If you put a whole bunch of people in one room, what's going to happen? You're going to have a fight. The shelters are worse because you're grouping everyone together. They're using drugs in there. Then people start stealing. When people are actually trying to get their lives together, people will still steal from them. My ex-wife would get money to go get stoned, but she was around people who were doing the same thing. It's the people

NOWHERE ELSE TO GO: An unhoused man rests on a subway platform at Times Square.

and the environment. And with police officers, it's like, if you're here to help me, then why do you have a gun?

I'm going to tell you this, I have a lot of hope. It took me 13 years to get my apartment. But I still sleep on the trains when the shelters get bad. My ex-wife was able to get a job, she provided them with eight pay stubs, and they still didn't give her the apartment. Where is the help? She followed through, and they still didn't help her. And that's the bad part."

ANGEL DELGADO

"The mayor is not in this situation. You have to be here to know.

For the past two months, I have had problems with my social security check. And I have been trying to make an appointment with my social worker to get my food stamps. But it's been hard. My only income is with the help of people on the subway. I live in a shelter, but I'm here all day trying to make money. At the shelter, I have a room with a key so no one goes in there. But a security guard stole \$800 from me because they have the key, too.

When I'm not in the subway, I sometimes go to McDonald's to hold the door for people to make money. My life is not good right now. And I've been living with HIV and AIDS for 34 years."

RUBEN ECHEVARRIA

"I've been homeless for two months. My family got evicted and there was no space for me. It's really horrible out here. I'm just trying to survive out here. I don't have a job. I lost my job because of the eviction process.

Police officers aren't really trying to help. People are trying to get away from the cold and find a place to sleep. Where are they going to go? I sleep on the 7 Train because it's quiet. There's not a lot of people there. But it's horrible. You see the old people getting woken up in the middle of the night. They don't treat people nice. Well, some of them do. But most of them are rude. My girlfriend and I were talking about this the other day. There's got to be a better way. I keep seeing all the old people on the street. Everyone has their own crap to deal with. It's rough out here, especially for people who have nobody. They're just fighting alone. At least I've got my girl Cynthia. She comes and she brings me food whenever she can.

With this new plan, I don't see it going the right way. There's got to be a better way to handle the situation. It's inhumane to not let people sleep in the subway system. Where are they going to sleep? Instead of spending all this money on cops, why don't they put it into making another hotel? The funding is all messed up. And not everyone who sleeps in the subways are mentally ill. And just because these people can be a challenge, you're going to kick everyone out? That's just going to create another problem. What is with all these extra cops? What do you need a thousand cops for?"

CYNTHIA EAGLE

"I read in an article that Adams is going to put extra warming places by the subways and I think they should've taken care of that before hiring all these cops. They're throwing these people to the streets in this cold weather. It's just inhumane. They hired all these extra cops and they're throwing them out into the streets.

I live in a shelter. I take whatever food they give me and I give it to [Ruben]. There's not a lot of food pantries. Especially on weekends, it's nothing. I hate my situation. It's taking forever to get an apartment. The minimum is waiting two years for an apartment. If they're building all these shelters, why does it take so long to get an apartment?"



SUE BRISK



SUE BRISK



SUE BRISK



STEVEN WISHNIA

HANDS OFF MY MEDICARE

COURT DELIVERS VICTORY FOR 250K CITY RETIREES. BUT, WILL IT TURN OUT TO BE A BANDAID?

BY STEVEN WISHNIA

New York City's plan to switch its 250,000 retired employees from traditional Medicare to a private Medicare Advantage plan has been stalled by a court order.

The plan had been scheduled to go into effect April 1, but Manhattan Supreme Court Justice Lyle Frank ruled March 3 that the city could not charge retirees who wanted to opt out \$192 a month to keep their current health coverage, in which Medicare pays 80% of costs and a private "Medigap" supplemental plan called Senior Care pays the other 20%. He said the city administrative code requires it to "pay the entire cost of health insurance coverage for city employees, city retirees and their dependents." At least 45,000 people had opted out as of mid-February.

The ruling came after months of protest by retirees, who objected that the bureaucracy and profit motive of a private plan would impair their health care.

"We are ecstatic," retired United Federation of Teachers (UFT) member Gloria Brandman told reporters outside City Hall on March 3. "Good-quality health care is a human right not just for us, but for everyone."

Neal Frumkin, associate vice president of inter-union relations for District Council 37 retirees, called it "a victory for low-income retirees." Having to pay almost \$2,300 a year to keep their current health care, he explained, would have particularly hurt those whose pensions are less than \$20,000, such as former school-cafeteria workers.

The city corporation counsel filed a notice March 4 that it plans to appeal the decision, but Mayor Eric Adams' administration said it would not put the plan into effect April 1. Adams, who criticized the move as a candidate, endorsed it in early February. The mayor's press office did not return inquiries from *The Independent*.

• • •

THE "MEDICARE ADVANTAGE PLUS" PLAN, paid for and regulated by Medicare but run by private companies, was touted as better than the current one. "The plan will not only cover all the traditional Medicare benefits as well

as the benefits covered by the Senior Care supplemental plan, but will also add some important new benefits," Mayor Bill de Blasio's office announced July 14.

Many retirees were skeptical. The Cross Union Retirees Organizing Committee argued that Medicare Advantage plans typically have higher copayments, require referrals and pre-approvals for many procedures, and there is no guarantee that doctors, hospitals, and other providers will accept them, particularly out of state.

At a December rally in Brooklyn urging Adams to cancel the plan, protesters displayed lists of more than 80 procedures, tests and supplies that wouldn't be covered without prior authorization from the insurance company, including knee and hip replacements, physical therapy, repairs to power wheelchairs and MRI scans.

"These Medicare Advantage programs are for profit," Edward S. Hysyk, president of DC37's Retirees Association, said March 3. "Whatever they don't spend on health care for you or for me is profit."

The plan was the result of a 2018 deal between the city and the Municipal Labor Committee, an umbrella group of municipal unions, to reduce health-care costs by \$600 million a year.

Brandman, who is running in the UFT's April elections on a slate opposed to President Michael Mulgrew's caucus, says the deal was made "without our knowledge." Retirees have little representation in DC37 and the UFT, the two largest unions in the committee, she notes. In DC37, they can't vote in elections for union leadership, and in the UFT, they're limited to 22,000 votes.

Municipal Labor Committee chair Harry Nespoli told City Councilmembers in January that more than 90% of the doctors "currently utilized by our retirees" were already in the plan's network, and that it had also "ensured the participation of major hospital systems" in Florida and the Carolinas, where many retired city workers move.

The UFT withdrew its support from the plan after the court ruling. "The judge's recent decision will effectively eliminate the savings the plan would have produced and that would have been reinvested in health benefits for our members," Mulgrew said in a statement.

The court decision likely voided the deal between the city and the insurance companies, says Steve Cohen, lawyer for the NYC Organization of Public Service Retirees, which filed the lawsuit. The contract, he told *The Indy*, was contingent on the city delivering 200,000 customers.

• • •

MEDICARE ADVANTAGE PLANS WERE INTRODUCED in 1997 as an alternative to the combination of Medicare and Medigap plans. According to Kaiser Family Foundation figures, they had 26 million people enrolled as of June 2021, 42% of the 62.7 million people enrolled in Medicare. That number has more than doubled since 2011 and more than quadrupled since 2006. Typically, they offer some benefits not covered by traditional Medicare, such as vision or dental care, but because fewer providers accept them, patients risk massive bills for going "out of network."

The House version of President Joe Biden's "Build

Back Better" bill passed last year would have expanded Medicare to cover dental, vision and hearing care, but in the Senate, opposition by all 50 Republicans and Democrats Joseph Manchin (W.Va.) and Kyrsten Sinema (Ariz.) sank it. Sinema, who also opposed letting Medicare negotiate drug prices with pharmaceutical companies, has collected hundreds of thousands of dollars from the drug and financial-services sectors over the past five years. Manchin, who raised \$1.5 million in the last three months of 2021, got contributions from CVS Health and the Anthem and Cigna health-insurance companies.

The city has six months to file its appeal, says Cohen, so the Medicare Advantage Plus plan will be on hold at least that long. The "nuclear option" the administration could use, he worries, is that since the ruling said the city couldn't charge retirees for staying with Senior Care as long as it gave them that option, it could simply stop offering it.

"That's a serious contingency that we have to consider," he says.

"This is not over. We still have to fight," Gloria Brandman told *The Indy*. "We want to make sure current workers know, because we expect their health care will be affected in the next contract."

At the December rally, retired City College administrator Naomi Nemptzow of Brooklyn called it "one battle out of many" against a nationwide effort to privatize Medicare. For-profit health care is why Americans "have terrible health care compared to most wealthy countries, and pay much more," she said. "I believe we need the New York Health Act and a national single-payer system."

The New York Health Act would create a single-payer system in New York State. But last year, after it was passed by the Assembly Health Committee and a majority of state Senators had signed on as cosponsors, key local union leaders joined with health-insurance companies in urging Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie and Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins to kill it. They said the bill would force New Yorkers into a "government-run health-care system" in which "union members would lose the benefits they have earned." The signers included DC37, the New York State Building and Construction Trades Council, several police unions, the Sanitationmen and the UFT.

"We don't want our insurance to be further privatized. We want it to go in the other direction," says Brandman. "And then we can work for Medicare for All."

"We may be retired, but we're not dead, and we will fight back," says Neal Frumkin.

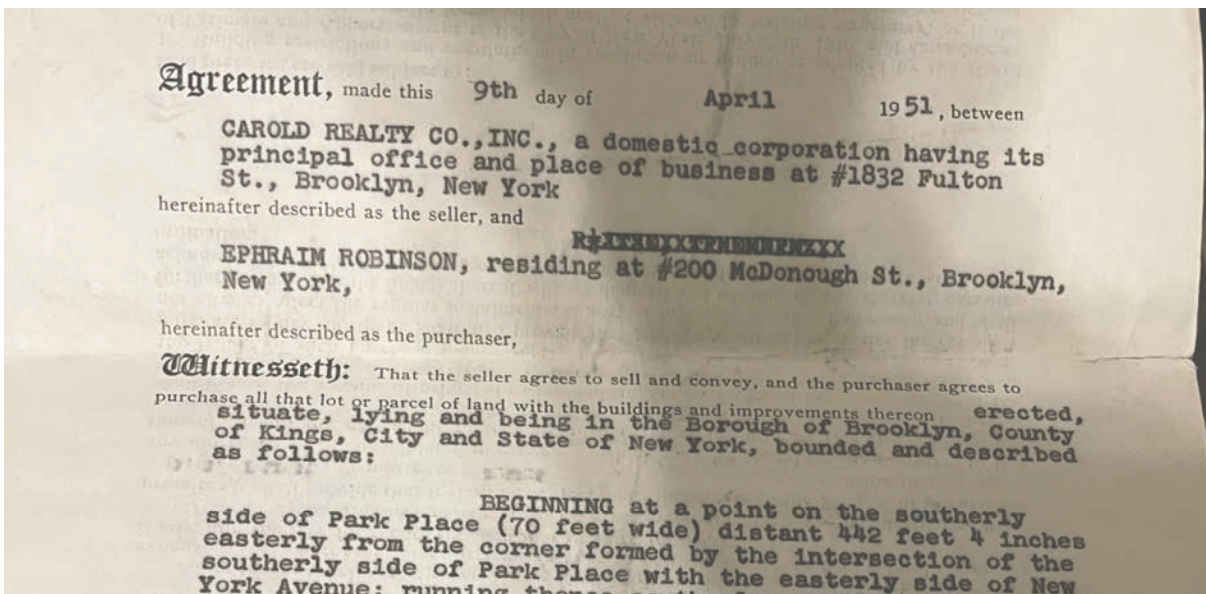
A PROMISE MADE: Retirees with District Council 37, the largest municipal union in the city, marching last July in defense of their right to continue being covered by Medicare.



COURTESY



AMBA GUERGUERIAN



COURTESY

Ida Robinson
Ida Robinson

Being and intended to be the same premises conveyed to the grantor herein by deed from 327 McDonough Street Corp. dated July 26, 1968 and recorded July 31, 1968 in the Kings County Registers/ clerk's office in Liberl Reel #86, Page 189. ✕

EVICTED THWARTED

BROOKLYN COMMUNITY SUCCESSFULLY MOBILIZES TO DEFEND FAMILY FACING REMOVAL FROM HOME OF 70 YEARS

BY AMBA GUERGUERIAN

On Feb. 11, Helen Robinson stood on the steps outside the four-story Brooklyn brownstone that had been her family's home for decades and looked out at a crowd of supporters.

For seven years, the Robinson family had fought a running battle with the unscrupulous landlord who was trying to swindle Robinson's mother out of her deed to the property. He won an eviction order in early 2020, but was unable to execute it when the state declared a moratorium on evictions because of the pandemic. When the moratorium expired on Jan. 15, the landlord moved to throw the family out once and for all, but ran into a wall of opposition he hadn't expected — longtime neighbors and younger anti-eviction activists banding together to physically defend the home.

"You are creating a violent situation," Helen Robinson said, as if addressing the landlord. "This is causing arthritis, pain, struggle, cancer, mentally, emotionally and physically. This has destroyed my family. We are rising no matter what. My mother is 98 years old. She's still in her body. This is her home. They can come — they're organized, but we're organized, too."

Helen's parents, Ida and Ephraim Robinson, bought the home at 964 Park Place in Crown Heights in 1951. They were the first Black family to own a home on the block.

On Feb. 28, Brooklyn Housing Court Judge Jack Stoller decided to "restore legal possession" of the home to Helen Robinson, her mother and her daughter, Sherease Torain. That phrase can be misleading — what the decision did was put a stay on any eviction until further notice. But it was an early victory in the family's battle to reclaim full ownership of their home. It gave them time to prepare for an appeal, asking New York State Supreme Court to review their 2017 claims of deed fraud. Oral arguments in that case are scheduled to begin April 12.

GOING AFTER AN ELDER

Menachem Gurevitch, the Robinsons' self-proclaimed landlord, claims that Ida Robinson sold her home in 2015.

The Robinson-Torain family says the sale was a scam was concocted by lawyers Andre Soleil and Yariv Katz, who were not authorized to represent Ida Robinson, and that their matriarch did not receive any money for her home. The deed was transferred to Gurevitch's control five days after being transferred out of Ida Robinson's possession. *The Independent* has reviewed legal documents related to the "sale" and found anomalies in what is purported to be Ida Robinson's signature on the 2015 deed transfer from her to 964 Park Place LLC.

Also in 2015, Soleil was accused of stealing \$500,000 from a non-profit. He has since been disbarred and fled the country, as confirmed by the Robinsons legal team.

"I went to the Department of Records, the Sheriff's Department. I went to the DA, to HPD — you name it, I did what they say. Politicians. I even spoke to an FBI field agent in 2017."

Torain says she's been trying to reclaim the deed for years, but that she found little recourse until Feb. 14, when Gurevitch's "goon squad" of about 20 local yeshiva students tried to force their way in, and dozens of housing activists barred their entry. A gaggle of police officers, including a captain and a lawyer, watched passively, allowing Gurevitch to act on an eviction order had expired months before.

"As long as you have money to pay, you can play, and this is what the game is *all* about and it's a shame on this system!" said Torain. "For the police to stand and watch, watch that behavior — I dream about that daily. They stand by and watch that abuse of women."

A COMMUNITY RALLIES

Gurevitch has been trying to evict the Robinson-Torain family since he obtained the deed. The family says they never signed a lease and that he never provided heat or hot water, which the State requires of

RTED

landlords. On Feb. 11, less than three weeks after the moratorium ended, he sent goons over to ransack the house and lock the family out while Torain was in the hospital. They pulled out a sink and shattered the family photos hanging in the living room. In another instance, three men sought to tear through the roof to gain

access to the home.

With the help of Crown Heights Tenant Union (CHTU) and Brooklyn Eviction Defense (BED), the women were able to re-enter and maintain control of their home. They have not left their property unoccupied since.

On Feb. 11, a round-the-clock “stoop watch” began — “a defensive formation where we watch for landlord activity to keep each other and the family at 964 Park Place safe,” said Brooklyn Eviction Defense.

Over the next few weeks, 964 Park Place evolved into a community hub. Stoop watchers organized classes on topics such as eviction defense and door-knocking as a means of organizing, screened movies and even hosted a crocheting event. One evening, Helen Robinson, who is a holistic health expert, led a meditation on communal healing. Community members made food for the stoop watch. The watchers would go on runs to the store if one of the family members needed something.

The eviction defenders also led speak outs and know-your-rights canvasses in the neighborhood, where they encountered other Black homeowners who have been victims of deed theft.

Volunteers dragged themselves out of bed in the wee hours to appear for their stoop shifts at a time when the nights were still frigid. “A lot of us are here whenever we’re not at work or sleeping,” said Xavier, a member of BED. The group says around 200 people signed up to take a shift monitoring the stoop, and dozens of them have become BED members.

Torain is a member of CHTU, a union of tenant associations from over 40 buildings. It closely supported her in resisting the eviction.

The Robinson-Torain family also saw an outpouring of solidarity from their neighbors. At one event, a woman approached Helen, asking if she remembered that they used to play together, and said she couldn’t believe what was happening to one of the mainstays of the block. Hal, the man who lives next door, invited stoop-watchers into his home. The neighbors directly to the right, too have stood by the family throughout the debacle.

“The people came out! If it weren’t for the people, we wouldn’t still be in our home,” Helen Robinson said at a press conference announcing Judge Stoller’s decision in her favor.

During the hearing that resulted in Judge Stoller’s Feb. 28 decision, Gurevitch’s lawyer David Stern argued evicting the family would uphold the rule of law and the sanctity of private property at a time of increasing resistance to evictions.

“Either we’re going to be a society of laws or a society of the street,” Stern said.

For Sarah Lazur of CHTU, the growing resistance is a blessing, not a curse. “This is a moment where homeowners and tenants are talking with each other more, are grasping to a greater extent the way their struggles are connected,” she said.

Gurevitch himself is no stranger to crime. His umbrella company, Mandy Management, is a notorious slumlord in New Haven, Connecticut, where it’s based. He’s bought up whole blocks in New Haven, Connecticut, where he’s a notorious slumlord. Through Mandy and its affiliates, Gurevitch has spent roughly \$125 million acquiring 444 properties containing 1,307 different apartments in New Haven in the past four years alone, reported the New Haven Independent in January. The landlord has been found guilty on multiple occasions in landlord-tenant court in New Haven. Most recently, he pled guilty to 21 housing code violations including rat infestations and fire code violations.

DEED FRAUD & ITS IMPACT ON FAMILIES

The only deed transfer from Ida Robinson to 964 Park Place LLC — which was created by Soleil, Katz and their cronies solely for that property, a common practice in real estate — is not notarized and appears to be a draft version, with scribbles all over it. Robinson’s printed name looks completely different in the two places it appears on the document.

But if a victim of deed fraud has the documents to prove a deed or signature has been forged, they can only do so through the court system, which requires hiring a lawyer. “Usually people who fall victim

of deed theft are cash-poor and house-rich... so affording a lawyer can be an insurmountable task,” says Adam Birnbaum, an attorney who recently began representing the Robinson-Torain family.

Those victims are almost always Black and Latino, and commonly older, says Birnbaum. The perpetrators usually seek out someone with financial troubles who bought a house decades ago that is now worth hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars, which is common in gentrifying neighborhoods, and the inflating real-estate values raise owners’ property taxes. They market their offer as if it’s a refinancing project, as was the case with Soleil and Katz, and have the homeowner unknowingly sign away their property-ownership rights. But before the supposed new owner can use the property for themselves, they have to evict the old occupants.

“Since this case went public, many families have called me to share similar stories,” Birnbaum told *The Indy*.

At a speak out against deed fraud on the sidewalk in front of 964 Park Pl. during the stoop watch, Janina Davis told a small crowd that her home was stolen out from under her, too. “It took me a while to speak about it because I was so ashamed,” she said. “But I went to a neighborhood awareness meeting about deed theft in 2019, and the church was packed with people.” When another neighbor asked Davis if she got her house back, she said “no,” eyes welling with tears.

Davis was in a legal battle with M&M Developer LLC for 10 years. When her case was finally set to be heard by the New York Supreme Court, the developers filed for bankruptcy, nullifying the case. “They pit family members against each other. They rob your home of all its equity,” she told *The Indy*. “There needs to be a class-action lawsuit around this.” In 2019, Attorney General Letitia James launched the Protect Our Homes Initiative, which collected information from victims of deed theft under the premise of helping them combat it. But after submitting her documents and receiving a case number, Davis never heard back from the state. “They continue to drop the ball because this is Black and brown people. And I do think misogyny was involved in my case, too.”

THE ARC OF HISTORY

“I can’t even believe how everything has changed. Our house went from being the house that everyone came to, to being a sad place. It used to be a very happy place.” Torain told *The Indy*.

The family’s odyssey to New York began when Torain’s great-grandfather, Ephram Robinson’s father, was killed by his bosses while working on a chain gang in the South. His wife was told to leave town by sundown, so she took her kids and went to Washington, D.C. Ephram sought greater freedom in New York City after returning from World War I and realizing that “when you come back to America, you’re still a nigger,” Torain recalled. His wife, Ida Robinson, came from a family of sharecroppers in Monroe, Louisiana.

Ida used to garden in the backyard of 964 Park Pl., which was full of friends and family on sunny days. The home has hosted several family weddings. They were close enough with their neighbors that when Torain was a child, she minded any adult on her block who kept her in line. “I always had a bunch of girlfriends, and my house was the sleepover house,” she says. Her family was highly involved in the block association until it was dismantled about 10 years ago.

But the seven-year battle to regain ownership of their home has put immense strain on the family. Torain’s brother, who also lived there with his partner and their baby, moved out of state.

“His child’s mother couldn’t handle the stress,” she said. “Having that level of chronic stress for years, it changes you.”

ONE HOME, THREE GENERATIONS:

From left to right: Ida Robinson owner of 964 Park Place, her grandson Ali Torain, her daughter Helen Robinson and granddaughter Sherease Torain in happier times.

24/7: In February, activists from the Crown Heights Tenant Union and Brooklyn Eviction Defense participated in a round-the-clock encampment to protect the Robinson family from being displaced.

YES, INDEED: The deed from when Ephram Robinson purchased 964 Park Place.

EVIDENCE OF FRAUD?: There’s no notary’s signature on the document that Ida Robinson, then 92, purportedly signed giving her home away.

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AMAZON PRIMED

BY AMBA GUERGUERIAN

The Amazon facility on Staten Island is suffocatingly vast. Four massive warehouses sit among parking lots and endless rows of truck-loading docks. In the parking lot of the 2.5-acre JFK8 warehouse sits a giant National Labor Relations Board election tent. As *The Independent* goes to press, the roughly 6,000 Amazon employees who work at JFK8 are voting on whether or not to unionize.

If the Amazon Labor Union (ALU) — the independent group of Amazon employees leading the unionization struggle — is successful in this election, they will then have to bargain a first contract with the company in order to win demands for basic workplace protections. If the giant online retailer were to become fully unionized, it could galvanize labor organizing in a broad swath of low-wage jobs in the retail, service and logistics industries. The ALU says 70% of the workers approve of the union, based on its phone-banking data. However, the organizers know that number could shrink in the face of a ruthless anti-union campaign by Amazon.

The ALU's origins date back to the first month of the pandemic, when workers Christian Smalls, Gerald Bryson, Jordan Flowers and Derrick Palmer led a walkout in protest of unsafe working conditions at JFK8. In retaliation, Amazon fired Smalls and Bryson.

In the year since it launched in April 2021, the ALU hasn't stopped to catch a breath. Its members have kept a constant presence at the S40 bus stop in front of JFK8, offering the workers the warmth of a home-cooked meal or a small bonfire. At union-hosted parties and rallies, they tell Amazon workers they deserve paid time off, wages of more than \$19 an hour and basic workplace protections. In every space employees traverse, ALU members are there, telling their coworkers about the benefits or organized labor.

Meanwhile, Amazon has been ruthlessly breaking labor law. The company's union-busting tactics over the past year included firing Staten Island worker Daquan Smith for his ALU affiliation (he now lives in a homeless shelter while appealing his case); forcing workers to attend anti-union "captive audience meetings" disguised as required trainings, during which they deploy scare tactics, threatening workers with misinformation about unions, like that if they unionize, they'll be brought down to minimum wage; and having police arrest Smalls for "trespassing" twice. In the most recent arrest, Smalls was pushed around while cops demanded, "Where's the gun?"

Amazon, owned by the world's second richest man, has annual sales of \$470 billion, and is the second-largest employer in the U.S. after Walmart. It is a daunting foe.

"Amazon is the great American nightmare," says Seth

Goldstein, the ALU's pro bono lawyer. The corporation has gained a chokehold on the U.S. economy — its cheap prices can't be beat by other companies, and it has set a low bar for work-

ing standards: Crank as much work out of your employees as you possibly can, surveil them, fire them quickly for "low productivity" and make sure they don't have enough time to use the restroom, drink water or eat.

Flanks of fencing topped with barbed wire separate some parts of the facility from others. When the sun beats down on the asphalt and concrete, heat waves emanate from the complex. The environment is hostile to human activity. The only bathrooms are inside the facilities. (This reporter found herself peeing behind a locked, MTA-use-only outhouse.) "Yup, this is the trench," said Smalls. "We had the code to the bathroom the MTA drivers use, but we lost it when Amazon called the driver into the office."

During shift changes, mostly young, overwhelmingly Black and brown workers get on and off the S40 buses. They take long commutes, usually from 90 minutes to three hours each way, to and from the warehouses where they work 12-hour shifts, often overnight.

Things are looking gloomy if this is a template for our future. But it doesn't have to be. Only 6.1% of private-sector workers in the United States are in a union, and it's time for that to change, which the members of the ALU hope to do. Imagine what they picture: a tidal wave of labor organization, starting now.

The roughly 1,500 workers at the LDJ5 warehouse, also in the Staten Island complex, will have their own union vote April 25-29. The NLRB will soon announce the results of the second union vote at the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama, with ballots scheduled to be counted March 28. (The board ordered the redo after it held that Amazon illegally interfered in last year's election, which went against the union.) In February, workers at Seattle's Amazon Fresh store declared they'd formed a union, which would be the first one in Amazon's collection of grocery stores. And new Teamsters President Sean O'Brien, who took office on March 22, has doubled down on his promises to take on the challenge of unionizing Amazon.

• • •

THROUGH GRUELING DAYS and sleepless nights, the core group of about 20 deeply committed ALU organizers have become friends and created a sense of community and camaraderie necessary for a successful union. Here's what we learned from speaking with some of them.

SETH GOLDSTEIN, ALU attorney:

"It's the right time. Young people want change because

this country is deteriorating for them. There's a time for everything and this is the time for organizing."

CHRIS SMALLS

President, ALU; Hired in 2015; Fired in 2020

"You see people get hired and fired all the time, so job security is our number one; higher wages is number two. We're fighting for \$30/hour. Amazon makes millions and millions off our labor and they don't pay us enough. Some people work at Amazon and have two, three jobs."

"All these other companies are gonna start organizing and there's gonna be a shift in the labor world. ... We stand in solidarity with all the struggles across the nation. It's all connected. Yesterday, I got a call from workers in New Mexico."

DERRICK PALMER: Vice President of Organizing, ALU; Hired in 2018

"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."

BRETT DANIELS: Hired spring 2020, laid off; Rehired summer 2021

"Chris and I connected because he saw all the support I was giving the ALU on social media. When he called me and asked if I wanted to transfer up here and work on the campaign, that was the easiest, fastest decision I've made in my life."

"We need to take down the oligarchs. People are dying. In Bessemer, just recently, two workers died within 24 hours of each other."

JORDAN FLOWERS

Hired 9/18, robotics maintenance worker

"It's really scary, the technology they have is advanced. It's crazy that they could even get their hands on that type of technology."

"They put me on disability which I'm still fighting with them to get. They fired me before in 2019 and it was the same issue. I had a hospital note requiring me not to work but they terminated me. ...I have a medical issue, Lupus Nephritis. It's not often spoken of. It's an auto-immune disease."

"Derrick, Gerald and Chris are my friends. We've been hanging out since before the pandemic. Regardless of my medical issue or not, I would always walk out with them."

GERALD BRYSON: Hired 2018; Fired for walk-out

"I'm a single parent. It's stressful not being able to buy my nine-year-old the things I wanna give him, being that I'm still waiting for Amazon with the decision to rehire me. ...I was one of those employees that broke dirt here. I was one of those employees that made sure [Jeff Bezos] got up to



AMBA GUERIERIAN

space and I'm fired for nothing, wrongly. They're racist pigs and I don't say that lightly."

ANGELIKA MALDONADO
Hired fall 2021

"The other day, I was organizing, and I missed my son's first tooth falling out. So it's things like that I have to sacrifice. But I think that as he grows older, he will be excited to talk about how his mom helped organize a union."

"My mom is a part of the 1199SEIU union. ... We had great health insurance; they paid for childcare. When I said 'Amazon having a union?!' all these flashbacks start coming to me and I'm like, 'do you know how many families would benefit from a union in Amazon?!' It would be amazing. It would be so amazing. ... Currently I pay \$54 a week for medical, dental and vision for me and my son but I still have copays."

"I would say it's a mix of jail and a very strict school .. You're constantly being tracked. They track you if you wanna use the bathroom, if you take too long to get water. We work 12 or 10 hours a day. You have to stay hydrated to avoid injury. You try to drink water but if you drink too much water but if you use the bathroom too much you're gonna get TOT (time off task) and if you get TOT then you're gonna get written up and if you get too many write-ups you get fired... On the third write up you get fired, no discussion."

MADLINE (MADDIE) WESLEY
Treasurer, ALU; Hired August 2021

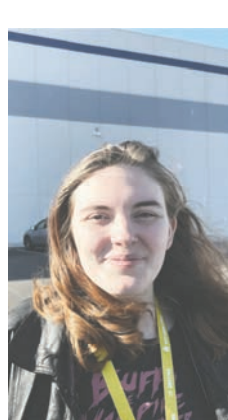
"This is a worker-led movement. We're going against one of the richest companies in the world and they're dropping millions of dollars on this anti-union campaign; meanwhile, we've spent about \$100,000 total in the past year."

KAREN PONCE: Secretary, ALU; Hired October 2020, laid off; Rehired February 2021

"And look at that. As we speak. What is that, an ambulance? You see, just a typical day at Amazon. That happens a lot. Either somebody faints — it's hot in there. We're working to the max — and it's like, why is it normal to see ambulances at work all the time?"

"After I spoke with the ALU, it was an immediate relief. That's what it's like with everyone. Usually people are anti-union just for a lack of information. People's responses to us are right off of Amazon propaganda. They make us sit in mandatory training sessions where it's a pure anti-union meeting. ... They make sure that each worker has been in one of those meetings seven times."

ONE WORKER, ONE VOTE: *The National Labor Relations Board's election tent outside the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island.*



TWITTER/STARBUCKS ASTORIA.BUVA

LABOR BRIEFS
BY INDEPENDENT STAFF

STARBUCKS UNIONS PERCOLATE

Union organizing at Starbucks is spreading like steam from an overheated espresso machine. Workers at more than 150 of the company's almost 9,000 U.S. stores have filed requests that it recognize their unions, and seven so far have voted for union representation, including one in Seattle on March 22. In the New York area, voting will begin Mar. 31 at the Roastery on Ninth Avenue, and over the next 10 days at Astor Place, the Caesar's Bay mall in Brooklyn, Great Neck, and Massapequa. Workers at the Astoria Boulevard Starbucks in Queens filed for a union March 18.

On March 20, the Starbucks Workers United campaign, affiliated with the Workers United union, filed an unfair-labor-practice complaint with the National Labor Relations Board, alleging that the company threatened to fire union supporters in Great Neck and Manhattan or reduce their hours. Meanwhile, Starbucks announced that multibillionaire former CEO Howard Schultz, who it enlisted last fall to discourage workers in Buffalo from unionizing, would return to the helm on April 4. Schultz's net worth increased by \$145 million within two days. "Yes. Starbucks workers need a union," Sen. Bernie Sanders posted on Twitter March 18.

NYC REI WORKERS PITCH UNION TENT

Workers at the REI outdoor-equipment store in SoHo voted 88-14 on March 2 to join the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union. Like Starbucks, REI often presents itself as "progressive," but workers complained about being overworked, underpaid, and having deficient COVID safety procedures. The company also campaigned aggressively against the union. "Our entire break room was just littered with flyers and anti-union propaganda. Not a surface was safe," shipping and receiving specialist Damien Sowell told LaborPress. Graham Gale, a bike and ski technician, said he was particularly inspired by the Kickstarter union's podcast, which "detailed how they actually organized and the types of conversations they were having and the strategies that they use."

AOC IN THE HOUSE: *Queens congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez visits a Starbucks on Astoria Boulevard that recently filed for union recognition.*

MINNEAPOLIS TEACHERS' WALKOUT ENTERS THIRD WEEK

A strike by teachers in Minneapolis entered its third week on March 21. "We're looking for contract language around class-size caps, mental-health supports, recruiting and retaining educators of color, and living wages for education support professions," Shaun Laden of Minneapolis Federation of Teachers Local 59 said in a video update March 16. "We don't have a budget crisis. We have a values and priorities crisis." The union says the state can afford it because it has a \$9 billion budget surplus. Teachers in the twin city of St. Paul had also planned to strike March 8, but reached a last-minute deal with raises, class-size limits, and \$3,000 bonuses.

70-HOUR WEEK IS TOO MUCH, SAY CHEVRON REFINERY WORKERS

More than 500 workers at a Chevron refinery in Richmond, California, went on strike March 21 when the company refused to resume bargaining after United Steelworkers Local 5 rejected its contract proposal. Chevron offered a 2.5% raise, but the union wanted 5%, to compensate for a 23% increase in their health-insurance costs. "If we had more people and could get a better pay rate, maybe our members wouldn't feel obligated to come in and work as many as 70 hours a week to make ends meet," longtime refinery operator B.K. White told the British Guardian. Chevron has hired strikebreakers to run the refinery.

L.A. STRIPPERS DEMAND SAFER SEX WORK

Dancers at the Star Garden strip club in North Hollywood, California, went on strike March 18 after management fired two women for signing a petition demanding stronger safety and privacy protections. "They just locked the door for the night. We successfully shut this club down!" one striker exclaimed after the dancers walked out. A main reason for the strike, they said in an Instagram post, was that "management explicitly instructs the security not to intervene when we need help."

BEYOND CON ED

FOR NEW YORK, PUBLIC POWER IS THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

BY LACHLAN HYATT & JOHN TARLETON

In the past year, Elsa Martinez has seen utility bills from New York energy monopoly Con Edison soar to as much as \$300 per month. The costs seemed inexplicable to Martinez, a disabled Harlem resident.

“Half the time I wasn’t home! That’s what threw me off.” Martinez mentions that the high bills may stem from her grandkids watching television. And the fact that she has to leave her hallway light on to make sure she does not miss steps when she gets up in the night — things she fears giving up. Martinez had to turn to Adult Protective Services to keep her lights on, though Con Ed has shut off her power multiple times since the start of the pandemic.

“They’re the pits to me, I call them a bunch of crooks,” said Martinez about Con Ed. “Somebody in that company is scheming, organizing something that’s not right.”

“It’s a great example of why the system is broken,” says State Senator Michael Gianaris (D-Queens) about soaring electricity rates that have left one in five New York State residents at risk of having their electricity cut off according to the Public Utility Law Project. “The bigger question is, Why don’t we have a utility that prioritizes the concerns of its customers and of the public? Why don’t we have a utility that is worried about how people are gonna make ends meet when they get a 300% jolt to their electricity bill?”

Con Edison serves the five boroughs and Westchester County. It was organized as a private monopoly at the beginning of the 20th Century by Wall Street financier J.P. Morgan. Since 1973, it has returned a higher annual dividend to its shareholders in every year except two. Last year, it made \$1.5 billion in profits and is eyeing a double-digit rate increase for the coming year even as Gov. Kathy Hochul urges the company to review their billing practices so as to “better serve” their customers.

Con Ed and other private utilities across New York State show no sign of abandoning a business model built around squeezing customers, skimping on upkeep and investment and continuing to rely heavily on fossil fuels instead of moving toward renewable energy sources like wind, solar and geothermal.

But, a growing cohort of progressive and socialist state legislators and environmental advocates in New York are calling for private utility monopolies to be sidelined in favor of a robust public power system that could usher in a renewable energy revolution.

“A public utility would be charged with doing exactly the opposite [of Con Ed] in making sure that there’s a transition to renewable energy and the vagaries of global politics of fossil capitalists don’t affect local people’s energy bills,” says Ashley Dawson, author of *Extreme Cities: The Peril and Promise of Urban Life in the Age of Climate Change* and an activist with the statewide coalition Public Power NY.

In 2019, New York State lawmakers passed the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA). It mandates that New York’s electricity sector runs on 70% renewable energy by 2030, becomes greenhouse gas emission free by 2040 and that by 2050 New York achieves an 85% reduction in all emissions from 1990 levels. It’s the most ambitious state-level climate legislation in the country, but no new legislation has been enacted since to begin turning its lofty goals into reality.

much the same way that the more efficient government-run Medicare is reserved for people 65 and over that private health insurers are disinclined to cover, or that the post office’s ability to provide basic financial services to unbanked people is limited at the behest of the payday lending industry.

The New York Build Public Renewables Act, which has dozens of sponsors in the state assembly, would unleash NYPA’s full potential. Under this legislation, NYPA would become the sole provider of energy to all state-owned and municipal properties and offer expanded energy services to other customers, too, with low-income customers being prioritized. The Build Public Renewables Act also calls for establishing 10 community energy hubs spread across the state. The hubs would assist with everything from helping people adopt energy efficiency measures to setting up local microgrids to helping with billing issues.

“We need to be investing in heat pumps, in wind, in solar throughout the state, in better connecting our grid,” says Assemblymember Robert C. Carroll, the lead sponsor in the Assembly of the Build Public Renewables Act. “All of this could be done if we use the power of the state, especially with this giant [budget] surplus that we have.”

Solar and wind currently account for 4% of New York’s energy supply. A rapid buildout to 70% renewables by 2030 would create as many as 51,000 union jobs and \$93 billion in economic activity, according to a report by University of Pennsylvania-based Climate and Community Project. No new taxes would be required as NYPA can issue bonds to be repaid through future revenues. After the initial upfront costs of establishing a green public power grid are covered, utility rates would decrease as the wind and the sun are both free sources of energy unlike fossil fuels, which must be extracted from deep within the Earth, transported long distances and are subject to the whims of global markets.

In New York, launching a Green New Deal doesn’t require starting from scratch so much as circling back to an earlier era when bold public infrastructure projects were in vogue.

NEW YORK CITY RELIES HEAVILY on natural gas to meet its energy needs, a legacy of former Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s aggressive push in the early 2010s to connect the city to out-of-state supplies in Pennsylvania and other states that were experiencing a production boom. Natural gas was pitched as a cleaner-burning alternative to traditional heating oils, a “bridge fuel” to an even greener future.

That future has continued receding, as costly infrastructure investments are not readily abandoned by their corporate owners. Meanwhile, the U.S. natural gas market has become increasingly globalized and tied into international demand. In 2015, the U.S.’s 40-year-old oil export ban, a product of the 1970s oil crisis, was lifted, and U.S. companies began selling record-setting amounts of natural gas to Europe and Asia where fuel prices — and potential profits — are higher.

With countries competing for a limited natural gas supply, fossil fuel markets are becoming more volatile and the world is experiencing an energy crisis that has only been deepened by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and ensuing embargos against Russian oil and natural gas. Because of the costs and infrastructure associated with the stockpiling of natural gas, which has to be turned into a liquid from a vapor for storage, there is a lack of incentives for long-term storage. The result is a precarious system in which the supply and demand must be carefully balanced, says Alex Gilbert, a fellow at the Payne Institute at the Colorado School of Mines. When a disruption occurs, such as the pandemic or the crisis in Ukraine, the gas market cannot react quickly to these changes and prices climb steeply.

Despite the abundance of natural gas in the United States, consumers at home are now having to compete with other countries for the natural resource.



SUE BRISK



JOHN WARETON



BEAN MCGREGOR

“We’re now exporting, depending on the numbers we look at, about 15% of our total natural gas supply,” Gilbert says. “That’s a lot we’re sending to foreign markets and because these global markets are really tight right now, we’re actually maxing out our export capacity. We’re exporting as much as we possibly can, so that drives up natural gas prices across the whole of the U.S.,” he says, thus contributing to higher utility bills from Con Ed.

With the adoption of renewable energy through the Build Public Renewables Act, New Yorkers’ utility bills would become untethered to the global market. In addition to the economic benefits for consumers, public power would make it possible to democratize energy in New York.

“The bill requires the authority to present the public with a democratization plan within two years of the effective day,” said Carroll who envisions a board that would give customers a direct say in how NYPA is run, as opposed to private utilities that must answer to their shareholders.

• • •

PUBLIC POWER STILL FACES key roadblocks in Albany.

Gov. Kathy Hochul supports a more modest renewable energy plan that emphasizes ramping up imports of hydroelectric power from Quebec and building giant wind farms off of Long Island. The additional power from Quebec would be transported via the Champlain Hudson Power Express, a \$3 billion powerline backed by the Blackstone investment firm that would travel underneath the Hudson River.

Assemblymember Zohran Mamdani (D-Queens) said he and Carroll have both met with Hochul’s staff to lobby for the Build Public Renewables Act. But she’s given no indication she will fold the measure into the state’s annual budget.

“We need a new vision that matches the scale of the problem — not a slightly upgraded version of what was there a few years ago,” says Mamdani, a democratic socialist who knocked off a 10-year incumbent in 2020, running in part on a vocal opposition to a gas-fired power plant that was intended for his district in Astoria, which is already saturated with power plants.

Mamdani’s election victory helped persuade the New York City chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (NYC-DSA) to make the fight for public power a top priority for their organization, says Jay Wu an organizer with the NYC-DSA Ecosocialist Working Group.

“When we knocked doors, we found that caring about the climate is not just a liberal, white, rich person issue. It’s a big giant anxiety bomb in the back of everyone’s head,” Wu said. “The way mainstream media talks about climate leaves people feeling hopeless. We say the climate crisis is not caused by everyone. It’s caused by very specific people who own fossil fuel companies that are polluting the planet and their lobbyists and the politicians that enable them instead of protecting us from them. When you talk about it that way, it’s a fight. And people want to have that fight.”

NYC-DSA has made waves in New York State politics in recent years by defeating six machine-backed incumbent legislators and replacing them with their own members, all of whom are strong supporters of public power. In addition to trying to re-elect its incumbents, the DSA is running a slate of seven new candidates for this year’s June 28 Democratic primary, many of whom are making a climate-oriented appeal in working class communities.

One closely watched race is in Senate District 21 in Flatbush, Brooklyn, where David Alexis is challenging 18-year incumbent Kevin Parker.

Parker is the Chair of the Senate Energy and Telecommunications Committee and is the lead sponsor of the Build Public Renewables Act in the Senate. Yet, the bill has never moved out of his committee. Alexis refers to Parker as “the Joe Manchin of the state senate” due to his role in thwarting progressive climate legislation and criticizes the incumbent for having taken \$113,000 in campaign contributions from fossil fuel interests during his career in the state senate.

“Even though he’s a sponsor on the Build Public Renewables and other climate legislation,” Alexis told *The Independent*, “he does not champion them and allows them to die in his committee, ensuring that New York does not get any meaningful change.”

Several members of the DSA slate have backgrounds in climate

organizing. Illiapa Sairitupac was arrested last June while participating in a civil disobedience outside the offices of state legislators who failed to pass Build Public Renewables Act. This year, he is running for an open seat in Lower Manhattan’s Assembly District 65 which was devastated by flooding when Hurricane Sandy hit in 2012. Further north in the Hudson Valley, Vanessa Agudelo and Sarahana Shrestha were both active in the recently successful battle to stop a gas-fired power plant from being built in Newburgh, New York. They are both now running as DSA-backed candidates for State Assembly.

• • •

Agudelo, a former Peekskill, N.Y. city councilmember, is running for an open seat in State Assembly District 95 in northwestern Westchester County. Shrestha is primarying 24-year incumbent Kevin Cahill in District 103 which encompasses New Paltz, Kings-ton and Woodstock. Shrestha’s district was slammed by a winter storm in February that left 60,000 customers in Ulster County without power for as long as four days amid bone-chilling temperatures.

Shrestha’s campaign used the incident to talk about the poor performance of Central Hudson Gas and Electric, the local power monopoly, and why public power is urgently needed.

“People are very eager to talk to us when we come to the door,” Shrestha says. “They are like, ‘Tell me more about this. Tell me more about the renewable energy economy. Tell me about our energy system.’ People are thirsty to know more information about what can be done. And the hatred for Central Hudson is across the political spectrum.”

Back in Albany, Mamdani says bringing another cohort of socialist climate organizers into the state legislature will have “a tangible effect.”

“It’s through organizing that you can punch above your

IN NEW YORK, YOU CAN LAUNCH A GREEN NEW DEAL BY CIRCLING BACK TO AN EARLIER ERA WHEN BOLD PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS WERE ALSO IN VOGUE.

weight,” Mamadani says. “It becomes harder and harder to deflect the legislation.”

But, he adds, you don’t have to be a socialist for public power to be an issue to get behind.

“This is a battle that resonates with everyday New Yorkers,” Mamdani says. “No one likes to be held hostage to a corporate monopoly whether it’s having to fight with them over the phone about a bill or dealing with faulty service or knowing they aren’t responding to the latest IPCC report that shows the urgency of the climate crisis.”

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HOWEVER, PUBLIC POWER ADVOCATES in New York have an ace up their sleeve. The New York Power Authority was launched in 1931 as a New Deal prototype by then-Governor Franklin Roosevelt. It is the largest state-owned public power authority in the country. It provides cheap electricity to public entities, including MTA and CUNY, mostly through hydropower from upstate dams built many decades ago.

NYPA’s productive capacity is capped under state law so it doesn’t directly compete against private utilities such as Con Ed in



DAVID HOLLENBACH

MONEY GAMES

THE FEDERAL RESERVE'S PLANNED INTEREST RATE HIKES MAKES UNEMPLOYMENT SPIKE LIKELY

BY PADDY QUICK

“Fed Decides to Increase Unemployment” — A headline like this is never seen in the mainstream media, but it should be. Beginning this month and continuing through at least next year, the Federal Reserve, the central monetary authority in the United States, is putting in place a set of increases in interest rates that is intended and absolutely certain to lead to widespread layoffs throughout the country. The resulting unemployment will further increase the misery of the working class whose wages have not kept up with the rate of inflation, while further undermining our ability to get even small increases in monetary wages.

While there was heated debate in Congress over the agenda of the Biden administration, there is no debate at all on this issue. There are two reasons for this. One is that this increase in interest rates is intended to reduce inflation, and there is almost unanimous agreement that this is a worthwhile goal. The pandemic-induced problem of disrupted supply chains that led to an increase in inflation was initially thought to be transitory, and would therefore come to an end as the economy recovered. Measures to address individual prices, such as those of prescription drugs, are important, but inflation is a phenomenon of the economy as a whole. The decision has therefore been made (by the Fed and others) that inflation must be reduced and that raising interest rates is the way to do this.

The other reason for the lack of debate is that the Fed is constructed to be independent of all elected representatives including the President and Congress so that its decisions cannot be overruled by them. It is probably the least democratic institution in the United States. The only good thing that might come out of this is an increased understanding of unemployment and its role in the functioning of a capitalist economy and thus an increased ability to address the hardship that it causes.

In the first place, the decision by the Fed to increase unem-

ployment makes it clear that unemployment cannot be understood by looking at the characteristics of those who are unemployed. The fact that those with less education have higher unemployment rates than those with more education does not mean that an increase in education, however desirable that might be, would reduce unemployment. The increase in unemployment that we will see over the coming year can clearly not be explained by a sudden decrease in the ability of workers to address ever-changing technology. Nor can it be explained by a sudden increase in what conservatives claim is the “laziness” or poor work habits of workers. Nor, correspondingly, does the expected increase in the racial gap in unemployment rates between white, Black and Latinx workers indicate a change in their relative “employability.”

Instead, it will be clear that the increase in the number of people unemployed is the result of the actions of the Fed, rather than from any change in their abilities or characteristics. Since the construction industry will be particularly hard hit, and women are underrepresented in this sector of the economy, the unemployment rate of men will most likely increase more than that of women — a change that has nothing to do with changes in gender relations.

Secondly, it is important to understand that those who lose their jobs do not, in general, become permanently unemployed. While for some, that layoff notice may mark the end of their wage-earning lives, for most people it begins a period during which they seek alternative employment. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics keeps track of this period of unemployment. Currently (as of February 2022), about one-third have been out of work for less than five weeks, with a further one-quarter out of work between five and 14 weeks. A further one-third had been unemployed for more than 27 weeks. (The many people who give up even looking for work are not even defined as unemployed.) This means that the expected increase in the rate of unemployment will be experienced for most people as an increase in that period of time between jobs.

Even five weeks of missed wages does damage to the well-being of working families, and to the relatives and communities who help them cope with this hardship. An increase in the period of unemployment to 10 weeks can wipe out whatever they might have managed to save or free up on their lines of credit, while six months of unemployment can tip them from hunger into homelessness. The number of people who are unemployed at some point in a single year is maybe four to five times greater than the number unemployed at any one point in time. Concentrated as unemployment is in communities of color, the effects of the actions of the Fed will lead to further increase in racial disparities, and increased calls from right-wingers to further “police” these communities.

For the working class, the problem of inflation is that

wages are unable to keep up with rising prices, as has been the general problem over the past 40 years or so. But the concerns of the working class are not what motivates the Fed. Instead, their basic goal is to maximize the long-term profitability of capital, and this requires a lower and more predictable rate of inflation. Beyond a rate of 2%, inflation upsets the process of corporate decision-making, by increasing uncertainty as to future prices of both inputs and outputs. Thus, the Fed’s role within the monetary system of the United States is to act to reduce inflation. This can be done by increasing interest rates. Specifically, it can increase one specific interest rate known as the federal funds rate and through this reduce the ability of banks to make loans to businesses and households. While some credit will still be available, the interest rates they charge will be higher. As a result, households will reduce their consumer purchases due to increasing mortgage and auto loan interest rates. To an even greater extent, corporations will cut back on purchases of new plants and factory equipment.

There will also be a short-term reduction in corporate profits. The Dow Jones and other indexes of share prices are therefore falling as the Fed’s decisions become clearer. But from the perspective of the Fed, and of corporations as a whole, this will be temporary. The expected fall in inflation will have the long-term effect of setting the stage for a more “healthy” — i.e., more profitable — future expansion of production. (The fact that small businesses will be more likely to fail is an added benefit for big business.) From the perspective of the working class, the future holds no such benefit, only the hope of a reduction in the rate of unemployment and a return to the “normal” hardship of life. Additionally, increased unemployment over the next year threatens to set back the small but significant recent increase in unionization.

What can we do about this? There is zero chance of intervening in Fed decision-making. The seven members of the Governors of the Federal Reserve Board are appointed by the president with the consent of the Senate for 14-year terms of office, less than the life-time appointments of Supreme Court Justices, but long enough to make it nearly impossible for even a two-term, reform-minded president to alter its overall political perspective. The board shares decision-making with the presidents of the 12 regional reserve banks — in a process in which privately-owned commercial banks account for one-third of the votes. The Fed is the only political decision-making body in the United States in which corporations, rather than individuals and elected representatives, have a ballot. In addition, Fed deliberations do not take place in public, unlike the hearings of the Supreme Court. While the laws establishing the Fed could indeed be changed by Congress, the likelihood of this is very slim.

Instead, what is most immediately needed is a movement

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FROM STUDENT PROTEST LEADER TO PRESIDENT

GABRIEL BORIC RIDES A DECADE-LONG SURGE OF LEFTWING MOVEMENTS TO CHILE'S PRESIDENCY

BY DAVID DUHALDE

Nearly 50 years after the military coup that ousted Salvador Allende, a young left-wing legislator rocketed into the country's top office. Gabriel Boric, Chile's democratically-elected, socialist president, beat his far-right opponent, José Antonio Kast, in the December 2021 runoff election. He owed his victory to a center-left coalition against the far right energized by militant and persistent social movements that put the country on the road to a new constitution.

Just before the runoff, I represented the Democratic Socialists of America as an international delegate to meet with progressive forces deep in mobilization for an election in which — as in the United States in 2020 — everything was on the line. That trip was informed by my lifetime of traveling to Chile to visit my father's family, so witnessing Boric's nearly 10-point surprise win after decades of struggle and inequality was truly unforgettable.

PRESIDENT BORIC'S MOVEMENT ROOTS

President Gabriel Boric, just 36, first rose to prominence as a student leader during the Chilean Winter, a 2011-13 youth uprising against neoliberal education reform. Since then, Boric and other young leftists in the Frente Amplio coalition won congressional office alongside more historic left parties. Boric's coalition, Apruebo Dignidad, has deep ties to popular movements new and old. It's connected to the student, climate justice and feminist struggles that have grown in recent years.

In November 2019, a Chilean social uprising began in Santiago after a 30-peso public transit fare hike. The unofficial slogan of the uprising was that it was for "30 years, not 30 pesos," referencing three decades of neoliberalism that was enshrined in Chile's constitution even as formal democracy returned around 1990. Millions expressed frustration with inequality caused by decades of unregulated capitalism and demanded a new national legal framework.

A few weeks after the uprising began, Chile's major political parties — the Communists and Kast's Republican Party both notably excluded — reached an agreement intended to abate the mass mobilizations by setting up a process to create a new constitution. This didn't do much to quiet the protests, and the plebiscite that was to be the first step in the process was delayed numerous times by the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic.

When a referendum finally took place in October

MOVING LEFT: Gabriel Boric was sworn in as Chile's new president on March 11.

2020, Chileans voted by nearly a four-to-one margin to replace the current constitution; in 2021, they elected 155 delegates to draft a new document.

ESTABLISHMENT COALITIONS DISCREDITED

The 2019 uprising also signaled the discrediting of the mainstream coalitions that had ruled since the return to democracy — one coalition made up of Christian Democrats, social-democratic parties and sometimes the Communist Party and another consisting of two major mainstream right-wing parties. In the first round of voting in the 2021 election, each coalition finished with less than a quarter of the vote.

Chilean voters chose between seven candidates in that first round in November. By a three-to-one margin, they selected candidates from new parties, Boric falling unexpectedly second to Kast. The runoff thus took place between two candidates from relatively new parties at opposite ends of the political spectrum. Leaked polls showed a dead heat for the second round.

Kast is the son of a former German officer with ties to the Nazi Party. The ultra-right winger was the only major candidate to stand against the constitutional process and continued to oppose abortion, gender and sexual rights as Chile liberalized laws on issues like same-sex marriage.

Right-wing forces maintain a strong, albeit minority presence in the country. A growing evangelical movement has grown in response to mounting progressive cultural changes. This extreme bloc helped fuel a candidate such as Kast, who not only espoused reactionary views, but defended the legacy of the military junta and openly expressed fondness for former dictator Augusto Pinochet.

THE RIGHT THREATENS, BUT SOCIAL MOVEMENTS COME THROUGH

The week leading up to the election, I was very pessimistic about Boric's chances, considering his underperformance in the first round, general rising cynicism among Chilean voters and the results of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. But Boric won big. I hadn't accounted for Chileans' commitment to the constitutional process.

The center-left coalition that came to Boric's aid was subsequently rewarded. His cabinet includes members of the Socialist and Radical parties — two of the social-democratic parties that had long been in coalition with the centrist Christian Democrats. Members of the left were disappointed with Boric's choice for finance minister, Mario Marcel, who had served in several center-left governments and was specifically chosen to placate the business community. This market-oriented choice alongside Communist leaders demonstrates the tensions and hopes of the new government as it tries to balance threats while remaining committed to progress.

ELECTION KEEPS NEW CONSTITUTION ON TRACK

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WELCOME TO THE NEW COLD WAR

AND THE RETURN TO NUCLEAR BRINKMANSHIP

BY JOHN TARLETON

One day when I was about 10-years-old, I asked my dad if we would all die if there was a nuclear war.

I don't remember if we were driving home from little league baseball practice, or if I had tagged along on a trip to the grocery store. I don't remember what exactly prompted the question, though the Cold War rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was the backdrop against which our lives unfolded. What I do remember is the response of this good-natured man who doted on his family and rarely missed Sunday mass.

"Son," he said, his voice dropping to underscore the gravity of the matter, "Better dead than red."

The idea that we might have to allow life on Earth as we know it to be annihilated amid thousands of exploding mushroom clouds was terrifying. So I buried my 10 year-old's sense of dread. Surely our leaders would guide us through these dangers without the worst happening. And if we did someday leap into the nuclear abyss to avoid being enslaved by a godless communist tyranny, well, that only showed how precious our freedom was.

I moved to the left in my college years and became critical of capitalism, U.S. imperialism, the arms race and the role of the military-industrial complex in fueling our many wars. Then the Cold War ended in 1989 and it became easy enough to forget about the prospect of nuclear war even if the U.S. and Russia maintained much of their vast stockpiles

of nuclear weapons. There were so many other more immediate issues to address.

A ROUGH BEAST AWAKENS

Now, as war rages in Ukraine, the nuclear beast awakens from its slumber. For many of us who came of age during the Cold War, the fact that Russia and the U.S. are both deeply involved in a rapidly escalating conflict is deeply unsettling. Not only has the prospect of nuclear war returned but so too has the logic of nuclear brinkmanship, which makes us all hostage to these weapons.

In case you weren't around for the Cold War or forgot its nuclear lessons, here's a quick rundown.

1) *Every sane person knows there would be no winner in a nuclear war, only losers. Yet, the logic of "deterrence" requires the leaders of nuclear-armed countries to insist they would be willing to use them, otherwise they risk being blackmailed by rival heads of state who do appear willing to use their nukes.*

2) *Nuclear-armed missiles fired from the United States and Russia can travel to their targets in 30 minutes or less. Once a missile is launched, it can't be recalled. Inter-continental ballistic missiles can carry 10 warheads, each one far more powerful than the atomic bombs that the U.S. dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945.*

3) *The most likely way a nuclear war starts is during a moment of escalating tensions in an international crisis. Picture Side A becoming convinced it's about to be annihilated by Side B and so decides to fire its nukes first rather than risk being wiped out. Or, being aware that Side A might mistakenly launch its nukes could also*

trigger Side B into rushing ahead to fire its weapons first.

4) *Surviving the Cold War was due to luck as much as anything else. In addition to hair-raising international confrontations like the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, there were a number of false alarms on both sides that brought us to the brink of catastrophe. Among the causes of these nuclear near-misses were an exploding satellite, a faulty computer chip, the sun reflecting off the tops of high-altitude clouds and a flock of geese misinterpreted as a Soviet bomber attack.*

If the United States and Russia detonated roughly half of their 10,000 nuclear warheads, more than 700 million people would die from the initial blasts and their immediate aftermath, according to a 2008 study published by Physics Today. Global temperatures would plummet below freezing for more than a year due to the soot caused by the nuclear explosions and forest fires blotting out the sun. Agricultural production would collapse by more than 90% and billions would starve. Bands of survivors would be left to eke out an existence on a barren wasteland of a planet.

Cooler heads have prevailed so far in denying Ukraine's appeal for a U.S./NATO no-fly zone to be established over its skies. To sustain a no-fly zone would require shooting down Russian warplanes and destroying Russian anti-aircraft systems on the ground in Ukraine and inside Russian territory. The Russians could respond by attacking U.S. assets in Poland or another nearby NATO country. From there, the retaliatory spiral could escalate into an exchange of nuclear weapons within hours or days.

RUSSIA'S INVASION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been a horror show. Nothing can justify it. Russian President Vladimir Putin has put Western leaders on notice with his veiled threats about being ready to use nuclear weapons. Still, the United States and Europe are going to find it harder to exercise caution if the pummeling of Ukraine continues. Wars by their nature tend to produce more extreme behavior over time, and to draw in more and more third-party actors.



GARY MARTIN

Many on the left, myself included, misjudged Putin's willingness to invade Ukraine. We should be humbled by that. The Ukrainians, with U.S. backing, are now fighting a war of independence against a cruel imperial power. For those of us who've long protested our government's various wars and interventions, CIA-backed coups, despots and death squads, it's a disorienting space to be in. Some on the left have echoed the Russian narrative that the Ukrainian resistance is largely made up of neo-Nazis. Others have decried weapons shipments to the Ukrainians as harming the prospects for a diplomatic solution when the Ukrainians' ability to fight back is the only thing that has brought the Russians to the negotiating table.

The Ukrainians against-all-the-odds defense of their freedom has been inspiring. The most important thing progressives can do is insist that this conflict will have to be resolved through peace talks, the sooner the better.

There are elements in the U.S. national-security establishment who would welcome Ukraine turning into a long-term, Afghanistan-style quagmire for the Russians. This would be a boon for weapons makers but a disaster for the people of Ukraine and Russia as well as for the world's food supply, given the key role the two countries play as exporters of wheat, barley, corn and fertilizers, especially to countries in Africa and the Middle East.

Should the government of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reach a peace accord it can live with, the United States and its allies should be ready to roll back sanctions on Russia, if that's what it takes to close the deal. Conservative and liberal hawks who are high on the good vs. evil fervor of Cold War 2.0 will cry "sell-out." They should be ignored.

To end a conflict in which they are badly outgunned, the Ukrainians will have to make compromises they find distaste-

ful. This means renouncing their quest for NATO membership and acknowledging, in one fashion or another, Russia's control of Crimea in the south — which is home to a key warm-water port — and two Russian-speaking separatist provinces in the east. The most important thing the Ukrainians can win is their freedom to rebuild the kind of society they want to live in. That alone would be a powerful blow to Putin's demented dream of absorbing their country into his "Greater Russia."

A POST-NUCLEAR FUTURE?

"We have found ourselves in the midst of this giant cyclone of demand," Italian businessman Giulio Cavicchioli told the New York Times as he showed off an underground air filtration system that is part of the nuclear shelter his company manufactures. In the first two weeks of the Russo-Ukrainian War, his company received 500 queries about their shelters, after building 50 of them in the previous 22 years.

This can't go on. Reaching new arms control agreements with the Russians seems impossible at this time. But, assuming we get through this crisis, the wheel of history will turn again. When a new opportunity arises, we should recall the unease we feel now. Instead of burying it somewhere deep in our psyche with a 10-year-old child's naive belief in the wisdom of our leaders, we should insist our government renew arms control treaties that were shredded by the Trump administration and do everything possible to push the nuclear genie back into the bottle. Given enough time, it's quite likely that if we don't end nuclear weapons, they will end us.

INTEREST RATES

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to protect working families from the effects of these forthcoming interest rate increases and the accompanying increase in unemployment. This increase cannot be blamed on the individuals who are unemployed. Instead, it must be recognized as the result of actions by "the government" (in the form of the Fed) acting supposedly in the interest of "everyone," but in fact in the long-term interests of the capitalist class. We must therefore demand that "the government" in the form of Congress and the President tax the recipients of the long-term benefits of this policy to provide funds for the current well-being of the working class. Such programs must differ from the Payroll Protection Program in which most money went to employers rather than the people they employed, or to "eviction-prevention" programs that funded landlords rather than their tenants.

The specific measures needed are clear. They must include a serious restructuring of the system of unemployment compensation that at present provides benefits —

often ridiculously small — to little more than one-third of those who are actually unemployed. More generally, we need an immediate, major repair of the already inadequate but increasingly frayed "safety net." This requires other forms of support including health care and the provision of food and shelter in recognition of these as human rights to which everyone is entitled. More long-term goals could include limiting the ability of corporations to lay off workers without mandated severance pay, as is required to some extent in European nations. It should be pointed out that a reduction in corporate sales does not necessarily mean lay-offs. Workers could be kept on payroll, in which case it would be profits, not wages, that would suffer.

Unfortunately, capitalism just doesn't work that way!

Paddy Quick is an economist now retired from teaching at St. Francis College, Brooklyn. She is a long-time member of the Union for Radical Political Economics.

HOT CHILE

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Voters prioritized preserving the path toward a new constitution over Kast's hate-filled campaign focused on immigration and crime.

The 155-person group of delegates elected to draft the new constitution, dominated by the Left and independents, decided to start on a clean slate and to not bring over any copy of existing documents.

This radical departure from Chile's past includes discussions of eliminating the senate and nationalizing natural resources. Even under the dictatorship's privatization schemes, the government never sold the copper mines nationalized under the early 1970s Popular Unity coalition. Chile's dependence on these minerals for income inspires the desire to bring lithium and water under collective control.

The attention on the constitutional process has led to concerns arising from all political perspectives. One is that the delegates are leaning towards more decentralization of government. Chile historically has had a strong president, who until only recently picked the governors of the regions. Further devolution of roles and taxation could make it harder for the state to generate revenue. The country is already heavily dependent on tariffs and exports of minerals and agricultural products; lack of taxation of the wealthy could undermine the social programs of the future.

THE RIGHT'S GLOBAL PLAYBOOK

While Kast didn't win, Barbara Sepúlveda, a Communist Party activist, reflected the

long-term concern about the growing influence of the right, including their ability to advance socio-political divisions around issues such as immigration. While traditional conservative parties have collapsed, Kast's Republican Party represents an embrace of Pinochet-era authoritarianism tied with worldwide trends of right-wing populism. She noted how Trump's solution to immigration was a wall and that Kast proposed digging a ditch in the Chilean desert. Sepúlveda lamented that the right wing — not the left, despite our "internationalism" — has a global playbook.

DAYS OF HOPES, YEARS OF UNCERTAINTY

Boric's new government hopes to seek policy solutions outside of the market, such as nationalizing lithium and creating public healthcare, but it will have to manage the high expectations of its base, militant opposition of its detractors, an eclectic Congress and an evenly divided Senate. Concerns over neoliberalism dominating the economic policy reflect fears that the new government will not be able to truly break with the current socio-economic order.

We understand this is a critical moment to implement progressive, lasting change in Chile. The world is watching as our Chilean comrades try to use this critical moment to implement progressive, lasting change in their country.

David Duhalde is a member of the International Committee of the Democratic Socialists of America.



HOW I DISCOVERED MY UKRAINIAN SUPERPOWER

BY CHRISTINA ZAWERUCHA

I still remember that day in third grade when Ms. Barnes invited me to the front of the class, gave me a big black marker and invited me to draw my country on the map. It was 1992, and for the bulk of my childhood I had come from a country that didn't exist. Like most of America's English-language students, I was born in the United States, but my family spoke only Ukrainian at home. My cultural miscues, exotic tastes and impossible last name made me an outcast in our suburban elementary school. But for the first time, when I climbed up on that desk and drew Ukraine (three sizes too large) on the map of the Soviet Union, I finally felt seen.

I guess I had assumed that Ukraine would always be there. Which is why I surprised myself when on the morning of February 24 I suddenly broke down in tears.

My relationship with Ukrainian culture has gone through several seasons and transformations over the past 30 years, with long breaks and passionate returns. Instead of watching Saturday morning cartoons like my American friends, my parents would wake us at the crack of dawn and drive into the city to St. George's Ukrainian Catholic School on East 7th Street for *ukraino snavstvo*, Ukrainian school.

In sterile rooms, old Ukrainian ladies dressed in drab colors would bring our families' native country to life. We read the legends of Askold and Dyr founding Kievan Rus', scratched our wax fortunes on bright *pysanky*, play-acted the old pagan myths and recited the new catechism. We read poignant allegories by Lesha Ukrainka, memorized poetry by Ivan Franko and Taras Shevchenko. After Ukrainian school, we would go to Ukrainian Scouts, slurp borscht at my grandparents' apartment across from Veselka and then head uptown for Ukrainian dance lessons where Pani Roma Prima would smack my wobbly "Macaroni legs" into shape.

It was at St. George's that Pani Olenech, playing a gray plastic casio synthesizer in the church basement, told me that she thought I could sing. It started with the song *Sadok Vyshevi*, which means cherry orchard, and then grew into a repertoire that I would sing with Ukrainian scouts around campfires as we orienteered across upstate New York, Ohio and Canada. Those minor-chord melodies were the soundtrack of my identity. My love for nature, for music, for food, for justice, was first learned not in English, but in Ukrainian. When I was bullied and outcast in American school, I always felt like there was a secret magic superpower that I could dip into, an alternative universe that others couldn't understand.

I remember the first trickle of new Ukrainian immigrants coming into the U.S. in the mid-90s. My Ukrainian-American friends and I were so excited to welcome our new Ukrainian classmates and cousins from the old country, only to be heartbroken when they didn't understand a word we said. Under the Soviet Union's Russification policies, the Ukrainian language had been made illegal. Their "h"s formed hard "g"s and we struggled to find common ground between the Russian they had learned in Soviet-run schools and the Ukrainian our grandparents taught us. So many of them were traumatized, displaced and disoriented. We gave them our hand-me-downs and make up, showed them how to do their hair and taught them how to be "cool."

When I became a teenager, I started to drift away from my Ukrainian heritage. There were push and pull factors. With the science olympiad, school plays and U.S. Girl Scout canoe races eating up my Saturdays, I began to realize that there was a bigger, more exciting world out there beyond my little Ukrainian diaspora community. I also started becoming aware of the things I didn't like about Ukrainian culture. I started to pick up on casual homophobic and anti-semitic comments that made me feel ashamed of the culture that until then I had loved so unquestioningly. The socially-accepted, toxic cycle of alcoholism and family abuse that seemed endemic in our family systems began to represent a way of life I yearned to escape. The conservative overcorrection to failed Soviet "socialist" policies did not align with my developing values, and once in college I made a conscious effort to distance myself from my culture and instead focus on learning from others.

I studied Arabic in college, and learned Spanish, French and



Amharic while working internationally. I made a career at the intersection of organic agriculture and second language learning working with immigrants, refugees and preliterate smallholder populations near and far. And what I have discovered is that the love I developed for my

Ukrainian culture is what makes me love and appreciate other people's cultures.

The truth is, being Ukrainian is a super power. You can't escape it. Even as I was making new life choices, I still felt Ukrainian culture choosing me.

It came for me in my twenties at a party in a Brooklyn backyard. I started singing those Ukrainian folks songs when I was tipsy. A couple of hipsters loved the music and asked me if I would be willing to sing with their band. I sang with the Drunkard's Wife for three years, where we did modern mash-ups of Ukrainian, Klezmer and Baltic music from all over Eastern Europe.

I tell my students to go into their communities and make the changes they want to see there. Now I had to do the same thing. Around this time, a family member approached me for help maintaining a rustic bungalow at a Ukrainian camp in Pennsylvania. I re-engaged with my Ukrainian culture, but on my own terms. I brought my gay best friend, Jewish then-boyfriend, and Black and Asian friends to spend time with me at the camp. I even wore my Black Lives Matter hat to church a few times. People were welcoming, or at least willing to have a conversation. The culture is shifting.

In January 2014, I had the opportunity to go to Ukraine for the first time, for a permaculture research conference in Lviv, my grandfather's hometown. My family had escaped Ukraine under some horrific circumstances, and had absolutely no desire to return. When I told them I had bought my ticket, they were fearful for my life, and told me that I would be kidnapped or worse. But I felt like I needed to go. Ukraine had been such a huge part of my cultural imagination. It was time for me to experience it for real, and on my own terms.

Being in Ukraine far surpassed my expectations. Lviv, in Western Ukraine, is like the Paris of Eastern Europe, with a coffee, chocolate, art and music culture that reminded me of the hippest parts of Brooklyn. I stayed with Tatyana and Sasha, a Ukrainian couple that runs an organic farm-to-table apothecary in Lviv. As we dusted off the cobwebs of my Ukrainian language, I discovered, most importantly, that we could make each other laugh. Walking across the countryside, and looking up at the newly oriented constellations, I felt a profound connection to my native country I was encountering for the first time.

On my last night in Ukraine, we walked out to a large pro-European protest taking place in the center of Lviv. People were holding candles and singing. The corrupt pro-Russian president Victor Yanukovich had just resigned from power, new elections were being prepared, and people were singing in the streets with hope and joy. Sasha and Tatyana asked me if I wanted to join in the singing.

In the middle of the square, in the candle light, I began singing a song my Ukrai-

nian grandfather had sung to me, called *Volya*, freedom.

"Ya bachyla ptashku khoto vpala z hnizdechka..."

As I started to sing, a hush came over the crowd. They pulled out their phones and started recording. Afterwards, people started coming up to me in the square and hugging me, saying, "Please sing another song. We don't know these old Ukrainian songs." I discovered that many of the songs that my grandparents and Ukrainian school teachers had taught me had been lost during the Soviet era. All of a sudden, all of those hours at Ukrainian school, scouts and dancing really meant something. At the Ukrainian permaculture conference, we learned about heirloom seeds. In that moment, I felt like I was an heirloom variety of Ukrainian, holding the nourishing wisdom of songs and stories that people were hungry for. I sang long into the night, and learned a few songs from them. There were some we all still knew.

A week later, Putin invaded eastern Ukraine and gave his support to a separatist movement there that simmered for the past eight years.

Later, I was asked to help co-facilitate a virtual permaculture course for Ukrainian displaced persons from my little farm in Virginia. My ESL students and I built a stage in a barn and streamed videos in broken English about potential solutions to broken systems with the goal of bringing some hope to people who were in a long state of uncertainty. How much did we succeed in our mission? Hard to say. But I helped in the way I was asked, in the way I knew how.

I have since moved on to run projects in other parts of the world and now in my new home in Binghamton, New York. My ESL students come from all over the world — Pakistan, Haiti, Sudan, Nepal and yes, even Ukraine and Russia. When my students come into my classroom, they are often for the first time finding themselves in a setting where they are meeting people who speak a different language than them, practice a different religion or look and dress differently from where they came from. On the first days of school, I share the words every Ukrainian learns from the famous poet, Taras Shevchenko.

"Learn my brothers. Think and read. Learn from others' differences, but never forget where you came from."

These are authentic Ukrainian words to love, and live and learn and teach by.

When caring people ask me, "Do you have family there?" the answer would technically be no. But it is a very real frame of reference for my entire Ukrainian-American experience, and now for a very real and disorienting sense of loss. Through my tears, I swear I hear bandura music playing songs that we all still know.

Christina Zaverucha is an English as a New Language teacher and permaculture agronomist who is passionate about facilitating the exchange of ecological wisdom in multicultural contexts.

THEN &

NOW: (Above)

Christina Zaverucha and her brother dancing at the Yonkers Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Festival circa 1991. (Below) The author today.

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IN SEARCH OF UTOPIA

Heaven is a Place on Earth: Searching for an American Utopia
By ADRIAN SHIRK
COUNTERPOINT PRESS, 2022

By Eleanor J. Bader

When teacher-writer Adrian Shirk began working on *Heaven is a Place on Earth*, she set out to create a “playful but straightforward social history of American utopian movements.” Then, like many well-laid plans, as she began her research, the project morphed into something else.

The result is an engrossing read, part deeply-personal memoir, part travelog of her visits to numerous contemporary intentional communities and part reflection on the troubled and troubling history of domestic attempts to create collectives and communes. The book is not comprehensive. For example, Shirk does not include the co-housing movement and for the most part skims over

“American utopia vanquishes the nuclear family, the blood ties, the marriage, often sex, so that we are only, all of us, strangers and pilgrims together on the same path.”

That path, of course, has taken multiple forms. Among them are the early 19th century Zoar community, Harmony Society and the Most Divine of the Most Divine, whose members believed in adult baptism and holding “all things in common.” There’s fascinating history here. At the same time, it is Shirk’s visits to current “utopias” that are most eye-opening.

Take The Simple Way, located in Philadelphia’s Kensington neighborhood, a collective that offers members a place to live while also providing concrete mutual aid — from housing assistance to food — to area residents. The group, Shirk writes, “is mostly led by women, the majority of whom are white; all have roots in different evangelical movements but they have been part of this community for many years, and their theologies have evolved a lot over the past 25 years.”

Indeed, since its 1995 founding by six friends, The Simple Way has expanded into a looser, larger network and has become a



GABRIELLA SZPUNT

communities that fell sway to the cultic authority of a leader, typically a charismatic white male.

Nonetheless, what makes the book most compelling is Shirk’s willingness to interrogate her own yearning for fellowship and her own privilege as a white, college-educated professional. She also acknowledges the overt appropriation of many Native American customs by early utopian planners. “The life those communities created, which we call American utopias, was more or less a paltry mimesis — consciously or not — of the kind of life that North American indigenous people had been living for centuries and were, at that time in the mid-1800s, defending with their blood and bodies,” she writes.

Other facts and insights add to the sobering recognition that, with few exceptions, collectives tend to be short-lived, riven by financial insolvency, personality clashes and emergent inequities. Timing is also a factor. “Utopia-making emerges in force,” she writes, “especially during times of economic and social precarity, after wars, depressions, natural disasters, sexual revolutions.” What’s more, many are steeped in Christian theology, inspired by the Book of Acts which reports that after Christ was crucified, his most ardent followers relinquished their material possessions and moved underground where they lived communally, far from the watchful eyes of Roman authorities. Still, there were deviations from anticipated piety: “Almost always, Christian or not,” Shirk explains,

501(c)(3) nonprofit while continuing to shelter its core members.

Similarly, The Farm, formed more than 50 years ago in rural Tennessee and one of the longest lasting U.S. collectives, has gone through many incarnations, from a place where “free love” predominated to today’s collection of individual dwellings, A-frames to tee-pees, that are located in close proximity to one another, but still off the grid. In fact, the community is now fully self-sustaining thanks to the development of a solar technology company, a new-age publishing company and a longstanding midwifery practice created by Farm cofounder Ina May Gaskin. At the same time, Shirk notes, most of its members are now elderly, which makes the community’s future profoundly uncertain.

Shirk, herself, now lives in a collective house in upstate New York where she and other residents run what she calls a “beta-residency program” for writers, musicians and fine artists. I doubt that she considers it a utopia. That’s likely okay though, since one of the lessons she gleaned from writing *Heaven is a Place on Earth* is actually quite simple. “Nothing is ever done,” she writes. Plans and projects change as we change, both individually and collectively, in an unending circle of trial, error, birth and rebirth.

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REVEREND BILLY'S REVELATIONS

Dear Rev,

I check my phone every day for news from the war in Ukraine. I hope it ends soon. Most of all I don't want this to become a nuclear war. I've been concerned about climate change for a long time, and, to be honest, I worry more about these weapons that could end life on Earth as we know it in a single day and worry less about the end coming in decades or centuries with climate change. What are you thinking?

WALTER
Fort Greene

Dear Walter,

Walter, two timelines to Hell, comparing nuclear winter to the climate melt-down... Sketchy, Walter, that's fear not facts. You are gravitating to your personal maximum terror. Let's go in another direction. Instead of choosing one terror over another, what if we answer your question from the least terrifying perspective.

You remember Bob Marley's phrase, "One Love"? What if the solution to climate violence and war violence is a practical application of nonviolence. I'm not asking you to picture Gandhi marching up against the Russian tanks, but stick with me here. I'll start my One Love explanation with scaling up to a sort of intersectionality of issues, and what I believe is a more helpful view.

Climate change causes war, and war is the world's most intense spewing of carbon into the air. The two godzilla machines share similar direct attacks

on innocent children. And obviously, most climate and war violence comes from petro-states, petro-corporations and/or petro-tyrants. The closer you look at the two kinds of mass mortality, the more they blend

into each other in this modern era. They feature imperialism, racism, sexism and violence against those who cannot defend themselves.

So, Walter, don't force yourself to make a choice between climate and war. That is a false dilemma. They are separate "issues" in the news of the corporate media, marketed separately, with each catastrophe generating its own experts, graphics and fashions, lobbyists and lawyers, etc. The creation of "false disconnections", resisting analyses that reveal common causes — that is a neo-liberal tactic, beloved by the billionaires who profit from ... what? Climate chaos and war.

Leaders should be healers. Our leaders of the future are the leaders who let us have a future. And our one basic solution for climate and war? Leave the oil in the ground. As for the deep cultural and psychological habits of violence that come down to us through the centuries... well... the solution there is the "One Love" in the song. It's the One Love we all feel.

Peace-a-lujah!
REV

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.



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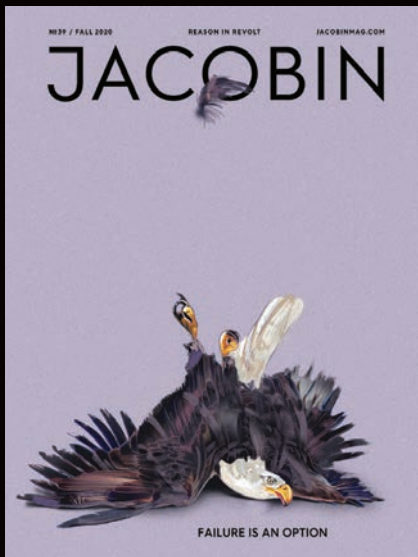
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